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## In the Interest of History

**ABSTRACT** Psychoanalysis is often wrongly perceived to be uninterested in history. Yet, as the most comprehensive and sophisticated basis for the exploration of human consciousness, the field of psychoanalysis, from its inception to the present, has continued to offer unprecedented insights into how we perceive, record, and share the complexities of temporality. The aim of this article is to demonstrate, with the help of various works by Walter Benjamin—works in which his attunement with psychoanalytic concepts is of special interest—that all historical writing must yield, in one way or another, to the post-Freudian description of the unconscious and its role in elaborating historians' interest in the historical as such.

**KEYWORDS** psychoanalysis, historiography, critique, autobiography, interpretation

You do not think. You dream. Dream all day long. Dream everything.  
Dream maliciously and incessantly. Don't you know that by now?

—Patrick Hamilton, *Angel Street*

Psychoanalysis began as an attempt to help patients who were, as Sigmund Freud and Josef Breuer put it in 1893, suffering “from reminiscences” (*SE* II: 7). The significance of this starting point for further psychoanalytic understandings of neurosis, trauma, dissociation, desire, fantasy, knowledge—and of mental functioning generally—cannot be overstated. Indeed, psychoanalysis inaugurated a new historical episteme—a new era of consciousness, in which individual and collective relations to the past, present, *and* future were permanently transformed. Along with the mentally ill, *all* of civilization's discontented—nostalgics, revanchists, melancholics, utopians, ideologues, reactionaries, reformers, dreamers, revolutionaries, misanthropes, and fantasists—have come to be understood, and have often been able better to understand themselves, as struggling with various aspects of the complex temporality of experience that psychoanalysis has introduced into the thought of history, including the historical present and the historical future.

Freud did not “discover” the unconscious. As he himself liked to say, the poets always “got there” before him. Saint Augustine, for example, in the fourth century CE, was well aware of the unconscious: “There are some things in man which even his own spirit within him does not know” (210–11). But what Freud and those after him have done is to help us learn to question “the very idea of the self as an object of knowledge.” In other words, psychoanalysis provides both the obligation and many of the best tools with which to live our lives as subjects (in every sense of the word) of uncertainty. Before Freud, the “self” most often *seemed* to be a problem of knowledge; so it seemed to Saint Augustine. After Freud, knowledge is itself the problem, and the ancient dictum “Know thyself!”—which had so often been questioned before—finally gives way, as Adam Phillips puts it, to “a radical and formative insufficiency, something that cannot be solved by knowledge. With the post-Freudian description of the unconscious, the idea of human completeness disappears. We are not in search of wholeness . . . we are in search of good ways of bearing our incompleteness” (7).

The aim of this article is to demonstrate, with the help of various works by Walter Benjamin in which his attunement with Freudian psychology is of special interest, that all historical writing must yield, in one way or another, to this “radical and formative insufficiency,” even as it often quite anxiously seeks to preempt potentially endless elaborations of the historian’s unruly, subjective investments in the past. The early insights of psychoanalysis helped Marxist and Progressive historians, including Benjamin, to dispel the Rankean naivete that had come to dominate Western historiography since the late nineteenth century. Yet, more recently, the prestige of the social sciences, the dawning of the computer age, and a lamentable mistrust of narrative history have all aided the widespread institutional entrenchment of social historians’ empiricist fixations. These fixations have continued, into our own time, to make the animations of subjective interest seem like insurmountable but unfortunate limitations on the historical enterprise, rather than what psychoanalysis helps show such interest to be: the project of history itself.

### Very Interesting

In economical, psychological, and philosophical terms, “interest” is often a trope for desperation: for a lack or surplus of interest, for interest’s malfunctioning or impotence, and for the tenuity both of interested self-states and of what is of interest to them. Regarding the phenomenology of interest, Heidegger (in what was originally a lecture delivered in 1951) complained about a lack of contemporary readiness to “learn thinking,” which in his view ought to begin, not with “thinking” as such but with affect or mood (*Thinking* 5).

Thinking should begin, that is, precisely with that which interrupts and frustrates all efforts (for example, in political or economic theory) to equate rational (self-)interest and disinterested (self-)knowledge. In Heidegger's own psychoanalytic formulation, interest must always be a matter of contestation, for how can we be certain of our interests when our ability to know *ourselves* is so limited and uncertain? How can we reliably judge our own interests when we cannot reliably judge our own desires, fears, and resistances? We cannot. Thus Dean Mathiowetz, following Heidegger, has aptly characterized "interest" as a medium of "contested self-constitution" (9).

One sign of this aptness is the sprawling interest in counterfactuals in contemporary discourse, from novels and films to philosophy, sociology, computer science, and history—an interest driven by the ramped up stakes of questions about both causation and contingency. Never before our post-nuclear, posttruth, post-Holocenic era has the relation between past, present, and future seemed so uncertain to so many. Never before has the authority of counterfactuals seemed more legitimate in so many different disciplines. Humanity's pressing concerns, not only with what might have been but also with what might otherwise be, range from the political and economic to the environmental and existential, and its tides of regret and longing have become tsunamis, straining the material resources of the planet along with the conceptual resources of semantics, epistemology, and metaphysics.

In the field of history, one of the reactions to these conceptual strains has been a resurgence of ontological realism—a resurgence, that is, of faith in an objective reality that exists independently of our modes of accessing it. This faith expresses itself in historiographical endorsements of naïve empiricism and in history writing that seeks its footing in events understood to exist prior to transcription and narration. Of course, no serious historian doubts that transcription and narration are subjectively conditioned—that historical "facts" are produced through interpretation. But many serious historians hold fast to the conviction that events themselves precede interpretation and thus that historical causation proceeds in a strictly linear, chronological fashion, from the event to interest in the event, including the historian's interest in transcribing and narrating it.

### **The Specularity of Interest**

These days, so many contemporary historians and historiographers espouse neo-Rankean forms of ontological realism—as if history were nothing more than narrativized data and as if historical method were nothing more than what Adorno calls "reconstruction, mere technique" (247)—that even the

most persuasive, archive-based speculative histories, such as those by Saidiya Hartman, tend either to be exiled to the remote precincts of intellectual history or to be exceptionalized as maverick or virtuoso. Indeed, Hartman herself anticipates this sort of reception in her recent essay on Esther Brown—an African American woman living in New York in the early twentieth century—by identifying her own work of speculative history with the accusations of “wayward” and “riotous” activity that fill the official archive of Brown’s life: “State violence, surveillance, and detention produce the archival traces and institutional records that inform the reconstruction of [lives like Brown’s]; but desire and the want of something better decide the contours of the telling.” Hartman’s own narrative, that is, “emulates the errant path of the wayward and moves from one story to another by way of encounter, chance meeting, proximity, and the sociality created by enclosure. It strives to convey the aspiration and longing of the wayward and the tumult and upheaval incited by the chorus” (470).

To tell the history of Esther Brown and of the “chorus” of women with whom she chanted and cried, in what was mere “din” to outsiders and to agents of the state, Hartman practices a method she dubs “critical fabulation” (470). This “wayward” term challenges both the fear of imagination (Lat. *fābula*: “story-telling”) and the resistance to critique that, together, characterize the forms of naïve empiricism currently dominating the profession of history writing—not to reject or obscure the “cold hard facts” (477) of the newspaper articles, personal correspondence, institutional documents, testimonies, prison records, interviews, and other archival materials Hartman’s research uncovered but rather to challenge the material and ideological premises (many of them quite factitious) of their matter-of-factness. To do so in the absence of a rich counterarchive requires imaginative labor of the sort that many historians are still all too quick to resent and to discredit as “literary,” as if “literary” were a synonym for “falsified,” or—to put a sharper, psychoanalytic point to it—as if identification and projection were akin to psychosis.

Insistence on ontological realism—and on the transparent meaning of what is simply “there”—functions among many contemporary historians like a reaction-formation: a defense, not only against the fear of being accused by other historians of wearing their psyches on their sleeves but also against the anxiety generated by the unconscious knowledge that telling anyone’s history means telling some version of one’s own. The critique of objectivity—in Kantian terms, the critical investigation of the perceived need to distinguish between objectivity and subjectivity—has been a collective working-through of the defensive reaction-formation that insists on

cleaving to ontological realism in the writing of history. Modern historiography was inaugurated in the simultaneously enabling and constraining context of the critique of objectivity, and, ever since the late eighteenth century, the vicissitudes of critique have kept the fate of the past from falling permanently into anyone's hands. This has been unsettling for all concerned, and various consequential contestations have been staged. The one that has occupied us most strenuously in recent decades pits the desire to drive a wedge between the empirical and the theoretical against the desire to harmonize them. As in every such contest, there are skilled players on both sides as well as those who persist in trying to change the rules of the game.

The crucial point is that all such players are actual existents—human beings with full subjectivities of their own. For there will always be those who will forget or deliberately ignore the fact that behind every history there is a *histōr*, someone giving an account of their inquiries, and that both the inquiry and the account are conducted by people in particular social and historical circumstances. The historian is not, as some enjoy pretending, a figure of pure immediacy and disinterestedness but an individual with a specific history of subjectivation for which that historian (just like anyone else) is and will remain accountable. This accountability, when recognized, very understandably generates ambivalence, even among players on the side of the “harmonizers”—such as Joan Wallach Scott, for example, as she contemplates the fate of the papers she herself has contributed to Brown University's Feminist Theory Papers archive: “When I think about the uses to which my artifacts could be put, I become the worst kind of objective historian, insisting on the transparent meaning of what's there . . . a legitimacy I want preserved on my terms” (*Fantasy* 146). But Scott knows that others, including other harmonizers, are likely to resist such awareness of their own defense mechanisms, and this prompts her, elsewhere and in a more urgent tone, to inveigh against the sidelining of critical theory by the “wedge-drivers” and thus

to call attention to what seems to me to be an increasingly evident tendency among scholars who know they have been influenced by poststructuralist theory to minimize that critical influence, to describe it as simply one among many “methodologies” that has been used to advance empirical projects that are now taken to be the primary object of research and writing. The minimization of poststructuralist influence and the denial of its epistemological position (one that, among other things, insists on *the necessary interconnection between the theoretical and the empirical*) takes place under the sign of eclecticism. (“Against Eclecticism” 114; emphasis added)

Scott's term, "poststructuralist theory," designates a very large and unfixed canon of post-WWII theoretical (i.e., interrogative and propositional) writings that share, if nothing else, a commitment to reflect on the (shifting) grounds of their own possibility.

In Scott's essay, Derrida is the representative figure for what she and others also call "critique." But many other suitable figures could be invoked, including Roland Barthes, Judith Butler, Gilles Deleuze, Umberto Eco, Michel Foucault, Julia Kristeva, Jean-Luc Nancy, Richard Rorty, and Bernard Stiegler—figures who, for all their idiosyncrasies and clashes with one another, tend to be strategically homogenized by the "wedge-drivers" in service of their defense mechanisms. One such historian (like Scott, a skilled player and a leading scholar of Native American history) worries that "to go all the way with the postmodernists is to reject the *entire* historical enterprise—not just Indian history—as a hopeless discourse of meaningless texts talking to meaningless texts; no document or oral tradition could ever provide useful evidence about the world outside itself" (Richter 386). Richter's skittishness about "going all the way" and his hyperbolic rhetoric of *rejection*, *entirety*, *hopelessness*, and *meaninglessness* are familiar signs of the anxiety that can beset even the smartest wedge-driver's unconscious resistance to the wish to relinquish, as Scott is more or less able to do, the cumbersome fantasy of control.

In her embrace of other kinds of fantasy, Hartman, one of the rule-changers, goes so far as to make her own imagined accountability the primary subject of her accounts of the past. Speculation, fantasy, identification, projection, and countertime all have both evidentiary and methodological significance for her historical work, which resolutely defies the generic boundaries between history and autobiography that much recent historiographical work, such as Jaume Aurell's monograph on "historians' autobiographies," seeks to maintain, not least by commending the effort to preserve "epistemological distance" from the subjects of their properly historical writing. In Aurell's view, "historians turn to autobiography, as philosophers do to poetry and literary critics to history, to learn not only about other people and the past but also about themselves and the present" (2)—as if these "turns" were matters of recreation or truancy. When, one wants to ask, have literary critics had to "turn" to history? And is the writing of philosophy, from Empedocles to Nietzsche, not frequently poetic in both substance and form? As an objectivist, Aurell is surprised and impressed to discover that so many eminent historians have elected to face "the difficulties that practicing this new genre—and a very subjective one—has brought them" (3). Yet he seems unwilling to engage—and does not even mention—

scholarship, such as Hartman's *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (2007), that participates in both genres simultaneously. Nor does he offer any account of the prodigious work of recent speculative historians, such as Robert N. Bellah's *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age* (2011) and Steven Mithen's *After the Ice: A Global Human History, 20,000–5000 BC* (2004).

### Walter Benjamin's Dream of Time

Remarkably, Aurell also bypasses Benjamin, one of the twentieth century's greatest historiographers, critical theorists, *and* autobiographers, who famously observed that one might "speak of an unforgettable life or moment even if all men had forgotten it. If the nature of such a life or moment required that it be unforgotten, that predicate would not imply a falsehood but merely a claim not fulfilled by men, and probably also a reference to a realm in which it *is* fulfilled" (*Illuminations* 70). As Benjamin fully appreciated, one such realm of forgotten fulfillment is the unconscious. Indeed, for Benjamin, history is to be understood as a dream of time, and historians have to be willing to take on "the task of dream interpretation" (*Arcades* 464). By making a fetish of genre, scholars like Aurell not only suppress the fundamental intersectionality of history and autobiography but also seek to shore up the objectivist's barrier between the psychodynamics of autobiography and the "real empirical research" (Aurell 187) of history.

In contrast, Scott, Hartman, and other nonobjectivist historians understand that the task of interpreting history's dream of time cannot begin unless and until the events, texts, and other artifacts of "real empirical research" are recognized as being just as overdetermined, in the psychoanalytic sense, as the historian's interest in interpreting them. That is, ceremonies, ledger-entries, and fossils are as fully overdetermined as a historian's fantasy or projection; fossil and fantasy alike are condensations of multiple ideations, images, associations, and meanings that exceed their ipseity. A fantasy is as real as a fossil, even though the fantasy cannot be grasped in the same manner; and a fossil is as potent as a fantasy in its resistance to disaffected objectification. History itself, understood as the narration of events that have taken place, cannot, as Freud argued, be fully explained by "impersonal factors." For "each event," he continues, "seems to be overdetermined and proves to be the effect of several convergent causes. Frightened by the immense complication of events, our investigations take the side of one correlation as against another and set up contradictions which do not exist but have only arisen owing to a rupture of more comprehensive relations" (*SE* XXIII: 107–8).

Freud makes it quite clear, here and elsewhere, that he is not espousing the sort of radical, amoral relativism that many detractors of “postmodernism” have sought to wield as a blunt weapon against critical theory. He is writing about the historiographic need to properly recognize and account for the overdetermination of “each event”—which is precisely what, even before Freud published the passage above (in *Moses and Monotheism* [1939]), Benjamin had already described in the following way, employing a very Freudian archaeological analogy for what he called the historians’ need

to return always and again to the same body of fact, scattering it about as you scatter about earth, turning it over as you turn the earth. For bodies of fact are but strata, layers, which disclose to the most painstaking investigation alone whatever constitutes the true valuables hiding within the interior of the earth: The images which, once having been pried free of all earlier contexts, lie as precious objects *in the sober chambers of our late understanding*. . . . [T]he cautious touch of the probing spade in dark soil remains indispensable, and whoever preserves in his notes only the inventory of finds and not *this dark joy at the very site of his finding*, too, denies himself the best part of it. (*Berlin Chronicle*, 52–53; emphasis added)

Contemporary speculative historians take their cue, one way or another, from these always-ready-to-be-returned-to sources. Christopher Tomlins, for example, in his recent speculative history of Nat Turner and the Turner Rebellion, describes marshalling “empirical evidence” to “conjecture” with scrupulous reflexivity about the phenomena whose oft-told history he seeks to write anew (xvi–xvii). Conjecture and speculation, as practiced by scholars like Tomlins and Hartman, have become at least partially legitimized historical methodologies because, from a psychoanalytic perspective, they are *predicates* of understanding.

### The Necessity of Psychoanalysis

The notion that our current episteme is fundamentally psychoanalytic remains controversial, and not only among historians. Such controversy is healthy, to the extent that it is well informed—not least because psychoanalysis is no unified, static model of the mind but rather a complex system of thought in which constantly evolving schema of clinical practice and metapsychological insight continue to be subject to revision, retesting, and reconceptualization. As Joan Scott admits, she herself came quite late to the serious study of psychoanalysis. Once having done so, however, she quickly recognized how crucial psychoanalytic thinking is to any historical methodology that would refuse “the conflation of social construction with



subjectivity”—a necessary refusal, because social construction “presumes an external causality for the constitution of subjects that is challenged by the operations of the unconscious in the formation of individual subjects” (“Psychoanalysis”). Still, far too many otherwise capable intellectuals persist in equating psychoanalysis with Freud’s (largely unread) corpus, or they assume that psychoanalytic theory has remained more or less unchanged since the epoch of Lacan’s seventh seminar. Even those scholars of history and literature who are devoted to critique often fail to recognize that psychoanalysis is, in one way or another, the epistemic foundation of the oeuvres of all the critical theorists they most admire (see, e.g., Allen). Very few twenty-first-century literature departments (in the United States) ask their students to read further than Freud and Lacan, and even fewer history departments offer courses on psychohistorical methodologies. (The discipline of psychology, having recast itself as an empirical social science, has almost entirely banished psychoanalysis from the curriculum.) And only a handful of humanists have been paying close attention to the dramatic reconvergence, over the past three decades, of psychoanalysis and neuroscience (Freud’s original field), giving rise to the new field of neuropsychology.

For the more objectively minded and/or temperamentally self-effacing historians who remain thoroughly skeptical of psychoanalysis as our best-yet-descriptive and dynamic model of the mind, it will perhaps come as welcome news that, since the 1990s, advances in neurophysiology and neurochemistry have harmonized with many aspects of the psychoanalytic model. Freud, a neurologist by training, was forced in the late nineteenth century to break from what was then an extremely rudimentary science of the mind—one that had yet to understand even the most basic workings of neurons themselves, and that, until quite recently, has perversely refused to study the single most important aspect of human mental functioning: subjectivity. But, at last, neuroscience—and, specifically, the field now known as neuropsychology—has begun to do what Freud always predicted it someday would: help confirm the clinical findings and theoretical propositions that he and others have been expanding and refining for well over a century. For example: the fundamental psychoanalytic premise that most of our thoughts and feelings are unconscious has both prompted and helped describe the findings of recent neurological investigations of the brain’s limbic system; examination of the workings of the brain’s frontal lobe executive control systems provides a neurological groundwork for what psychoanalysis understands as conscious, or “secondary-process” thinking; the brain’s dopaminergic seeking systems behave much like operations of what Freud called “libido”; and lapses or losses in frontal executive control of mesocortical and

mesolimbic seeking systems manifest in what Freud dubbed the royal-road to the unconscious—dreams—and in other forms of “primary-process” thinking.

Speaking and working across the fields of neuroscience and psychoanalysis continues to be challenging, and many professionals in both fields remain skeptical of the endeavor. Yet, whatever else it is, neuropsychology is not a zero-sum game: contemporary neuroscience has not set out to “replace” psychoanalysis nor is psychoanalysis merely waiting for neuroscience to “catch up” with what it already knows. Rather, researchers in both fields have begun in earnest to unite their efforts in reciprocal, mutually enhancing work on clinical, scientific, and theoretical fronts, better to pursue the study of human subjectivity in ways unfettered by the rigidity of earlier mind/brain distinctions.<sup>1</sup> And psychologically inclined historians who want to avoid the functionalist opportunism of neurohistorical speculators like Daniel Smail and Lynn Hunt can now look to the field of neuropsychology for evidence-based insights into *interest itself* as an evolutionary achievement—one that affords us the *pleasurable anticipation* of discovering resources necessary for survival and success and, as such, is the foundation of our brains’ meaning-making activities. As Heidegger put it long ago, “understanding is grounded primarily in . . . anticipation” (*Being and Time* 321). Much more recently, Jason Wright and Jaak Panksepp, whose research on the neural mechanisms of emotion helped establish the field of “affective neuroscience” and the foundations of neuropsychology, posited the existence of a neural “seeking system” that, when chemically or electronically aroused, promotes a psychological state “of positive euphoria accompanied by increased engagement with all of the life-supporting ‘affordances’ of the world” (9). This psychological manifestation of neural “seeking” is what we, like Heidegger and Benjamin, mean by “interest,” which we experience as a combination of spontaneous excitation and the purposeful maintenance of a state of heightened awareness of and openness to various internal or external objects.

One of Panksepp’s crucial observations is that this seeking system—which links emotions, thoughts, sensations, and internal and external objects—is subject to vicissitudes that can lead away from, as well as toward, what might be considered in a given time and place, cogent, shared representations of reality. And extreme overstimulation and overtaxing of the seeking system, Wright and Panksepp note, are associated with hypomania, delusion, and even psychosis (29). For, like all mental processes, interest—as manifested by neural seeking systems—operates on a continuum and is associated with a wide variety of subjective states, or self-states, and it helps condition the affective linkages at play in the storage, retrieval, and reconsolidation of memories in and through language.

## Benjamin's History of His Own Making

Of his early discovery of the pliancy of words in relation to external objects and of his fervent interest in perceiving similarities, Benjamin writes: "If, in this way, I distorted both myself and the world, I did only what I had to do to gain a foothold in life" (*Berlin Chronicle* 131). Such "distortions," in other words, are both adaptive and meaningful. The "line" of history, along with all of its potentially meaningful "affordances" (or "footholds"), is always already "distorted," which means that the work of history must proceed with an awareness—an awareness best articulated in psychoanalytic terms—of our subjective interest in redeeming those distortions. "We can never entirely recover," Benjamin writes, "what has been forgotten. And this is perhaps a good thing. The shock of repossession would be so devastating that we would immediately cease to understand our longing. But we do understand it; and the more deeply what has been forgotten lies buried within us, the better we understand this longing" (140). To understand our "longing," our interest, is the work of history—thus Heidegger's interest in history, not as mere antiquarianism but as a vital concern for *unrealized possibilities in the past* and their relation to *unresolved problems of living in the present*. For Heidegger, thinking is always a form of remembrance, a remembrance of what has yet to be thought, an effortful overcoming of what he calls *Seinsvergessenheit*.

In his autobiographical work, *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, Benjamin describes walking through the city as a child and "planting" himself in various places where calamitous "events" had recently occurred. He did so, he tells us, "in order to steep my senses in the evanescent breath which the event had left behind" (106). His autobiographical interest in the Berlin of his childhood leads him to this (and other) recollections of the history of his interest as such, which he experiences—and recalls experiencing—in one or another particular, contingent self-state whose transience or evanescence is a sign, not of its facticity but of its authenticity. Benjamin's autobiography teaches us that it is in the interest of history to approach the past from a psychoanalytic—and, latterly, neuropsychanalytic—perspective, precisely because history, all history, is the history of our interest in it.

Yet the genre of autobiography still occupies an uneasy place with respect both to history and to psychoanalysis: to the field of history, because of the tensions it amplifies regarding the nature and relation of the objective and the subjective; to the field of psychoanalysis, because of the legal and ethical demands of privacy and the need to preserve the integrity of clinical experience. Yet this same uneasiness is also an index of autobiography's pervasive implication in the narratives both fields generate, including the historiographical

and metapsychological stories they tell, as it were, about themselves. In our own time, psychoanalysis no longer occupies the authoritative position it once, briefly, did in certain domains of literary and even historical studies. Societal and cultural changes help account for this—changes that include the economically driven shift away from psychodynamic psychotherapies toward behaviorism and psychopharmacology, the resurgence of identity politics, and the superannuation of the psychoanalytic profession. In clinical and academic environments, psychoanalysis has been driven to the margins by the prestige of the physical sciences, the “post”-postmodern reaction against critical theory, and, especially, the widespread intellectual clamor for empirical, evidence-based research in the humanities. Yet at the disciplinary margin of history, autobiography (in which literary, popular, and commercial interest has never been higher) pushes back against naïve empiricism and, precisely in the interest of history, could further help illuminate the participation of contemporary historicisms in what Jacques Derrida calls “resistances of psychoanalysis” (*Resistances*)—that is, both the nature of the resistances that psychoanalysis seeks to understand and to work through the various forms of resistance to psychoanalytic inquiry manifested by so many contemporary historians themselves.

Indeed, many of Derrida’s own efforts to deconstruct logical positivism begin with autobiography, including his exacting readings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Confessions* as a work that is at once literary, historical, and philosophical and that participates in—that has an *interest* in—each of these discourses and in the *interested*, often counterfactual, thinking that governs not only its signifying structure but also both its writer’s and reader’s relation to what may go “unperceived” (*Of Grammatology* 158). What may go unperceived, along with what comes to be acknowledged to have been perceived, are operations of the unconscious that must themselves be recognized as historical. That is, they are fully immanent to what Walter Benjamin calls “the concrete historical situation of the *interest* [*Interesse*] taken in the object” (*Arcades* 391). In other words, the “interest” of the historian in an object of study—like that of the philosopher and the literary critic—is a consequence of the historian’s own subjectivation, including the formative consequences of the “epistemophilic instinct” that Freud postulated in his theories of childhood sexuality and obsessional neuroses (*SE X*: 245). By itself, Freud’s own epistemological project does not, of course, define or delimit historicism as such. But it does offer compelling support for a practice of history that eschews what Georg Lukács, shortly before Freud’s death, rebuked as “the pseudo-historicism of the mere authenticity of individual facts” (166). Here, Lukács is referring to the genre of the historical novel, but his critique of both

the scientific reduction of qualitative experience to quantitative data and the naïve historicism of relentless temporal separation is framed, like psychoanalysis, in service of the *interests* of actual, not merely or nominally fictive, persons.

The complexity of Benjamin's appeal to "interest" has never been fully acknowledged. Indeed, Benjamin's other fundamentally psycho-historical concepts of "dream," "phantasmagoria," and "awakening" have only recently begun to receive serious attention (see, e.g., Stewart). His understanding of the historian's "interest" is that it is neither wholly endogamous nor wholly exogamous; it arises and exists in relation to both social structure and individual consciousness; it is neither the deep spring of the historian's desire nor is it a shallow reflection of some common good. Instead, Benjamin unites the perspectives of the psychoanalytic thinker and the historical materialist, blasting apart the rigidly doctrinaire historicism of "collective *versus* individual" history and bringing together historical materialism and the ethics of subjectivation. As Marx puts it: "Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please in circumstances they choose for themselves" (32). For Benjamin, in his unique synthesis of Marxism, psychoanalysis, and messianism, the historian's relation to the past exists by way of "interest," which, as a word—in Benjamin's and Marx's German as in English—derives from the Latin word *interresse* ("to concern, make a difference, be of importance"), meaning literally "to be between" (*inter* + *esse*). Interest, in this radical sense, finds its meaning not merely in the calculating form of its rationality but also in the contestatory form of its subjectivity—for example, in Freud's Oedipal scenario, in which the child's interest in both mother and father is at once self-regarding and irrational; driven instinctually to interest (seduce, please, satisfy, obey, challenge) both parents, the child seeks to drive them apart from each other, to interrupt their interest in each other ("I hate their love," writes Mohamed Choukri of his parents in his autobiography [26]), so as "to be between" them, to survive rather than to be dangerously and frustratingly excluded from the bright circle of *their* interest, despite the various risks that captivating parental interest always entails.

One of these risks has to do with both parents' responses to the child's "epistemophilic instinct." Children's efforts to pursue their interest in their parents (their bodies, their relationship with each other, their sexual behaviors, etc.) may be either inhibited or encouraged, punished or rewarded, in ways that are potentially of tremendous consequence for their future intellectual lives. That the desire for knowledge is a developmental achievement of early childhood is one of the insights into the historian's "interest" that Benjamin ruminates in his reworking of the contents of his *Berlin Chronicle*

*Notices* into his more conventionally autobiographical account, *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, completed in 1938. Many of Benjamin's vignettes, or images, of his earliest memories illuminate the sorts of protractions and interruptions that constitute any child's fitfully advancing knowledge of the parental world. For example, in the "*Berlin Chronicle*" *Notices*, Benjamin reports being awakened one night by his father, who had entered his bedroom to deliver—"half against his will, I believe"—news of the death of a cousin, "an older man who meant nothing to me" (131). His father shares with him a very detailed account, and Benjamin implies that it is the meaningfulness of some aspect of the man's death that prompts or compels his father to tell him far more than he can, or cares to, absorb. Still, Benjamin recalls storing away "an impression of my room and my bed . . . the way you scrutinize a place with greater care when you sense that one day you will have to search there for something you have forgotten" (132). The child, in other words, registers that something is odd and thus notable, not *in* his father's discourse, but *about* it, something "half against his will," something "forgotten" that will have to be retrieved. It was only many years later, Benjamin tells us, that "I learned what that was. Here, in this room, my father had 'forgotten' one piece of the death-news: That the disease was called syphilis." (132). Benjamin's ironizing of the word "forgotten" draws full attention to his sense of the overdetermined nature of the forgotten piece of information. In the later, *Berlin Childhood* version, Benjamin omits this direct reference to his father's amnesia. However, he adds the rather disaffected speculation that his father, "in order not to be alone," had sought out "my room . . . and not me" (86) as if to hint at their later alienation from each other.

The vignette stirs up many questions: What is his father's interest in the salacious detail, or in telling his son the story from which it is omitted, or in his son's future discovery of what he had "forgotten" to include? And what is the relation between Benjamin's own interest, as a child, in the inferred significance of the otherwise unmemorable story and Benjamin's later interest in the recollection and narration of this particular memory? If, in Benjamin's own words, "the mysterious work of remembering" is nothing less than "the power of making endless interpolations into what has been" (*Berlin Chronicle* 28), then what is his interest in exercising such power in this instance? Indeed, what remnants of a child's phallic striving might stir such an interest, not only in the past but also in the present of the past, in relation to a father with whom he had been (prior to his death in 1926) so frequently at odds?

Such remnants are found in the comical sketch of his father's frustration with their newly installed telephone, which is cast in distinctly Oedipal terms: the schoolfriends who call young Walter in the afternoon turn the

phone's ring into "an alarm signal that menaced . . . my parents' midday nap," as if the son himself had burst in on them, in the manner of a primal scene. Yet it is not only the "nap" that is "menaced," he tells us, but also "the historical era that underwrote and enveloped this siesta" (*Berlin Childhood* 49)—a historical era (the nineteenth century) that, for Benjamin, "contains the whole distorted world of childhood" (133). This, his own former "abode . . . now lies hollow before me like an empty shell." "I hold it to my ear," he tells us, as if it were a kind of telephone receiver and the voice on the other end of the wire, not his father's, but his own future voice, calling to awaken him from the world in which he remains his father's child (132).

The trope of awakening concentrates Benjamin's thoughts on memory and conscious knowledge of the past in his *Arcades Project*, where its structure "yields," as he puts it, "before an unending variety of concrete states of consciousness conditioned by every conceivable level of wakefulness within all possible centers" (389). His explicitly psychoanalytic analysis of the structure of awakening anticipates, here, what later psychoanalytic theorists would call "self-states" and for whom, as for Benjamin, the trope of awakening would help account for the dynamics of intersubjective (social) as well as intrapsychic experience. The concept of "self-states" emerged in the clinical practice and theoretical writing of (chiefly) Philip Bromberg, Jody Messler Davies, and Donnel Stern, building on a number of much earlier, underdeveloped concepts including Pierre Janet's emphasis (in 1889) on the primacy of dissociation, Freud's notion of "part-egos" (*SE IX*: 150), and W. R. D. Fairbairn's observations on the multiplicity of ego states. Since the 1990s, Bromberg, Davies, Stern, and others have published numerous clinically grounded and metapsychologically astute books and articles premised on a nonmonadic, dissociative model of subjectivity. As Bromberg puts it most fundamentally: "Self-states are what the mind comprises. Dissociation is what the mind does" (*Awakening* 2).

Bromberg elaborates an understanding of the self "as decentered, and the mind as a configuration of shifting, nonlinear, discontinuous states of consciousness in an ongoing dialectic with the healthy illusion of a unitary selfhood" (*Standing* 270). And he suggests that what we have long been used to calling "the unconscious" might be more usefully described as a "suspension or deterioration of linkages between self-states, preventing certain aspects of self—along with their respective constellations of affects, memories, values and cognitive capacities—from achieving access to the personality within the same state of consciousness" (*Standing* 182). Intersubjectively, as well as intrapsychically, self-states are engaged in a form of dialogue that Bromberg, like Benjamin, associates with the structure of awakening. Indeed, one of Brom-

berg's books is called *Awakening the Dreamer*, by which he does not mean to evoke the rousing of a benighted patient's slumbering unconscious by a classically alert and controlling analyst but rather "a multitude of processes whereby shifting self-states in the patient, and in the analyst, come forward onto the stage of intersubjective dialogue, generating greater self-state coherence in both parties" (22). In Bromberg's structure of "awakening," the dissociative gap between a sleep state and a waking state is only one among innumerable possible dissociative gaps between different self-states, and it is in the spaces *between* different self-states that we may most often find ourselves "standing"—not rigidly, but actively taking our stand, as we seek to know the tenebrous forms of continuity we require to live in and with the world.

Benjamin's account, in *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, of his experience of distorted relations between ego and world (e.g., his projection and identification with inanimate objects and his difficulty finding or producing an image of himself) is not a mere recollection of the past—a notion of memory he himself eschewed—but a coming forward onto Bromberg's "stage of intersubjective dialogue" of a childhood self-state and a recollective self-state. In this light, the narrated continuity of a life, or what we call "autobiography," is an account of one's contingent efforts to generate sufficient self-state coherence, where "sufficiency" can only be judged subjectively and where "life" consists largely of casting about for ways to realize, often retrospectively, the pursuit of one's interests.

### **Conditional Interest and Historical Imagination**

All "lives," like all lives, are, of course, largely counterfactual. Human beings are engines of irrealities: fantasies, confirmation-biases, psychic defense mechanisms and dissociative states, ideologies and belief-systems, states of desire, disgust, ecstasy, optimism, and shame, vicissitudes of temperament, genetic predispositions, "unformulated experience" (Stern), and even "unexperienced experience" (Blanchot 67). We make the world, and one another, up as we go—not as fiction but as what Jacques Lacan calls the "symbolic order," the term by which he refers to the social world generally and, more specifically, to that world as it is ordered by language. Focusing on the symbolic dimension of lived experience can help us to understand more keenly the "made up" (but not "fictive") quality of human experience, as Benedict Anderson did so influentially in his study of modern nation-states as "imagined communities." Lacan's theory of the symbolic order, as he himself came to realize late in his career, was hampered by its underestimation of the centrality to human experience of all that resists, thwarts, or escapes signification, including the ways



in which the intelligibility of the symbolic is forever being subverted by the gaps, or aporias, inherent in language itself—the instances of recalcitrance to meaning to which meaning-making systems can help us testify, but which they cannot necessarily solve (with laws) or even cogently formulate (with symbols). Yet, even though our relation to the symbolic order is less passive and more complex than Lacan initially thought, we nevertheless remain its subjects, and thus there can be no certain way of understanding any utterance, sensation, judgment, symptom, triumph, relationship, satisfaction, or ordeal *that is predicated on its facticity*. Indeed, facticity, or matter-of-factness, is the slipperiest of predicates. As Robert Frost puts it: “The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows” (26)—a line that rings true, despite making (or perhaps because it makes) mincemeat of commonsense distinctions between the concrete and the abstract—neatly epigrammatizing imagination’s centrality to our manipular contact with the world, including the concretions of language itself. To live in a world of pure facticity (as if it were possible even to imagine such a thing) would be to enter the maw of fire that some of us still picture as hell. Without the symbolic order, there would be nothing but conflagration. Hell would be real.

Instead, we have the hellishness of regret to contend with. In his essay on the shortness of life, “De brevitae vitae,” Seneca asks us to “look back in memory and consider . . . how many have robbed you of life when you were not aware of what you were losing” (295). For most of us, this is a superfluous injunction; we already spend far too much time looking back in precisely this way, scanning the past for someone else to blame for our missed opportunities. Autobiographical writing is uniquely susceptible to this all-too-human, all-too-serious frivolity. Indeed, many autobiographies function chiefly as its alibi—Oscar Wilde’s *De Profundis*, for example, with its perseverance on the series of larcenies, both petty and grand, by which Lord Alfred Douglas robbed him of his splendid life and, ultimately, his liberty. Sooner or later, we all discover that to recount a life is to be brought face-to-face, repeatedly, with what once would have been better choices, better paths. If only one had known! If only the right person had been there to light the way! Anticipating the rekindling of regret, Rousseau ends the perambulatory opening of his *Confessions* with a wistful meditation on “the lot that would naturally have been mine if I had fallen into the hands of a better master,” advising the reader that the rest of his book is one long dilation on “*instead of which*” (42–43; emphasis added). Edmund Gosse has less patience with his second-guesses, reprimanding himself for what he calls, in *Father and Son*, his “vain and trivial speculations”—speculations on how much happier his mother’s life might have been had she not repressed her story-telling

instinct and perhaps, implicitly, on what his own life would have been like, had he not largely repressed certain sexual instincts of his own (49). Similarly hard on himself, Behrouz Boochani, in *No Friend but the Mountains*, condemns as “worthless” his desire, while contemplating his mortality, “to interpret a counterfactual occurrence; that is, reflect deeply on something that might have occurred in the past—but in fact didn’t” (76).

Other autobiographers are less prone to condemn in themselves what is so common to all: the desire that life could yet be something we had differently lived. “Somewhere in the world,” Lauren Slater writes, “if you pressed the right keys, or the right combination of keys, there would be thunder and Mozart, and more; there would be all you’d craved but been too clenched to take, soft songs you could sleep to, chords like a hammock, maybe, and a hand to hold, the way time slows in a tub. If you knew the right notes” (19). In *Lying*, of course, Slater revels in what might or might not be her pathological tendency to blur all distinctions between what might have been and what actually was. But one may also confer on lying the presumptive dignity of literary fiction—an ethical sleight-of-hand nowhere better exposed than in Toni Cade Bambara’s “A Sort of Preface” to *Gorilla, My Love*:

It does no good to write autobiographical fiction cause the minute the book hits the stand here comes your mama screamin how could you and sighin death where is thy sting and she snatches you up out your bed to grill you about what was going down back there in Brooklyn when she was working three jobs and trying to improve the quality of your life and come to find on page 42 that you were messin around with that nasty boy up the block and breaks into sobs and quite naturally your family strolls in all sleepy-eyed to catch the floor show at 5:00 A.M. but as far as your mama is concerned, it is nineteen-forty-and-something and you ain’t too grown to have your ass whupped. . . . So I deal in straight-up fiction myself, cause I value my family and friends, and mostly cause I lie a lot anyway. (ix-x)

Bambara’s “straight-up fiction” is a sly oxymoron, evoking the undiluted strength of whiskey without ice: not watered-down truth masquerading as a liquor never brewed but life right from the bottle, on which a misleading label has been slapped (“cause I lie a lot anyway”). Bambara implies that her lying, unlike Slater’s, is intentional, volitional; she lies because she can, not because she cannot help it or because she cannot distinguish between lies and truths. But both writers are taking a similar kind of pleasure in shaking the reader’s tree, with the slightly scandalous reminder (as reminders of the obvious usually are) that prevarication is part of the truth of everyone’s

experience and, thus, that autobiography, as Derrida puts it, always “takes place between fiction and truth” (*Demeure* 16).

This “place,” or “taking-place,” “between fiction and truth” is strongly associated, not only with the tradition of confession but also with the testimonial place or space of sufferance and suffering where people are engaged to tell the truth of their experience and, thus, the place or space of all the forms of perjury, falsification, lying, silencing, amnesia, and denial to which all testimony remains forever open (*Demeure* 29–30). Every autobiographer who testifies to her ipseity is a witness to her own testimony—perhaps a secret witness, perhaps a multitude of witnesses, each in its own time, situation, and mood; each in its own relation to each of the other witnesses, if we regard them, as contemporary psychoanalysis invites us to do, as individual self-states, who may or may not trust or even believe (in) one another.

Nostalgic self-states protect us from thinking too exclusively in terms of remote conditionals. By dwelling sentimentally on what was, we can avoid perseverating on what might have been, which is an especially handy defense for autobiographical writers, who must somehow face, or efface, the various ill-considered actions and lamented outcomes that populate all of our pasts and that scar so many of us with the lacerations of regret. Benjamin Franklin—a man who seems never to have suffered very keenly from regret—observed that an autobiography may be thought of as an opportunity for “a Repetition of the same Life from its Beginnings, only asking the Advantage Authors have in a second Edition to correct some Faults of the first” (9). Franklin’s preferred term for such faults was “errata,” and, skilled printer that he was, he often likened living to the composition of a book. For the most part, the “errata” of his life—the ones, at any rate, that he shares in his autobiography—are trivial. The greatest exception is his account of the death of his son Francis: “In 1736 I lost one of my Sons, a fine Boy of 4 Years old, by the Smallpox taken in the common way. I long regretted bitterly and still regret that I had not given it to him by Inoculation. This I mention for the Sake of Parents, who omit that Operation on the Supposition that they should never forgive themselves if a Child died under it; my Example showing that the Regret may be the same either way” (96). The poignancy of loss is compounded here by Franklin’s uncharacteristically glum implication that the correction of an erratum may be just another erratum; even if he could have gone back in time to inoculate his son, the boy might still have died.

Franklin’s own death, in 1790, left his autobiography unfinished. Around the same time, the neologism “autobiography” itself began to migrate from German to English, French, and other European languages, just as—one notes with interest—the term “nostalgia,” which had been coined (also in

Germany) in 1688 by the Swiss physician Johannes Hofer, began to lose its distinctly nosological categorization as a disease. Hofer had first identified the disease among Swiss soldiers serving abroad who, in his view, exhibited a manic or melancholic longing for their homeland that could in some instances be seriously debilitating and even fatal. For almost a century, doctors debated the possible physical and psychological causes of the disease until reaching the consensus that what had seemed, at least in the most grievous cases, like pathological homesickness was, in fact, misdiagnosed tuberculosis (see Boym). Thus, as “autobiography” entered the modern lexicon of literary genres, medical science began to relinquish the term “nostalgia” to a modern language of emotion keyed to particular ways of understanding time and place. That is, a crippling longing to revive some object, event, or quality of the past came to be recognized as a psychological condition rather than a physical malady—a condition in which the nostalgic failed, even refused, to forge or sustain a personally tolerable relation to the past.

“Autobiography” names a mode of historiography by which writers seek—and often very interestingly fail—to forge for themselves a personally tolerable relation to the past, and also by which they contribute to the historical record of what and how human beings remember, both consciously and unconsciously. Psychoanalysis has always been in the interest of (this) history because it helps keep history, as a discipline of writing (about) the past, *open to the intolerable*, to what Michel Foucault—in his praise of psychoanalysis as a counterpositivist methodology—describes as the “perpetual principle of dissatisfaction, of calling into question, of criticism and contestation of what may seem, in other respects, to be established” (373). For almost a century, the idea of studying “internal” or subjective states seemed intolerable to those who devoted themselves to understanding the human brain—until one of history’s characteristically unanticipated shifts in perspective occurred. Is it too much to hope that, after the past several decades of empiricist retrenchment, historians might, in the interest of history, embrace a similar shift? ■

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## NOTES

- 1 As Elizabeth A. Wilson observed in an early issue of this journal, there has been a tendency among some neuropsychanalysts to idealize as “a strong, polished alloy” what has been and might yet be forged “out of various elements of neuroscience and psychoanalysis” (149)—an idealization that has had the effect of masking or suppressing, she argues, their mutually deconstructive potentials. While I agree that historical antagonisms, steep learning-curves, and skeptical funders have induced many neuropsychanalysts to minimize all that remains (and might always remain) noncongruous and incommensurate between psychoanalysis and neuroscience, the decade since Wilson voiced her concerns has seen a breathtaking expansion and diversification of this still-emergent field. The work of Mark Solms (2015; 2021), George Northoff (2011), and Jaak Panksepp and Lucy Biven (2012), for example, has already pushed far beyond the empirical and the medically verifiable both conceptually and in relation to the treatment of neurologically and psychologically compromised patients. Even in the area of sexuality—much neglected by psychoanalysis in recent decades, as Wilson rightly observes (161)—rekindled interest in drive theory, within and beyond the field of neuropsychanalysis, has energized important new debates regarding the relationship between functionalist and nonfunctionalist theories of libido.

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