2018

Metaphors of Trauma: An Excavation

Kate Brock
Metaphors of Trauma
An Excavation

Kate Brock
Preface or The Motive for Metaphor¹:

Metaphor strikes at the essential, though ambiguous truth involving the subject’s inability to speak directly about those intimations which are most significant. Metaphors, whether linguistic or aesthetic, are necessary distortions inextricably bound to human subjectivity and expression. Metaphor strikes at the very space of “X” within subjectivity which analytic understanding cannot reach. From the impossible weightiness of that which cannot be said, metaphor emerges. The Motive for Metaphor captures the movement toward and away from the “vital, arrogant, fatal, dominant X” of self. A metaphor of metaphors, the poem defies explanation while pointing toward the existential conditions which gave rise to it. It alludes to its own subjective, authorial origins while embracing the impossibility of witnessing or knowing them fully.

¹ The Motive for Metaphor
Wallace Stevens

You like it under the trees in autumn,
Because everything is half dead.
The wind moves like a cripple among the leaves
And repeats words without meaning.

In the same way, you were happy in spring,
With the half colors of quarter-things,
The slightly brighter sky, the melting clouds,
The single bird, the obscure moon—

The obscure moon lighting an obscure world
Of things that would never be quite expressed,
Where you yourself were never quite yourself
And did not want nor have to be,

Desiring the exhilarations of changes:
The motive for metaphor, shrinking from
The weight of primary noon,
The A B C of being,

The ruddy temper, the hammer
Of red and blue, the hard sound—
Steel against intimation—the sharp flash,
The vital, arrogant, fatal, dominant X.
Metaphors are evocative errors. Their resonant power comes from their inaccuracy, revealing to us the fundamental but unanswerable experience of recognizing our own subjectivity. As Ralph Waldo Emerson writes:

It is very unhappy, but too late to be helped, the discovery we have made, that we exist. We have learned that we do not see directly, but mediately, and that we have no means of correcting these colored and distorting lenses which we are…

Perhaps these subject-lenses have a creative power; perhaps there are no objects.

The realization of one’s own subjectivity exposes a tenuous relationship to a position outside of the outside, that is outside of subject-object distinctions. While we are unable to witness the origins of our existence fully, we are able to imagine a vantage point by which there would be an account for subjectivity. This liminality toys at the edges of real and unreal, subjective and objective, embodied and universal. We find ourselves somewhere in-between, unable to reconcile a coherent view of our own existence, yet able to conceive of our inability. The possibility, and impossibility, of our sight being bound in blindness, speech in silence, knowing in unknowing, and truth in error, can be labelled generally as a traumatic realization. Recoiling in anxiety or exhilaration, our subjectivity is neither wholly embraced nor wholly alienated within the enigmatic error of metaphor.

The impossibility of our speaking the truth about our own existence arises most pointedly when confronted with the structures embedded at the core of our troubled subjectivity. The interpretative fields of trauma theory, psychoanalysis, and aesthetics excavate the laceration of the witnessing of subjective consciousness. Trauma-aesthetic
occurrences necessarily induce metaphor as a means of grappling with the inexplicable break down in categorical concepts which structure our understanding of reality. The impossibility of the subject witnessing his/her own origins in full induces a motion of departure like that of the Child’s Game in Beyond the Pleasure Principle. Those encounters which dissolve the separation between the universal and embodied, such as traumatic happenings, are traumatic within themselves but also in their close proximity to some unknown ‘original’ trauma. The back and forth motion of traumatic events involves not a locative proximity, but a proximity of reference, presenting itself as a rupture in time. Were traumatic occurrences and aesthetic objects either entirely outside of the range or contained wholly within the particularity of human experience, they would not cause such troubling phenomena like traumatic repetitions or “anxious objects.” What exactly one finds so troubling within the encounter escapes perceptibility and articulation, for the object or event denies explication.

Surely the clinical definition of trauma as “an event that is outside the range of human experience”\(^2\) does little to explain the essential nature of traumatic occurrences. This definition presupposes the possibility of a distanced and objective understanding of extra-experiential trauma. Whereas an intra-experiential interpretation of trauma reveals an incomprehensible wounding which touches upon the individual subject’s experience. At first glance, an internal interpretation of trauma, one which places the event within the particular happening of an individual, appears to account for the personal suffering which trauma causes. However, this interpretation does not suffice in capturing that which is precisely most traumatic about trauma: that it dwells within and outside of mere

individual embodiment, connecting to a broader universal structure. Neither the clinical
definition of trauma nor an intra-experiential interpretation can account for collective
traumas, mass events which are buried in history without witness. Traumatic events
involve a curious mingling between external and internal, or subjective and objective
worlds- a sensation that is only intensified when the public eye of history enfolds the
traumatic occurrence. A clinical explanation which places trauma outside of experience
entirely, though comforting in thought, does little to capture the enigma which trauma
presents. We feel the situated-ness of our position, as “subject-lenses” who can only
mediately access the world of experience, more keenly when trauma reveals the
troubling error of consciousness. With no comfort in the categories we construct in order
to survive, we are left with the space in-between, or “the obscure moon lighting an
obscure world- Of things that would never be quite expressed-where we were never
quite ourselves and did not want or have to be.” Our subject-ness is put into play, at
stake, and implicated by inexplicable encounters and the metaphors which they
demand. Yet, our position as subjects in the world is defined by the very possibility of
such encounters. They are at once within us, and foreign to us, painful and essential.

Whether from exhilaration or anxiety, the drive toward metaphor implies some
desire for understanding of those particulars within our experience which we intuitively
know to be true but cannot articulate directly. Holding open the space between inside
and outside, embodied and universal, metaphor simultaneously creates a breech
between objective and subjective categories, while providing the only access point for
articulation of that breech. The inability to speak the truth about ourselves as subjects
also opens up the frailest possibility of that lack being the fundamental link to a more
universal sense. When we speak about trauma, art, and subjectivity, we do not do so because we can but because we must. A clinical definition of trauma which aims to maintain a wholly objective position resembles a survivor in the stage of severe denial, who objectifies their experience as totally external to self. Unable to account for this traumatic truth: trauma is neither wholly held outside of the range of human experience nor within individual embodied experience, but that it is everywhere and nowhere, cropping up as the universal within the particular and the subject within the object. Touching upon the very nature of what it means to be a subject within the world, metaphors of trauma pry open the possibility of glimpsing the inaccessible, if only mediately.

The following pages are an exploration of a range of metaphors which touch upon varied aspects within trauma-aesthetic experiences. Metaphors, within this text, are a form of knowing precisely through unknowing, illuminating truth even as they obscure other information. The illumination brought by metaphors of trauma continually bear the same inevitable repression and repetition as the trauma itself, inextricably binding the particularity of story to the immensity of structure. Wherein descriptive words fail, one must turn to a form which fits the content of the experience. The resonant power of traumatic metaphors, whether literary, aesthetic, or spiritual, strike at the core structure of trauma precisely through their ambiguity.

Embracing my own position as a subject-lens involves a level of blindness necessary to uncovering insights, especially those hidden in plain sight. As a reader of metaphors, I occupy a perspectival position of margin in relation to each text, signifying my own inability to access the origins of a given event, narrative, or object. The form,
one of indirect mediation and oscillation, informs the development of content, just as the implications of traumatic experiences present themselves in the life of the survivor. Though not explicitly related, the metaphors I have chosen to interpret share the potential for uncanny inter-connectedness which points beyond their particular narratives, toward a deeper structure.
Gerusalemme Liberata: *Becoming Remembrance*

A kind of blended feeling seeped into his heart. pity, and dread, and sorrow… With a start

he drew his sword at last and threw his strength behind the stroke. But wonder! That tall wood oozed freshly from the blade cut in the bark and dyed the earth about the color of blood. He shook with horror, swung his blade once more to see it through, to find out all he could. And now he hears a low and wavering moan as of a voice within a tomb of stone,

now gathering into words, distinct. “Ah, Tancred, you have hurt me too deeply. Let it be enough, to drive me from my happy dwelling, the body where I lived, that lived through me. Why should you once again hurt this poor trunk, where I am pent by my hard destiny? How could you be so cruel to resume war with your adversaries in the tomb?”

*Gerusalemme Liberata*, Torquato Tasso

Ensnared in an ill-fated repetitious trajectory, the figure Tancred, in *Gerusalemme Liberata*, poetically represents the curious, unconscious structure buried within the subject’s experience of trauma. Tancred, the epic poem’s hero, unknowingly slays his beloved, Clorinda, in battle while she is dressed in enemy armor. After mourning her death, he finds himself in a mystical forest clearing with a solitary tree. Upon the tree is an inscription warning him not to strike, for he is on sacred burial ground. Like a man possessed, he cuts into the tree, releasing blood onto the soil and the voice of Clorinda, whose spirit was trapped within it. From the wound, her voice cries out, testifying to his repeated murder of his beloved.

---

The parable⁴ of Tancred and Clorinda speaks profoundly to the characteristics and structure indicative of traumatic experience, as referenced in Sigmund Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and Cathy Caruth’s *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Both Freud and Caruth draw upon Tasso’s text as a metaphor of origins which weaves a complex understanding of the unconscious, inaccessibility of traumatic fates. While Freud uses the poem anecdotally to explain his curiosity with traumatic phenomenon, Caruth expands the intersection between psychoanalysis and literature to the recurrent witnessing and telling of trauma through the voice of the wound. Within the poem and its re-readings by Freud and Caruth, three figures emerge in relationship to one another and the traumatic narrative: Survivor, Witness, and Subject. Far from mutually exclusive, these three positions dwell within and apart from one another simultaneously. Much like the disintegration between otherwise distinct categories present in traumatic events, the barriers between survivor, witness, and subject, dissolve and reemerge throughout the text. My paper will begin with an exploration of the survivor and witness, and conclude with an image of the subject.

Tancred, as the one who lives on in spite of Clorinda’s death, assumes the role of the survivor, but specifically as one who is implicated within the perpetration of the crime. An Oedipus of sorts, his actions are not fully known to him in their occurrence, but emerge as incessant repetitions which rupture his own blindness. Within the poem’s narrative, traumatic recurrence becomes the temporal structure and reference point from the emergence of the first wounding on. Tancred’s returning to the origins of his act, with a double wound, signifies an unconscious movement of departure and return.

---

⁴ I’m using Cathy Caruth’s terminology of labeling the poem as a sort of parable.
contained within the tension of repression and revelation. Cathy Caruth illuminates the figure of the haunted survivor in the following passage:

> Just as Tancred does not hear the voice of Clorinda until the second wounding, so trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely not known to him in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on.5

A paradigm shift occurs within Tancred’s life from the point of the “first instance,” such that his life after the traumatic event continually references the unknown and unassimilated within his experience. In witnessing his own tragic fate and the death of Clorinda, his living is connected with her death. The weight of the impossibility of life after survival becomes the hallmark of the survivor’s experience. Unable to fully assimilate the reality of traumatic occurrences in their happenings, the survivor lives on in relation to his or her impossible proximity to the unknown.

Though he perpetrates the acts of violence upon the body of Clorinda, the reader gets the sense that Tancred himself is positioned within a greater tragic fate which he can neither recognize nor escape. The traumatic nature of the parable comes not only from his unknowing violence, but from a confusion of internal desire and horrific external loss. Within the poem, Clorinda functions simultaneously as the object of Tancred’s longing and the site of his trauma, as his desired lover. His inability to address her as a subject within the instance of his violence crops up again when she addresses him from within a wounded object.

---

In Freud’s searching for rational explanations for the phenomena of traumatic repetition and nightmares, he attributes the possibility of repeated traumatic actions to a “compulsion to repeat which overrides the pleasure principle.” While he does write that this compulsion and the instinctual drive for satisfaction share an intimate partnership, he cannot make sense of a singular compulsion which brings unconscious, irreparable loss. In fact he writes that any appearance of “the compulsion of destiny,” or fate, can be rendered “intelligible on a rational basis; so that we are under no necessity to call in a new and mysterious motive force to explain it.” Freud suddenly moves within the text away from his discussion of traumatic neuroses and into a revisiting of the story of the child’s game (*fort* and *da*). Even though he says there is no need to call in a “new and mysterious motive force” to explain the inexplicable tendency toward traumatic repetition, he unconsciously reopens the deeply enigmatic structure of the child’s game in response to his own rationalization. An unexpected and mysterious encounter, the story of the child who continually casts away the spool of thread and draws it back toward himself, uttering *fort* (gone) and *da* (here), combines the effects of traumatic loss with the creation of a new encounter which repeats itself. Cathy Caruth writes:

Yet the game of the child playing *fort* and *da*, gone and here, with his spool seems to become not less, but more enigmatic when it is understood in relation to traumatic repetition. If the child’s reenactment of his mother’s departure repeats, ultimately, her loss and her death, the game remains nonetheless, an

---


act of creation that, unlike the dream of the war veterans, does not simply compulsively repeat a history it doesn’t own but creates, in its repetition something new.\(^8\)

I would like to propose that the “something new” created within the structure of the child’s game is analogous to the emergence of the double wound or voice within the story of Tancred and Clorinda. Furthermore, the compulsive itinerancy between here and gone, relates to the margin of movement present in traumatic, and as I will argue, aesthetic encounters.

Tancred’s double wounding and the child’s game contain a sudden and repeated acknowledgement of an absence which is central to their experience as perpetual survivors.\(^9\) The itinerant motion of here and gone triggers the necessary but impossible recognition of an absence that cannot be assimilated by rational theory, but that requires the game, the object, or in Tancred’s case, the site of the tree, in order to make sense of it. Therefore the unfolding of traumatic repetition within the survivor’s life emerges in connection to an absence felt through the world of objects. More than mere projection, one gets the sense that the objects enfolded in traumatic histories are symptomatic of the subject-lens, or the distortions through which we see the world. This encounter occurs within a margin of overlap wherein the sensation of seeing and being is coupled the inability to distinguish the object from the subject which renders it meaningful.


Clorinda occupies the space of witness to her own slaying, therefore her sight and subjectivity are bound up within the traumatic event itself. A connection between her address of Tancred in the double wounding and her witnessing of both events within her body surfaces through her speech. Her utterance is only subsequently heard through Tancred’s violent act of striking. The survivor’s realization of his own act is bound up in his bearing witness to her address, a cry from within the wound itself. Playing beautifully with the metaphor of the tree as body, or containing body, Clorinda’s witnessing and remembrance transcend subjective embodiment to include the whole of experience, including the world of objects. Within the initial trauma, Clorinda’s personhood qua subject is denied. She becomes an object body, who must remain so in order to preserve Tancred’s position within the narrative. Within the traumatic act, the absence of her subjectivity implicates, or puts at stake, the loss of the subjectness within the perpetrator himself.

Her voice passing through the physical wound to the object of the tree eerily bears witness to her subjectivity awakening Tancred to his ill-fated actions upon his striking. Her witness contains an address which cannot be known in the first instance, but that appears after a period of delayed latency. To use Freud’s metaphor of the child’s game, her witnessing is caught in the in-between trajectory between here and gone, that is, until Tancred’s returning of his original act and subsequent remembrance. It is precisely through the inability to assimilate her loss which structures the possibility of a history of remembrance, or an uncovering of her voice. The tree poetically encases this history, serving as an icon of the body. Tasso’s choice to represent Clorinda’s voice through a physical object rather than a ghostly subject figure expands the sense of
erasure which the traumatic act inflicted on her subjectivity. The absence of an external witness far from absolves Tancred’s act, rather it preserves it through the lens which he first saw Clorinda- as an object body. Only upon the second wounding does the object of the tree become the site of witnessing, finally allowing the Clorinda’s voice to speak.

When trauma involves an erasure of the sole witness, the symbolic world of objects undergoes a sort of transubstantiation in the wake of catastrophic loss. Furthermore these objects no longer exist within history purely as such, but rather become intermediary figures who bear witness to the departure and absence of the subject. Their resonant power cannot be understood in the instance of their transformation, but they go on witnessing even as they are buried within the ashes of history. They allow the suffering of the witness to speak, a space denied in the first instance of the traumatic encounter. Furthermore, these object-witnesses represent the intersection of utter particularity and universality. It is precisely through their specificity within a traumatic occurrence or loss, that they are able to speak with a universal longing for return. Excesses of personal articles- shoes and hair- left by traumatic events such as WW II and the Holocaust, become icons of witness within history, testifying to the event of the extermination of the subject.

The appearance of the witnessing-object represents a body which cannot be kept in its place, continually cropping up and witnessing the subject when least expected or least warranted. Freud’s reading of traumatic repetition in the life of the survivor does not account for the possibility of this object-witness structuring the recurrence within the life of the subject.

---

The recognition of our fundamental uncomfortability with the possibility of the subject-lens in which there are no objects. As if the object-witness, or in Clorinda’s case, the tree, contains an excess of experience which cannot help but to pour out from the site of the wound, staining the ground beneath it.

A historic example which connects to Tasso’s parable of the wound which speaks, unfolds through the delayed witnessing of the practice of lynching within the American deep south. The Equal Justice Initiative (EJI) in Montgomery, Alabama houses an installation based in the research and memorialization of documented lynchings through proximity to the site of their occurrence. The exhibit displays rows of jars filled with soil, simply labelled in some cases with a name and date, in others, only the name of a town. All of them are samples collected from the approximate sites of lynchings. The practice of lynching often times constituted a public event or spectacle that included coverage in local newspapers and documents, but it also includes countless murders which disappear without any external witness. Even within mass encounters of lynching, the presence of the public does not necessarily signify the culpability of their sight or recognition. I propose that lynching shares a structure with the parable of Tancred and Clorinda, such that upon the instance of murder the only subject witness is contained within the life and death of the victims themselves. The act of lynching requires that the victim be perceived as an body-object, whose subjectivity and voice are denied within the original act of violence. The sublation of the body-object’s witnessing into the natural world creates a motion between the act of witness and the referential site of the original trauma. The family and community who survive in the wake of loss, do so without the freedom to recognize and mourn the horror and
immediacy of lynching. In other words, the raw inexplicability of loss continues without
the illumination of the witnesses’ voice, so long as the witness remains buried in the
reference of history.

Only through the creative act of a second striking, a digging up, of the referential
site, is the community allowed the space to transform traumatic occurrence into
remembrance. Through the jars of soil the sight of the contemporary viewer is wrapped
up in the possibility of the voice of the subject being contained in, and heard through the
object. Like the child who generates a new encounter to assimilate the experience of
departure through the game of fort and da, the emergence of the witness’ voice housed
in objects opens the possibility of return to the original site.
Sight and Site:

In both Gerusalemme Liberata and the jars which memorialize the catastrophic history of lynching, a referential relationship emerges between the sight of the survivor and site of trauma. Their interconnectedness can be understood through what may be labelled an aesthetic experience, wherein sight and site, though distinct, occur simultaneously, rendering the other meaningful. The clearest example of the sight/site oscillation can be found within the sacred architecture of Western Christianity. Structures built from the material world, cathedrals circumscribe a space of sacred significance around the sacrament, or site of violence, within religious tradition. Built to contain objects and icons which possess universal power, such as the Eucharist, sacred architecture contains a specific site based in the revelatory sight of liturgical practitioners.

Architecture creates an interior which is exterior to, or in the margins of, experience. Quite literally symbolic space, architecture functions as an experiential, spatial occurrence which draws attention to an inside-outside opposition present in non-spatial being. That is, the physical revelation of site and sight contained within architecture can be read metaphorically for the kinds of references to site which occur in trauma and aesthetics. Queer theorist John Paul Ricco defines this area of overlap as an Outside which exists socially and spatially displaced from the inside and the outside. It simultaneously defies categorization yet begs to be identified in relation to established categories.

With every inside-opposition there comes something, something that is outside the closure that is this coupling, something that is not a thing at all (at least not
necessarily). This is the Outside that not only remains outside of every inside, but outside every outside. The outside might be understood as that which exists prior to and stands in the wake of every inside-outside opposition. It is what remains before and after all is said and done.\(^{11}\)

Architecture provides a concrete instance wherein spatial site implicates the distorted lens of subjective sight, or insight. The etymology of insight as revelatory vision which contains an inner-ness implies that sight turned inward has the potential to articulate broader, universal truth. But truth can only arise out of a connectness to experience through the world of objects, or sites. The unfolding of sight in relation to site is a necessary but impossible aspect of human existence, alienating us while drawing us into the fold of thought and language. Like the child who traces the movement of the spool in terms of presence and absence, coupling his experience with speech, site and sight catches the subject in the motion of the in-between. Neither a departure or a full arrival, the sight/site distinction images the impossibility of articulating our subjective experience fully.

Anxious Objects: *The In-Dwelling of Trauma and Aesthetics*
The word **imago** designated the effigy of the absent, the dead, and more precisely, the ancestors: the dead from whom we come, the links of the lineage in which each of us is a stitch. The imago hooks into the cloth. It does not repair the rip of their death: it does less and more than that. It weaves. It images absence. It does not represent this absence, it does not evoke it, it does not symbolize it, even though all this is there too. But essentially, it presents, absence. The absent are not there, are not “in images.” But they are imaged: their absence is woven into our presence. The empty place of the absent is a place that is not empty, that is the image. A place that is not empty does not mean a place that has been filled: it means the place of the image, that is, in the end, the image as place, and a singular place for what has no place here: the place of a displacement, a metaphor...


Weaving together a sensation of traumatic loss and revelatory insight, the works of contemporary artist Doris Salcedo present the experience of an ongoing absence to the viewer. The traumatic quality of her work seeps out of it’s raw materiality, a testimony to the trace of subjectivity within history, or perhaps the imagined history of the future. *Untitled 2003* is a site specific installation of one thousand one hundred and fifty wooden chairs piled into the space created by a demolished building. The excess of objects references the absence of the lives of their owners, reminiscent of piles of personal articles left over in the wake of genocide or collective traumas. Precarious and suffocating, the physical burial of space draws attention to what cannot be fully known within the presentation. The loss of particularity created by the mass amounts of objects is transformed into an all consuming universal and the objects’ witness of some unknown event can only present itself to us in the form of an absence.

---

Presenting a fundamental anxiety about their identity, anxious objects dwell in the perceptual gap between real and unreal, art and life, inner and outer, subject and object. They share a curious relationship to the traumatic, as object-bodies which refuse to stay in their place, presenting themselves to the viewer through the wound, which is distorted or subjective sight. In one sense, all art objects are anxious objects insofar as we can only understand them as art because we accept a certain level of unknowingness, or indeterminacy about art’s identity. The label “anxious object” merely serves as a verbal placeholder for the upsetting, perhaps even traumatic quality of aesthetic experience.

Whether intimations of exhilaration or anxiety character the viewer’s experience of art, were they to contemplate the origins of such a phenomenology, they would find themselves trapped in puzzling ambiguity. How can it be possible that material objects transcend their object-ness and present themselves as art? Furthermore, “anxious objects” often present themselves as something entirely unlike objects, more closely akin to subjects. And if they are subjects, something like us, then our gaze does not only fall upon them, but it is returned by them. Aesthetics creates the possibility of a perpetual subject-survivor, a state of continual awakening to the impossible reality of subjectivity.

From a wounded object, Clorinda addressed Tancred in the wake of his movements toward and form the site of his original trauma. One gets the sense that not-quite-object-objects, like the tree whose wound speaks or the art object qua witness, know us and address something within our experience. In Doris Salcedo’s work, the unfolding of the object bearing witness to some past traumatic loss not only references an event within the object’s history, but touches upon the possibility of that occurrence
within us. The injection of the universal abstract into the embodied particular, the sacred within the profane, and the impossibility of subject-hood within objects creates an enigmatic experience within the viewer’s sight. Works of art which emerge from a buried history may cry out as testimonies to past traumatic acts, but the objects themselves are appearances in the process of disappearance. Containing histories beneath our sight, anxious objects haunt our remembrance but are themselves becoming remembrance. They exist as traces of subjectivity in the world of objects, perhaps traces of histories unknown which can never be fully witnessed. Anxious objects function as sacramental icons, endowed with the power and belief in transcendence beyond their materiality.

While examples of curiously anxious aesthetic objects abound within contemporary art, I’d like to access the experience of aesthetics through an occurrence entirely outside the gallery. Collected and told by Dori Laub in his work, *Truth and Testimony*, the following story of the boy with the photograph weaves together traumatic experience, the role of the anxious object, and the double-wounding which the loss of the aesthetic witness contains.

At the age of 4, a little boy was separated from both of his parents as they were taken to the Krakow ghetto. His parents were able to smuggle him outside the gates of the city before being taken away, leaving him with a passport photograph of his mother, and a promise to return and take him home. His mother told him to turn to the photograph whenever he felt that he needed, and as he was shuffled from homelessness, to whorehouse, to friendly families who opened their doors to him, he prayed to the photograph of his mother, remembering the promise she had made. Years later, his parents would miraculously reunite with him, but they had been drastically
altered by their experiences within the concentration camp. Far from the smiling woman in the photograph, his mother resembled a stranger whom he could not address as mother, only as “mrs.”.

The photograph in this instance, functions as a silent witness to the boys unimaginable suffering. Without the presence of a subject, his beloved object became the point of mediation for coping with the sudden, traumatic loss of his parents. Like the child who casts away and returns the spool, his prayers to his mother’s photograph were a mode of addressing the inexplicability of pervasive absence. His prayers also endowed the profanely banal with the power of an icon, or even an anxious object. The sense that within the photographic witness which he perceived, his suffering was also seen. Our relationship to objects within aesthetic experience involves our sight, but also the eerie capability of those objects bearing witness to us.

Their witness is impermanent, however, dissolving for the boy with the return of his mother, or for the viewer when they are no longer with the object. Aesthetic experience involves a suddenness of revelation which cannot be fully assimilated within its temporal instance, rather unfolding in the life of the subject over and again. The subject as survivor continually experiences the loss of the witness, departing and returning to the sight of their original absence.¹³

---


Dori Laub writes on p. 74 the same essay as the story of the boy about the loss of the witness: It is the realization that the lost ones are not coming back; the realization that what life is all about is precisely living with an unfulfilled hope; only this time with the sense that you are not alone any longer- that someone can be there as your companion- knowing you, living with you through the unfulfilled hope, someone saying: “I'll be with you in the very process of you losing me. I am your witness.”
Reading Caruth, Reading Freud, Reading Tasso

“He shook with horror, swung his blade once more
to see it through, to find out all he could.”

Within the practice of psychoanalyses, trauma theory, and aesthetics, the third figure of Gerusalemme Liberata emerges: the subject, or the subject-seeker. Notably, Tancred’s act of double wounding occurs out of a desire for knowledge or insight, “to find out all he could.” He strikes, compelled to do so, to uncover the truth about his original crime which he cannot fully assimilate or witness. In doing so, he releases the voice within the wound.

As Freud revisited Tasso’s original metaphor and as Caruth revisits Tasso through Freud, the fields of psychoanalyses and trauma theory take on the structures of the metaphors which they attempt to explicate. Rather than an unconscious returning to a traumatic event, however, there is a return to a truth or insight that could not be fully known at its origins. The act of returning through thought relates the reader of the text to the figures within, expanding the metaphor to include the creative act of thinking.

Tancred, in his blindness, could not fully assimilate the reality of his murdering Clorinda, until witnessing her second death, his second loss. While the parable references two separate events within a character’s history, the same double-wounding occurs within the fields that attempt to excavate such histories. Those significant, traumatic truths which are illuminated in thought cannot be fully understood, even as they are articulated. In Tasso’s writing of Tancred’s fate, the full structural implication of the metaphor of the wound which speaks could not be known. Because traumatic
events cannot be fully witnessed contemporaneously, so too insights into the nature of trauma strike beneath rational consciousness. The after quakes of their impact are felt through history, resurfacing to those who bear witness to their truth.

As Freud reflects on Tancred’s fate as a poetic picture of the phenomenon of repeated catastrophic or traumatic encounters, he unknowingly implicates himself within the act of returning, and striking. In order to make sense of a structure for which the *Pleasure Principle* cannot account, he turns to metaphor. In doing so, he positions himself as a subject-lens in the ongoing theoretical trajectory of Tasso’s original creative act. His fixation on this inexplicable structure does not revolve around traumatic death or loss as an event, but instead focuses on a particular insight or metaphoric truth.

Alfred Hitchcock’s *The Lady Vanishes* presents another instance of the subject-seeker in the character of Iris Henderson. The film begins with the elderly Miss Froy, who befriends Iris in a crowded hotel. Their original departure is delayed due to an avalanche, causing the two women to end up on the same train. In the midst of the trip, Iris suffers a spell of unconsciousness as Miss Froy suddenly disappears, leaving almost no trace. Iris frantically and insistently questions the other passengers and service staff about the disappearance of her friend to no avail. The denial of Miss Froy’s disappearance signifies an absence or error within the congruent train ride of theoretical discourse. Her character represents a truth too traumatic to assimilate or see fully, like a voice from the wound. The nature of her disappearance is easily erased, forgotten, and buried within the consciousness of the “passengers” on the train. The failure to testify to the vanishing of Miss Froy is to be complicit in her erasure; her absence becomes salient in the wake of denial.
But the Iris’s among us, such as Freud and Caruth, continue to give voice to the loss of Miss Froy, opening space for sight and acknowledgement. The unfolding levels of perception, denial, and witnessing present in *The Lady Vanishes* speak to the kinds of intuitions to which the fields of trauma theory and aesthetics bear witness. With each repeated striking, new insights present themselves in reference to the site of their origin. Like a voice which cries out from the wound, metaphor continually reemerges, witness to the impossibility of subjectivity.
Bibliography:


