engaging biography of Sartre demonstrates, his was a life of unceasing commitment to intellectual and political praxis, especially at the time when he became an existential Marxist. Heidegger was certainly for a while, and perhaps for longer, a Nazi. Much has been written about the latter's political identifications. As we shall see, Herbert Marcuse once suggested there was a link between Heidegger's philosophical preoccupation with death and the Nazi death camps. Others are more cautious, asking whether in Heidegger's anti-humanism there is an in-humanism, and in his embrace of nothingness and death a nihilism, which connects with, if not prepares for, Nazism. George Steiner, reminding us that we still disagree over the politics and the impact on politics of writers like Machievelli and Rousseau, is surely right in saying that there are no easy answers to these questions (p. xxv).[9] But one thing seems certain: the radically different political trajectories of Sartre and Heidegger are inseparable from their different philosophies of death; Sartre could not have so radically embraced praxis had he not deviated from Heidegger's privileging of death. Social praxis entails a repudiation of a Western metaphysics of death of which Heidegger's work is a powerful mutation. Two years before he died, Sartre reiterated biographically this repudiation of the philosophy of death:

> Death? I don't think about it. It has no place in my life, it will always be outside. One day my life will end but I don't want it to be burdened with death. I want that my death never enter my life, nor define it, that I be always a call to life. (cited in Cohen-Solal, p. 524)

V

THE DESIRE NOT TO BE: LATE METAPHYSICS AND PSYCHOANALYSIS

14

Freud: Life as a Detour to Death

Freud's 'On Transience', written and published during the First World War, describes a summer walk, just before the war, on which Freud was accompanied by 'a taciturn friend and . . . a young but already famous poet'. This poet was afflicted with an 'aching despondency' at life's mutability: everything seemed beyond enjoyment because on the edge of oblivion. That the beauty around him, 'like all human beauty, and all the beauty and splendour that men have created or may create', was fated to extinction meant that it became 'shorn of its worth by the transience which was its doom' (p. 287).

This encounter apparently preceded, and influenced, the writing of Freud's 'Mourning and Melancholia'; of the poet's powerful emotional disturbance Freud remarks, 'I believed later that I had discovered what it was,' and proceeds to outline his thesis on the nature of mourning (pp. 288–9).

It is a theory which marks a yet further, and greatly influential, elaboration of the internalization of mutability. Within psychoanalysis, the narrative of human desire riven by loss is unfolded in a dramatically expanded domain of human interiority. Eventually Freud arrives at his theory of the death drive, which draws extensively on the long tradition we have been examining. In previous chapters I drew attention to ideas which anticipate Freud's. What these also mean, of course, is that Freud borrowed extensively from the past. But, as we shall see shortly, he evolved a new language – almost a new mythology – to express the conviction that death is absolutely interior to life.

Freud counters the poet's despondency with an attitude of *carpe diem*. Transience does not diminish the value of life; on the contrary

it enhances it: 'Transience value is scarcity value in time. Limitation in the possibility of an enjoyment raises the values of the enjoyment.' Freud also invokes the old idea of '*eterne in mutabilitie*': the seasonal cycle means that 'in relation to the length of our lives [the beauty of nature] can in fact be regarded as eternal'. If this is optimistic, in other encouragements to the poet he adopts the facile tones of the sober rationalist, identifying exactly what is agonizing about mutability in Western culture – 'the beauty of the human form and face vanish for ever' – only to add, lamely, 'but their evanescence only lends them a fresh charm'. He continues, 'Nor can I understand any better why the beauty and perfection of a work of art or of an intellectual achievement should lose its worth because of its temporal limitation.' A time may indeed come, he says, when what we admire today will crumble to dust, when our culture will be incomprehensible to succeeding ones, when an epoch arrives in which all animate life on earth ceases, 'but since the value of all this beauty and perfection is determined only by its significance for our own emotional lives, it has no need to survive us' (p. 288).

Freud's trite response to the poet is especially surprising given that he is writing during a war which, on his own admission in this very article, shattered human pride in the achievements of civilization, undermined human faith and human hope, and showed 'how ephemeral were many things that we regarded as changeless' (p. 289). Perhaps his optimism was mischievous; certainly it was not without irony: 'I noticed that I had made no impression either upon the poet or upon my friend' (p. 288). The poet's sense of mutability seems poignantly endorsed by a more lasting irony in that we do not know who he was; although by then already famous, according to Freud, his identity has never been established.

In his account of the walk, Freud concludes that his friend and the poet were in a state of mourning. He touches on a typical attitude in the mutability tradition: 'those who . . . seem ready to make a permanent renunciation because what was precious has proved not to be lasting, are simply in a state of mourning for what is lost' (p. 290). Mourning is here described as the inability or refusal of the libido to detach itself from the lost object in order to attach itself to new ones.[1] Actually it is just as likely that the poet was also experiencing the melancholia

which Freud was later to consider as a more severe and even pathological response to loss – one in which libido is withdrawn into the ego, where it serves to establish a sometimes suicidal identification with the lost object,[2] and where a traumatic perception of transience and loss becomes interwoven with the pain of desire.

There is much in Freud's theory which seems questionable or just implausible; but what is intriguing is the way in which it connects the perception of mutability, the pain of melancholic desire rooted in loss, and the pull of death – a connection which is, as we have seen, endemic in Western culture. Equally compelling is his belief that in melancholy there is not just an experience of loss, but a deep identification with what is lost.

The themes of loss and lack pervade Freud's work; and, if they figure most dramatically in his theory of the death drive, they are equally important in his theory of human erotic development. In fact, as we shall see, loss and lack provide some of the crucial links between the two.

From polymorphous perversity to the death drive

According to Freud, a child's sexuality originally exhibits a strange blend of self-sufficiency on the one hand, mobility and dispersion on the other. In other words a child's sexuality is polymorphously perverse, and, as such, undiscriminating in terms of object (e.g. mother or father, man or woman) or aim (e.g. incest, homosexuality, coprophilia, heterosexuality). And this is a condition of mobility, in which desire itself is definitely not unified, but of distinct and different kinds; it entails 'a widespread and copious but dissociated sexual life . . . in which each separate instinct pursues its own acquisition of pleasure independently of all the rest' (*Five Lectures*, p. 74). Polymorphous perversity and the dissociation of instincts echo primal or Edenic innocence, which, retrospectively for the adult, is beyond reach and even difficult to conceive. But this is a challenging, highly sexual innocence which henceforth can never be smothered by our sentimental categories of childhood. And the challenge remains even after a 'Victorian' outrage at the very idea of children having a sexuality has

subsided; indeed, perhaps that outrage was itself a displacement of a more fundamental anxiety which persists: in Freud's account the child confronts adults with their own renunciation of instinct; the child *is* what we have lost.

As is well known, for Freud the evolution, not to say the very survival, of civilization depends upon the containment, restriction, repression, sublimation and channelling of sexual desire. The early efflorescence of infantile sexuality is doomed to extinction as we become constrained, organized (fixed/fixated) as subjects in the social order, always haunted by the loss of that original libidinal freedom. Our original instinctual energies remain for ever alienated in order that civilization may be, but those energies are never entirely eliminated; there remains an unending conflict between the demands of the original instincts and those of civilization. Even when the processes of repression are as successful as they can be, that conflict remains at the heart of the human individual. In certain respects the individual becomes a permanent casualty of that struggle. To a greater or lesser degree, we are all repressed, neurotic and narcissistically scarred (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, p. 291).

This unremitting clash between instinctual desire and civilization, between nature and culture, leads Freud back to the old idea that there is something about human desire which makes its fulfilment impossible. Human beings are governed by a pleasure principle which has one major problem, namely that 'all the regulations of the universe run counter to it'. Worse still, we are internally constituted to make the pleasure principle doubly incapable of realization. For example, we derive our most intense enjoyment only from a contrast, like the sudden satisfaction of a need long denied. In this and other ways, our possibilities for happiness are already restricted by our constitution. Indeed, 'the programme of becoming happy, which the pleasure principle imposes on us, cannot be fulfilled'. But Freud adds, 'we must not – indeed, we cannot – give up our efforts to bring it nearer to fulfilment' (*Civilization and its Discontents*, pp. 263–4, 271).

Freud lists eight ways by which we typically try to avoid or minimize the suffering which inevitably results. The seventh is love – potentially the most intense experience of happiness, and so, apparently, the most triumphant repudiation of life's inherent suffering. Except that

suffering is no sooner left behind than it re-emerges from within love itself as love's very condition: 'we are never so defenceless against suffering as when we love, never so helplessly unhappy as when we have lost our loved object or its love' (p. 270). And it is in the sphere of sexuality that desire becomes somehow self-defeating.

Eighteen years earlier, in 1912, Freud had declared, 'It is my belief that, however strange it may sound, we must reckon with the possibility that something in the nature of the sexual instinct itself is unfavourable to the realization of complete satisfaction' ('On the Universal Tendency', p. 258). One reason is that sexual libido intensifies in relation to the difficulty and obstacles which resist it: 'the psychical importance of an instinct rises in proportion to its frustrations'. But fully to overcome the resistance which impedes desire is also to defeat the possibility of desire's satisfaction:

> This is true both of individuals and of nations. In times in which there were no difficulties standing in the way of sexual satisfaction, such as perhaps during the decline of the ancient civilizations, love became worthless and life empty . . . (p. 257)

There are other reasons why desire remains incapable of satisfaction, to do specifically with the repression of the so-called perversions. Freud considers what this means in practice through a brief account of instinctual drives towards incest and coprophilia.

In the case of the first, all 'normal' sexual relations are only poor surrogates for the primary, incestuous desire of the child for its mother, who, in her capacity *as* mother, becomes the child's first seducer, 'established unalterably for a whole lifetime as the first and strongest love object and as the prototype of all later love-relations – for both sexes' (*Outline*, p. 188). But this primary desire has to be surrendered, and 'normal' desire – that is, socially prescribed desire – is founded on this loss; as desiring subjects in the world, we embark on a restless and repetitive (because always inadequate) search for a substitute:

> when the original object of a wishful impulse has been lost as a result of repression [in this instance, the incest taboo], it is frequently represented by an endless series of substitute objects none of which, however, brings full satisfaction. This may explain the inconstancy in object-choice . . . which is so often a feature of the love of adults. ('On the Universal Tendency', p. 258)

Freud is quite specific about this. The breast is the child's first erotic object, from which all too soon it has to separate: 'for however long [a child] is fed at its mother's breast, it will always be left with a conviction after it has been weaned that its feeding was too short and too little' (*Outline*, p. 189). Again the theme of loss is paramount; as Malcolm Bowie comments, according to this view, 'Weaning gave a backward drift, a helpless retrospective tenor, to all passion' (p. 6).

Dissatisfaction arises too from the fact that the coprophilic instinctual components have also proved incompatible with culture, 'probably since, as a result of our adopting an erect gait, we raised our organ of smell from the ground'. But the instincts remain active, which is why, still, 'the excremental is all too intimately and inseparably bound up with the sexual'. Equally incompatible with culture are the sadistic instincts. The effect of the repression of such perversions always remains, and 'can be detected in sexual activity in the form of non-satisfaction' ('On the Universal Tendency', pp. 258–9).[3]

The ego too is the effect of restriction, and Freud describes this in terms which take us a step closer to the death drive, in that the primary, pre-social 'unity' of being is also a state of non-being or undifferentiation:

> originally the ego includes everything, later it separates off an external world from itself. Our present ego-feeling is, therefore, only a shrunken residue of a much more inclusive – indeed, an all-embracing – feeling . . . of limitlessness and of a bond with the universe . . . (*Civilization and its Discontents*, p. 255)

Death and the instincts: Freud's mythology of life's origins

Undergoing repression, desire tends towards a compulsion to repeat[4] which is a manifestation of the death drive (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, pp. 283–4). This drive was also there from the beginning, but now comes to the fore (in Freudian theory the human infant is astonishingly invested at birth). Instinct socialized as loss and lack somehow reconnects with the most fundamental instinct of all, which is to die. As life flickered in inanimate substance, says Freud, it

endeavoured to cancel itself out. In this way the first instinct came into being: the instinct to return to the inanimate state. It was still an easy matter at that time for a living substance to die . . . (p. 311)

This is the origin of the death drive – that which seeks to 'dissolve' life back into its 'primaeval, inorganic state' (*Civilization and its Discontents*, p. 310).[5] This is the definition of the death drive – an instinctual reaching towards that state in which there is the complete absence of excitation, a state of zero tension characteristic of the inorganic or the inanimate.

We should be clear about what Freud is claiming here: the most basic instinctual drive for satisfaction is in fact a backward movement to death, to the absence of all tension: ' "*the aim of all life is death*" ' (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, p. 311; both the emphasis and the quotation marks are his). As he wrote to Albert Einstein in 1932, the death instinct is 'at work in every living creature and is striving to bring it to ruin and to reduce life to its original condition of inanimate matter' ('Why War?', p. 357).

Originally, says Freud, it was relatively easy for living substance to die. Eventually, however, external influences make death more difficult; the organism has to make 'ever more complicated *détours* before reaching its aim of death. These circuitous paths to death . . . thus present us to-day with the picture of the phenomena of life' (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, p. 311). Life itself is only a detour to death.

There are those who believe in a future-oriented, human instinct towards perfection. Freud disagrees, believing that

What appears in a minority of human individuals as an untiring impulsion towards further perfection can easily be understood as a result of the instinctual repression upon which is based all that is most precious in human civilization. (p. 315)

He elaborates as follows: because 'the backward path that leads to complete satisfaction' – ultimately death – is blocked by the repressions which constitute social and psychic life (repressions which, we must never forget, are themselves the basis of civilization), the instinct reluctantly – against its will, so to speak – proceeds forward, because that is the only direction in which it *can* go. But this forward movement

has no possibility of completion or of reaching a goal. Which means that what drives the instinct forward is not eros, not even energy as such, but social and psychic repression experienced as lack:

it is the difference in amount between the pleasure of satisfaction which is *demanded* and that which is actually *achieved* that provides the driving factor which will permit of no halting at any position attained, but, in the poet's [Goethe's] words, 'presses ever forward unsubdued'. (p. 315)

Desire's impossibility derives from the fact that socialized desire is a lack which it is impossible to appease because it is the lack of death itself, with life merely an enforced substitute for death, a movement in the only direction available, which is forward, and one always undertaken against the more fundamental desire to regress, to die.

If the instinct towards human perfection is an illusion, so too is the notion of instincts of self-preservation. On the contrary, such instincts are in service to the ultimate death of the organism:

the theoretical importance of the instincts of self-preservation, of self-assertion and of mastery greatly diminishes. They are component instincts whose function it is to assure that the organism shall follow its own path to death . . . the organism wishes to die only in its own fashion. Thus these guardians of life, too, were originally the myrmidons of death. (pp. 311–12)

Eros

But there is a crucial exception: 'instinctual life as a whole serves to bring about death . . . *apart from the sexual instincts*' (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, pp. 311, 314). The emphasis here is Freud's own, but, significantly, was added to the text only from 1921 onwards. In his later work this distinction comes to form the basis of the eros/death opposition upon which he then sought to base everything else. Given this opposition,

The emergence of life would thus be the cause of the continuance of life *and also at the same time of the striving towards death*; and life itself would be a conflict and compromise between these two trends. (*The Ego and the Id*, p. 381; my emphasis)

Or, as he put it in *Civilization and its Discontents*, 'The phenomena of life could be explained from the concurrent or mutually opposing action of these two instincts' (p. 310). The meaning of the evolution of civilization is nothing less than the struggle between eros and death, which, between them, share 'world-dominion' (p. 314).[6] Here, more clearly than in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, civilization is regarded as in the service of an eros 'whose purpose is to combine single human individuals, and after that families, then races, peoples and nations, into one great unity, the unity of mankind' (p. 313). Whereas the aim of eros is to establish these ever greater unities, to bind them together, to prolong them and to bring life to a 'higher development', the aim of the death instinct is, 'on the contrary, to undo connections and so to destroy things' ('The Libido Theory', p. 258; *Outline*, p. 148).

One of several difficulties with this account is the way that, on closer scrutiny, the two drives, allegedly in perpetual antagonism, also unite or at least partake of each other. While being convinced that the two instincts do unite, Freud is unsure as to exactly how. On his own admission, the dualistic hypothesis 'throws no light whatever upon the manner in which the two classes of instincts are fused, blended, and alloyed with each other'. But he insists on retaining the assumption that a very extensive fusion and amalgamation does occur, and regularly (*The Ego and the Id*, p. 381). Thus, says Freud, the death drive, or '*instinct of destruction*', is habitually brought into the service of eros (p. 382), sadism and masochism being obvious and important examples (*Civilization and its Discontents*, p. 310). Turned inwards, as masochism, the instinct destroys the organism; turned outwards, as sadism, it constitutes the violence of human history, which is the greatest impediment to civilization, and directly responsible for what, in his 1932 letter to Einstein, Freud calls 'all the ugly and dangerous impulses against which we are struggling' ('Why War?', p. 358).

When a portion of the destructive instinct is sexualized, 'this is sadism proper'. Another portion remains inside the organism and, with the help of sexual excitation, remains libidinally bound there; this is 'the original, erotogenic masochism'. Freud also calls this portion of the death instinct 'primal sadism', and regards it as identical with masochism ('The Economic Problem of Masochism', pp. 418–19).

This primal sadism or erotogenic masochism is a component of the libido, with the self as its object. A 'secondary masochism' may be added to it: in this case an originally projected instinct of destruction – sadism – is introjected, turned back upon the subject; this occurs regularly where a '*cultural suppression of the instincts*' frustrates the subject's need for destructive instinctual expression (pp. 419, 425). Both normal and pathological phenomena can be traced to the internalization of the destructive instinct. Thirdly, there is 'moral masochism', which also originates from the death drive, and also has an erotic component; and this leads to the remarkable proposition that 'even the subject's destruction of himself cannot take place without libidinal satisfaction' (p. 426).

If the life and death drives can become fused, they can also become defused.[7] Even more significantly, they are inherently mutable, each being capable of actually turning into its opposite, as with love turning into hate and hate into love. Freud is not asserting the obvious point that an experience of hate can be succeeded by love, or vice versa, or that a change in the loved object can provoke such a shift of regard; rather, he is claiming that there can occur a direct transformation of hate into love which is purely internal and not dependent upon other meditations. And if this does indeed occur – as it most plausibly does for Freud in paranoia, where homosexual love is transformed into persecutory hate – then, on Freud's own admission, 'the ground is cut away from under a distinction so fundamental as that between erotic instincts and death instincts, one which presupposes physiological processes running in opposite directions' (*The Ego and the Id*, p. 383).

To preserve his dualistic theory Freud obviously wants to resist this conclusion, and he does so by invoking yet another hypothesis.[8] But he cannot get away from the fact that the life and death drives remain intimately, inextricably related. He reiterated this in the letter to Einstein. Declaring that 'human instincts are of only two kinds: those which seek to preserve and unite – which we call erotic . . . and those which seek to destroy and kill', Freud continues:

> Neither of these instincts is any less essential than the other; the phenomena of life arise from the concurrent or mutually opposing action of both. Now

it seems as though an instinct of the one sort can scarcely ever operate in isolation; it is always accompanied – or, as we say, alloyed – with a certain quota from the other side, which modifies its aim or is, in some cases, what enables it to achieve that aim . . . The difficulty of isolating the two classes of instinct in their actual manifestations is indeed what has so long prevented us from recognizing them. ('Why War?', p. 356)

In short, Freud resorts to this most fundamental of all dualisms only to find that it is unsustainable or, to the extent that it is sustainable, is lacking in explanatory power: the two most elementary and opposed forces in the universe are also so closely bound together as to be indistinguishable. Conceptually the life and death drives are separate; in practice they are not.[9]

Freud's dualism is unpersuasive in other respects too. When speaking of the death drive, he equates its activity of destroying with that of unbinding. But these two activities are not necessarily the same. It is just not plausible that the most fundamental cosmic binary is the opposition between binding/life and unbinding/death. For one thing, in Freud's earlier account of human development it was precisely sexuality itself which had the power to unbind; it was conceived as a force with enormous potential for profound psychic disruption – 'forever threatening the equilibrium of the psychic apparatus from within'.[10] The sexual perversions, for example, had a power of unbinding which, in an important sense, was on the side of life (or at least instinct) against civilization; not only could they inhibit the development of psychic and social unity, they could also re-emerge inside and against that unity, often disarticulating it. But in his dualistic theory (eros *vs.* thanatos) this very capacity to unbind shifts the perversions across on to the side of death. And, whereas desire had once threatened civilization, now Freud implausibly aligns the two: 'civilization is a process in the service of Eros' (*Civilization and its Discontents*, p. 313).[11]

These weaknesses and inconsistencies result, I believe, because Freud resorted to the dualistic theory in order to contain some of the more shocking implications of his theory of the death drive. Footnotes and paragraphs added to later editions of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* support this. For example, a footnote added in 1925 warns that the

death-drive theory 'is the development of an extreme line of thought. Later on, when account is taken of the sexual instincts, it will be found that the necessary limitations and corrections are applied to it' (p. 310). And whereas in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* Freud acknowledges his closeness to Schopenhauer without reservation, in his *New Introductory Lectures* he distances himself from the philosopher precisely on account of his own emphasis on eros: 'we are not asserting that death is the only aim of life' (p. 141).

Perhaps this is why it was a short step for some to rewrite the death drive as primarily an instinct of aggression. But, as Laplanche remarks, such a rewriting is in error, since for Freud 'the death drive is in the first instance turned, not toward the outside (as aggressivity), but toward the subject . . . it is radically not a drive *to murder*, but a drive *to suicide*, or *to kill oneself*'. It emerges, says Laplanche, from Freud's attempt to 'shatter life in its very foundations', from his 'compulsion to abolish life' (p. 123; cited in Boothby, p. 11). And yet: does not Laplanche here echo the terms of Satanic transgression; and does not Freud's own account of the death drive – the drive to unbind, to undo – do the same? Or, as John Donne put it in 1611, three hundred years earlier, paraphrasing the Augustinian theory of evil:

> We seem ambitious, God's whole work to undo;
> Of nothing he made us, and we strive too,
> To bring ourselves to nothing back . . .
> (*An Anatomie of the World*, ll. 155–7)

Unbinding is an idea with a theological history, and one which included Satan's power to undo (pervert) the created universe, to subvert it from within, to turn it against itself, and bring it back to chaos or nothingness. And this was a mythology which always knew that the power of unbinding was an expression of death working through human desire.

Freud's account of the death drive is a mythology of civilization, indeed of the world, even of the universe: it does, after all, purport to describe nothing less than the origin of life and of death. As such it draws on, or finds confirmation in, earlier philosophers. Keen to co-opt the authority of the ancients against his own contemporary critics, Freud half-acknowledged precedents as close as Schopenhauer

and as distant as Empedocles.[12] Virtually without qualification, he embraces the latter's theory of an elemental, everlasting conflict in the universe between *philia* and *neikos*, love and strife, as parallel to his own theory of the 'two primal instincts, *Eros* and *destructiveness*', remarking 'I am very ready to give up the prestige of originality for the sake of such a confirmation' ('Analysis', p. 245). In his letter to Einstein, Freud even conceded the mythological basis of his own 'scientific' theory – albeit somewhat defensively:

> It may perhaps seem to you as though our theories are a kind of mythology and, in the present case, not even an agreeable one. But does not every science come in the end to a kind of mythology like this? Cannot the same be said of your own physics? ('Why War', p. 358)[13]

Some four years later Freud seems still unsure about this; in acknowledging again the striking coincidence between his theory and that of Empedocles, he nevertheless distinguishes between the 'cosmic phantasy' of the latter and his own theory, which is 'content to claim biological validity' – only to add, 'at the same time, the fact that Empedocles ascribes to the universe the same animate nature as to individual organisms robs this difference of much of its importance' ('Analysis', pp. 245–6). As for Schopenhauer, the similarities are apparent from what has already been said. Richard Boothby has remarked that

> in both the metaphysics of Schopenhauer and the concept of the psychoanalytic death drive, what is at stake is the dissolution of the individual ego that poses an obstacle to the further unfolding of the very forces that constituted it. (p. 196)[14]

I think it is much more than that: Freud was never more provocative, insightful or profound than when, as here, he was being perversely speculative and evasively derivative,[15] when he was rediscovering, yet at the same time trying to circumvent, even to avoid, an ancient, shocking vision – at different times a metaphysic, a theology and a mythology – whereby death is not simply the termination of life (that being the mystifying banality by which we live) but life's driving force, its animating, dynamic principle: simply, in Freud's own words in 1920, ' "*the aim of all life is death*" '; or, as Schopenhauer put it earlier, 'Dying is certainly to be regarded as the real aim of life.' As I suggested earlier, these propositions recall William Drummond's vision of death being to life 'an inward cause of a necessary dissolution', or Montaigne's contention that 'the goal of our career is death. It is the necessary object of our aim' (above, Part II). And out of context they even resemble Old Testament wisdom literature. Freud's persuasiveness derives in part from his brilliant refashioning and incorporation – one might almost say 'implantation' – of these older ideas into the 'new' world of interiority created by psychoanalysis. And, if something of their persuasiveness is thereby reactivated, it is in a form even more internal to the human psyche.

One thing that Freud adds is the theory of all instincts as essentially regressive: '*an instinct is an urge inherent in organic life to restore an earlier state of things*' (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, p. 308; his emphasis). All organic instincts are, in this sense, conservative. The earlier mutability tradition is shot through with world-weariness, nostalgia, loss, resignation and regressive desire, but in a way which remains reluctantly forward-looking and forward-driven: desire, savaged internally by death as a living mutability, is nevertheless driven forward by death to its own destruction, and death as future event is awaited as the end or transcendence of desire. Freud describes a similar situation, only now it is a consequence of the lack and dissatisfaction deriving from repression. But deeper than repression, and continually exerting its pull, is an instinctual harmony between death and desire; in the deepest source of life itself is a regressive desire to die.

Death beyond Freud

The death-drive theory has not found wide acceptance among Freud's followers. With significant exceptions like Melanie Klein, it has been explicitly denounced as misconceived biology, unsubstantiated speculation, logically incoherent and/or without evidence. It has also been attributed to Freud's own painful personal circumstances: the death of his daughter, the death of a grandson, his own illness (cancer), and his lifelong preoccupation with death. Of those who have been sympathetic to the idea, most have tended to tame it – as indeed did

Freud himself. One move was to rewrite the instinct as largely an instinct of aggression. But for Freud the aggressive aspect of the death drive had been secondary; the instinct was primarily self-destructive. Sadism derives from a more primordial masochism, which means in effect that human aggression is, originally, self-destructiveness.

Of all subsequent theorists of psychoanalysis, Jacques Lacan takes the death drive most seriously, and most contemporary psychoanalytic attention to it comes via him. To his credit, Lacan does not underplay or tame the death drive, and he locates Freud firmly within the Western tradition when he remarks that Freud questioned life as to its meaning and his answer was not that it had none – 'which is a convenient way of washing one's hands of the whole business' – but that life has 'only one meaning, that in which desire is borne by death' (*Écrits*, p. 277).

According to Lacan, the Freudian world is one not of things, nor even of being, but rather of desire. More so even than Freud, Lacan finds in desire 'the paradoxical, deviant, erratic, eccentric, even scandalous character by which it is distinguished from need'. Although this distinction has been 'always obvious to moralists worthy of the name', psychoanalysis nevertheless misses the point by pursuing an obscurantist reduction of desire to need (p. 286). And that, for Lacan, is a cardinal error. This distinction between desire and need leads him to dwell on something else in both Freud and earlier writers, moralists and otherwise: the relation between desire and lack. In modern psychoanalysis we find a secularized, intensified version of an existential perception that goes back a long way, even though the immediate influences here are Heidegger and Kojève:

> Desire is a relation of being to lack. This lack is the lack of being properly speaking. It isn't the lack of this or that, but lack of being whereby the being exists. (Lacan, *Seminar*, II.222–3)

For Lacan, death is the name for a primordial absence intrinsic to presence; as John Forrester puts it, 'presence includes as its very condition the limit beyond which is its absence' (p. 176).[16] To bind desire so resolutely into lack and absence means that it inevitably becomes a kind of essential negativity (Lacan, *Seminar*, I.146)[17] – something premised on an initial failure of satisfaction and which, as such, comes to exist only by virtue of its own alienation; as Juliet

Mitchell puts it, 'Desire persists as an effect of a primordial absence and it therefore indicates that, in this area, there is something fundamentally impossible about satisfaction itself' (Lacan, *Feminine Sexuality*, p. 6). One consequence of this is a radical fragmentation of the human subject.[18]

In one respect Lacan recasts the familiar metaphysical idea that life is rooted in death: 'it is death that sustains existence' (*Écrits*, p. 300). In his development of this idea he combines diverse elements of the Western tradition of desire's impossibility: a theology of desire as death, crossed with something more romantic if no less severe – desire as annihilating excess, a primordial discord. The two elements are fused in those places where, for example, he speaks of 'that desperate affirmation of life that is the purest form in which we recognize the death instinct' (p. 104). These ideas then get reworked according to structuralist and linguistic preoccupations, as when he speaks of the 'frenzy' of desire 'mocking the abyss of the infinite', and of how this amounts to 'no other derangement of instinct than that of being caught in the rails – eternally stretching forth towards the *desire for something else* – of metonymy. Hence its "perverse" fixation at the very suspension-point of the signifying chain where the memory-screen is immobilized and the fascinating image of the fetish is petrified' (p. 167).

In the same vein Lacan suggests that it is from death that existence takes on all the *meaning* it has; the lack which is at the heart of desire is also the price that human beings pay for their admission to language and culture. Death makes life possible in that it makes meaning and representation possible; it is not only before speech but 'primordial to the birth of symbols' (pp. 104–5, 300). Hence Lacan's most well-known formulation, that the unconscious is structured like a language, and his claim to have demonstrated 'the profound relationship uniting the notion of the death instinct to the problems of speech' (*Four Fundamental Concepts*, p. 20; *Écrits*, p. 101). Richard Boothby regards this as the most radical and innovative aspect of Lacan. I remain unconvinced.[19]

Lacan's invocations of death's centrality to life are more derivative than their complex, often obscure, formulations suggest.[20] When he declares that

> All that life is concerned with is seeking repose as much as possible while awaiting death. This is what devours the time of the suckling baby at the beginning of its existence . . . Life is concerned solely with dying (*Seminar*, II.233)

we can hear Freud and Schopenhauer most closely, but also Montaigne (especially in that last assertion – 'Life is concerned solely with dying'), who also, incidentally, consolidated his own perception of this truth with extensive citation of classical sources. In the giving over of the newborn child to death we might hear too the early Christian Fathers. Lacan does not exactly disguise his precedents; the passage just cited continues with a reference to Hamlet's 'to die, to sleep, perchance to dream' and to the idea developed by philosophers in antiquity that it would have been better not to have been born. But (and this recalls Freud's own evasive acknowledgment of his influences) in Lacan these allusions to the past are fleeting, in passing, almost secretive; the implication is that these past writers anticipate something which can only properly, and only now, be understood through the lens of Lacanian psychoanalysis, whose complexity is, at the same time, almost guaranteed to defeat the attempt. Some at least of that complexity is obscurantist.

In the wake of contemporary cultural developments, including the perceived failure of sexual radicalism and the trauma of AIDS, there are those who have turned to Lacan for a more honest view of desire, and, via him, are reconsidering a severe account of human desire. I should not speak for them; what I find in Lacan is an overtheorized expression of something more significantly and relevantly expressed elsewhere (in Freud and before). It this respect I believe he is symptomatic of a much wider tendency in (post-)modern theory. But in terms of his influence alone Lacan remains significant for this study. By crossing Freud's death drive with the philosophy of lack and nothingness derived from Kojève's version of Hegel (itself influenced by Heidegger), he continues to drive death ever further into being; now, perhaps more inexorably than ever before, death is the lack which drives desire. In doing that he also exemplifies another significant tendency in modern thought which I have already remarked, namely the anti-humanist wish to decentre 'man' in the name of a philosophy

which is truly adequate to the complexity of being, yet which seeks to retain a residual human mastery in the very effort of articulating this complexity. As we have seen, the philosophical bid to comprehend the truth of being was always a form of intellectual empowerment – even, or rather especially, when issuing in the declaration that life, desire and the world have to be renounced. But modern theory, having lost faith in older philosophical notions of truth, now half-settles for the mastery of a new kind of complexity which it partly produces in order to enable this performance of mastery. Phoenix-like, the omniscient, masterful and above all complex analytic of the modern theorist rises above his sacrifice of 'man' to death.