The trauma remains traumatizing and incurable because it comes from the future. For the virtual can also traumatize. Trauma takes places when one is wounded by a wound that has not yet taken place, in an effective fashion, in a way other than by the sign of its announcement. Its temporalization proceeds from the to-come.

Jacques Derrida, *Rogues*

**Prologue (Beyond the Pleasure Principle)**

*Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) is often thought to be Freud’s most philosophical work. It is not then surprising, that philosophers have devoted so much critical attention to it. As Jacques Derrida points out in his famous reading of *Beyond* in *The Post Card*, Freud’s most ambitious metapsychological work attempts to ground psychoanalysis philosophically while refusing to acknowledging its debt to philosophy. Many psychoanalysts, however, (particularly Americans) have regarded this book of “philosophy” as a bizarre aberration in Freud’s thinking and have excluded it from the accepted canon of psychoanalysis. One of the reasons that philosophers have found the book so interesting is that it offers a radical account of trauma and temporality in the form of the so-called repetition compulsion. Cathy Caruth’s important work on trauma, largely derived from a close reading of Freud’s description of the belated temporality of the repetition compulsion, has helped inspire a new field of trauma studies and has contributed to *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*’s becoming the principal point of reference for many recent readers of Freud.

As most readers of *Beyond* know well, Freud introduces his description of trauma by telling a story. The story that Freud tells is about how some people suffer terrible illnesses (what is now known as PTSD or post traumatic stress syndrome) after surviving war, railway disasters, and other near-death experiences. Surprisingly, however, Freud uses these stories of near-death experiences in order to argue that the illnesses suffered are not caused by the actual threat of death, but rather by the element of surprise itself. People become traumatized, Freud claims, not because they have a close encounter with death, but because they become overwhelmed by fright produced by their encounter with an experience for which they are not prepared. Freud is adamant on this point: trauma cannot be directly correlated to an external threat to life no matter how real the threat may be. Rather, trauma is caused by a rupture in the experience of time itself caused by the state of fright. The repetition compulsion that accompanies trauma is an automatic, uncontrollable, and belated attempt to repair the rift in time caused by the unpreparedness of fright. Because the psyche is overwhelmed by fright, it misses the very experience that provoked the fright. The repetition of the experience is an attempt to prevent the missed event from having happened in the past by preparing for its future happening.

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud defines the specific nature of trauma by comparing it to other potential affective responses to situations of danger. He writes:

“Fright” [Schreck], “fear” [Furcht], and “anxiety” [Angst] are improperly used as synonymous expressions; they are in fact capable of clear distinction in their relation to danger. “Anxiety” describes a particular state of expecting the danger or of preparing for it, even though it may be an unknown one. “Fear” requires a definite object of which to be afraid. “Fright,” however, is the name we give to the state a person gets into when he has run into a danger without being prepared for it; it empha-
sizes the factor of surprise. I do not think that anxiety can produce a traumatic neurosis. There is something about anxiety that protects its subject against fright and so against fright-neuroses. (SE, XVIII, 12–13)

According to Freud here, all three terms (fright, fear, and anxiety) describe possible responses to a given situation of danger. A situation of danger—even extreme—can produce either fear, anxiety, or fright. But only Schreck (fright) produces trauma because it and it alone is determined by the element of surprise. Fear does not produce trauma because it has a known and knowable source. When we are afraid of something, Freud suggests, we do not become overwhelmed by surprise because we know what we fear even if it is something genuinely fearful.

While the distinction between fright and fear seems fairly clear, Freud’s description of the case of “anxiety” introduces new difficulties. Anxiety, Freud asserts, is the inverse of fright. By means of the feeling of anxiety, the psyche prepares itself to expect an unknown threat so as to avoid the experience of fright. In fright, the psyche responds too late to danger—and the experience of the event is marked by this belatedness. In anxiety, the psyche anticipates the experience of an event and responds to it before it happens. To the extent that the psyche responds to something before it happens, one can say that in anxiety, the psyche’s response comes too soon. By producing a feeling of surprise in advance of and in preparation for the unknown danger to come, anxiety protects the psyche from trauma. For this reason, Freud claims that fright and anxiety are mutually exclusive: fright produces trauma whereas anxiety prevents it.

The Return of Trauma (Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety)

Six years later, in Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety, Freud returns to the relationship between trauma and anxiety and substantially revises his story. Like Beyond the Pleasure Principle, Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety is one of Freud’s major metapsychological undertakings. Unlike Beyond the Pleasure Principle, however, aside from a few notable exceptions, Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety has not attracted sustained philosophical attention. Furthermore, whereas Beyond the Pleasure Principle’s many ambiguities and complexities have stimulated philosophical interest in the text, the inconsistencies, inconclusiveness and internal contradictions of Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety have largely been dismissed by readers who tend to minimize the extent to which it resists being reduced to a coherent narrative of determinable and stable claims.

Even French psychoanalyst Jean Laplanche, who is arguably one of the most subtle philosophical readers of Freud, considers that in Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety, Freud retreats from the daring conceptual leap he had made in Beyond the Pleasure Principle. In an essay provocatively entitled “A Metapsychology put to the test of Anxiety,” Laplanche writes that:

In this rich and exciting but rather ambiguous and even contradictory book, a fruitful trajectory seems to be deflected, indeed turned back on itself in an alarming way; I mean the line of thought which reached its apex with Beyond the Pleasure Principle.

According to Laplanche, the problem with this Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety is that it goes back rather than beyond. It interrupts the “fruitful trajectory” of Beyond the Pleasure Principle—a trajectory that was taking Freud’s thinking beyond—and sends it back in the wrong direction. For Laplanche, in the backward thinking of Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety, Freud turns his back on himself and his own thinking. In this “rich and exciting but rather ambiguous and even contradictory book,” Laplanche is alarmed to find that Freud’s thinking is “turned back on itself,” and he implies that Freud’s text is an example of anxiety rather than an analysis of it. One might even go so far as to say that he implicitly asserts that the book itself is an anxious defense against the anxiety provoked by the step beyond of Beyond the Pleasure Principle.

But what would it mean to accept Laplanche’s description of the movement of Freud’s text without accepting his conclusions?
about it? I would like to suggest that the interest of Freud’s text lies precisely in various ways in which it thinks about what it means to step back. Furthermore, I would like to raise the possibility that by following the tortured and contorted movement of Freud’s text, we may find that in the very moments in which Freud seemingly turns against himself and his own thinking, he goes beyond himself. By attending to the many inconsistencies and ambiguities that comprise Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety, we may find that in this curious step back, Freud might offer us some of his most powerful thinking about the future. Thus, paradoxically, perhaps the only way to go beyond the step taken in Beyond is to take a step back. Freud himself almost says as much in the famous concluding lines of Beyond: “Was man nicht erfliegen kann, muss man erhinken.” [What we cannot reach flying, we must reach by limping.]

Therefore, as I hope to show, in Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety, Freud proposes a radical new way of thinking about anxiety in order to tell a rich and strange story about the temporal dimension of the human psyche. By means of this new conception of “anxiety,” Freud opens some of the most philosophically difficult regions of psychoanalytic theory by suggesting that anxiety underlies the very birth of the psyche as such and accounts for its subsequent relationship to time. More radically still, and at the risk of moving much too fast, we might propose that anxiety is the strange and even uncanny temporal dimension of birth itself and that it gives birth to the psyche in time as well as the psychic conception of time. Unlike Beyond the Pleasure Principle, in which Freud tells a story about near-death experiences in order to illustrate the belated temporality of trauma, in Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety, Freud’s exploration of anxiety leads us to rethink our relationship to birth, not death. And although the philosophical tradition has long explored the ways in which human temporality is a relationship to death, we are less accustomed to thinking about birth in unfamiliar ways.

One of the things that makes the treatment of the temporality of anxiety in Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety so powerful is that Freud makes birth itself strange to us in this text. Freud’s text resists any simple biological, philosophical, or narrative explanation of birth. As we shall see, instead of presenting birth as the origin of a developmental linear trajectory that leads inexorably to death along a time-line that moves us forward from a past, through a present towards a future, Freud places birth at the heart of the human psyche but refuses to think of birth as an event in any simple sense. Birth is figured essentially as the birth of anxiety. And anxiety cannot be linked directly to a fear of death, but rather a fear of life that itself comes from life—that is life. Birth, like the primal anxiety that marks it, neither constitutes a fixed origin or beginning, nor is it certain that it is ever completed. Birth, Freud will suggest, is a trauma in the strongest possible sense, and anxiety is always the repetition of the trauma of birth. As such, anxiety recalls the trauma of birth and in so doing, gives birth to the possibility of a future.

But perhaps we have gotten ahead of ourselves. Let us return for the moment to Freud’s revised understanding of the relationship between trauma and anxiety in Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety. In this text, Freud discards the clear-cut distinction between fright and anxiety that he had taken such pains to establish in Beyond the Pleasure Principle and replaces it with a new and very strange conception of “anxiety.” Now it appears that anxiety is no longer simply opposed to trauma, but rather is a particular psychic manifestation of it. In fact, in Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety, it turns out that anxiety and trauma are actually two versions of the same thing and Freud refers to them both by the term anxiety. The earlier distinction he established between fright and anxiety is now recast as an uncanny drama between anxiety and itself.

At the very end of Inhibitions, Symptoms of Anxiety, after numerous (seemingly failed) attempts to define anxiety, in the very last chapter of this complicated and twisted text, Freud reaches the conclusion that anxiety can be neatly divided into two types: automatic anxiety and signal anxiety. Automatic anxiety is an uncontrollable and traumatic response to danger. In automatic anxiety, the psyche is overwhelmed by a situation of danger and triggers an automatic repetition of an earlier trauma and reproduces it in the present situation. The trauma from the past overwhelms and annihilates the present moment and the psyche is re-
traumatized. In signal anxiety, on the other hand, the psyche responds to the perceived threat of a future danger by reproducing a feeling of anxiety from a past trauma and using it as a warning signal. The feeling of anxiety “signals” the possibility of the future danger and helps to avert the occurrence of a future experience of anxiety. A small dose of anxiety in the present prevents one from being exposed to an overwhelming dose of anxiety in the future.

Although he only formalizes the distinction between these two kinds of anxiety in the final chapter of the book, throughout *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety*, Freud struggles to derive a model for the psyche in order to establish and maintain a rigorous distinction between automatic anxiety and signal anxiety. Nonetheless, despite Freud’s elaborate attempts to derive and sustain the difference between them, automatic and signal anxiety constantly threaten to become confused with one another. In fact, as we shall see, they cannot be separated from one another because they are in an uncanny relationship with one another. One might even say that the very notion of the “uncanny” itself is directly linked to the double nature of anxiety. But Freud needs to maintain this distinction because without it, the boundaries of the psyche itself threaten to become irrevocably unstable. Instead, despite Freud’s many efforts to contain them, the uncanny properties of anxiety permeate the text and destabilize it in particularly telling ways. As we shall see, throughout this uncanny text, Freud has great difficulty in maintaining all distinctions including those that determine the lines that should separate the inside from the outside, the past from the present, the future from the present and the past and, interestingly enough, the ego from everything that is not ego.

But perhaps we need to take another step back.

It is generally agreed that Freud’s theory of anxiety undergoes a change around the time that he was writing *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety*. Roughly speaking, the shift concerns Freud’s understanding of the relationship between anxiety and repression. Where Freud had once thought that anxiety was an effect of repression, he now believes that anxiety causes repression. In his former view, Freud had understood that anxiety was a by-product of inadequately or inappropriately discharged sexual energy. In *Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety*, he takes a step back from that conception of anxiety and now asserts that anxiety belongs to the ego and to the ego alone. The ego, he now argues, is “the actual seat of anxiety;” In section II he writes:

but we may legitimately hold firmly to the idea that the ego is the actual seat of anxiety and give up our earlier view that the cathetic energy of the repressed impulse is automatically turned into anxiety. If I expressed myself earlier in the latter sense, I was giving a phenomenological description and not a metapsychological account of what was occurring.” (*SE, XX, 93.)*

And again, in section IV, he insists on the fact that anxiety comes from the ego and belongs to it: “It is always the ego’s attitude of anxiety which is the primary thing and which sets the repression going. Anxiety never arises from repressed libido.” Although many of Freud’s readers have called attention to consequences of this shift, they tend to focus on what it implies for the understanding of the drives. For our purposes, however, I would like to call attention to the impact that shift produces on the ego itself. I would like to suggest that in the re-location of anxiety from the id to the ego, the ego becomes radically alienated from itself. Once anxiety can be located in the ego, the ego becomes dislocated in relation to itself. In other words, once the ego becomes the seat of anxiety, the ego’s relationship to itself becomes uncanny.

But what happens to the ego and how does anxiety make it so uncanny? Among the strangeness of this text is the fact that the focus is, at it were, not on the ego’s struggle with its privileged others, but with the ego’s struggle with itself, in itself, against itself, and, most radically, as a self. After explaining that the ego is the actual seat of anxiety, Freud goes on to assert, rather surprisingly, that the ego is actually not different from the id, but rather is identical to it:

To return to the problem of the ego. . . . We were justified, I think, in dividing the ego from the id, for there are certain consider-
ations which necessitate that step. On the other hand, the ego is identical with the id, and is merely a specially differentiated part of it. If we think of this part by itself in contradistinction to the whole, or if a real split has occurred between the two, the weakness of the ego becomes apparent. But if the ego remains bound up with the id and indistinguishable from it, then it displays its strength. . . . In repression the decisive fact is that the ego is an organization and the id is not. The ego is, indeed, the organized portion of the id. We would be quite wrong if we pictured the ego and the id as two opposing camps. (SE, XX, 97)

In this view, the ego and the id should not be considered as two separate agencies or entities. The ego, Freud specifies, is not opposed to the id, it is merely a special and specialized part of it. And it is special because it is specialized. The ego, Freud tells us, is an organization. Furthermore, although we do not have the time to pursue this now, the ego is not only an organization, it is, in a very profound sense, a political organization. Therefore it is no accident that Freud, who always loves to describe psychic structures with political analogies, outdoes himself in the sections of Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety devoted to the structure of the ego. Indeed, these sections of the text almost read like a treatise in political theory. Finally, although I cannot take the time to prove it here, I would say that the political dimension of the ego is a consequence of its uncanny nature. Simply put, it is destined to be political because it cannot be itself, cannot found itself or define itself in relation to any other.

Despite the fact that the ego is conceived of as an organization, (even a political organization) it is important to remember that it is not a conscious organization, nor can it be associated with or assimilated to consciousness in any direct way. To the extent that the ego comes into being as a response to anxiety, and in so much as it is part of the id, the ego is now redefined as an unconscious, but organized defense against anxiety. In other words, the ego’s ability to separate itself from the id lies in its capacity to produce itself as an organized structure. But this structure itself only comes into being as a defensive response to internal and external stimuli. To the extent that the psyche is overwhelmed by the stimuli through trauma, it responds to the trauma by repeating it. But the repetition of the trauma is itself a signal. As a signal it calls for a defensive, organized response to the overwhelming stimuli. The ego is the name that Freud gives to this organized response. The strength of the ego lies in its power to defend itself from stimuli by incorporating the stimuli into its own organization. And the stronger it gets, the more it becomes capable of appropriating foreign elements and turning them into part of its complex organization. Nonetheless, anxiety remains the driving force behind all of the subsequent negotiations and defenses in which the ego ultimately engages. Each and every encounter that the ego has with anything that is non-ego is, in some sense, determined, mediated, and regulated by the ego’s primordial relationship with anxiety. This brings us to one of the most fundamental paradoxes in Freud’s text. The root of all anxiety is disorganization. But the home of anxiety is the ego, which is organization. To the extent that anxiety is located in the ego, that it inhabits the ego, anxiety is the ego’s absolute other, its demonic doppelganger, as well as its raison d’être.

In order to understand why Freud makes such a paradoxical claim, we must begin to refine our understanding of anxiety itself. Anxiety, we have suggested, is both a response to primal trauma and a repetition of it. More precisely, the response is repetition. One of the ways in which Freud describes this repetition that is a response is by calling it a signal. Anxiety is the psyche’s signal response to trauma. The signal is both a response to the missed encounter of the past and a call to the future. But these two temporal dimensions of the signal cannot be simply separated from one another. We shall return to this temporal dimension of anxiety later, but for the time being it is important to underscore that the ego absolutely requires anxiety—its alien other—in order to function as an organization. Anxiety enables the ego to function because without it, the ego would be unable to assert its claims, or even to make them known, to the other agencies of the psyche. Anxiety is the primordial language of the psyche. Anxiety is always response. But a response is also always a call. Therefore, anxi-
ety facilitates the ego by responding to id impulses (internal stimuli) and then the ego responds in turn by using anxiety in order to quell these impulses by compelling the id to produce repressions. This is why Freud is able to say that anxiety causes repression rather than the other way around.

Anxiety gives us the future and there is no future without anxiety.

But in order to understand why this is so, we may need to step back, yet again, and take another look at Freud's text. It is worth pointing out, for example, that Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety is explicitly organized around his own repeated admissions that there is something about anxiety that continues to resist all of his efforts at explaining it. For example, in the opening paragraph of chapter VIII, he writes:

What we clearly want is to find something that will tell us what anxiety really is, some criterion that will enable us to distinguish true statements from false ones. But this is not easy to get. Anxiety is not a simple matter. Up to now we have arrived at nothing but contradictory views about it. (SE, XX, 132)

But before we take a closer look at some of the contradictory views that Freud puts forth about anxiety in Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety, it might be useful to recapitulate some of Freud's most basic claims about anxiety. Throughout the text, there is one fundamental description of anxiety that he repeats and to which he clings tenaciously: anxiety is a response by the ego to a situation of danger. However, despite the alluring clarity and simplicity of this utterance, it turns out that Freud's clearest definition of anxiety not only fails to define the term in question, but also reveals the extent of its inherent difficulties. As Freud's essays shows, the concept of "anxiety" destabilizes each and every one of the terms that Freud uses in order to define it. Thus, what does it mean to say that "anxiety is a response on the part of the ego to a situation of danger" when, as we have seen, anxiety alters our conception of the ego by making it radically uncanny. Similarly, we have begun to see how anxiety radically challenges our understanding of what a response is and what it means to respond. Finally, as we have suggested, even the notion of a situation of danger presents problems because danger cannot be assimilated to death. Furthermore, we do not know how exactly the ego assesses danger given that, as we have seen throughout our discussion, there can be no simple correlation between the psychic experience of danger and the existence of a real, external threat.

It is around this question of danger that Freud's text becomes most contradictory and arguably most interesting. At the risk of oversimplifying, but in the interest of time, we can say that Freud gives two parallel, competing and, I would argue, ultimately incompatible accounts of the danger associated with anxiety. Very simply put, anxiety is either essentially and irreducibly related to the trauma of birth as an unfinished event, or it is essentially related to a fear of loss of being separated from a loved object and hence castration and death. Freud, of course, attempts to reconcile these two accounts throughout his text. Moreover, he uses his discussion of the relationship between anxiety and phobias in order to suggest that the prototype of the danger associated with anxiety is castration. Thus he writes:

The anxiety felt in animal phobias is, therefore an affective reaction of the part of the ego to danger; and the danger which is being signaled in this way is the danger of castration. (SE, XX, 126)

Furthermore, and again moving very quickly, Freud uses castration in order to argue that anxiety is a response to loss. On the basis of that assertion, castration not only becomes the privileged example of any kind of fear of loss, but also, more radically, becomes the very anchoring point of reference for the temporal model of the psyche. Thus, through castration anxiety, the ego negotiates all dangers and situates itself as a self in time. Castration anxiety provides the ego with a defense against the unruly repetitions of the primal trauma of birth and allows it to enter into a relationship with death that is modeled on castration. Thus, Freud writes:

But the unconscious seems to contain nothing that could give any content to our
concept of the annihilation of life. Castration can be pictured on the basis of the daily experience of the faeces being separated from the body or on the basis of losing the mother’s breast at weaning. . . . I am therefore inclined to adhere to the view that the fear of death should be regarded as analogous to the fear of castration. (SE, XX, 130).

And, indeed, most readers of Freud (with the notable exception of Lacan) tend to accept the notion that Freud fully subscribes to the notion that the danger associated with anxiety is related to the threat of separation or loss.

But this is not the only story Freud tells in this text. Throughout, Freud returns, again and again, to an understanding of anxiety based on a repetition of birth that opens up new ways of thinking about both birth and time. And now, if we return to where we began, we can hear how the traumatic nature of birth haunts Freud’s description of the distinction between automatic anxiety and signal anxiety.

Thus we attributed two modes of origin to anxiety in later life. One was involuntary, automatic and always justified on economic grounds, and arose whenever a danger-situation analogous to birth had established itself. The other was produced by the ego as soon as the situation of this kind merely threatened to occur, in order to call for its avoidance. In the second case, the ego subjects itself to anxiety as a sort of inoculation, submitting to a slight attack of the illness in order to escape its full strength. It vividly images the danger-situation, as it were, with the unmistakable purpose of restricting that distressing situation to a mere indication, a signal. (SE, XX, 162)

Most radically, Freud suggests that to be born is to be born into anxiety. To be born into anxiety is to be torn out of linear time. Thus the very first act of life, the cry that emanates from the heart and lungs, is itself a traumatic repetition of the signal by which anxiety calls us into time. But anxiety calls us into time traumatically; it gives time to the psyche, gives the psyche time, by ripping time open from birth. To the extent that it recalls the trauma of birth automatically, automatic anxiety lies both beyond and before the ego. It lies beyond the ego, marks a potential beyond for the ego because it comes before it, precedes it, calls it into being although it remains radically other to it. Anxiety is the first “sign of life” and it is the most irreducible form of life’s relationship to that which lies “beyond.” Anxiety has no proper time. It comes from the unlived past of birth and opens up a future from it. It is a signal from birth that tells us that our birth will forever lie before us in a future that is yet to come. But this dislocated relation to time is, as Derrida has suggested, both a promise and a threat. It is our best and only chance for a future.

ENDNOTES

4. Although, as is well known, the question of anxiety is extremely important in the work of Melanie Klein and Jacques Lacan, this essay focuses exclusively on Freud’s treatment of anxiety.


7. In this context, it is interesting to note that Jacques Derrida calls attention to the political dimension of the organization of the ego as follows in Rogues: “What can a bygone psychoanalysis or one that is still to come tell us about democracy? Is there any democracy in the psychic system? And in psychoanalytic institutions? Who votes, what is a vote, or a voice, in the psychic and political system? In the state, in international institutions, including those of psychoanalysis?...I can do little more than simply situate these questions, which would no doubt all have to be put to the test of the autoimmune.” Jacques Derrida, Rogues: Two Essays on Reason (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2005), 55.

8. I would like to thank Charlie Shepherdson and Geoff Bennington for discussing some of these issues with me.

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