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SEPARATION TRAUMA IMAGE

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It was in a high school Physics textbook that I first saw a photograph of a stone falling into a pool of calm water. The photograph appeared on the introductory page of wave theory; it was unattractively “framed” and badly printed. It showed the wave forming on the water as a representation of the invisible wave of sound. A series of concentric circles “concentric stomatic lips” swallowing up the stone which had already disappeared: one could clearly discern the center of the disturbance and its rhythmic expansion; however, it was hard to imagine the external limits of this disturbance.

The calm surface of the water surrounding the wave was separated from the disturbed area by a zone which lay between the area within the range of the wave and the area outside it. Inside this zone, the wave began to lose its intensity, but had not yet abated. The transition from disturbance to calm, the abandonment of the regulated wave oscillation revealed the distinctive threshold which separates the calm exterior from the “oscillatorily regulated” interior of the disturbed surface. At the threshold of range, we are still within the area of disturbance and already outside it.

Martin Heidegger's essay “Building Living Thinking” defines spatiality based on a central topical space which “radiates” spatiality. Spatiality is conceived in this text as the corollary of the condensing which surrounds a thing/place. In order to explain this, Heidegger uses the example of the bridge.

“... only that which is itself a place may concede [einräumen] a position. The place does not already exist before the bridge. Of course, before the bridge is erected there are many sites [Stellen] along the river which may become occupied by something. One of these emerges as a place and indeed does so via the bridge. Thus, what occurs primarily is not the fact that the bridge is erected in a place, but the fact that by means of the bridge itself a place is initially created.

The bridge is a place. ... The space allocated by the bridge contains many different locations at a varying closeness to or distance from the bridge.”¹

The installed place of the bridge creates closeness to it and distance from it. It organizes the area of the bridge as a space which is conceded by the bridge. Within this specific area the distance from the bridge cannot be infinite. The bridge has its own space, and yet this space, without being vast, is not finite. We are interested in the intercalated area which is no longer the area of the bridge, but which is not yet an area without the bridge. Within this zone, we are already mourning for the bridge, but we have not yet forgotten it. For this area of separation our thought processes are mournful, hurriedly leading us to the image of loss, filling us with nostalgia for that which is being lost, but at the same time looking forward impatiently to the blind space where that which is being lost will already be lost. In the intermediate space of mourning (for that which will soon be lost), there is also a reigning impatience for the loss: zestfully, hurriedly, what is sought is the obliteration of that which is being mourned, the oblivion of the area, blindness.

¹ “Building, Dwelling, Thinking”, paragraphs 8,12.

That we remain, by necessity temporarily, in this intercalated zone, occurs because the action of blindness is the event which concerns us here. If blindness were defined as the transition from disturbance to invisible obscurity, as an obliteration of the traces of the central transmission, we have still to talk about the traces of the loss of traces: during the weakening of the signal (of the extension of the time and space of the disturbance), blindness, the end of the central transmission, takes place with injuries and mnemonic incisions: the blindness of the calm lake mourns for the lost center of the stone which disturbed it. I am already writing with the words of this mourning. The lake is carved by the stone it swallowed up. The lake itself keeps mournful diaries of the action of the stone. And the moment of recording, of the image, that is the moment of traumatic separation: time freezes, crystallizing there where the central transmission is becoming extinct. Moreover, between disturbance and calm, the sound is still here in the silence, the image still here in the darkness, the dream still here in the awakening. The presence of the center haunts its absence, the absence of the center is established as centrally present, temporarily.

A retrogressive entry and exit in and out of the region defined by the range of the signal: that is what characterizes residing on the borderline. The central transmission “begins” to disappear and

stopping inside the zone of loss is characterized by a continuous transformation of the relation to the wave. The wave is “lost” as long as we can “remaining stationary” inhabit continuous re-entries into and re-exits out of its disturbance. Residing on the borderline is defined by the reaffirmation of the fact of loss, the reaffirmation of the action during which we lose and regain the central signal; as if we were losing and regaining our eyesight when we go to sleep and when we wake up. Night and day, blindness and vision, withdrawal and return.

I remember the blinding of Michel Strogoff in Jules Verne's novel by the same name, as an extreme action of retrogression: the hero regains his eyesight, even though he has been blinded by a red-hot iron. This return to the world of visible things is justified by the last image the hero sees before being “blinded,” the unexpected appearance of his mother, her image seen after a long time.

“Mother! He cried out. Yes! Yes! My last gaze is yours.”

... “Nothing else existed for his eyes except for his mother, whom he devoured with his gaze. His entire life was contained in this last vision.”

His emotion causes such excessive production of tears that the power of the red-hot metal is staved off. The tears are organized

by the “vision” of the loved one, becoming the depth of the maternal image and saving him from blindness.

“Michel Strogoff looked at her, as a son may look upon his mother for the last time. Like waves, the tears rose from his heart to his eyes, tears which his pride tried in vain to hold back. And these tears which filled his eyes evaporated upon his corneas and spared his eyesight. The layer of water vapor formed by the tears, between the burning sword and the pupils of his eyes, was enough to annihilate the action of the heat. The same occurs when the foundry worker, having dipped his hand in water, can then harmlessly pass it through molten iron”².

I came across a narrative reversal of this specific role of tears, many years later, while reading *Memories d'Aveugle*. Jacques Derrida wrote this text³ “during a temporary loss of his own eyesight. At the end of the text one locates one of its “central” themes: the blindness caused by the tear itself, the blurring which blinds the eye caused by the tearing itself. “At the same moment as the tears veil the eyesight, they would reveal the typical feature of the eye,” wrote Derrida⁴.

² Jules Verne, *Michel Strogoff*, Paris, 1875.

³ *Memoires D' Aveugle; L'autoportrait et autres ruines*, Paris, 1990.

⁴ *Op.cit.*, p. 125.

The tear prescribes the technique of the blinking of the eye and crystallizes an emotional disturbance. The tear saves from blindness but also blinds. The eye loses the image because of the tear at the same moment as the tear wells up as a concentration on the image. The tear mourns for the lost image and inaugurates the duration of the image.

E.T.A. Hoffmann's short story "The Sandman," which became famous thanks to Freud's essay "Das Unheimliche"⁵ also refers to the topic of blindness and the eye. The character of the Sandman is encountered in German popular tradition. He is the man who wanders through the night, making sure that children are asleep. If a child is not sleeping, the Sandman punishes it by throwing sand into its open eyes. Thus, the Sandman will surrender the child to the darkness of blindness, since the child refuses to surrender itself to the temporary darkness of sleep. Hoffmann presents the Sandman as a real narrative character which haunts the hero's life, appearing at different stages with different names and roles. The hero of Hoffmann's book first hears of Sand-Man in his childhood.

He thinks that Sand-Man is a friend of his father. As a student, he meets Coppola, a man who sells optical mechanisms. In Coppola, Hoffman's hero discovers someone who resembles his perception of

⁵ "Das Unheimliche" The Uncanny, in: *Art and Literature: Jensen's Gradiva, Leonardo da Vinci and Other Works*, Penguin, London, 1985, pp. 335-376.

Sand-Man. He buys a telescope with which he watches the house across the street. He falls in love with the good looking but silent girl who lives there. Finally he finds out that she is an automaton with artificial eyes created by Coppola.

Freud skips from the question of the eye and of blindness to the question of the automaton's animation. I insist in this change and in the way Freud observes it. Freud tries to understand why the image of the living doll creates such fear.

“Curiously enough, while the Sand-Man story deals with the arousing of an early childhood fear, the idea of a “living doll” excites no fear at all; children have no fear of their dolls coming to life, they may even desire it. The source of uncanny feelings would not, therefore, be an infantile fear in this case, but rather an infantile wish or even merely an infantile belief. There seems to be a contradiction here; but perhaps it is only a complication”⁶.

Hoffmann's short story is useful to Freud as an example, in order to broaden the theory of repression beyond the area of significant traumatic events. This broadening does not take place in a spectacular way, but rather without affectation, as if it is of no special significance. As Freud writes in this text:

⁶ *Op.cit.*, 350, 355.

“In the first place, if psychoanalytic theory is correct in maintaining that every affect belonging to an emotional impulse, whatever its kind, is transformed, if it is repressed, into anxiety, then among instances of frightening things there must be one class in which the frightening element can be shown to be something repressed which recurs. This class of frightening things would then constitute the uncanny; and it must be a matter of indifference whether what is uncanny was itself originally frightening or whether it carried some other affect. “It is a matter of indifference whether what is uncanny was itself originally frightening or whether it carried some other affect”.⁷

Freudian uncanniness is thus founded upon the very trauma of separation and not on the content of the traumatic process. In itself, the act of abandoning powerful positive expectations leaves behind its own mourning, the mourning of the act itself of abandoning, the mourning for that which has been lost. The loss haunts the person who has suffered the loss in such a way that separation still seems incomplete and is prolonged in the person's emotional life. In this respect, we can interpret Freudian repression theory as the inability to exit from a memory. Repression succeeds in preserving in a state of disfigurement those things which could

⁷ *Op.cit.*, 363-364.

be considered lost, thus expressing a deep emotional inability to separate from those things which have “passed.”

Once again, I recall the image of the lake and the increasingly limited oscillation in the area where the wave disappeared. The area on which we are concentrating is the area of farewell, the area of separation from the center. The center which controls the range of its spaces is in danger of disappearing. Persistence during loss is persistence on the act of separation. However, separation now appears again as the center of another range. It is the range of the trauma caused by separation, the power of memory, the weight of recording, the image, the healing and the shape separation takes on. Just as the tear crystallizes separation, loss, the image of the lost central scene, so does eviction (from the house of the center and its range) build a new house, worthy of returning over and over, the house of an image of loss.

In the area of the loss of the center, the center is honored in an epic way.

“An archer shoots arrows from a certain spot, turning only this way or that, without leaving his place. A circle begins to form around him, which defines the radius of the range of his bow. An observer watches the image of the archer, standing at first in the area outside the bow's range. He suddenly decides to approach the

archer as much as he can. Upon reaching the area which is defined by the radius of the range, the observer does not stop. He slows down and stands among the first arrows he comes across. Then, an arrow hits him in the right eye.”⁸

The range of the bow now defines the area. The observer looks at the archer. Within the shooting area he can protect himself “by residing” or be injured himself. The observer is a foreigner to the organizational will of the area: the archer aims where he thinks he should aim. Riveted to the center, he goes on shooting ceaselessly. But why” The observer will not interact with him; he won't find out whether the shooting is determined by chance or not. The archer may not even turn his gaze in the direction in which he is shooting; perhaps he too is blind. The observer knows the archer only as an archer. He may choose his observation point, he may decide where to stand. If he enters the “inner space” defined by the range of the bow, if he swiftly covers a certain distance and settles within the range of the bow, he will be putting his life at the archer's disposal. He will make his existence dependent on the decision of the archer. If he stays outside the area he will not find out whether the archer decides to shoot towards him.

⁸ Zaphos Xagoraris, «The arrow and the eye», notes, 2002.

He decides to stand in the area just reached by the archer's arrows, at the threshold of the bow's range. At the limits of the bow's range, the observer is endangering the act itself of observing. Observation becomes an injury of the eye. The trauma becomes the image of the archer.

Outside the range of oscillation or shooting, space is blind. With no center, no transmission, no regulation, space is abolished in the same way that the area in which a blind man moves is abolished for his cane, when that area has no limits or end. Such is Euclidian space as seen by Husserl⁹ and Cartesian space, by Heidegger¹⁰, Merleau Ponty¹¹, Patočka¹². If I think of exiting the area of range as a traumatic process, if blindness occurs as a trauma, then the depth of the area of range, the power of its center, defined as mourning following the trauma, is carved as an indelible memory. Exiting the area within the range is announced by the incision which at the same time certifies abandonment and the interminable residing in the area. Crossing the limit of the area I hold the

⁹ I use the French translation, *L'origine de la geometrie*, Paris, 1974, and *Chose et Espace, Leçons de 1907*, Paris, 1989.

¹⁰ "Building, Dwelling, Thinking", <http://pratt.edu/~arch543p/readings/Heidegger.html>, 14.9.2007.

¹¹ For example, *L'oeil et l'esprit*, Paris, 1964,

¹² Jan Patočka, "La problematique de l'espace", in *Qu'est-ce que la phenomenologie*, Millon, Grenoble, 1988, pp.17- 96.

evidence of transcending the threshold in such a way that my world is transformed into a collection of records of separations.

Aristotle¹³ wrote that there is no thought without an image to retain it. I now read this in the light of all that has come before: the word, the name would be the pictorial ἢ simulated evidence of a separation, the proof of exiting, the lack and the mourning for whatever has been lost. “Le langage se parle “ de l'aveuglement”, wrote Derrida¹⁴. Language is proof of blindness and it develops from the area where we can no longer see the things of which we are talking.

Residing in the area of loss is residing in the area of the tears of separation, of pictorial or simulated incisions, residing in the depth of the world of writing.

¹³ *De anima*, 432a,17. Cited in Yates' *Art of Memory*, London, 1966.

¹⁴ *Op. cit.*, p. 11.