



*Abstract:* This paper explores the conceptual thresholds of psychoanalysis as they have been laid out over the course of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, specifically focusing on the tensions between Sigmund Freud and two of his many heirs, namely Jean Laplanche and Jacques Lacan. First, I extricate Freud's visionary text *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) from Laplanche's condemnation of the text as either whimsically metaphysical or simply a return to Freudian seduction theory. I argue that neither categorization has the capacity to contain the argumentative force of *Beyond*. Second, by attending to Lacan's theorizations of the philosophy of science apropos of psycho-analysis, I speculate on the possibility of a psychoanalytic future, one that incorporates scientific rigour into its theories and practices. By accounting for the materiality of the death drive (through Timothy Morton's object-oriented interpretation of molecular processes), I show how the death drive was never necessarily metaphorical and thereby acts as a discourse-altering facet of psychoanalysis in a way that neither Laplanche nor Lacan could have anticipated.

## **Beyond the *Entwurf*:** **Project for a Scientific Death Drive**

MLA Chernoff<sup>1</sup>



*Thanatos, the death-plant in the skull  
Grows wings and grows enormous.  
The herb of the whole system  
– Jack Spicer (378)*

A certain floral death drive is apparent in the life of the herb, given that dissipation is the pinnacle of its existence: the herb withers upon flowering. It is also a seed-bearing plant, ensuring the regularity of

---

<sup>1</sup> The anonymous reviewers of a previous draft of this essay were helpful in reformulating the argument of the present version. I am also deeply indebted to Thomas Loebel: without his illimitable encouragement and expertise, I wouldn't have found the curious intersection of psychoanalysis, biology, and philosophy to be so playful.

this, perhaps, vain and fugue-like process. But the herb is just one metaphor among others in our Spicerian epigraph, each of which strike a Freudian chord and complicate our perceptions of what is known as the “psyche,” specifically in its relationship to the “skull” or its allegedly corporeal place of residence. Spicer begs the question of the system itself: is Thanatos the herb of the “whole system” as brain-in-skull? Or does wholeness refer to something much more expansive than our cranial quarters, such as the nervous system? If so, where does the death drive stand or, for that matter, soar? In 1895’s *Project for a Scientific Psychology* (henceforth referred to as the *Entwurf*), Freud introduces various physiological and neurological concepts, such as “quantity” (Q) and the “neurone,” anticipating ideas prevalent in contemporary neurology. The *Entwurf* is, indeed, one of Freud’s early excursions into a certain scientism, arguably one that he could not abandon: like an interminable game of *fort/da*,<sup>2</sup> Freud picks up science as quickly as he drops it for the benefit of Oedipus’ mommy-daddy-me obsession in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899). Years later, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) signifies, paradoxically, the reluctant return of a strange scientism (particularly in section V’s discussion of embryology and/or/as the repetition compulsion) and its seemingly permanent abolishment from properly psychoanalytic thought for the sake of a mythopoeic vernacular and the whimsical silences of an elusive drive towards quiescence.<sup>3</sup> While

---

<sup>2</sup> For more on Freud’s performativity, I refer the reader to Derrida’s essay “To Speculate – On Freud” in *The Post Card*.

<sup>3</sup> My invocation of “proper” will henceforth refer to Freud’s early texts, which cultivate a clinically-indebted and libidinally-oriented psychoanalytic writing

attempts at locating Freud's Erotic/Thanatropic binary within a biological framework have been made time and time again, few critics have gone so far as to suggest a complete break from psychoanalysis as psyche-oriented in praise of that which we may call "object-oriented."<sup>4</sup> With this in mind, we must ask: could Thanatos have an ontology distinct from the audacious "metapsychological, metaphysical, and metabiological fresco" (Laplanche, *Life* 106) proposed in *Beyond*?

In advance of all possible answers, we must nevertheless acknowledge our line of questioning as a tremor in traditional psychoanalytic thought, which jeopardizes the "whole system" in its disclosure of a timeworn disciplinary crisis in the Freudian corpus. In his address to the States General of Psychoanalysis in 2000, Jacques Derrida poignantly remarked on the state of the discourse, asking, "What is the crisis of worldwide psychoanalysis today . . . Is it merely, which I don't believe, a crisis, a passing and surmountable crisis, a *Krisis* of psychoanalytic reason as reason" (269; emphasis in the original)? He tentatively concluded that the crisis is an "autoimmune

---

practice, with a focus on seduction theory, wish-fulfillment, and oedipality. In contradistinction, psychoanalysis "improper" refers to the mythopoeia, religiosity, and socio-political inclinations of works beginning with *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* in 1920.

<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, Zurak and Klain who argue for a Freudian scientism, claiming that the death drive is conceptually anticipatory of a natural occurrence known as programmed cell death or apoptosis, in which old cells inhibiting the growth of an organism are replaced by new ones through a series of biochemical events – either cell changes (morphology) or the death of cells (a kind of automated self-annihilation). This process – though it involves destructive thanatropic movements—would be more closely aligned with the tenets of the life drive as proposed by Freud, given that programmed cell death binds organisms together at a cellular level by way of entropy.

resistance [of] psychoanalysis to its outside and to itself" (269); a crisis that comes from within. Here, Derrida refers to the discipline's propensity for inwardness, its fear of the outside, and its guarded attitude towards inhospitable encounters with other disciplines. Consider, for instance, psychoanalysis's haphazard entry into the humanities (in which aporetic concepts like the unconscious and the death drive are subject to contemporary theory's rapid-fire logic of bricolage), the resentment and disdain it faces from psychology at large, and its inability to be taken seriously as a discourse whose interests lay beyond the domain of sexual vitalism (which becomes apparent in Laplanchean discourse).<sup>5</sup>

In order to overcome such resistances, a relation to the outside is necessitated. Derrida agrees that such an exotopy does not simply hinge on the formulation of a psychoanalysis without (the tenets of) psychoanalysis; Freud's supposed induction into metaphysical discourse in *Beyond* has already been criticized, if not demonized, for demonstrating such a possibility. Rather, this new relationality would herald a recombinant psychoanalysis that has "nothing to do with either drives or principles," one that would dispose of or suspend the

---

<sup>5</sup> See, for instance, Todd Dufresne's *Killing Freud: Twentieth-Century Culture and the Death of Psychoanalysis*, which illuminates how Freud's influence in the humanities—which was largely due to the upsurge in post-structuralist thought—is finally dissipating (155). So too does Elisabeth Roudinesco's *Why Psychoanalysis?* discuss, at length, the question of a Freudian death or afterlife, specifically in the United States. For more on what has come to be known as the "Freud wars," see *The Black Book of Psychoanalysis: How to Live, Think and Get on Better Without Freud*, edited by Catherine Meyer, which offers a number of critiques and polemics against Freud, some of which attempt to demonstrate how the methodological tenets of psychoanalysis have inhibited the growth of psychology as a field.

psyche as we have come to know it, requiring “altogether other words” (241), a vocabulary not readily available to the traditional analyst. By reading the *Entwurf* alongside *Beyond*, as well as Laplanche’s many criticisms of the death drive, this essay will explore the possibility of a psychoanalytic science, one that accounts for the entirety of the “whole system” of the psyche. As Lacan writes, “If psychoanalysis can become a science (for it is not yet one) and if it is not to degenerate in its technique (and perhaps that has already happened), we must rediscover the sense of its experience” (“Function” 43). A rediscovery of its sense of experience arguably lies in the formulation of an imminent-immanent materialist ontology that accounts for the nuances of the neurone as it is understood today. No doubt, the neurone possesses an element that Freud could not have anticipated: viz., the compulsively self-replicating matter known as deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA) that lies at its centre.

By engaging Lacan’s sporadic encounters with the philosophy of science and Timothy Morton’s meditations on DNA as the inorganic and thanatropic foundation of mammalian life, I seek to legitimize and justify not only the death drive but psychoanalysis *tout court*.<sup>6</sup> This is

---

<sup>6</sup> My employment of “meditations” is not haphazard in regards to Morton and his essay “Thinking the Charnel Ground (The Charnel Ground Thinking): Auto-Commentary and Death in Esoteric Buddhism.” Here, Morton aligns the metaphysics of the Freudian death drive with contemporary science, speculative realism, and esoteric traditions of (Buddhistic) mysticism, posing the curious question, “is it possible . . . that mysticism is a form of science?” (74). One might say he aims for a compromise between “the post-modern-deconstructionist Cultural Studies and the cognitivist popularizers of ‘hard science’” (Žižek 291). While I am inclined to agree with his speculations, I will not, in this essay, explore the faith-oriented aspects of Freud’s death drive and the religiosity that may or

also to move away, or with, the dualism of life/death, which, read accordingly, will appear to us as redundant: Freudianism in the 21st century need only concern itself with a monistic scientism whose core is the advent of DNA. Moreover, this is not simply to metaphorize DNA but to interpret its movements and peculiarities from a vantage point that acknowledges the interminability of error as the basis of a death within life, of DNA's inorganicism, that which precedes and constitutes all vitalisms. From this traversal, I hope, will one day emerge a new psychoanalytic afterlife.

### **“What we cannot reach flying we must reach limping”: Freud's Limp, Laplanche's Crutch**

What, then, is the death drive as the “beyond” of the pleasure principle? This question resonates with a certain impossibility as Freud pirouettes from one thanatropic formulation to another in *Beyond*. Immediately, Freud interrogates psychoanalysis proper in its assumption that the pleasure principle (as “the avoidance of unpleasure or the production of pleasure”) is that which determines “the course taken by mental events” (1). His resistance does not directly lend itself to clinical and/or scientific credibility: in dealing with a certain “beyond,” one attends to “the most obscure and inaccessible region of the mind,” which calls for “the least rigid hypothesis” (1). In a sense, Freud's own speculative mode of writing is a performative throwing and retracting of his theses; a game of

---

may not be involved in *Beyond*. My focus, instead, veers towards the philosophy of science (as opposed to science qua science – if there is such a thing).

textual *fort/da* is the outcome of this dearth or absence of rigidity. Old conjectures, indeed, bring about new ones; in abandoning the assumptions of psychoanalysis proper, he is forced to speculate even more wildly, declaring, “What we cannot reach flying we must reach limping” (al-Hariri qtd. in 58).<sup>7</sup> Specifically, a “life drive” (Eros) and “death drive” (Thanatos) – supposedly the two most fundamental propulsions of the psyche – are coined to underpin the energies that lie beyond the pleasure principle; Eros is the binding clamour of life itself, whereas Thanatos is an entropic, silent (or indifferent) conservatism which seeks only to return the organism to a previous, inorganic state.

Conceptions similar to this life/death continuum appear in a number of texts throughout Freud’s corpus. In his 1914 addendum to *The Interpretation of Dreams*, he writes on the concept(s) of regression: “All these three kinds of regression are, however, one at bottom and occur together as a rule; for what is older in time is more primitive in form and in psychical topography lies nearer to the perceptual end” (548). We might read this “perceptual end,” and its proximity to that which is “older in time” and “more primitive in form,” as anticipatory of the inorganic anterior-futurity of the organism, which is always, in advance, plagued by the conservative drive to inorganic quiescence. Looking even further back, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905) commences with an allusion to Aristophanes’s myth of the origin of love in Plato’s *Symposium*

---

<sup>7</sup> Strachey notes that Freud uses the last lines of “Die beiden Gulden,” Rückert’s translation of the *Maqamat*, a poem by al-Hariri: “Die Schrift sagt, es ist keine Sünde zu erhinken” (qtd. in *Beyond* 58).

(although Freud does not explicitly name the myth): “The popular view of the sexual instinct is beautifully reflected in the poetic fable which tells how the original human beings were cut up into two halves—man and woman—and how they are always striving to unite again in love” (Freud, *Three Essays* 136). Reference to this myth is made again, but also named, in *Beyond* as an originary explication of Eros. The model rests on a conceptual finding of what Laplanche calls one’s “soul-mate” in the confines of an apparently “well adapted love life!” – indeed, Freud first employs the myth to illustrate “popular opinion,” that is, heteronormative views of love against the grain of psychoanalytic tropes (Laplanche, “So-Called” 60). Inversely, the Freud of *Beyond* (and subsequent works) guiltily embraces this apparent doxa: “In none of my previous writings have I had so strong a feeling as now that what I am describing is common knowledge and that I am using up paper and ink and, in due course, the compositor’s and printer’s work and material in order to expand things which are, in fact, self-evident” (*Civilization* 112). For Laplanche, this life/death drive dualism – a turn to mere doxa – is a mistake, a going-astray, a speculative metaphysical “fresco” tantamount to the Freudian slip-up par excellence.

Nonetheless, Laplanche admits that to “‘put Freud to work’ means to ‘do justice’ to him,” which means lending credence to his “discoveries but also to his errors” (“So-Called” 463). Laplanche attempts, at once, to satiate and debunk Freud’s inquiries, concluding that the death drive is neither metaphysical, nor metabiological, nor metapsychological. First, one cannot formulate a thanatropic



biologism, as Freud attempts; the organism in its physiological and psychological states can only be conceived of as libidinal: "it is life which crystallizes the first objects to which desire attaches itself, before even thought can cling to them" (Laplanche, *Life* 126). The "death drive" is merely unbound (sexual) energy, and psychoanalysis need not lend itself to transcendental niceties, for "the death drive does not possess its own energy. Its energy is libido. Or, better put, the death drive is the very soul, the constitutive principle, of libidinal circulation" (124). In this way, Laplanche fixates upon "the domain of the human being," which is "the heart of sexuality itself," insisting on the use of the adjective "sexual" when speaking of the dualism *Beyond* sets out ("So-Called" 455). The only relevant or properly psychoanalytic dissonance in Laplanche's view is between the sexual death drives and the sexual life drives.

According to Laplanche, these metaphysical and sociological transformations occur primarily at the level of the vocabulary of psychoanalysis; the primacy of sexuality remains, just under a different name with the advent of Thanatos. Laplanche thereby endeavours to reclaim and retain, through a rigorous systematic and etymological reading, a proper Freudian vocabulary, irrespective of (or, perhaps, alongside) the dualistic philosophemes of Eros and Thanatos. He traces the movement of terminological binaries across the Freudian corpus, which will eventually lead to the death drive and Eros distinction: primary process/secondary process, free energy/bound energy, unbinding/binding, and finally, sexuality/ego (Laplanche, *Life* 124). What Laplanche discovers is that, if "we place

face to face the terms constituting the constant pairs of opposites in Freud's thought, that genealogy takes the form of a strange chiasmus whose riddle we, as Freud's successors, are beginning to decipher" (124). Like many of Freud's disciples, Laplanche is both amused and perturbed by *Beyond* and the other so-called "sociological" works that follow this ostensible upheaval of Freud's lexicon. In response to this outrage, there must be a humanistic vitalism, he insists, that runs all the way through Freud's work.

### **Nerves and Machination: Freud against Vitalism**

A "strange chiasmus" may be afoot, but not in the sense that Laplanche gleans. In the *Entwurf* lie two integral hypotheses: that of the neurone and that of quantity (Q), the former being the "basis of the topographical or structural point of view" in psychoanalysis, and the latter, that of the "economic [or energy-oriented] point of view" (Laplanche, *Life* 54). Freud hypothesizes neurones as differential units – they are distinguished only by their position and bifurcation in a neuronic system where they participate in a procedural conveyance of energy, and, in certain cases, act as storehouses for energy. Quantity, on the other hand, is wholly enigmatic, an unknown factor "without any element 'qualifying' it," acting as a "hypothetical x" or independent variable (55). Along neuronic paths, this mysterious quantity circulates, current-like, as a "neuronal excitation in a state of flow" (Freud, *Project* 296). Qn, on the other hand, is an inert quantity that has entered into a "special connection with the nervous system" (393). More specifically, Qn is a "cathected neurone filled by Q"

(298). The *Entwurf* offers a physiological explanation of the embodied mind, expanding the psyche far beyond the confines of the skull, strewing it throughout the nervous system, whose structure “serve[s] the purpose of keeping off Qn from the neurones and its function [serves] the purpose of discharging it” (306). Given that the organism that does not immediately perish from this drive to inertia, it is clear that “the nervous system is obliged to abandon its original trend to inertia [...] It must put up with maintaining a store of Qn sufficient to meet the demand for a specific action” (297). In short, its “primary function” is absolute inertia (the expulsion of cathected quantity from permeable neurones), while its “secondary function” is to maintain a steady or constant (low) level of Qn to address the “exigencies of life” (297).

It is imperative, then, to acknowledge the similarities – not necessarily the synonymy – between the Qn/Q and Eros/Thanatos (bound and unbound energy) dualisms. Perhaps it is the inscrutable nature of Q – as psychical, physiological, or both – that Freud so desperately attempts to grasp as “the death drive.” Whereas “quantity” is the use of an inconspicuously calculative, perhaps scientific, term to metaphorize the unknown, “death drive” is a metaphor for that metaphor. *Beyond*, in this way, is contingent upon the doubling of supplementarity, a representative representation. Is this not precisely why Laplanche refutes the death drive *qua* death drive, its substitutive alterity, the fact that one term displaces another? The terms are repetitions with difference. As soon as we acknowledge this, we lend credence to Laplanche’s investigation and

his desire for synonymy. But we must also suspend the fullness of its flavour, which is palatable only to the institutionalized (i.e. proper) psychoanalyst.

Doubtless, the *Entwurf* is rigorously scientific, but it is also “highly abstract and philosophical,” in its examination of bound and unbound energies (Laplanche, *Life* 55). In spite of its many ambiguities, the *Entwurf*, according to Freud, is both clinically and experientially procured. “The quantitative line of approach,” he admits, is “derived directly from pathological clinical observations” (*Project* 295). Freud also views his *Beyond* in the same way, given that he deduces the existence of a repetition compulsion through his encounters with sufferers of traumatic neurosis. He speculates that “science recognizes only *quantities*,” and this is precisely what is addressed in this text and *Beyond*, given that the death drive has no qualities of its own (309; emphasis in the original). The concern is never for the exigencies of life, but the energies with which such exigencies must interact and endure. The *Entwurf*, as Strachey notes in his introduction, hints at “the hypotheses of information theory and cybernetics in their application to the nervous system” (*Project* 292). Is it not the case that both the *Entwurf* and *Beyond* ought to be viewed in this doubly bound mode of scientific rigour and philosophical abstraction, given their propensity to mechanize the so-called sexual energies of the human (which are enigmatic and without quality)? Lacan, in noting these resemblances, will take up the cybernetic qualities of psychoanalysis in order to negate the possibility of the discourse being overtaken and limited by a certain

vitalism. All of this is to say that, notwithstanding the rigour of Laplanche's trajectory, the psychoanalytic lexicon cannot be contained by vitalistic proclivities. Nor are we limited to the domain of the human being. Rather, what Freud posits in the *Entwurf* is an anti-vitalistic becoming-machine of the biological body, a notion that will reluctantly return in *Beyond*, albeit a return thinly veiled in literarity (perhaps as an attempt to appeal to doxa, to communicate more easily to the masses an unpalatable scientism that is clinically pessimistic, if not a precursor to some discourse of the anti- or post-human).

And yet, we have thus far managed to turn Laplanche on his head, to work through and interrupt, for the moment, his line of argumentation. Our conclusions have yet to grant the death drive any more credibility than it already possessed, scientifically or otherwise. To "do justice" to Freud is certainly to trace the path along which his thinking occurs, and Laplanche does this with a great deal of finesse. But such a tracing need not condemn the death drive to the fate of a mere herb, repeating itself in vain: as previously mentioned, such a judgement dooms psychoanalysis to a kind of futurelessness "in a quasi-autoimmune fashion" (Derrida, "Psychoanalysis" 242). Laplanche's genealogical investigation, might be seen, finally, as a rigid pitting of optimistic tropes (sexuality) against pessimistic tropes (death drive), the metaphysical against the material (i.e. neuronic or kinetic) and/or libidinal, and so forth. Read like this, Laplanche takes on an almost moralistic tone, making sure to distinguish between proper (libidinal) and improper (drive-based) psychoanalytic

approaches in the pivotal economy of Freud's thought. With this, Laplanche's intention of putting Freud to work and bringing him (to) justice is contentiously aporetic, acting to "gnaw[ ] away" at the Freudian corpus, a gnawing "which always takes place around any kind of speculative novelty, and [attempts] to make everything fit back into the routine" (Lacan, "Freud" 65). By imposing routine on Thanatos, we view it with a furrowed brow, unwilling to recognize its capacity to alter our understanding of the psyche within psychoanalysis, deferring the psychoanalytic revolution to-come, which, in the company of Lacan, may be a scientific revolution: "For it seems that, caught by the very quirk in the medical mind against which psychoanalysis had to constitute itself, it is with the handicap of being half a century behind the movement of the sciences, like medicine itself, that we are seeking to join up with them again" (Lacan, "Function" 54).<sup>8</sup> So, too, does our own inversion of Laplanche gnaw at Freud's marvel, as well as the possibilities innate in Laplanche's own investigation.<sup>9</sup> In lieu of rehashing the distinction

---

<sup>8</sup> Here, we invoke one modality of Derrida's *l'avenir* (the to-come): [W]e must sometimes, in the name of reason, be suspicious of rationalizations. Let it thus be said in passing, albeit all too quickly, that the Enlightenment to come would have to enjoin us to reckon with the logic of the unconscious, and so with the idea, and notice I'm not saying here the doctrine, arising out of a psychoanalytic revolution. Which, I might add, would have had no chance of emerging in history without, among other things, this poisoned medicine, this *pharmakon* of an inflexible and cruel autoimmunity that is sometimes called the 'death drive' and that does not limit the living being to its conscious and representative form." (*Rogues* 157)

<sup>9</sup> As de Lauretis rightly points out, Laplanche is in no way doing an injustice to Freud. On the contrary, Laplanche's work in *Life and Death in Psychoanalysis* signifies the starting point for an expansive investigation on the function of the ego, one that is necessarily in contradistinction to Freudian mythopoeia.

between bound and unbound energy, the following will seek out a more tangible and fundamental conception of the death drive – one that is, quite possibly, in and for itself.

### **Inner Disequilibrium and the Science of Thanatos: Virtuality and Death's Omnipresence**

As we shall see, it is only through an invocation of contemporary science that we can examine the existence of imminent-immanent thanatropic processes that exceed the typical bound/unbound binary. First, the idea that the Freud of *Beyond* provides a metaphysics of the unconscious is unproductive in Lacanian registers. In difference to Laplanche's reading, Lacan looks askance at the "discordant harmony of circumstances" suggested by a thanatropic transcendentalism: "Can anything be poorer or more worthless after all than the idea that human crimes might, for good or evil, contribute in some way to the cosmic maintenance of the *rerum concordia discors*?" ("death drive" 213). So, too, is adhering to routine vitalism an inanity, if not an impossibility, for Lacan. Even a vital, libidinal science – the kind Laplanche alleges to be true of psychoanalysis – must find its roots in the habits of automata: "[S]cience, if one looks at it closely, has no memory. Once constituted, it forgets the circuitous path by which it

---

Laplanche is, in fact, defending Freud against a variety of factors in the late 1960s, which were dominated by the "intellectual and political climate of structuralism, the Cold War, the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia and in the wake of Lacan's inspiring resistance to North American ego-psychology," and it is in such a context that the "unconscious, the primary process, and the drive were read uncompromisingly in opposition to the ego, as forces that disrupt or undermine its 'triumph' in Freud's later work" (79).

came into existence" ("Science" 738). Here, "circuitous" describes repetitive inhuman protocol. Lacan agrees that the death drive is integral to psychoanalytic discourse, but only as an anti-vitalistic conception, given that the "articulation of the death drive in Freud is neither true nor false"; it is, instead, "suspect" in its necessity, taking on the role of the "impassable . . . site of the Thing" (Lacan, "Death Drive" 213).

The death drive, as impasse, heralds a thanatropic monism of desire wherein the circuitousness of each and every drive is subject to the inevitable quest for quiescence. Drives, without fail, aim to go "beyond" the pleasure principle to the excessive realm of *jouissance*, a kind of pleasurable pain, an impossible realm of excess which "implies precisely the acceptance of death" (Lacan, *Sem. VII* 189). Whereas the pleasure principle establishes a limitation on one's capacity for pleasure, for the sake of repose, the reality principle "consists in making the game last" and perpetually renews pleasure, "so that the fight doesn't end for lack of combatants . . . [it] consists in husbanding our pleasures, these pleasures whose aim is precisely to end in cessation" (Lacan, "circuit" 84). Consequently, there is no pleasure to be found in the program; such an inclusion would unhinge "the very categories of our thinking" (84). Pleasure, in this circuitous schema, is necessarily an immanence flummoxed by hyperbolic imminence, by the effervescence of a tantalizing proximity to the dormancy of total satisfaction. And yet, the desiring-subject always already attempts to transgress such prohibitions, to go beyond the pleasure principle, and, in short, fulfill the constancy principle i.e., die



(81). With this, Lacan succinctly concludes, in his infamous dictum, that “[e]very drive is virtually a death drive” (“Position” 848). It is on these terms that Lacan champions the death drive, allowing it to “grow[] wings and grow enormous,” without metaphysicalizing it.

Every drive seeks to cancel itself through fulfillment, but what makes this revelation of interest to our study is the corporeality of our inescapable flounce towards inorganic inertia. “At the level of the nervous system,” Lacan writes, “when there are stimuli, everything works, everything comes into action, the efferents, the afferents, so that the living being returns to a state of repose. That’s the pleasure principle, according to Freud” (“circuit” 84). It is the omnipresence of a virtual thanatropic inclination in drives that calls into question and suspends the nature of the “whole system” of properly Freudian psychoanalysis. The notion of virtuality, nevertheless, implies that all drives merely possess the potential for a thanatropic pivot. Still, there is no death drive in or for itself. Read in isolation, Lacan does not go far enough for the purposes of our investigation.

If we look to similar arguments in the *Entwurf*, however, our Lacanian formulations appear more actual than virtual: “the  $\omega$  neurones [of the perceptual neuronic system] show an optimum for receiving the period of neuronal motion at a particular [strength] of cathexis; when the cathexis is stronger they produce unpleasure, when it is weaker, pleasure – till, with a lack of cathexis, their capacity for reception vanishes” (Freud, *Project* 312). Once again, enjoyment is defined according to looming inertia and controlled intensities. The neuronic level is novel in that death can be made

possible as the vanishing capacity for cathexis. But constancy *qua* pleasure nevertheless remains a determinant of this entropic element of disappearance. If what is meant by “pleasure” in psychoanalytic discourse is, without exception, related to variations of a principle of constancy, then “pleasure” will always pertain to that which is affective and, by association, to the nervous system. In other words, psychoanalysis is only capable of grappling with cognizable affects, ones that lend themselves to apperception, which equates to the depreciation of the death drive as mere virtuality. If this is the case, what is unquestionably beyond the pleasure principle can have nothing to do with pleasure or unpleasure that can, in any way, at any point in time, be affectively conceived by a subject.

A beyond of the pleasure principle is a beyond of affect and, *ipso facto*, a beyond of the nervous system. Lacan pursues a similar line of thought in an early seminar on the repetition compulsion:

[T]he manifestation of the primary process at the level of the ego, in the form of a symptom, is translated into unpleasure, suffering, and yet, it always returns. This fact alone should give us pause for thought. Why does the repressed system manifest itself with such insistence, as I called it last time? If the nervous system is set to reach a position of equilibrium, why doesn't it attain? (“Freud” 65)

The equilibrium is wholly unattainable insofar as a genuine beyond of the pleasure principle must be more primeval than nerves or neurones; there is always, in advance of neural capacities, a more originary disequilibrium, given that neurone's centre encompasses

deoxyribonucleic acid, a compulsively self-replicating carrier of genetic information, a foundational material constitutive of nearly all living organisms. Perhaps this inescapable facet of the neurone is that which actualizes the virtuality of every-drive-as-death-drive, a possibility with which I will grapple shortly. If so, the future of psychoanalysis is this infinitesimal reframing of the death drive, and it is precisely a futurity which has little to do with either the human or psychoanalysis proper. "Bless me now," Spicer writes in his thanatropic meditation, "for I am a plant and an animal" (379). In (altogether) other words, we have arrived at the becoming-science of the discourse *qua* object-analysis (the object being inorganic DNA). This is not to say that science can subsume psychoanalysis, for, "it is not yet capable of encompassing psychoanalysis. Science must first come to grips with the specificity of the psychoanalytic object" (Fink 140). On the contrary, there is a mutual solicitation by way of the psychoanalytic outgrowth that is Thanatos, which psychoanalyzes science as science interrogates psychoanalysis for rigour and objectivity (Caudill 133). The two discourses compete and compliment each other, in the same stroke.

Science, Lacan notes, is an anti-dialectical endeavour that does "not, in any way, fit together according to the thesis/antithesis/synthesis dialectic," wherein those disturbing aspects of "truth" are "constantly being reabsorbed, truth being in itself but what is lacking in the realization of knowledge" (Lacan, "Subversion" 675). Indeed, psychoanalysis is more scientifically rigorous than philosophy's positivistic *modus operandi* by virtue of its recognition of

marginality, error, and negation outside of (Hegelian) synthesis. The more science advances, the further away it is from grasping its object (for example, the more progress made in physics, the more speculative the endeavours become).<sup>10</sup> An identical process of fading, no doubt, occurs in Freud's writings: between Q and the advent of Thanatos, a scientific rigour compliments and institutes the fading of the object of inquiry – we are further and further pushed from the thanatropic enigma which was always, to be sure, the very core of Freud's neuronic schematic; a strange chiasmus, indeed. Similarly, the conception of science was, and is always, "not without its vicissitudes," such that it was "preceded by a number of failures – abortion or prematurity" (Lacan, "Subversion" 672). At the same time, in a manner not unlike a limping Freud, Lacan admits that a "science cannot be conditioned upon empiricism" (695). In other words, a series of detours is inevitable, not metaphysical. To conclude this minor detour, I will turn to Caudill, who succinctly summarizes the similarities between science and analysis:

---

<sup>10</sup> Bruce Fink agrees that "modern physics became so far removed from any intuitive understanding of the phenomena supposedly under investigation that, rather than developing new theoretical advances to explain or account for phenomena, physicists often had to think of what never-before-noticed phenomena might in fact validate the theories" (154). Broadly speaking, the scientific drive for discovery and newness (i.e. experimentation) certainly has its Baconian origins, (viz., in the Royal Society's assertion of a scientific method). Despite whatever grandstanding performances of authority such a method may entail, science is always, in advance, aleatoric and must acknowledge, through repetition, the necessity of failure and contingency in hypotheses and their ability to be carried out to a logical conclusion. Science, in this way, must be anti-scientific and open to uncertainty and speculation: such is the nature of the hypothesis.

Lacan, in the ten years before Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962), had already taken that turn: (i) science is a socio-psychological symbolic system, like religion or law or politics; (ii) apprehension depends on the position of the subject; and (iii) science involves articles of faith that constitute the experimental tradition. (140)

With this in mind, it is clear that a science of the death drive would be tantamount to an irreducibly unique science of the subject with the unconscious as an absolute and, more importantly, material starting point, that being the body and its foundations: deoxyribonucleic acid and ribonucleic acid. This is also the materialization of the death drive, beyond (i.e., more imminent and immanent than) Freud's insistence on embryology as evidence of the repetition compulsion in the single-celled organism (as he notes in part V of *Beyond*). As Panksepp concedes, all of molecular biology is dependent on the fundamentality of DNA (and RNA) as the only information needed to construct a mammalian body – “man or mouse” – in which “individual genes, small segments of DNA, contain instructions for the manufacture of specific proteins” (Panksepp 98). This material production gives way to a certain identity – beyond the conscious affects of a subjectivity influenced by the nervous system's interaction with quantities, external and internal. And yet, both DNA molecules, and those of its messenger, RNA, partake of an “irreducible disequilibrium” (Morton 80). As we have known for quite some time, a DNA molecule is structured as a double helix, which combines into specific pairs of chemical bases, forming complimentary strands of

helixes. As Morton puts it, "DNA is involved in a noir plot in which the detective finds out that he is the killer. In attempting to solve the riddle of its existence, *DNA redoubles existence*" (Morton 82; emphasis mine). Indeed, the death drive is neither silent nor elusive; rather, its omnipresence lies on a register more explicitly material than that of the life drive, rendering Freud's binary thinking entirely monistic.

So too is DNA a hybrid of bacterial DNA and viral insertions, with no specific "flavour" of its own. Viruses, moreover,

are capsules of RNA . . . that tell DNA to find a copy of itself in its system . . . Or viruses resemble Cretan liar paradoxes: 'I am a Cretan; I am lying.' That's how they kill you – you they turn you into an infinitely looped virus factory . . . A virus is already a form of non-life, questioning in its very existence the rigid boundary between organic and inorganic worlds . . . All these entities exist because of self-replicators, which may have started with non-organic replicators . . . to which RNA could attach itself. (81)

Replication occurs in order to further the search for quiescence, away from this inherent entropy, in DNA's attempt to cancel itself out. It could be said, then, that the movement of DNA is  $Q_n$  without  $Q$ : an internal quantity that relies only on the excitation of its own self, its position within a neurone. Veering towards a panpsychism, we might ask, as Morton does, what if "sentience was not some kind of soul or essence that survives death" – [e.g., an individual bound by Eros, surviving the extremities of life] – "but is in fact a default mode of

existing at all, whether you are organic or not?" (79). It is an inorganic (and thus non-vital) movement (of code) which forgets itself as such, and comes to resemble and comprise something much more open and energetic, namely, the organism:

Why is it no accident that to reach the charnel ground you must pass through the valley of sorrow? Because the darkness is installed at the DNA level. DNA replication is a forgetting of the inorganic essence of DNA. Life cleaves to the delusion that life is why life lives. Yet DNA is also simply molecular physical form, 'as it is,' *thathata* (suchness). (Morton 89)

Thanatos cannot be said to "grow[] wings and grow enormous[]" because of its metaphysical stature – Freud is too whimsical in his categorization of it as a "heavenly power," even if he snidely wraps around the phrase quotation marks (Freud, *Civilization* 112). The death drive only appears to transcend or escape the grasp of the analyst, when, all along, its enormity occurs because it is what constitutes us materially. While Laplanche is correct to discount the possibility of a mystical fresco, that it is merely unbound sexual energy overlooks the prospect of a more holistic and fundamental approach. Laplanche's assessment, perhaps, arrived far too early, for "[t]he whole psychoanalytic tradition supports the view that the analyst's voice can intervene only if it enters at the right place, and that if it comes too early it merely produces a closing up" (Lacan, "Subversion" 673). Without any appeal to metaphysics, Morton and Lacan, read side by side, reveal that Freud's death drive is a necessary component in psychoanalysis and beyond. If "doing justice"

to Freud, as Laplanche suggests, is to “put him to work,” then it is imperative that this work differ from that of a psychoanalysis “proper”; what is needed is a labour that uproots and re-routes, a productive deracination that allows the so-called property of psychoanalysis to intermingle with those assemblages which may or may not be considered improper. What will a scientific psychoanalysis look like? What will a thanatropic science entail? How could this revolutionize clinical practices of not just psychoanalysis, but medical practices in general? These questions are, perhaps, worth limping towards, being mindful of the fact that we “are not following Freud, we are accompanying him” (Lacan, “Two Narcissisms” 120), inching away from the matrix of crises which have, for too long, plagued and delegitimized the discipline. ©

### Works Cited

- Caudill, David S. “Lacan, Science, and Law: Is the Ethnography of Scientism Psychoanalytic?” *Law and Critique* 14.2 (2003): 123-146. Print.
- Derrida, Jacques. “Psychoanalysis Searches the States of Its Soul: The Impossible Beyond of a Sovereign Cruelty (Address to the States General of Psychoanalysis).” *Without Alibi*. Trans. Peggy Kamuf. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2002. Print.
- . *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*. Trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2005. Print.
- Dufresne, Todd. *Killing Freud: Twentieth Century Culture and the Death of Psychoanalysis*. New York: Continuum, 2003. Print.



- Fink, Bruce. *Lacan to the Letter: Reading Écrits Closely*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003. Print.
- . "Psychoanalysis on Science." *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance*. Ed. Bruce Fink. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1995. Print.
- Freud, Sigmund. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Trans. James Strachey. New York: Norton, 1961. Print.
- . *Civilization and Its Discontents*. Trans. James Strachey. New York: Norton, 1989. Print.
- . *The Interpretation of Dreams (Second Part) & On Dreams*. *Standard Edition* (vol. 5) 339-630.
- . *Project for a Scientific Psychology*. *Standard Edition* (vol. 1) 283-344.
- . *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Trans. and ed. James Strachey. 24 vols. London: Hogarth, 1952-74. Print.
- . *Three Essays on Sexuality*. *Standard Edition* (vol. 7) 125-244.
- Laplanche, Jean. *Life and Death in Psychoanalysis*. Trans. Jeffrey Mehlman. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1985. Print.
- . "The So-Called Death Drive." *The Death Drive: New Life for a Dead Subject?* Ed. Rob Weatherill. London: Karnac, 1999. Print.
- Lacan, Jacques. "The Circuit." *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book II* 77-92.
- . "The Death Drive." *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959-1960*. Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller. Trans. Dennis Porter. New York: Norton, 1992. 205-217. Print.

- . *Écrits*. Trans. Bruce Fink. New York: Norton, 2006. Print.
- . "Freud, Hegel and the Machine." *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book II* 64-76.
- . "The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis." *Écrits: A Selection*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: Routledge, 2001. 23-86. Print.
- . "Position of the Unconscious." *Écrits* 703-721.
- . "Preliminary Comments on the Problem of Resistance." *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book I* 19-28.
- . "Science and Truth." *Écrits* 726-745.
- . *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book I: Freud's Papers on Technique, 1953-1954*. Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller. Trans. John Forrester. New York: Norton, 1998. Print.
- . *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book II: The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis, 1954-1955*. Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller. Trans. Sylvana Tomaselli. New York: Norton, 1988. Print.
- . "The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire in the Freudian Unconscious." *Écrits* 671-702.
- . "The Two Narcissisms." *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book I* 118-128.
- Lauretis, Teresa de. "The Queer Space of the Drive: Rereading Freud with Laplanche." *Freud's Drive: Psychoanalysis, Film, and Literature*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008. Print.

- Morton, Timothy. "Thinking the Charnel Ground (the Charnel Ground Thinking): Auto-Commentary and Death in Esoteric Buddhism." *Glossator* 7 (2013): 73-94. Web. 16 June 2015.
- Panksepp, Jaak. *Affective Neuroscience: The Foundations of Human and Animal Emotions*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998. Print.
- Roudinesco, Elisabeth. *Why Psychoanalysis?* Trans. Rachel Bowlby. New York: Columbia UP, 2001. Print.
- Spicer, Jack. "Thing Language." *My Vocabulary Did This to Me: The Collected Poems of Jack Spicer*. Ed. Peter Gizzi and Kevin Killian. Middletown: Wesleyan UP: 2008. Print.
- Žižek, Slavoj. "Lacan Between Cultural Studies and Cognitivism." *Lacan and Science*. Ed. Jason Glynos and Yannis Stavrakakis. New York: Karnac, 2002. Print.
- Zurak, Niko, and E. Klain. "Freud's Theory of Thanatos and the Concept of Programmed Cell Death." *Yugoslav Neurological Association* 48.2 (December 1998): 105-117. Print.

**MLA Chernoff**, Honours B.A. (University of Toronto), M.A. (York University), is a doctoral student in the Graduate Program in English at York University. His dissertation will attempt to theorize a properly Jewish-Canadian poetic through psychoanalytic and object-oriented explorations of mourning and melancholia in Holocaust literatures from across the nation.

[Return to contents \(LINK\)](#)