

“I Can Dream, Can’t I?”

Leo Bersani

A fairly eminent colleague recently described to me his recurrent dream: Having been invited to lecture at a university in an unidentified city, he has chosen to stay at a downtown hotel a few miles from campus. The lecture has been scheduled for 4 PM, and at about 3:45, still in his hotel room, he suddenly realizes that he has only fifteen minutes to get to the building where his academic audience has, he assumes, begun to gather. In a panic, he rushes outside and tries to hail a taxi. In some versions of the dream, there is no taxi to be had; in other versions, his cab gets stuck in heavy city traffic; in still others, the taxi runs out of gas and he must, desperately, search for another one. Or, in the most peculiar twist in this minor nocturnal epic of a failure to reach an assigned destination, the taxi driver makes a detour into a rural setting adjacent to the city where he stops to visit his aged parents, who cordially invite my exasperated friend in for coffee and cake. In the next frame he has, somehow, arrived at the lecture hall, which is—perhaps the dreamwork’s compensation for his harrowing journey—packed with students and faculty. But, it turns out, my friend has brought the wrong lecture, and—although he is to be introduced in a few moments—another colleague offers to rush back to the hotel and bring the right one. This is especially embarrassing since my friend is aware of having something of a reputation on the university lecture circuit for not having the lecture he is expected to give and for having to improvise, awkwardly, with none of the verbal elegance and eloquence for which his talks had been appreciated.

In another dream, which my friend and colleague thinks of as analogous to the one just described, he is in an apartment in Rome—where he often goes for research purposes for one or two months—on the day of his

return to his home in Boston. He suddenly realizes that he has only one hour before his plane takes off and hasn't even begun to pack his clothes and books. Somehow he manages to get to the airport on time, but, once there, he has enormous difficulty finding the right check-in counter, then has to run about a mile through abandoned streets and warehouses in order to board a propeller plane that just manages to rise a few hundred feet above ground in an endless trans-European and trans-Atlantic crawl toward a never-reached home.

Since I am not my friend's analyst, I can dispense with any therapeutically oriented discussion of these rather nerdy academic nightmares. Interpreted affectively, and in the most obvious terms, they are panic dreams about being unable to accomplish what he is frequently expected to accomplish in his professional life. We might of course also say that they manifest a desire not to do what he in fact spends a considerable part of his life doing. Instead of pursuing such familiar interpretive lines, I will—somewhat incongruously (but incongruity will be central to what I will be arguing)—allow these oneiric narratives to initiate certain speculations about time and logic. It is fundamental to Sigmund Freud's notion of the unconscious that its logic is without a sense of time. The psychoanalytically defined unconscious exists in a timeless present. Having said that, we have no reason to be perplexed by our dreams' major anomaly: the repeated failure to carry out movements and obligations consistently undertaken by the dreamer, in his waking life, with success. The peculiarity of continuous dreams of failure during the sleep of some one who has just as consistently succeeded in doing what he fails to do in dreams is psychoanalytically intelligible as a function of the different temporal and purposive logic in waking life and in dreams. The dream is constitutively blind to the temporal anomaly (and gratuitousness) of fearing or desiring failure *after* success, that is, nonanticipatorily. Dreams know no obligation to a before-and-after logic; a timeless terror can apparently be unaffected by the reassuring satisfaction of numerous successes in time.

I want, however, to insist on something else. Let's take a more global or unitary view of mental life. I have been making these dreams intelligible by implicitly accepting how psychoanalysis paradoxically makes the mind intelligible by its account of mental *unintelligibility*. The logical absurdity of repeatedly failing where, in actuality, we repeatedly succeed—the waste,

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we might say, of psychic energy being spent on an “unnecessary” anxiety— is resolved once we posit a split between two modes of thinking, what Freud called primary-process thinking and secondary-process thinking or, more generally, between consciousness and the unconscious. And, by the unconscious, I of course mean, as Freud specifies in his 1915 essay “The Unconscious,” not the mass of perceptions, thoughts, and memories that are simply absent from conscious attention at any given moment, but rather the unconscious of repressed representations, memories, or fantasies that are not allowed into consciousness.¹ The distinction, to put it in yet another way, is between what we know (or think we know) and mental contents, or impulses, or pulsations whose entrance into the field of conscious knowledge is strenuously, and for the most part successfully, resisted by an ego that can itself unconsciously mount the resistance. This distinction justifies, from a psychoanalytic perspective, the rejection we have become accustomed to of a coherent, single identity, of what now seems to many of us the flawed idea of a unified self. If there is a self, it is a divided self.

If, however, we momentarily suspend our confidence about what may be the human subject’s constitutive dividedness, we may have to renounce the way we account for the double syntax of mind. Let’s begin by noting that there is a great deal of communication between the divisions of the divided self. Not only are there numerous occasions, early in our lives, of conscious material being pushed into the unconscious; contents of the latter are also constantly striving to make their way into consciousness, a passage effected, as Freud recognized, in a variety of conscious events, ranging from neurotic symptoms to all the phenomena studied in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905) and *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (1901).² There is also the reassignment in a psychoanalytic cure of unconscious representations to what has been, until the cure, floating misplaced affects. If the human subject is divided, the conscious self is at least partly constituted by more or less abrupt intrusions into conscious temporality of material that has traveled into consciousness from that mental space or depth or neural area from which, presumably, it has been divided since the primal repression of infancy. It may take a professional

1. See Sigmund Freud, “The Unconscious” (1915), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. and ed. James Strachey, 24 vols. (London, 1954–74), 14:161–215.

2. See Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905), vol. 8 of *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* and *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (1901), vol. 6 of *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*.

psychoanalytic intervention to bring our selves together, thereby moving toward the goal, never to be achieved, of definitively challenging the very foundation of a psychoanalytic view of the mind.

The divided subject is not, however, a psychoanalytic discovery—although it is in psychoanalysis that the division becomes especially difficult to close, remaining, essentially, an intractable aspect of the mind's structure. In an essay in this journal, my major examples of a pre- or non-Freudian divided subject were René Descartes and Marcel Proust:³ in Descartes, the split between the searching I of the *Meditations* and the hidden ground of intellectual certainty within the mind (an internal version—subject-mind and object-mind—of the fundamental Cartesian dualism of the thinking subject and the world, the ontological division between *res cogitans* and *res extensa*); in Proust, the split between the anxiety-ridden subject helplessly seeking to penetrate the presumed secrets of the world and of others, even while obscurely and intermittently recognizing that those secrets are an impenetrable differential otherness within himself. To the extent that this inner division can be bridged (Descartes is militantly optimistic about this), it will be, for Descartes, Proust, and Freud, through knowledge. We can, with varying degrees of success, know that inner otherness, just as, through knowledge, we can connect to the world outside the human subject.

Michel Foucault identified “the Cartesian moment”⁴ in the history of subjectivity as a period in which knowledge takes priority over “care of the self.”⁵ The distinction, as it is developed in the 1981–1982 seminar at the Collège de France, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, is compelling. But Foucault failed to note that neither “the Cartesian moment” nor the *souci de soi* puts into question a more general assumption common to both: that of a difference of being between the subject and the world. Knowledge as defining our primary relation to the world depends on an opposition made most starkly explicit by the Cartesian dualism of mind and nonmind, and this opposition accounts for what Richard Rorty criticized as the primacy of epistemology in modern philosophy.⁶ (Ulysse Dutoit and I have been attempting to define a different relational mode, one of exchanges and correspondences between the subject and the world, exchanges that depend on the anti-Cartesian assumption of a commonality of being among

3. See Leo Bersani, “‘Ardent Masturbation’ (Descartes, Freud, and Others),” *Critical Inquiry* 38 (Autumn 2011): 298–329.

4. Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1981–1982*, trans. Graham Burchell, ed. Frédéric Gros (New York, 2005), p. 17.

5. See *ibid.*

6. See Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, N.J., 1979).

the human subject and both the human and the nonhuman world.) The presumed divided subject could be thought of as a subjectifying of the *res cogitans* and *res extensa* dualism. In the most confident exercise of what I called a masturbatory mode of thought, the Cartesian subject seeks to appropriate, principally through knowledge, both an internal and an external otherness, one that becomes, with Freud, a radically *differential* otherness.

I want to argue that the idea of a divided self prevents us from recognizing the syntax of an *undivided* self, a syntax that is, however, different from the logical order that characterizes a now largely discredited notion of a unified self. In the short 1910 essay “A Special Type of Choice of Object Made by Men,” Freud—acknowledging a marked discrepancy between his description of the symptoms that characterize this type of object-choice and his interpretation of the symptoms—writes that there is nothing surprising about this because the connections being made are unconscious and, as we know, something that “in the conscious, is found split into a pair of opposites often occurs in the unconscious as a unity.” More interestingly, he will later compare “a slight change of meaning, such as is easily effected in the unconscious . . . to the way in which in consciousness concepts shade into one another.” The transition Freud has just made, however, involves much more than “a slight change of meaning”; he has interpreted his patient’s fantasy of rescuing “a woman . . . of bad repute sexually” who is the object of his amorous obsessions as a disguised repetition of the boy’s fantasy of making a child for the mother he sexually desires.⁷ Such semantic discontinuities—logical leaps rather than “slight change[s] of meaning”—are apparently as characteristic of the conscious as well as of the unconscious mind. This truth is exemplified in the very sentence that announces it by Freud’s jump from the rescuing motif in the clinical case to the idea of the son giving to the mother a child who, as Freud claims, is also none other than the subject himself.

How does the inner other operate within the syntax of conscious thought? There are numerous examples in Freud of *another* connective logic that implicitly negates the rational dualistic logic to which Freud clings even while he undoes it. I have spoken elsewhere of the invasion of the death drive by the pleasure principle within the very text meant to demonstrate what is “beyond the pleasure principle,” as well as Freud’s collapse of the central opposition between sexuality and aggressiveness in *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930), even while he elaborates on their

7. Freud, “A Special Type of Choice of Object Made by Men” (1910), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 11:170, 173, 166.

distinction.⁸ There is also the tenuous nature of the differences between presumably distinct drives or psychic categories, especially between sadism and masochism, and the further, always threatened, merging of those drives into narcissism. Such "events" in the Freudian text shatter the distinctness of linguistic categories. They train us to assimilate the principle of noncontradiction into the syntax of conscious thought; no longer sequestered within the special, "other" domain of primary-process thinking, they act along with the processes of secondary-process thinking. We should not think of the Freudian text as being at odds with itself. Its exceptional nature is to enact a oneness of being—not a divided being—which may be the most profound discovery of psychoanalysis.

A distinctive trait of that oneness is incongruity, which, as Dutoit and I have argued, is central to the structural logic of Jean-Luc Godard's 1982 film *Passion*.⁹ Godard compels us to rethink an important category of thought: that of *alike*ness. The notion of one thing being like another is fundamental to our presumed knowledge of the world. There are several pairings in *Passion* that deceptively encourage us to look for the attribute that two disparate terms have in common. The film begins with images of traces made in the sky by a passing plane. Toward the end, just as the film director Jerzy is about to sexually penetrate Isabelle (the factory worker played by Isabelle Huppert) from behind, she acquiesces, saying: "Yes, there mustn't be any traces."¹⁰ The remark is particularly fraught in that it extends into another implied similitude: that between Isabelle and the Virgin Mary. The sexual scene begins with Isabelle's recitation of the *Agnus dei* and alternates with a tableau vivant (part of the film Jerzy is directing) of El Greco's *The Assumption of the Virgin*. A somewhat perplexing remark about sexual positioning is juxtaposed with a prayer and a famous painting and recalls the entirely different traces seen as the film opens, creating a connection between the opening material traces and, much later, the evocation of a humanly traceless birth. Is there a point of comparison? Almost as incongruously, Isabelle asks twice, early in the film, "Why have you abandoned me?" The first time, she is sitting alone, working in the factory; the second time, running alongside Jerzy's slowly moving car, she asks him the same question. Within the film's narrative, the question is about Jerzy's intermittent and uncertain interest in her; however, we can't help but think of the infinitely more momentous version of that question asked by

8. See Bersani, *The Freudian Body* (New York, 1986), esp. chaps. 1 and 3.

9. See Bersani, "The Will to Know," *"Is the Rectum a Grave?" and Other Essays* (Chicago, 2010), pp. 163–67.

10. All the quotations from the film are from *Passion*, dir. Jean-Luc Godard (1982; Santa Monica, Calif., 2008), DVD.

Christ on the cross (at least as reported by Mark) in a moment of apparent despair at having been abandoned by His Father. In each case we have an analogy without similitude or, at most, one in which the likeness between terms is faint, remote, incongruous.

Such analogies are different from both Proustian metaphors (in which two terms are presumed to have a common essence) and from more startling juxtapositions (in, for example, metaphysical poetry and much modern verse) that reveal unsuspected connective lines among feelings and objects. Whether the similitude is easily perceptible or wholly unexpected, it is presumed to be real, and we are expected to come to recognize the likeness. Such metaphors function as epistemological accretions. The singularity of Godard's similitudes is the insignificance or even the irrelevance of likeness itself to an irreducibly incongruous repetition (of two kinds of traces or two examples of abandonment) or comparison of terms (such as the thematic yoking together of love and work in *Passion*).

To put it schematically, it is less a question of epistemological gain than of ontological loss. The comparison of Jerzy abandoning Isabelle to God the Father abandoning His Son reveals nothing about the nature of being abandoned; rather, it trivializes the divine example of abandonment while at the same time initiating a potential likeness, one that is inexplicable and may never be made intelligible. Indeed, intelligibility is not at stake. Rather, the incongruous connection is a way, so to speak, of ungluing each term from its actuality. By incongruously directing them toward each other, Godard exposes what Giorgio Agamben has discussed as the potential for potentiality.¹¹

Passion's narrative, what there is of it, unfolds in a frequently hectic atmosphere of people running after each other, car horns blaring into the sounds of a Ludwig van Beethoven sonata or Gabriel Fauré's *Requiem*, characters just avoiding being hit by a car heading straight toward them. Hectic and also comic. Or, more exactly, all this activity gives to the film a lightness consistent with the implied movement of dissimilar terms just beginning to move toward one another, thus creating a new but still undefined field of relations. It is not a question of incongruity finally being replaced by a congruity that, until Godard had put us on the path toward recognizing it, we may have failed to perceive. Incongruity institutes virtualities that have no intrinsic reason to be actualized. This retreat from the actual creates a freedom that might be defined as a kind of being to which no predicate can be attached.

11. See Giorgio Agamben, *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, trans. and ed. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, Calif., 1999).

To return to my colleague's dreams with which I began, we might consider his dreamt failures as having, paradoxically, a liberating effect on the actual successes. Instead of thinking of the dreams as infecting the reality with an otherwise unavowed anxiety or self-defeating desire, we might welcome them as potentializing the having-taken-place of the lectures or the trans-Atlantic flights. Having the dreams would not be the distressing reminder of a timeless anxiety corrupting the satisfaction of successful accomplishments in real time. Those accomplishments would, on the contrary, benefit from their temporal juxtaposition with accomplishment failures. In this juxtaposition, the unconscious reveals itself not as a reservoir of repressed representations and impulses that aim to block the realization of our conscious projects but, precisely because the repressive ego prevents them from being realized, as the original reservoir of psychic virtualities.

Jean Laplanche often speaks of the psychoanalytic cure, not as a binding of psychic impulses that helps us to develop and solidify adaptive structures, but rather as an *unbinding* of the structures that already impoverish our mental life by positing a knowable reality to which it would be desirable that we adapt. Unbinding in the analytic cure is a project of psychic freedom. The luxury of associative thinking in analysis is that of enjoying unrealized fantasies, of moving among our potentialities without the constraint or the compulsion to make them materially real. The comparatively unbound thinking in dreams is unjustly devalued if we think of it only as containing secrets about waking thought, as exposing the hidden instability of the structures of conscious, more or less rational, thinking.

Rather, dreams of failures, alternating with successful accomplishments in waking life, bring a degree of uncertainty to those accomplishments, making them less definitive—in a sense, even less necessary—after the fact. Fantasmatic failures at least partially free us from the limitations of actual success; they beneficently inject doubt into those successes, successes that the dreams move into an enlarged field of potentiality. We speak of dreams as being remembered, but we might more properly say that they are permanently *present* in consciousness once they take place. They act and correspond with everything that surrounds them. Our dreams belong to the single syntax of our mental being.

For the idea of a divided subject (the psychoanalytic version of the *res cogitans/res extensa* dualism) we might now substitute a notion of present consciousness as always including—processing, recategorizing—past thought and unconscious thought. The notion of memory allows us to sequester the past *in* the past, whereas remembering as a function of the oneness of being is always a project of present conscious thinking, a temporal thrusting forward. To argue for an ontological difference between consciousness

and the world, as well as for a divided self (divided both between consciousness and the unconscious and between past and present) is to nourish the illusion of consciousness as a site of control. As suggested earlier, the divided self would seem to defeat the prideful confidence in a unified subject always identical to itself. But the notion of that subject as only fitfully bruised, as it were, by an internal otherness intrinsically foreign to the mind in which it has been lodged keeps the otherness at a distance even at those moments when it most conspicuously disorients conscious thought. That distance objectifies the world, the unconscious, and the past, thereby fulfilling, we like to think, the precondition of appropriative knowledge. Much more difficult to master is an otherness inherent in the same, to the self-identical. In the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, G. W. F. Hegel writes that thinking has its otherness within itself.¹² This proposal might be taken as pointing to an ontology of the virtual. The inherent otherness of thought to itself is what prevents it from being fully realized. Thought differs before it can *be*.

It is, I should add, difficult to collapse the distances over which knowledge exercises its illusory mastery of otherness. In particular, the persistence of records, of a textual or documentary past, serves the belief in the reality of the past as a kind of distinct, bounded, knowable object. Or perhaps, even more consequentially, the persistence of the past as a retrievable text means that the illusion—the hope and the fear—of a real past can't stop haunting the virtual past, as if the notion of virtual being itself were nothing but a virtuality buried within realized being, an illusory potential for potentiality. Ultimately, there may be something undecidable about the status of what I have been describing as the incongruities of intrinsically unfinished, virtual being. How real is virtual being? And does the very ability to ask that question manifest an irreconcilable imbalance between the categories of reality and virtuality? To ask about the ontological status of the virtual is to risk having virtuality disappear into the question designed to establish its “reality.” Our mobility within the evolving oneness of our virtual being does not depend on an immobilizing knowledge of virtuality. And this perhaps also means that the notion of undivided yet permanently fragmented being is a utopic notion. We can, and should, will ourselves to be less than what we *are*; an expansive diminishing of being is the activity of a psychic utopia.

The neurobiologist Gerald Edelman speaks of the brain as continuously

12. See G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (New York, 1977), p. 34.

recategorizing, or reprocessing, its past.¹³ The past, never really lost, is, as Freud had already said in a letter to Wilhelm Fliess, subject to multiple retranscriptions; it is present several times over.¹⁴ The past does not persist in the form of unchanged foreign objects buried within the psyche; rather, we might think of mental time as a spiraling movement rather than a linear trajectory that leaves its past behind. We spiral forward in time, which means that moving forward is indistinguishable from a relooping movement backward. Our futures are relooped, spiraling pasts.¹⁵

It is in psychoanalytic treatment that we may find the clearest evidence of the persistence of a continuously recategorized past in the present. And yet there has been considerable ambiguity in psychoanalytic thinking about the status of the past in mental life. In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud gets into interesting trouble attempting to illustrate the affirmation that "in mental life nothing which has once been formed can perish—that everything is somehow preserved and that in suitable circumstances (when, for instance, regression goes back far enough) it can once more be brought to light." His famous analogy of the persistence of ancient Rome in modern Rome at first appears to support this straightforward declaration. A visitor will see the walls of Aurelian, as well as sections from the Servian wall almost unchanged and may even be able "to trace out in the plan of the city the whole course of that wall and the outline of the *Roma Quadrata*." To find ancient buildings as they were, however, is impossible, not only because "their place is now taken by ruins," but also because the ruins themselves are "of later restorations made after fires or destruction." "It is hardly necessary to remark," Freud goes on (although in fact nothing is *more* necessary to remark), "that all these remains of ancient Rome are found dovetailed into the jumble of a great metropolis which has grown up in the last few centuries since the Renaissance." The shakiness of the analogy is practically confessed to by Freud himself when he imagines what Rome would look like if it were not a city but "a psychical entity with a similarly long and copious past—an entity, that is to say, in which nothing that has once come into existence will have passed away and all the earlier phases of development continue to exist alongside the latest

13. See Gerald M. Edelman, *Bright Air, Brilliant Fire: On the Matter of the Mind* (New York, 1992). On memory as recategorization, see also Arnold H. Modell, *Other Times, Other Realities: Toward a Theory of Psychoanalytic Treatment* (Cambridge, Mass., 1996), esp. chaps. 10 and 16.

14. See Freud, letter to Wilhelm Fliess, 6 Dec. 1896, in *The Complete Letters of Sigmund Freud to Wilhelm Fliess 1887–1904*, trans. and ed. Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson (Cambridge, Mass., 1985), p. 207.

15. It should be clear by now that this essay is, for me, a recategorizing of some of my past thinking: a reactualizing of former work in the retranscribing context of my present emphasis on the oneness of being.

one.” Two examples: “Where the Coliseum now stands we could at the same time admire Nero’s vanished Golden House”; and “on the Piazza of the Pantheon we should find not only the Pantheon of to-day, as it was bequeathed to us by Hadrian, but, on the same site, the original edifice erected by Agrippa.” Clinging to his view that our psychic past persists intact “alongside” our psychic present, Freud abandons his analogy as “an idle game” and justifies his flawed comparison by giving it the virtue of showing us “how far we are from mastering the characteristics of mental life by representing them in pictorial terms.”¹⁶

Actually, the analogy isn’t that bad. It becomes useless only to the extent that Freud holds on to his view of the mind as composed of intact historical layers. In this view, the past remains alongside a present as distinct from it as, in Freud’s fanciful reconstruction of Rome, Santa Maria sopra Minerva would be from “the ancient temple over which it was built” (C, p. 18). The view of Rome as a jumble of past and present is closer to the topographical reality of both the Italian capital and the human psyche. Having spelled out the unavoidable truth that nothing remains unchanged in the history of a city, Freud then seems compelled to acknowledge that “even in mental life” the past is preserved exactly as it was lived in the past only if the brain has remained intact and “its tissues have not been damaged by trauma or inflammation”—or, we might say more accurately, only if its tissues have not been modified by time (C, p. 19).

Freud then turns to “what is after all a more closely related object of comparison—the body of an animal or a human being” (C, p. 19). But this analogy is dropped even more quickly, although, as in the comparison with Rome, the very unsuitability of the analogy points to the way that its original term—a mind in which nothing that has once been formed can perish—should be recategorized. While no one would claim that the body of a five-year-old boy continues to exist “alongside” that of a thirty-year-old man, it is nonetheless the case that all the earlier phases of development “have been absorbed into the later phases for which they have supplied the material” (C, p. 19). This absorption could be thought of as analogous to the “dovetailing” of the remains of ancient Rome into the jumble of a great modern metropolis. But Freud seems reluctant to acknowledge the way in which a presumably inaccurate analogy implicitly corrects (absorbs and recategorizes) the assertion the analogy was meant to illuminate. He repeats, perhaps a bit stubbornly: “The fact remains that only in the mind is . . . a preservation of all the earlier stages alongside of the final form

16. Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. and ed. Strachey (1930; New York, 1989), pp. 16, 17, 17–18, 18, 19; hereafter abbreviated C.

possible," and Freud concludes, perhaps a bit wistfully, that "we are not in a position to represent this phenomenon in pictorial terms" (C, pp. 19–20). But the pictorial representation has in fact at once negated and validated the original claim.

Psychic past is absorbed into psychic present in a manner analogous to the transformed presences of ancient Rome and an infant's body in present-day Rome and an adult body. It is as if Freud realized the startling aptness of his analogies when he makes the concession that "perhaps we are going too far in this," that is, in saying that we are unable to represent mental life in pictorial terms (C, p. 20). And so he ends this section of chapter one with an inconclusive conclusion, one that vacillates between the conflicting views of what psychic preservation might mean, a vacillation made imperative by the very analogies intended to strengthen the original thesis of the passage:

Perhaps we ought to content ourselves with asserting that what is past in mental life *may* be preserved and is not *necessarily* destroyed. It is always possible that even in the mind some of what is old is effaced or absorbed—whether in the normal course of things or as an exception—to such an extent that it cannot be restored or revived by any means; or that preservation in general is dependent on certain favourable conditions. It is possible, but we know nothing about it. We can only hold fast to the fact that it is rather the rule than the exception for the past to be preserved in mental life. [C, p. 20]

We might have traced a similar play between opposing points of view in Freud's 1937 paper, "Constructions in Analysis." There it is a question of the relation between historical truth and interpretive construction in analytic treatment. How are the patient and the analyst to determine the "correctness" of the analyst's construction of a piece of the patient's early history that the latter has forgotten? While recognizing the difficulty of recovering the patient's past as it was *in* the past and while affirming that even constructions unrelated to historical truth can achieve "the same therapeutic result as a recaptured memory," Freud nonetheless strains, throughout the essay, to locate where, among all the failures to recollect exactly what has been repressed, that elusive truth, or at least a parcel of it, has been lodged (displaced or distorted) in the patient's speech and how, consequently, it can be triumphantly retrieved by the analyst.¹⁷ Finally, with regard to the question of historical psychic truth in psychoanalysis, we should of

17. Freud, "Constructions in Analysis" (1937), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 23:266.

course also mention the most celebrated example of Freud's grappling with that question: his decision in 1897 to consider patients' stories of childhood seduction as fantasies rather than recollections.

I have focused on the passage from *Civilization and Its Discontents* for two reasons. First of all, it is an instructive example of the complex operation of analogy in Freud. Realizing that the comparison with Rome is leading him astray, Freud renounces (but, typically, doesn't erase) it, concluding that psychic time can't be represented in pictorial terms. But, as we have seen, the analogy does in fact work, but not in the way Freud intended. Interestingly, while it is presumably abandoned, the analogy seems to have a force of its own, redirecting the argument rather than merely illustrating it. It moves the argument forward by inaccurately replicating it. For all Freud's skepticism about the usefulness of pictorial terms in descriptions of mental structure, the discussion could be thought of as an unintended demonstration of the priority of visuality over abstraction (its effectiveness in the very passage in which that effectiveness is put into question) and, implicitly, the inseparability of perception and theory. The former operates not merely as an auxiliary of thought; it *is* a mode of thinking.

Second, the passage from *Civilization and Its Discontents* enacts, in a condensed form, the relation I have been arguing for between the past and present in mental life. Freud's final position recategorizes the position he begins with. By not erasing arguments that in the course of a single text risk being seriously modified or even repudiated, Freud allows us to follow in detail that absorption of the past into the present—more exactly, that reconfigured preservation of the past in the present—which the analysis enacts in treatment. In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, the analogical repetition of the original affirmation of the past's preservation in the present at once negates and preserves that affirmation. In the analytic cure, a real, retrievable past is negated in the very process of its being reconstituted or, better, in the process of its being constituted for the first time. Indeed, the therapeutic effect is perhaps brought about by this oneness of past and present, by an erasure inherent in its preservation, by a preservation inherent in its erasure.

The type of negation that authorizes what Hegel called "the mere 'Either—or' of understanding"¹⁸ institutes that discontinuity in mental life that leads to such notions as the divided self and the distinction between the present and a lost but intact and retrievable past. In psychoanalytic theory, repression has generally been understood as the activity separating

18. Hegel, *The Logic of Hegel*, trans. William Wallace (London, 1892), p. 180.

the conscious mind from the unconscious, the erecting of a barrier constitutive of a divided subject. But repression in psychoanalytic thought is itself inseparable from the return of the repressed. What has been negated by repression is restored to consciousness, made part of the nature of consciousness. Disagreement arises (within Freud himself and in subsequent analytic theory and practice) when the analyst, explicitly or implicitly, decides how to work with what has returned. Are symptoms, for example, to be treated as the ultimately disposable keys to the buried psychic realities they at once conceal and point to (the Kleinian inclination), or are symptoms the irreducible mental signifiers, signifying nothing beyond themselves (the Lacanian direction)? The disguises of symptom-formation may be the enrichment of what is presumably being hidden, the past's absorption into a continuously becoming present.

Psychic time is not a dialectical movement from one stage to another; its mobility, as I've suggested, is a spiraling that is neither forward nor backward, that is both forward and backward. Psychic time is unitary mobility. The very movement of thought that leads Freud to restate his original assertion as tentative ("what is past in mental life *may* be preserved") has in fact established the inescapability of the assertion. Nothing is lost in mental life. This does not mean that every thought, feeling, or impulse is always consciously realized. We could perhaps say that a mental event is virtualized *once it has already been*. What Hegel described as the otherness inherent in the immediacy of thought could be conceived of as a change of the ontological register. Having ceased to be, thought will ceaselessly begin to be. The present contains the virtualized future of our past.

In the 1817 *Encyclopedia* version of the *Logic*, Hegel writes: "Becoming always contains Being and Nothing in such a way, that these two are always changing into each other, and reciprocally canceling each other." Thus, he strikingly adds, "Becoming stands before us in utter restlessness." An utter but, at least so it would seem in this passage, unsustainable restlessness: since Being and Nothing vanish in Becoming, "the latter must vanish also. Becoming is, as it were, a fire, which dies out in itself, when it consumes its material." This consuming fire of Becoming is, Hegel specifies, identical with Being that "*has become*."¹⁹ In its inherent unfinishedness, however, the virtual never has become; rather, it can't stop becoming. The virtual is never finished with, or by, being. *It is nothing permanently in a state of becoming being*. Perhaps Freud's elaborate and changing architectures of mental life (the inner "housing" of conscious, preconscious, and unconscious as well as of the ego, the superego, and the id) was, at least implicitly,

19. Ibid., p. 170.

an effort to prevent the restless fire of mental time from dying out—a dying out that, however, he might have seen as continuously renewed and replenished virtuality. If a certain absent presence is integral to the evolving oneness of being, the incessant vanishing of mental events is inseparable from the multiplication of virtual connections, the proliferation of contacts within ourselves and with the world. Our unstoppable becoming is a permanent *availability* to being.