People do History precisely in order to make us believe that it has some sort of meaning. On the contrary, the first thing we must do is begin from the following: we are confronted with a saying, the saying of another person who recounts his stupidities, embarrassments, inhibitions, and emotions. What is it that we must read therein? Nothing but the effects of those instances of saying.

—Jacques Lacan

A psychoanalytic approach to history, trauma, and causation is quite different from what people are likely to do in popular biographies or even history departments. One might contend that, by foreclosing the possibility of available meaning in the study of the past, Lacan is to a significant extent denying the efficacy of any number of disciplines that claim to say something about what it means to be human. A response to such a critique would be that, where Lacan is in fact less interested in meaning as a constructed patchwork of signifiers—a narrative claiming to be true, he does offer a replacement: knowledge. Knowledge is exactly what the analyst is after. And knowledge is exactly what resists articulation.

More particularly, the analyst tries to discover and reveal the analysand’s relation to her or his desire in its particular relation to constitutive lack. That is, knowledge is knowledge of the void that calls the (speaking, thinking, writing, traumatized, barred) subject into being. While the constitution (and the implications) of the Lacanian “barred subject” is beyond the scope of this investigation, the bar itself as the representation or trace of formative lack, of trauma as cause, is not. People write in response to trauma all the time. And other people read those writings and often try to say (or write) something meaningful about...
them. The following is a move toward formalizing a position from which one might better (and more ethically) investigate those texts produced to address the lack that is trauma.

Interpreting Cause

Lacan indicates that what must be read in an utterance is less the intended message (or meaning) than the effect of uttering itself, but what does such reading entail? Such a reading references a cause-effect relation, since effects need their causes. Consider classic Freudian word association. Where the analysand would create chains of words following an “inner logic” of sounds, cultural associations, and so on, that illustrate both a metaphoric substitution (at the level of pairs) and a metonymic play (as the chain quickly becomes potentially infinite), the analyst is less interested in what words are proffered by the analysand than in those spaces between the words. What magical operators force one to connect “boat,” say, with “gravy” instead of “water,” “oar,” “sail,” or any number of other words? A missing cause thus operates despite the fact that it is absent and, often by the sheer weight of such demonstration, the analyst is able to help the analysand reconstruct her missing cause qua desire. What must be stressed here, though, is the fact that the truth of the subject’s desire is overdetermined by language in that she cannot help speaking it; and this desire as cause is reconstructed and is not assumed to be original.

It is the denial of any “original meaning” that actually allows for interpretation. If one cannot say anything certain about the intention of an author, for instance, one can nonetheless say something about the intentions of a text, with the caveat that the “contingent” nature of the subject is not equated with the word “arbitrary.” A text (a dream, a book, even word-association) cannot say everything, but is by definition the condensation and displacement of latent content warped by/in desire. And an interpretation cannot say anything at all about its subject; it is constrained by both manifest content and by its hermeneutic apparatus.

In Freudian dream interpretation, the understanding is that latent content qua the experiences and frustrations of real life and the unspeakable cause becomes, through the dream work, the manifest content that is the dream proper. Much of analysis is the unknotting of the dream work to “get at” the latent content that seems to trouble the patient, to both separate out the day residue and to get at the cause. Of course, one can readily see the appeal of applying such analytic techniques to other manifest content: histories, novels, movies, poems. What goes unnoticed, however, is that the analytic process does not mimic the dream work
itself, even as a back-engineering project. Rather, in its attempt to reveal "the cause" of a dream, analysis makes all sorts of assumptions that are themselves based on this particular process of interpretation. The result is that one cannot say with complete certainty that the narrative produced at the end of an analysis bears complete resemblance to the latent content. The latent content qua cause is lost to us. At the same time, it would be difficult to argue that what is produced by analysis is not true or has no meaning or no effect on the analysand at all.

What results from analysis is the construction of cause after the fact—that is, after the fact of there being an effect. This cause is really an insinuation of another signifier, or knot of signifiers—that is, the symptom itself. The act of interpretation—or the act of writing anything at all—is not simply the recording of an inference gleaned from an existing text or life or real world, but rather a forcible exchange of one symptom for another. In analytic practice, such implying would be the intervention of the analyst. For this reason, Lacanian analysis does not assume "recovered memories" as facts. One might actually have been abducted by aliens, but any memory of the experience is not nearly conclusive evidence that it actually happened.

What must be stressed is that the cause-effect relationship supported by, say, stubbing your toe and then shouting profanities is not the relationship analysts are concerned with—that is, unless, when confronted with a particularly startling example of cursing, one can then hypothesize a purely formal primal toe-stubbing that can account for this particular manifestation.

The point is that trauma qua cause is not the event itself, but something that is missing for which the event comes to function as a placeholder. Thus, a person may develop a symptom many years after an event has taken place. History in such cases must be read as addressing the present, not the past. Put slightly differently, the event as traumatic becomes an object called into being for some current (condensing, displacing) function. Thus, "What is it that we must read therein? Nothing but the effects of those instances of saying."

Shifting registers for a moment, doesn't something like this appear in the academy? In the literary canon, consider the introduction of William Blake. Until the 1950s, he was an oddity studied by only a very few specialists. He entered the canon then not because his works were hidden by malicious rivals or hoarded by greedy scholars, but because we needed him now as a powerhouse Romantic poet/artist. For our story of literary epochs, we needed the transition figure. It is not a happy accident that his
visual sense and writing happen to appeal to our own sensibilities. It was necessary for his recovery. In the same vein, more contemporary moves to restore, say, women writers to their proper place in anthologies would not be revisions of history, not marks of conspiracy nor of the paucity of the canon as much as an admission that we need them now for our own work, for our own purposes. The fact that we assumed that the newly discovered lack (of a transition-poet for the Romantics) is a loss in history demonstrates the Lacanian motif that "the truth arises from misrecognition." Blake had to be discovered as he was recovered. Or we could say that Blake was invented in the 1950s.

Cause and Trauma and Narrative
In her gloss of Freud's Moses and Monotheism, Cathy Caruth assumes an equity between history—or at least this supposed history Freud produced—and narrative. Indeed, people have tended to read the Freud work as a creative, even literary writing more than any historical account of an actual people. As a narrative first, certain possibilities for its reading are opened that would be denied by the straight assumption of a referential, this-is-what-happened-then simple history. Of course, most all histories are narrative. They often have plot, for instance. What is significant is that, when one's primary concern is less the supposed truth of a particular referent (a date, say, or a name) and more the organizational structure that narrative as a particular kind of writing is, certain gaps and contradictions become apparent that may lead to an Other understanding. Jean Baudrillard writes,

> What is involved ... is not a "liberation" of language [that is, not the removal of all referent, or language as sheer play], nor its dislocation as an effect of unconscious contents [not that the unconscious does the writing], but an extreme, accidental form in which language seems to wish to go beyond its intentional operation and get caught up in its own dizzying whirl. (37)

Language, he indicates, has its own agency, is Other. And writing, on the way to saying something meaningful about a particular subject, may produce—or, rather, implicate—something else besides. This *something else* has little to do with authorial intention (but perhaps everything to do with what Kenneth Burke calls motive) and may take an accidental form.

For these reasons, Caruth reads Freud's text in terms of Freud's writing of it. After Lacan, she seeks "the effects of those instances of saying" rather than the meaning he might seek to produce. Freud explains
the circumstances for the text’s production in introductions, notes, and in letters, and Caruth reads these as part of the primary text—which, of course, they are under this reading paradigm. I will consider the nature of narrative later, but what is useful now is Caruth’s understanding of trauma as both departure and return. She writes, “Centering his story in the nature of the leaving, and returning, constituted by trauma, Freud resituates the very possibility of history in the nature of a traumatic departure . . . . What does it mean, precisely, for history to be the history of a trauma?” (15). In Freud’s particular argument, the answer is something like the combining of what may or may not be “historical” (in the straight referential sense; the murder of one Moses, the introduction of another, and their combination) into a common narrative that at once gives a history (a past) and founds a people (a present as an unwritten but indicative future in the myth). This is what allows Freud to write that Moses invented the Jews, without bothering to indicate which Moses applied for the patent. That is, Moses is a placeholder, a signifier without a particular signified except an excess, a trauma, something Caruth calls “a latency” (17).

The latent character of trauma, the fact that it happens too soon for signification and is committed to returning as bits of the real-cum-signification (symptoms, holocausts) explains both how Freud’s work can be considered historical (it marks the contours of an event that cannot be spoken) and how Freud’s writing as a return to trauma (his political and personal situation) supports the notion of the return of the repressed (and allows for the understanding of trauma as Baudrillard’s “event” and its writing as being the enactment of what both Lacan and Lyotard call the future anterior, the “what will have been”). Perhaps it would be useful to remember here that trauma is universal. Chaitin writes that trauma is “the unassimilable kernel at the heart of human experience, and the contingent, the only haven for human subjectivity” (9). Particular traumas are, well, particular, but trauma as the mark of entering into language (and culture) is what Julia Kristeva is concerned with when she discusses the abject as the remainder of what cannot be symbolized, what Chaitin writes of in his discussion of the lost object and the death drive and what Lacan considers the object cause. Freud could not seem to give up his book at precisely the time he was preparing for his own departure “to die in freedom” (23). That is, as Caruth writes in her gloss of Lacan’s reading of the burning child dream, “the gap between the accident [for us, Freud’s situation] and the words . . . produces a significance . . . that must be read in the relation between the chance event and the words it calls up” (101).
The important point to be made here is that something is missing—namely, a signifier for what is covered in the gap, which becomes apparent only in the particular, contingent context. Put another way, there is no *sein* without *dasein*, as long as the "being there" is projected from the future into past following the logic of "what will have been." The result of this lack is precisely the desire or need to produce new signifiers which are never quite right, are always contingent on/in the present, but which nonetheless form the condition for—the cause of—writing.

**Temporal Cause, Logical Cause, and Something Else**

A result of treating trauma as a cause that cannot be apprehended directly is that, when its effects are registered, counted, and deciphered—that is, when the trauma is pinned to an event—something seems to happen to time. Where there was nothing/lack/formative trauma, there are then registered effects, and then there is reconstructed trauma which we cannot claim is original but which we nonetheless treat as a cause. And so the contingent thing becomes a necessary event.

One way of addressing the logic of the first cause that is both formative and contemporary is actually very old. Aristotle's Mover functions as the pivot for action and time that is always outside of them and is thus not a temporal process, but a logical relation. As Kenneth Burke writes,

> The Aristotelian God . . . acted upon nature neither as creator nor generator, but as a motionless inducement to development. The world and its genera and species were considered as eternal, hence not as derivations from God as "pure act." God acted upon nature solely as a goal, somewhat as a desired food might, by lying west of a rational and hungry man, induce him to move towards the west; or as the principles of a perfect art might lead the knowing artist to shape his work as nearly as possible in accordance with them. (Grammar 68)

We can read development as a temporal process; we can tell the story of a man moving west toward food. In this case, narrative functions as an example of logical assumed relations. But ultimates are eternal and motionless and function solely as principles. That is, following Burke's simile, food lying west doesn't do anything; it just is. Action comes in when a "rational and hungry man" moves toward it. And we say that this involves action (that is, motivated movement) rather than simple movement because our man is both rational and hungry. Food lying west does not *cause* movement toward it; hunger does, and more than that, knowl-
edge that the food is indeed west of here. Just as the principles of a perfect art (whatever that might be) can lead the artist who knows them toward—if not all the way to—them. These principles, immutable and pregiven, function as a kind of gravity for wise people and, as the potential to persuade is also a principle, allow the possibility of leading the unwise in the right direction.

It should be clear that it is possible to treat original trauma as such a principle, too. Principles exist prior to any motive, act, or even movement. They simply are, and in this sense are ahistorical constants. They are logical, not temporal. According to Burke,

“Principles” are “firsts,” but they are “absolute” firsts, not the kind of firsts that require a temporal succession as we go from a first to a second. They just are. They have logical, rather than temporal, priority. Hence, to treat of things in terms of their relation to underlying principles is to translate historical sequence into terms of logical sequence (whereby things can “precede” and “follow” one another in a kind of succession that requires no time coordinate). (73)

Here we might recognize a basic form of reasoning, the “if/then” ratio, as long as we also recognize that beyond the assumption of the “if” is the presumption of those didactic “premises” of which Susan Handleman writes (6). And the didactic premise of didactic premises, the God-term to which all other terms are ultimately pinned, is the Aristotelian Mover as inactive cause. Burke continues:

But if a first and a second are related “logically,” they are by the same token related “necessarily.” For a logical relationship, or principle of being, always was, is, and will be; and what always was, is, and will be, must be. Whereby ontology merges the “is,” the “must be,” and the rational. (73)

We could think of such a logical relationship as a part-to-whole relationship, whereby the “if” of a statement reduced to its zero degree, a necessary premise, becomes a representative of the whole and the “then” a simple index of it. If all cats are eaters and my pet is a cat, then my cat eats, too. My cat then functions as a representative of the principle “cat.” This is clear. A part indicates a whole. And I can shift this logical relationship into the temporal sphere. As a rational and loving man, I move toward the cat food. But there is a danger to this kind of shifting. We can imagine a situation when a logical reduction—say, the “All men are
mortal” syllogism—could become a rationalization (in the full sense of the word) for homicide or suicide. Or, with different terms plugged in, for the Nazis’ final solution.

One difficulty, then, with shifting from the logical to temporal is that the logically necessary does not always map to the temporally contingent. That is, problems can arise when some thing that is purely formal (the necessary primary lack-trauma) is conflated with the contingent event that covers over that lack. This contingency is precisely what Caruth points to when she says that the event “happens too soon” for symbolization.

Not every horrible event is traumatic. Only those events that functionally indicate lack in the symbolic by becoming signifiers for that lack, that trauma, attain the status of trauma.\textsuperscript{5} In the analytic—and perhaps in the literary—setting, one recognizes this signifier by its palpable absence. Lacan calls these signifiers that support the symbolic in absentia caput mortuum. Bruce Fink explains:

The chain [of signifiers; the symbolic order] is as unequivocally determined by what it excludes as by what it includes, by what is within it as by what is without. The chain never ceases to not write the numbers [or signifiers] that constitute the caput mortuum in certain positions, being condemned to ceaselessly write something else or say something which keeps avoiding the point, as thought this point were the truth of everything the chain produces as it beats about the bush. One could go so far as to say that what, of necessity, remains outside the chain causes what is inside; something must, structurally speaking, be pushed outside for there to be an inside. (27)

So one strategy for reading and hearing language responding to trauma is to pay close attention to what is not being spoken but what is nonetheless being spoken about. Clearly, one goal of analysis is the analysand’s uttering of that previously unspoken (and unspeakable) signifier. Indeed, the objective is actually to produce a signifier for what had none before. What remains unclear, though, is how that signifier can come into being (so to speak) after the work of analysis, writing, reading. That is, how might cause appear after its effect?

Slavjo Žižek offers as an example of this apparent paradox in the form of the joke about the conscript who tries to evade military service by pretending to be mad. His symptom is that he compulsively checks all the pieces of paper he can lay his hands
on, constantly repeating: “That is not it!” He is sent to the military psychiatrist, in whose office he also examines all the papers around, including those in the wastepaper basket, repeating all the time: “That is not it!” The psychiatrist, finally convinced that he really is mad, gives him a written warrant releasing him from military service. The conscript casts a look at it and says cheerfully: “That is it!” (Sublime 160)

The warrant finally produced has the structure of an object that retroactively causes the symptom. The symptom as repetition and failure—looking at every piece of paper in hope of finding “it”—makes sense only in terms of what it ultimately produces. The second point not to be missed is that everyone around the conscript makes the mistake of not realizing how they are already inscribed in the symptom. Assuming a properly scientific, objective position outside of the game is precisely what leads to their culpability in the production of the object-cause.

So how should one approach those utterances that address trauma? If what we are searching for is cause after the fact, the object produced in its enunciation, how can we be sure that what we are finding is not our own objects? One answer, as Caruth indicates, is the formal aspect of the text itself.

Narrative, Lack, and Discourse:
All narratives are temporal, if only at the level of the sentence. That is, narrative depends on an accumulation, a building upon what has happened before and a belief that something more is always coming. In this sense, narrative contains both its past (as necessity) and its future (as potential). As regards the function of this temporality, Žižek suggests that “narrative as such emerges in order to resolve some fundamental antagonism by rearranging its terms into a temporal succession. It is thus the very form of narrative which bears witness to some repressed antagonism” (Plague 10–11). Can the presence of narrative itself be the mark of the conflict narrative is supposed to hide? This seems counterintuitive, since the “antagonism” is really only made apparent by the attempt to resolve it.

We are, after all, dealing with discourse, with (written) signs and their peculiar ordering (as narrative) to sustain something we have called reality. This reality is constructed and cannot, by definition, be all-inclusive. It is determined by what can be talked about, what can be represented. Moreover, reality (in a chronicle or in the world) is determined by the temporality inherent in representation, and, since it is impossible to say everything at once, there must be something missing,
if here only at the level of the sign. There is, after all, still the future which, however implicit in narrative, is rendered only as potential at any given point. We might then say that narrative at any particular moment is always insufficient, that its assumption of a future marks a fundamental lack and that the conflict between what it purports to sustain (a mechanics of the fantasy of completeness) and this lack (the impossibility of saying it all) gives impetus to the very production of narrative, both psychic and written. It is the site of this lack “at which, in every use of language, writing may be produced” (Lacan 34).

Thus, narrative, by its nature, must keep moving in order to cover up what is always already missing from it. Another way of talking about this lack is in terms of symbolic castration, a cut in the signifying system that is by necessity always present. But what can be said to be missing fundamentally? Or, rather, how might we figure a fundamental lack (one that is apparently pregiven—both the “antagonism” above and our working definition of primary trauma) when the cut is instantiated by the very process by which we try to cover it up? Žižek suggests,

Let us imagine a situation in which the subject aims at X (say, a series of pleasurable experiences); the operation of castration does not consist in depriving him of any of these experiences, but adds to the series a purely potential, nonexistent X, with respect to which the actual accessible experiences appear all of a sudden as lacking, not wholly satisfying. One can see here how the phallus functions as the very signifier of castration: the very signifier of the lack, the signifier which forbids the subject access to X, gives rise to its phantom . . . . (Plague 15)

This phallic signifier, then, may be understood as a priori insofar as it by definition and in every case forecloses access to the object of desire (a wholly satisfying something: a) which paradoxically is engendered by the very search it frustrates. We might now understand the imperative to keep moving as a metonymy of desire, a shift from one small “x” to another in a futile attempt at laying hold of the “potential, nonexistent” final one. That we recognize this metonymy as a narrative—with an established before and a guaranteed after—indicates narrative’s relation to fantasy as an attempt to belie the anxiety inherent in the search for the object. Castration is the sacrifice of jouissance; fantasy is the paradoxical enjoyment of that sacrifice.

The jouissance-aspect of interpretation cannot be stressed too much. There is a very real sense in which the writing out of a testament or journal
or poem provides a release from suffering in the same way that counseling after a loss does. What the above discussion indicates is that this relief has a great deal to do with the fantasy of completeness and that the jouissance here is better rendered by Lacan as joui-sense, enjoying meaning. We should also admit here that much of what academics and researchers do falls under the heading of this brand of enjoyment. And, while there is nothing inherently wrong with enjoying one's work, it does seem that there should be something wrong with enjoying chronicles of other people's pain. The question, then, is how might one better approach these chronicles, respect the truth of them, without falling into the trap of the fantasy of completeness or enjoying them too much, thus becoming the Civil War Reenactors of, say, the holocaust?

If Lacan is right in saying that “there is no prediscursive reality,” then we should likely look to discourse for means of describing and supporting “real life.” And there are kinds of discourse, so it is in those kinds that one might discover exactly what is at stake in language in its determining role.

Lacan supposes that grammar is “that aspect of language that is revealed only in writing” (44). The context for the claim is, of course, an explanation (or defense) of his use of the letter in what he calls a mathematical sense—that is, his mathemes. The concern with the formal—formal anything—becomes apparent and approachable only in terms of the appearance of form. Writing as text or book or poem or matheme are perhaps the most approachable forms of writing, dealing as they do with what we might call common language. Everyone can participate in reading them and so they supply apt examples. But by extension one might assume other forms of “writing” that have little to do, at least superficially, with texts. The symptom, for instance, can be understood as a writing on the body. And oral cultures, who presumably have no formal script, nonetheless do have ritual, myth, and totem (see Levi-Strauss, for example, who seeks to script the previously unscripted under the belief that such organizations or forms can be read). A definition of writing might then be: that which can be read.

Thus, the discourses outlined by Lacan (which he does not claim to be a complete set) might constitute ways of reading (hermeneutics) as much as—or maybe more than—positions from which one may write. What follows is a quick primer on some Lacanian discourse structures.

**Lacanian Discourse Structures**

The master’s discourse, also considered the discourse of philosophy, assumes as the agent (a cause, a reason, perhaps) a particular (master)
signifier: $S_1$. From this predicate, one might then approach knowledge ($S_2$, the symbolic order) as meaning, as an other to be investigated. It might help here to think of Plato’s discussion of the soul and love in the Phaedrus. If one assumes the soul as primary to the individual (I am Mars-like fundamentally), one searches in the other for the same, for a likeness, from which one might find and found one’s place in respect to that other.

![Figure 1: The Discourse Matheme](image)

But according to Lacan, what is produced by this relation (or this relating) is precisely the object-cause which is never reachable as such, but is rather the sign of the metonymy of desire. The other both promises a likeness and withholds it indefinitely. One might then define love as the recognition of the promise regardless of the fact that there is no sexual rapport. That is, love is precisely what makes up for that fact—the other’s promise that I am loved. As Chaitin puts it, the philosopher “wants to find uniqueness by reproducing the ‘identically identical’ [the Mars-likeness], the pure particularity, of the original object of satisfaction [the supposed object-cause]” (9). The truth, then, of philosophical discourse is precisely the barred subject, the S/s (signifier/signified relation) with a new emphasis on the bar itself (as the mark of castration, of a fundamental paucity that is recognized as something lost). Žižek might consider the master discourse as being concerned with construction rather than interpretation, inasmuch as the fundamental paucity is implicated by “a knowledge [here, in and of the Other] which can never be subjectivized—that is, it can never be assumed by the subject as the truth about himself” (Plague 36). Knowledge is out there somewhere.

From this we might read the quarter turn that is the academic discourse as an assumption of the knowledge that philosophy places extrinsic to itself (the realm of forms, say, or the works of Shakespeare). What was the product of philosophical inquiry is now the Other under investigation. For folks in English departments, this might be Shakespeare-as-category, that wholly supposed thing one might call Shakespeare-ness. What is found, then, at the site of production is the barred-S that might be
figured as a critical edition of Hamlet, where competing readings are presented side by side, and the fact that they contradict might be read as the fact of the bar. Or one might say that, reading the barred-S as S/s, the signified "is not what you hear. What you hear is the signifier. The signified is the effect of the signifier" (Lacan 33). And this effect—since a signifier is the subject for another signifier—is precisely the presentation of a master signifier as the truth of the academic discourse. That is, I am ultimately able to declare that (in my investigations of Shakespeare) I am a Marxist and can present a Marxist reading of texts. Or even that I am a Lacanian.

\[
\begin{array}{c}
S_1 \\
S
\end{array}
\longrightarrow
\begin{array}{c}
S_2 \\
a
\end{array}
\]

Figure 2: The Master Discourse

The analyst's discourse is difficult to illustrate in these sorts of terms precisely because it claims to be a way of reading—and, in fact, the way of establishing—the other discourses. That is, though it was claimed that the discourses may be primarily ways of reading, it should be clear in our treatments above that they also illustrate modes of producing new texts (philosophic and academic genres, but perhaps not the literary). In fact, they may be the two primary modes. And, likely, any analyst bent on writing what he or she knows would work from the other two, since both assume knowledge as a priori (either as agent or other).

\[
\begin{array}{c}
S_2 \\
S_1
\end{array}
\longrightarrow
\begin{array}{c}
a \\
S
\end{array}
\]

Figure 3: Academic Discourse

A difficulty with the two primary modes of discourse in the academy is their relationships to the master signifier. In the discourse of master, the agent is the master signifier, which, as one might guess, is another name for the phallic signifier in the fantasy of completeness. Thus, to work from the position of the master is to assume the agency of the phallus. The result is the barred, cut, castrated subject of investigation with/and enjoying it.
Academic discourse then assumes the phallic support explicit in the master as the ground for knowledge in the position of agency. Thus, systematic knowledge "is the ultimate authority" (Fink 132). Both discourses fall on the side of producing or supporting the fantasy of completeness that is bent on covering over, eliding, or effacing the fundamental paucity marked by trauma. At best, working from these discourse (pre)dispositions increases the risks of totalizing (and killing) any utterance addressing trauma by excluding the excluded (the caput mortuum) from consideration.

**History and Writing**

So what does writing do to and for a notion of history, academic or otherwise? What happens to a supposed historical event in the writing of it? Jean Baudrillard writes that "[i]f there is something distinctive about ... what constitutes an event and thus has historical value—it is the fact that it is irreversible, that there is always something in it which exceeds meaning and interpretation" (13). And writing (traditionally, at least) has been understood as a creature of meaning and interpretation. So what happens when meaning fails to capture an event? And in such cases, what is the effect of writing as discourse as it both reveals its missing cause and tries to cover it up?

Any history that claims to be a simple statement of fact is, in essence, doing something else also. An essay entitled "What I did on my Summer Vacation" may in fact discuss events that occurred in the three-month break, but the point is that the fact that these events are ordered and explained (and are given priority over all the others that occurred, too) indicates some meaning over and above the simple statement "this happened." Such is likely obvious, but I wanted to stress it, since this understanding is what allows Caruth to read Freud's personal history (his moving from Germany to England, and so on) with the story he makes of/for Moses (15, 17, 101). History isn't only an operation of metaphoric substitution, but has something to do with metonymy as well.

This is also Burke's point in his discussion of motive and Kierkegaard (Rhetoric 245). Burke's point is that Kierkegaard's psychologizing of the Abraham story only makes sense in terms of his understanding (and excusing) of his own behavior toward Regina. Kierkegaard is not amplifying some strand already in the text, but making a purely personal addition that makes best sense only in terms (and I want to resist using this phrase) of the grammar (as the formal or relational structure I loosely
define above) of his inscription. And it is this kind of metagrammar that makes the kind of narrative I'm taking about.

Perhaps we can approach this another way, in terms of the hysteric's discourse. In the position of agent, we have the a priori barred-S (another definition of which is the subject of the unconscious). The hysteric recognizes fundamentally a lack (the bar, the absence of a stable relation to a signified), which she then tries to cover with a master signifier available in and from some other (an other person, an organization, "the poems of Sylvia Plath are about me!"), which then yields, produces, a particular body of knowledge. The truth, though, posited by the hysteric is nothing other than the metonymy of desire, which might be rendered as: The fact that I am looking guarantees its existence; I need only reclaim it. Thus, when Kristeva discusses the presymbolic in terms of the connection between mother and child and the child's entrance into the symbolic as a violent separation (10), we might recognize Burke's astute observation that Kierkegaard uses another story besides the Abraham story in the same discussion, that of the mother blackening her breast to make it unappealing. And this weaning, this loss, indicates the hysteric's position nicely as a "forever getting . . . by forever not getting" (Motive 191), which I am relating to narrative. Fundamental, formative trauma is only apparent in its return.

The writing—or the written-ness—of trauma narratives indicates that the trauma language circumscribes is not the event, but what the event "will have been" as that which signifies the insufficiency of jouissance (the hysteric's discourse). Lacanian analysis reveals that history qua the history of trauma is that which is waiting is its cause. That is, history in such a scheme is the (or a) meaning-effect (S2) as the truth of the produced, manufactured event-after-the-fact (S1). The agent is the traumatic thing that is more that the event: the object-cause.

So what about narrative? In one sense, the truth of narrative isn't in the fact-checking, but in the trauma it circles. Lyotard assigns this motive to the postmodern art and suggests such work "puts forward the unpresentable in presentation itself" (Postmodern 81). I'd like to suggest such isn't so much in the work as it is in its reading, but the point is that narrative generally (even the Summer Vacation kind) indicates a lack and that perhaps those writings we call literature best drive that lack home. I have suggested elsewhere that literature might be best considered in the feminine and indicated that the literary describes the real. This is another way of perhaps indicating that the basic discourse of literature resembles that of the hysteric. Or as Chaitin puts it, "a literary text may trace the
contours of those gaps [the unpresentable, the substantive lack in the
symbolic, the real] and bring out the places of singularity in which the
subject may live" (9). In the field of desire, one lacks the signifier for
completeness. The breast was blackened. But of course the blackened
breast itself is a placeholder, a signifier, for the event that cannot be
written but is always being written about (about also in the sense of
circumscribed—this is why people want to be writers, why people write
diaries, and why everyone is writing a novel), for what Caruth calls
history as trauma. My point may be simply that the metonymy of desire
(the a l-a l-al that doesn’t find its a) is what supports the jouissance of
writing and that studying such writing (and writing about it), to be ethical,
must take this jouissance into account.

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Notes

1. For more on the nature of the event and its representation, though in
different terms, see Richardson, “Brian.”
2. See Fink 26–28 for a discussion of this “second order” trauma.
3. Isn’t this what many literary critics do? The assumption is that a novel or
story or poem point toward something external to the plot. Thus, the kind of
historicism that claims that a novel must say something about its temporal/
cultural location also claims that there is a logical relationship between the
literary work and some assumed principle—say, sexual identity—and that the
literary work is a contemporary answer to a timeless question. We need only
discover the premise implicit in this conclusion (this novel). Of course, one
counter to such claims is that the issue at hand is really the critic’s issue and the
literary work is useful to illustrate the issue or question itself. But, then, the
assumption is that these are universal principles after all, so whether or not the
author or the critic brings them to the table is maybe beside the point.
4. We should be reminded of Plato’s assumption of knowledge, of course,
as well as that “within human limits” from his definition of good rhetoric in the
Phaedrus.
5. Another way of describing this lack in the symbolic is via castration; see
further below.

Works Cited

Baudrillard, Jean. The Illusion of the End. Trans. Chris Turner. Stanford:


