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Literature in the Ashes of History by Cathy Caruth (review)

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Book Review

Cathy Caruth. *Literature in the Ashes of History*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013. 144 pp. Paper, \$22.95.

Since the 1995 publication of her edited volume *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* and the appearance one year later of her path-breaking monograph *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*, Cathy Caruth has become universally acknowledged as a leader in the field of trauma studies. Her new book, *Literature in the Ashes of History*, builds on her previous work while breaking important new ground. Like *Unclaimed Experience*, *Literature in the Ashes* is a highly interdisciplinary study drawing on psychoanalysis, political theory, philosophy, and literary theory. Like her earlier work, it accords a certain privilege to the literary text and to what might be described as the literary, rhetorical, and performative dimension of the theoretical texts by Freud, Arendt, and Derrida she addresses, treating this dimension as a kind of textual unconscious.

Her readings are meticulous and constantly surprising. Each chapter is carefully researched and closely argued. The prose is dense and the arguments complex, yet everything hangs wonderfully well together, even if it is necessary to alter one's way of thinking to appreciate her unsettling insights.

Caruth begins with her own rereading of Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, a text she had already treated at length in *Unclaimed Experience*. Her reading here takes as its point of departure the familiar scene in which Freud describes his grandson's self-invented game of *fort-da*. Indeed, like Derrida's analysis of

this scene in "To Speculate on 'Freud,'" it is not the performance itself but rather the frequency with which readers return to it that interests her. It is as if this scene in which a certain mode of repetition is enacted exerted its own force of repetition, as if, like a trauma dream, it had an uncanny way of bringing readers back to it. Caruth's point is that those who, like Eric Santner (93n3), return to the scene, reading *the Spiel* of *fort-da* merely as a game of mourning and a form of mastery, unwittingly rehearse their captivation by something else at work in it, something that still calls for analysis. It is this unconscious call, this silent appeal, to which the compulsiveness of the scholarly return bears witness.

For Caruth, the scene is itself a locus of trauma, the site of a theoretical accident, the place where the text in its very performance thinks—or at least gestures toward a way of thinking—beyond itself. This is precisely the scenic, theatrical dimension of the passage in question, and this is why texts like Derrida's "Freud and the Scene of Writing" and its analysis of the gesture of two-handed writing in Freud's brief "Note on a Mystic Writing Pad" are so important to Caruth. What Freud gestures toward at the end of his "Note" is a thinking together of writing and repression, a thinking that exceeds the logic of "on the one hand, on the other" and the temporality of the *maintenant* (the present moment, but also more literally the single holding hand).

If the literary does indeed function as a kind of textual unconscious, it is associated first and foremost, Caruth argues, with the performative dimension of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, with those performances that are not only its explicit object but also its *modus operandi*. And nowhere are these two aspects of performance more closely intertwined, nowhere is it more necessary to view the text's method of operation as its true object, than in the famous play of the *fort-da*, a highly self-reflexive moment in which the text is itself the object—or in this case the performance—of which it speaks. The play of the *fort-da* is also the scene of an accident, the place where a rift or fault line may be seen to open in Freud's text. And it opens precisely as the two acts of the play Freud describes begin to come apart. Losing its in-

tegrity as a complete game of departure and return, and with this loss its status as an example of successful mourning and progressive mastery, it is the first act of departure that takes on a life of its own. What is enacted in this scene of departure is nothing less than a different theory of repetition, as though the rift described above had somehow given place to a repetition within the repetition, to another beat, another rhythm, to what Caruth here and elsewhere in the book refers to as a kind of stammer. Thus, for example, she observes, "The creative activity of the child's game, Freud recognizes with surprise, does not ultimately involve symbolic representation of the mother's pleasurable return, but repeats, in a kind of stammer that interrupts its story, the painful memory of her departure" (4).

This stammer, and the novel mode of repetition with which it is associated, repeats throughout Freud's text, spreading like a proliferating fault line, like the repercussions of an accident that will never have taken place once and for all and that, as such, will only have been experienced belatedly in and through its aftershocks. As Caruth suggests, the accident is itself highly overdetermined. It is associated not only with the death of Freud's daughter Sophie, mother of the child playing the game in question, but also with the way this trauma is uncannily inscribed in the scene of the *fort-da*; with the specular relationship in which spectator and spectacle, Freud and his grandson, are bound; and with the shocking discovery of a theory of repetition before which Freud himself seems to recoil and which insists in his text only in the mode of unconscious repetition; and finally with Caruth's own experience of loss. This loss is inscribed at the threshold of the chapter in its dedication to the author's mother, Elaine G. Caruth, described in the accompanying footnote as a psychoanalyst who "had discussed an earlier draft of this text with me a number of times before her death in March 1998" (3). The stammering that so concerns Caruth in Freud's text thus seems to carry over into her own, alerting us to the interruptions of her own story, which, it seems, is not fully hers to tell. Stammering at the threshold of speech and silence, such a story must be read instead in the

back-and-forth between the body proper and the appended note (similar in this way to Derrida's reading of Freud's "Note" and the general logic of supplementarity and the temporal structure of *Nachträglichkeit* he develops there). Moreover, it is a story that must be read in terms of its complicated structure of address—with a sense not only of those toward whom and in memory of whom it tentatively speaks, but also and perhaps above all of those who speak in broken, stammering, and hauntingly repetitive ways through it.

What is most original about Caruth's reading of Freud is the way she locates a way out of repetition—out of the melancholic fixations and cycles of compulsive return with which it is often associated—in the surprisingly fault-ridden structure of repetition itself. As noted above, such fault lines are initially apparent in the splitting of the *fort-da* performance into two acts, Freud's surprising recognition that the first act, that of departure, was "staged as a play in itself and far more frequently than the episode in its entirety" (9). Focusing on the surprising autonomization of departure as *Spiel* in both senses of the term—that is, as a game played in its own right and as a scene of repetition linked to the creativity of child's play—Caruth links this shift in emphasis on Freud's part, and the surprise that accompanies it, to a related shift in the Freudian theory of trauma, one also involving an element of surprise. She reminds us that the trauma of the nightmare does not simply consist in the experience within the dream but also in the experience of waking from it, noting, "It is the surprise of waking that repeats the unexpectedness of the trauma" (6). The implications of this crucial shift are twofold: not only does it displace the site of traumatic repetition from the content of the dream to the moment of waking, but it also redefines trauma itself as a doubly missed encounter. Indeed, what is repeated in the surprise of waking is a missed encounter both with death and with one's own survival: "It is the incomprehensible act of surviving—of waking into life—that repeats and bears witness to what remains ungrasped within the encounter with death" (6).

Caruth goes on to trace the consequences of this shift in focus from the content of dreams to the surprise of waking from them,

a shift that forces us to view waking itself as a double repetition, the repetition of one ungraspable situation—an encounter with death—in the incomprehensibility of another—the act of surviving. Such shifts lead us in turn beyond the pleasure principle insofar as the traditional theory of dreams and the privileged place it accords to questions of (repressed) desire gives way to the ethical and to an incomprehensible “imperative to live” (6). What was earlier described as the repeated opening of Freud’s text and the proliferating spread of fault lines within it may be seen in Caruth’s own text as the series of repeated shifts she traces. Perhaps the most surprising shift is the one concerning the notion of repetition itself. Returning to the child’s game with which she began, Caruth reminds us that the play of *fort-da* “does not simply compulsively repeat a history it doesn’t own but creates, in its repetition, something new” (8). Once again, the focus shifts from the content of Freud’s text to its performance—or rather to the return in this vertiginously self-reflexive text of one linguistic performance in another—for it is not so much the child’s game that returns in a subsequent discussion of the awakening of life from inorganic matter as its language of departure.

In subsequent chapters, Caruth’s analyzes Balzac on law and survival, Dorfman on musical performance and traumatic repetition, and Arendt on the atomic bomb. The final chapter, “After the End: Psychoanalysis in the Ashes of History,” concerns the structures of repetition and return that take Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* back past *The Interpretation of Dreams* to his earlier *Project for a Scientific Psychology*, structures that compel Derrida, in his turn, to do the same in *Archive Fever*, returning to his own earlier writings about Freud, belatedness, and the figure of writing in texts ranging from the *Project* to “Note on a Mystic Writing Pad.” If there was much at stake for the early Derrida in the gestural language of “two-handed writing” to which Freud had recourse in his “Note,” there is much to be said about the later Derrida’s dramatization of his relationship to the computer and particularly the scenes in *Archive Fever* that turn around his pushing of the “save” button. At stake both in his earlier text, “Freud

and the Scene of Writing,” and in the later one is the relationship between writing and metaphor. In both, Derrida does not simply ask whether writing is a good or appropriate metaphor for psychic inscription. Instead, he examines how such metaphors—and figurative language more generally—construct our very concept of the “psychic apparatus.” In *Archive Fever* Derrida asks in effect what the psyche might have looked like if Freud had had a computer. There is much more to say in this regard—particularly about the toe-prints marking the small point and fleeting moment at which impression and imprint touch that so fascinate Jensen’s protagonist in *Gradiva*, and the moment when the tip of a finger presses down on the computer “save” button (*touche*) that so preoccupies Derrida. While Caruth doesn’t develop this connection, she does devote some pages to the fleeting moments when the word “suddenly” appears and disappears in Jensen’s text, treating them as moments associated not only with the unexpected, with fright, and the event marked by trauma but also with the unpredictability of a chance meeting or encounter.

Caruth’s main focus in this chapter is on Derrida’s distinction between the archaeological project and the archival task. Just as figures of writing have enjoyed a privileged place in descriptions of the psyche, so too has the archaeological dig served as a privileged metaphor for the work of psychoanalysis, a point well illustrated by Freud’s early essay on *Gradiva*. If, as Derrida claims, it is necessary to distinguish the archive from the archaeological, it is because the former is all too often reduced to the latter; “notably,” as Derrida puts it, “the experience of memory and the return to the origin, but also the archaic and the archeological, the memory of the dig, in other words, the search for lost time” (77). Not only is the former reduced to the latter, but the privileging of the archaeological and all that goes with it effectively represses the archive and all the ways it might inform psychoanalytic thinking—including a thinking of the future (of psychoanalysis).

Writing with characteristic economy about this repressive relationship and the necessity of distinguishing the figure of burial from that of incineration, Caruth asserts, “At the origin of the fig-

ure of repression is the possibility of a complete erasure, which the archeological analogy of burial and preservation—and the concept of repression that it shapes—itsself erases and bypasses, passes over to pass on” (86). In other words, psychoanalysis will have been haunted by the possibility of a complete erasure, will have gathered itself around and against this possibility. At stake here is not only the concept of repression but also that of *Nachträglichkeit*, which, Caruth argues, Derrida “attempts to rename in the concept of the archive” (80).

What does it mean to “rename”? For Caruth, as for Derrida, analytic concepts are never immune to the unconscious objects they treat or the traumatic histories about which they speak. Thus, to understand the notion of *Nachträglichkeit* it is necessary to trace how

deferred action enacts its own deferred action and its own repetition throughout Freud’s career, [and how, in doing so,] it also both records and effaces its own past, and to a certain extent becomes erased from the psychoanalytic archive. We see this self-archiving and self-erasing act in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, where the notion of a deferred experience is newly figured as an “attempt to return” by consciousness that ultimately fails and departs into the repetitions of a future history. . . . The psychoanalytic concept . . . archives its own history and in so doing bears witness to the newness, and alterity, to the shock, of a history it cannot assimilate but only repeat. (80)

To rename is thus not so much to acknowledge the limited validity of a term like “deferred action” as to follow the movement of repetition in which it takes part and which in turn takes it apart. In this chapter, the figure of burial—or, more specifically, burial by ashes—itsself catches fire and turns to ash. Its incineration not only conjures the possibility of complete erasure but also makes us rethink the entire logic of the Freudian impression. Whereas the figure of the footprint in the ash seems in a first reading of Derrida to mark the small point and fleeting moment of contact

between impression and imprint, Caruth uses it to touch on more troubling questions: "How can ashes sustain a print when ashes are precisely that which may disperse and drift away? And what would it mean to leave a trace, or a remainder in that which is, itself, a remainder, the ash that is the burned up trace of what is incinerated?" "The figure of ash," she concludes, "is, indeed, not only the substratum for a writing that has taken place, but the figure of a writing that is burning up" (87).

While Freud never asked such questions, they nevertheless come to be posed in the context of his writing through Caruth's reading of what he encounters only in the mode of avoidance. Indeed, the turning point of his text on *Gradiva*, the point at which he turns away from the unimaginable, turning instead toward the saving figure of Zoë (whose name, he stresses, means "life"), is itself something of a tangent; that is, it is the infinitely small point where turning toward and turning away touch, where Freud in turning toward the saving figure of life unwittingly touches on and unconsciously makes contact with "another kind of figure, the imagination of an unimaginable erasure that is carried . . . by all of his figures of deferral, of repetition, of return and departure, of *Nachträglichkeit*, of trauma" (87). "The language of trauma," Caruth continues, "is the language of this absolute erasure, not imaginable in the past or present but always as something missed, and about to return, a possibility, always, of a trauma in the future" (87).

All of the figures mentioned above have, as it were, a touch of this absolute erasure, "not imaginable in the past or present but always as something missed" (87). Like the dispersed and drifting ash of which Caruth speaks, these moments of fleeting contact are scattered throughout Jensen's and Derrida's texts, appearing in the former as the recurring word "suddenly" (*plötzlich*) and in the latter as chance and as the signifier *même* which, according to Caruth, marks a certain difference that returns in the place of "same."

Literature in the Ashes of History is a highly original, deeply thoughtful, and fiercely courageous work. While it is in dialogue

with many major works in psychoanalysis, philosophy and literary criticism, all of which are referred to in the extensive and highly informative footnotes, it is truly in a class by itself.

Although Caruth is constantly cited in the field of trauma studies and in psychoanalytically informed studies of literature and philosophy, those who cite her rarely seem to engage in any detail with her densely textured, intricately argued work. Instead, they tend to cite her concise and authoritative definitions of trauma and allude briefly to her famous discussion of the Tasso citation in Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. The present essay is intended, at least in part, to counter this tendency and to suggest how rewarding and exciting it can be to follow the twists and turns of her endlessly surprising arguments.

Reviewed by Michael Levine