

WRITING TRAUMA: THE INTERTWINING OF THE SOMA, SEMIOTIC, AND SYMBOLIC

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Abstract: Rather than thinking of writing trauma as “coming to terms with”, some type of teleological endeavor to transcend or reconcile with traumatic experience, I propose that writing trauma involves processes of “being-with” the body, despite the overwhelming, alarming desire to distance the self from the trauma. That is, there is a risk in writing trauma and being-with the body: as the subject writes, they jeopardize the collapse of subjectivity by approaching the abject. The subject who chooses to bring the inner subjective reality of trauma in the body, experienced phenomenologically, into the symbolic, shared social-historical realm approaches such a threshold. I begin with a description of Kristeva’s depiction of the abjection of self, the looming threat behind writing trauma. Next, I look at the relationship between traumatic symptoms and metaphor through the works of Kristeva and Jacques Lacan. After understanding this relationship, I describe Kristeva’s conception of poetic language and assert that it is what best captures the somatic expression of trauma in the body. Last, I make some considerations as to why the subject would choose to write trauma, revisiting the abject, and reflect on the horror of Friedrich Nietzsche’s conception of the eternal return for the trauma survivor.

Keywords: Soma; Semiotic; Symbolic; Writing Trauma; Abjection; Metaphor; Poetic Language; Eternal Return

Resumen: En lugar de pensar en la escritura del trauma como un “llegar a un acuerdo”, como algún tipo de esfuerzo teleológico para trascender o reconciliarse con la experiencia traumática, propongo que la escritura del trauma implica procesos de “estar-con” el cuerpo, a pesar del abrumador y alarmante deseo de distanciarse al yo del trauma. Es decir, escribir el trauma y estar-con el cuerpo entraña un riesgo: al escribir, el sujeto pone en peligro el colapso de la subjetividad al acercarse a lo abyecto. El sujeto que elige llevar la realidad subjetiva interna del trauma en el cuerpo, experimentada fenomenológicamente, al ámbito simbólico, social-histórico compartido, se aproxima a dicho umbral. Comienzo con una descripción de la descripción que hace Kristeva de la abyección del yo, la amenaza que se cierne tras la escritura del trauma. A continuación, examino la relación entre los síntomas traumáticos y la metáfora a través de las obras de Kristeva y Jacques Lacan. Tras comprender esta relación, describo la concepción de Kristeva del lenguaje poético y afirmo que es lo que mejor capta la expresión somática del trauma en el cuerpo. Por último, hago algunas consideraciones sobre por qué el sujeto elegiría escribir el trauma, revisitando lo abyecto, y reflexiono sobre el horror de la concepción de Friedrich Nietzsche del eterno retorno para el superviviente del trauma.

Palabras clave: soma; semiótico; simbólico; escritura del trauma; abyección; metáfora; lenguaje poético; eterno retorno

*I want to say this before I choke on the growing boulder in my throat
 I want to write this before the dam gives way to the welling river behind my eyelids
 I want to write this before I am kidnapped by the scene of my nightmare
 I want to write this before my pen snaps from the pounding pressure of my heart
 I want to write this before the page is set ablaze by the churning acid in my stomach
 I want to write this before my words vanish in the dark sky of the coming storm
 I want to write this before the next lightning strike whips my mind, lash after lash with no
 time for the cuts to scar*
 (Liebig, N. N.)

As I write this poem, I am at a threshold: *approaching abjection*. I am anticipating the inevitable choking, damming, kidnapping, pounding, churning, striking, and vanishing. Metaphors of trauma. I have to write this quickly before, as I note, my words vanish. I must write this quickly before ‘I’ vanish into a convulsing, sobbing body.

There is a delicate, fragmentary liminality that one risks entering while writing trauma.¹ At the threshold of being seized by language while the body is engulfed in abject horror, the subject jeopardizes their own subjectivity in the art of writing trauma. Yet, knowing this risk, I return to the page, let the ink bleed into the fibers of the paper, and mark my trauma, again. As quickly as the words emerge from within my being I search for my notebook and pen to spill out the knot of words, images, sensations, gestures, emotions, and pains, as if to eject it all from my body. The poem captures the urgency of this process: to produce the inner reality of the abject in language *before* the abjection of the self. This is my experience of *writing trauma*.

In his work *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, LaCapra makes a distinction between *writing about trauma* and *writing trauma*. *Writing about trauma* is to establish a historiography by reconstructing the past, written as “objectively as possible” (186). *Writing trauma*, on the other hand, is a ‘metaphor’.² He explains that there is no such thing as *writing trauma* itself, but the term is a metaphor for processes of “acting out”, “working over,” “working through”, and “giving voice to the past” (186). Rather than thinking of writing trauma as “coming to terms with”, some type of teleological endeavor to transcend or reconcile with traumatic experience, I propose that writing trauma involves processes of “being-with” the body, despite the overwhelming, alarming desire to distance the self from the trauma.

On my account, writing trauma is not to distance oneself from the trauma as it shows up in the body. To bring the inner subjective reality of trauma in the body experienced phenomenologically into the symbolic, shared social-historical realm requires that the subject spend time with the body, listen to it, and translate it. As the hand writes, the soma, semiotic, and symbolic intertwine. The soma is the subjective feeling of the inner reality of the physical body apprehended phenomenologically. This is communicated through the semiotic, which in Julia Kristeva’s account is the non-expressive totality

1 I acknowledge that traumatic experience is heterogeneous. I speak specifically from an acute, but complex and extended experience of trauma such that I endure Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. In my work, I am speaking about trauma in a general sense in terms of what happens to us as humans when undergoing such a transformative experience on a phenomenological level. I do not claim that my experience is representative of all traumatic experiences.

2 “Writing about trauma is an aspect of historiography related to the project of reconstructing the past as objectively as possible without necessarily going to the self-defeating extreme of single-minded objectification that involves the denial of one’s implication in the problem one treats. Writing trauma is a metaphor in that writing indicates some distance from trauma (even when the experience of writing is itself intimately bound up with trauma), and there is no such thing as writing trauma itself if only because trauma, while at times related to particular events, cannot be localized in terms of discrete, dated experience. Trauma indicates a shattering break or cesura in experience which has belated effects. Writing trauma would be one of those telling after-effects in what I termed traumatic and post-traumatic writing... It involves processes of acting out, working over, and to some extent working through in analyzing and “giving voice” to the past—processes of coming to terms with traumatic “experiences,” limit events, and their symptomatic effects that achieve articulation in different combinations and hybridized forms.” (*Writing History, Writing Trauma* 186)

of the confluence of drive, instinct, emotion, and sensation (*Revolution in Poetic Language* 25). Tending to this ‘language’ of the body, or ‘music’ of the body, is the process of writing trauma. As disruptive as trauma is, the language which captures trauma is disruptive, fragmented, and ambiguous. Therefore, I argue against the classical theory that trauma is unrepresentable, or unspeakable,³ and I claim that it can be represented through poetic language.

As trauma is an embodied experience, my approach is a combination of phenomenology, psychoanalysis, and autoethnography. I begin with a description of Kristeva’s depiction of the abjection of self, the looming threat behind writing trauma indicated in the poem above. Next, I look at the relationship between traumatic symptoms and metaphor through the works of Kristeva and Jacques Lacan. After understanding this relationship, I describe Kristeva’s conception of poetic language and assert that it is what best captures the somatic expression of trauma in the body. Last, I make some considerations as to why the subject would choose to write trauma, revisiting the abject, and reflect on the horror of Friedrich Nietzsche’s conception of the *eternal return*.

1. Abjection of Self and the Semiotic

Much of trauma studies has been focused on the question of memory, witnessing, and testimony and one of the major arguments is that trauma is ineffable because of the way in which trauma happens too soon, too fast, to be known.⁴ Any cognitive knowledge of trauma is delayed, and it lies at the very intersection between knowing and not knowing. Literary theory focuses on issues of how trauma challenges narrative and historiography as it compromises memory. Beyond ruptures in memory, the traumatic event is not integrated into consciousness in a way that it can become understood, known, and spoken of. That is because it is not understood through the straightforward acquisition of facts gained through observation of behavior or biographical documentation. The problem of interpretation remains as the trauma is barred from conscious understanding. It is at the precise point where conscious understanding and normal, cognitive memory fail. The result is that the individual has difficulty in incorporating their experiences into meaningful narratives, and yet, the trauma continues to resonate within their body through the repetition compulsion. Any knowledge

3 See, for example, Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub. Caruth’s perspective on trauma has been challenged by Ruth Leys, Wulf Kansteiner and Harald Weilnböck and a debate on the “unrepresentability” of trauma continues to be waged in different fields of study.

4 See Arleen Ionescu and Maria Margaroni’s *Arts of Healing: Cultural Narratives of Trauma* (2020) for a comprehensive summary of trauma studies.

of trauma, thus, shows up as unpredictable and unintelligible, as well as unbearable in horror and intensity.

My approach is to write a phenomenology of bearing witness to trauma in the body.⁵ What makes it so difficult to *choose*⁶ to revisit traumatic experience is because the body revolts against any encounter with the abject. Trauma is perceived by the *subject* as a threatened breakdown of meaning through the loss of the distinction between the self and other, the subject and object. That is, the flashback, nightmare, intrusive thoughts, and so on, feel as though they are happening to the subject, yet it is the subject's own body in which these threats are taking place. This breakdown in meaning is the abject, the primordial "no." The body does not assimilate the trauma, but revolts against it. Kristeva describes this aspect of the abjection of the self:

There looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. It lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated. It beseeches, worries, and fascinates desire, which, nevertheless, does not let itself be seduced. Apprehensive, desire turns, aside; sickened, it rejects. A certainty protects it from the shameful—a certainty of which it is proud holds on to it. But simultaneously, just the same, that impetus, that spasm, that leap is drawn toward an elsewhere as tempting as it is condemned. Unflaggingly, like an inescapable boomerang, a vortex of summons and repulsion places the one haunted by it literally beside himself (*Powers of Horror* 1).

Kristeva states that "abjection, and even more so abjection of self, is its only signified" (5). There is no kin, no mimicry, no representation, no sign, not even a signifier other than the abject. The embodied experience of the abject, thus, is constituted in the pre-linguistic realm—a barren frontier devoid of signification. This pre-linguistic realm is that of the semiotic.

The semiotic (*la sémiotique*) is the rhythmic motility of the world, the pulsating flesh of the world—the musical, poetic, prosodic, and rhythmic topographies—a range of signification devoid of structure and sign, which is not encoded into grammar. The semiotic underpins all significance, both body and sign.

According to Kristeva, energies move through the body and are always already involved in the semiotic process, that is, they move through the body as rhythms,

5 Recent interdisciplinary, neurobiological, and phylogenetic studies of trauma focus on how trauma symptoms are bodily responses to perceived threat. Trauma is registered in the autonomic nervous system through alterations in the psychophysiological responses of the body which are stored as sensory memory fragments. See, among others, Stephen Porges and Bessel van der Kolk.

6 I explore the concept of choice and agency in the final section.

phonatory rhythms, gestural, acoustic, tactile, motor, visual devices. This is the signifying system of the semiotic. Drives in the body displace and condense energies, and are 'articulated' through the semiotic, rhythmic, kinetic, phonemic stage. These articulations are marks of the charges and stases of the drives. The *chora*, is "a modality of significance in which the linguistic sign is not yet articulated as the absence of an object and as the distinction between the real and symbolic" (Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language* 26). The *chora* lacks an object but is the medium of the connection between the body, objects, and subject, all of which are not yet constituted as such. Kristeva derives this language of the *chora* from Plato's *Timaeus*, in which Plato associates the *chora* with the mother's body in the sense that he sees it as material and maternal. The mother's body mediates the symbolic law which structures social relations, the other, and the subject as it relates to the primary "space" of the *chora*. As Kristeva explains, the *chora* is "unnamable, improbable, hybrid, anterior to naming, to the One, to the father, and consequently, maternally connoted to such an extent that it merits 'not even the rank of syllable'" (*Desire in Language* 133).

Kristeva advises, though, that we must be careful to make a distinction between the provisional, uncertain articulation of the *chora* and the descriptive phenomenological, spatial, and temporal intuition. That is to say, there is a distinction between the theoretical or "symbolic" representation of a *chora*, which we would see as "evidence" of the *chora*, and the *semiotic chora* which precedes any "evidence". As Kristeva notes, "the *chora* precedes and underlies figuration and thus specularization and is analogous only to vocal or kinetic rhythm" (26). The *chora* "shows up" for us through the constraints on the body by the family and social structures, and thus, is regulated through such constraints (26). Although these constraints are always already symbolic, Kristeva emphasizes that the *chora*'s "vocal and gestural organization is subject," not to law, but to "an objective ordering" (26-27).

The theoretical description of the *chora* is a mode of this constraint which involves symbolic structures of verisimilitude, spatiality, and temporality (Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language* 26). That is, we make a connection to the semiotic marked out by nonverbal rhythms, energy transfer and so on, and yet speak of it through linguistic forms of temporality and spatiality, for instance. We 'see' the marks of kinetic, chromatic, phonic energies at the semiotic stage, which are ordered through social, temporal, spatial categories. This is what, for us, provides 'evidence' of the *chora*. However, this 'evidence' is, as we have mentioned, in the organization of structures of temporality and spatiality, in which case, the totality of the drives as motility, rhythms,

and so on, precede this 'evidence.' The totality of drives and their stases *as* motility are a mode of *signifiante*, in the sense that the semiotic *chora* 'articulates'; yet the semiotic is not reducible to such structures, and moreover, it is not organized according to symbolic law. The distinction here is that *signifiante*, and further still language, is always structured in that it is a function of its context and grounded in a given set of elements. However, what is not presupposed are given laws which govern the semiotic. That is, the semiotic is able to articulate and communicate without the grammatical ordering of the Law of the Father.

Even so, the semiotic *chora* is necessary for the acquisition of language. The semiotic process is constitutive of the subject, as a knowing subject, insofar as it functions within the signifying process (Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language* 28). That is to say, the semiotic processes are always already in operation within the socialized body of the subject. The symbolic signifiante is created under explicit socio-historical relations, simultaneously with the signifying process of the semiotic, which constitutes the subject. The subject, not being reducible to the *chora* or to the symbolic alone, is constituted both within the semiotic and symbolic processes. The drives connect and orient the body to the mother, whose body, according to Kristeva, "becomes the ordering principle of the semiotic *chora*, which is on the path of destruction, aggressivity, and death" (27-28). Kristeva is referring to the death drive, which for Sigmund Freud is the most instinctual drive. She explains that the drives "are always already ambiguous, simultaneously assimilating and destructive" (27). There are what we could call dueling "positive" and "negative" motilities which ultimately lead to a "destructive wave" (28). She writes, "In this way, the term 'drive' denotes waves of attack against stases, which are themselves constituted by the repetition of these charges; together, charges and stases lead to no identity (not even that of the 'body proper') that could be seen as a result of their functioning" (28). The *chora*, then, is where the subject is both created and annihilated.

The drives and their stases *as* motility are *ruptures* in the body in the sense that the body is never static, but moves in compliance with semiotic rhythms, phonatory rhythms, gestural, acoustic, tactile, motor, visual devices, and so on. (Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* 53; *Black Sun* 62). If we think of how sound disrupts silence, so long as sound persists, the silence is continuously ruptured. Kristeva notes that the semiotized body *is constant rupture*, not a lack, but a continuum "that connect[s] zones of the fragmented body to each other and also to 'external' 'objects' and 'subjects,' which are not yet constituted as such" (*Revolution in Poetic Language* 28).

2. Abjection, Metaphor, and the Symptom

Repulsion erupts in the body in primordial repression as somatic symptom. Lacan holds that the symptom is a metaphor, just as desire is metonymy (*Écrits* 439). The symptom is “a metaphor in which flesh or function is taken as a signifying element” (431). In metaphor there is an immediate association of the signifier (acoustic image) as signified (concept). This signification is “inaccessible to the conscious subject” (431); that is to say, the symptom signifies without any mental operation required. It is a substitution through relations of similarity. Metonymy, Lacan accounts, is an exchange of name, “by which the signifier instates a lack of being [...]” (421; 428). It is when the symptom correlates to a geometrical part of the body that allows one to assign it a cause, and thus, establish a signifier (acoustic image) to signified (concept) relation. A mental operation is required to establish the relation and meaning of the metonym. This is how we can understand that the abject emerges as symptom (metaphor) and not as desire (metonymy). With the abject, there is no distinction between container and contents or material to object; the material is that of the flesh, the content and container are flesh. In the case of the abject, the symptom does not correspond to any geometrical part of the body. Kristeva explains, “In the symptom, the abject permeates me. I become abject” (*The Powers of Horror* 11).

The abject permeates being to the point that the subject becomes the *revolt of being*—the body is repulsed by its own existence, gagging, hurling, straining to vomit out its own repugnance, its own ability to “divide, reject, *repeat*” (12). It is left dry heaving, incessantly. At the same time, the body records the presence of an alien Other. To revolt, there must be a suppressor, an oppressor, or at least, an aggressor. Outside of any desire, the body perceives and records the presence of the aggressor—a threat—and immediately responds.

To understand the nature of the traumatic symptom and abjection, we need to return to Lacan’s two types of operations: metaphoric and metonymic. As understood, metaphor is a substitution through relations of similarity. In this way, it is a signifying substitution, “situated at the precise point at which meaning is produced in nonmeaning” (Lacan, *Écrits* 423). Lacan further notes, “metaphor’s creative spark does not spring forth from the juxtaposition of two images, that is, of two equally actualized signifiers. It flashes between two signifiers, one of which has replaced the other by taking the other’s place in the signifying chain, the occulted signifier remaining present by virtue of its (metonymic) connection to the rest of the chain” (422). This substitution is an immediate association of the signifier as signified, in which the signified obtains its coherence from the network of signifiers. The metaphor then, operates along the synchronic axis of language.

On the other hand, metonymy is the exchange of a name, in which two objects are linked by relation of material to object or by container to contents. For the metonym to have meaning, the first signifier must be retained in the immediate contiguity of the second signifier. With that, “an effect of signification is produced that is creative or poetic, in other words, which is the advent of the signification in question” (Lacan, *Écrits* 429). As we mentioned above, to make sense of the metonym a mental operation is always required, in which the connection between the signifier (S) and the second signifier (S¹) is re-established.

For Freud, these two operations are extended to the formation of the unconscious. The metaphoric and metonymic mechanisms are assimilated to the functioning of the primary processes, namely condensation and displacement (Lacan, *Écrits* 439). The process of condensation is a metaphoric process, while the process of displacement in dreams is a metonymic mechanism. According to Freudian psychology, the unconscious activity amalgamates diverse materials of different origins, making it so that the expression of the repressed desire is unrecognizable. In the condensation process, as discussed above, a single word can take over the representation of a whole chain of thought. The metaphor stands in for a successive stratification, taken as a symptom. In the case of trauma,

Metaphor’s two-stage mechanism is the very mechanism by which symptoms, in the analytic sense, are determined. Between the enigmatic signifier of sexual trauma and the term it comes to replace in a current signifying chain, a spark flies that fixes a symptom—a metaphor in which flesh or function is taken as a signifying element—the signification, that is inaccessible to the conscious subject, by which the symptom may be dissolved (Lacan, *Écrits* 431).

3. The Intertwining: Poetic Language

According to Kristeva, poetic language is spatial in that it “does not involve lines and surfaces but space and infinity”; it stretches horizontally *and* vertically (Kristeva, *Desire in Language* 88). This spatial dimension is created as poetic language is a double: “the minimal unit of poetic language is at least *double*, not in the sense of the signifier/signified dyad, but rather, in terms of *one and other*” (69). The sign (signifier/signified) is a 0 – 1 sequence. This is a product of scientific abstraction: “(identity-substance-cause-goal as structure of the Indo-European sentence), designating a vertically and hierarchically linear division” (69). Poetic language, Kristeva explains, functions very differently:

Saussure’s poetic *paragram* (‘Anagrams’) extends from *zero* to *two*: the unit ‘one’ (definition, ‘truth’) does not exist in this field. Consequently, the notions of definition, determina-

tion, the sign '=' and the very concept of sign, which presuppose a vertical (hierarchical) division between signifier and signified, cannot be applied to poetic language—by definition an infinity of pairings and combinations (69).

For Kristeva this suggests that “poetic language functions as a *tabular model*, where each ‘unit’ (this word can no longer be used without quotation marks, since every unit is double) acts as a multi-determined *peak*” (69).

“*Poetic logic*” connotes “the concept of the *power of the continuum* [which] would embody the 0-2 interval, a continuity where 0 denotes and 1 is implicitly transgressed” (Kristeva, *Desire in Language* 70). Kristeva states that “Within this ‘power of continuum’ from 0 to a specifically poetic double, the linguistic, psychic, and social ‘prohibition’ is 1 (God, Law, Definition). The only linguistic practice to ‘escape’ this prohibition is poetic discourse” (70). God, Law, and Definition prohibit anything other than the 1. This is what poetic language transgresses—this limit, stopping point. An example of what Kristeva means can be traced in an anecdote of a child on my caseload while serving as a Care Coordinator for Severely Emotionally Disturbed Children in Therapeutic Foster Care. When the child utters, “There is a dark man living inside of me, telling me to kill people”, from what we know, the child actually *believes* or *knows* what he is saying or intends to communicate. Yet, scientific language bars the utterance from having any truth or ‘real’ significance. That is, in scientific language of the 0-1 interval, the signifier “dark man” signifies a human being and the color of his skin. Yet, poetic language can transgress this prohibition. The “dark man” can be referring to the child’s father, any other man, a character from a movie or book, and so on, while “dark” can be used to indicate color, character, mentality, sinister intentions, evil, maliciousness, many more of which are possible due to the condensation of the child’s experience. There are many possible qualities permitted, an infinite number of pairings of dark/man. This is how we can think of it as a multi-determined peak. The interval 0-2 of poetic language means that poetic language always carries with it prohibition and transgression: *it cannot be*, and *it can be otherwise*.

Another distinction between scientific discourse and poetic language relates to the presence of the semiotic. In scientific discourse, the semiotic component is reduced as much as possible. “On the contrary”, Kristeva states, “the signifying economy of poetic language is specific in that the semiotic is not only a constraint as is the symbolic, but it tends to gain the upper hand at the expense of the thetic and predicative constraints of the ego’s judging consciousness” (*Desire in Language* 134). The semiotic constrains in the sense that it expresses meaning and significance, which is always a limiting feature, even though this may be, as Kristeva suggests below, a polysemic space of significance:

However elided, attacked, or corrupted the symbolic function might be in poetic language, due to the impact of semiotic processes, the symbolic function nonetheless maintains its presence, it is for this reason that it is a language. First, it persists as an internal limit of this bipolar economy, since a multiple and sometimes even incomprehensible [sic] signified is nevertheless communicated; second, it persists also because the semiotic processes themselves, far from being set adrift (as they would be in insane discourse), set up a new formal construct: a so-called new formal or ideological “writer’s universe,” the never-finished, undefined production of a new space of significance (134-135).

Citing Bakhtin, Kristeva states that language has a double character: 1) syntagmatic, manifested through extension, presence, and metonymy; and 2) systemic, manifested through association, absence, and metaphor. What is present and lost within the symbolic order of metonymy and metaphor can be recovered in the semiotic. Kristeva notes that poetic language “posits its own process as an undecidable process between sense and nonsense, between *language* and *rhythm* [...] between the symbolic and semiotic” (Kristeva, *Desire in Language* 135).

Invested in the semiotic, poetic language is also disconcerting in that it “awakens our attention to this undecidable character of any so-called natural language, a feature that univocal, rational, scientific discourse tends to hide—and this implies considerable consequences for its subject” (135). As it is a series of ruptures to the symbolic order, it mimics the semiotic. It has the ability to reactivate what the individual wants to forget but cannot. Indeed, it may reactivate many of the overwhelming feelings of chance, accident, meaninglessness, and ambiguity. Kristeva states that, “the unsettled and questionable subject of poetic language (for whom the word is never uniquely sign) maintains itself at the cost of reactivating this repressed instinctual, maternal element”, precisely what gets mobilized through poetic language (136). This “maternal element” is the body.

4. The Will to Write Trauma

I am casually flipping through my notebook looking for a particular note and I gasp, my head rattles, my body flinches, and I slam my notebook shut. I encountered a single fragment that I wrote which caused an immediate visceral reaction. I urgently look for something to cover the page with and write “don’t read” on the covering. My notebooks are littered with sticky notes and notecards bearing the words, “don’t read”, covering over clusters of words that are too disruptive and repulsive to review. In writing trauma, the inner scream of the body gets captured in the eternity of language, namely, the symbolic. The idea of any traumatic experience being eternal is already felt by the

subject and brings with it the horrifying recognition that capturing it in language will not resolve the incessant interruption of the repetition compulsion.

I do not know if I will ever return to these fragments. I know what is looming behind the cover, not the exact image or words, but enough to know not to return. And yet, at some point I *chose* to write such traumatic fragments. I do not choose the images, intrusive thoughts, flashbacks, and fragments that come to me. But I do choose to be with the fragmentary thoughts and sensations long enough to replicate them in the shared, social-historical world of meaning, the symbolic. And in the sense that I chose to write the soma, I willed it into an existence beyond the body.

For us who experience trauma, the idea of willing it beyond the body onto the page into the symbolic is heavy. We already know the horrifying reality of Nietzsche's proposal of the *eternal return* through the repetition compulsion.⁷ Nietzsche's proposed question of the eternal return is presented through multiple metaphors. In *The Gay Science*, he presents it as a demon, who wakes you at night, and asks you how you would respond to the idea that your life will be repeated exactly as it has been and will have been. The demon proposes two options: would you "gnash your teeth and curse the demon, or say, 'I've never heard of anything more godlike?'"⁸ You are asked if you would say yes to life, recognizing and embracing all that has been and all that will be, or reject and want that it be otherwise.

Having endured the incessant interruption of horror, I ask, "How dare *you* ask that question?" I already experience the horror of that question every day, yet unpredictably. That I will be hauled back to the scene of the trauma, by chance; *that* is not uncertain or ambiguous. Acknowledging this horror of knowing is acknowledging the heaviest weight of Nietzsche's proposal. Do you will it once more, and countless times more,

7 I am not claiming that Nietzsche's concept of the eternal return is in reference to the repetition compulsion. There are multiple interpretations of the concept, and I am not advancing any new interpretation. I am merely noting that this concept takes on different meaning, or weight, rather, when traumatic experiences are unpredictably, incessantly repeated through sensory memory fragments which repeat the scene of the trauma exactly as it has occurred, without modification.

8 "What, if some day or night a demon were to steal after you into your loneliest loneliness and say to you: 'This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything unutterably small or great in your life will have to return to you, all in the same succession and sequence--even this spider and this moonlight between the trees and even this moment and I myself. The eternal hourglass of existence is turned upside down again and again, and you with it, speck of dust!' Would you throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus? Or have you once experienced a tremendous moment when you would have answered him: 'You are a god and never have I heard anything more divine'. If this thought gained possession of you, it would change you as you are or perhaps crush you. The question in each and every thing, 'Do you desire this once more and innumerable times more?' would lie upon your actions as the greatest weight. Or how well disposed would you have to become to yourself and to life to *crave nothing more fervently* than this ultimate and eternal confirmation and seal?" (Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* 341).

exactly as you have experienced it? What is being asked is that I will, not only the traumatic tears, fissures, disruptions of worlds and self, but also every instant—flashbacks, intrusive thoughts, nightmares which linger through the day, visceral reactions to images and even language—and every physical sensation of the revolt of being.

I would gnash my teeth—I do gnash my teeth. And yet, I pick up my pen and write.⁹ The question of the eternal return is not a theoretical question for the subject who experiences trauma; it is an existential, ethical question—ethical in the sense that it is a call to respond to the body. As soon as I write, I know I am approaching a perilous threshold—the chance of being turned back, hauled back. And yet, this is my responsibility: to choose to write or not, to choose to be with the body in trauma or to make any attempt to distance myself from the traumatic experience.

According to Lacan, it is the Other who places this burden on us—we must haul this burden along while being hauled along, back to the scene of the trauma. Repetition, as he explains through the transliteration of *wiederholen*, is the “hauling of the subject who always drags its thing into a certain path that he cannot get out of” (*The Four Fundamental* 51). What is proposed by Freud and Lacan is that the repetition compulsion is an endeavor to master the stimulus retroactively, an attempt to master what was not completely grasped in the first place. From this perspective, writing trauma would be the materialization of the repetition compulsion, and the repetitive act of writing trauma could be a function of mastering the painful experience, the memory, the self, and the body.

However, I offer a different way to regard this repetition for the sake of mastery. The moment the ink bleeds into the natural fibers of the paper, the will bleeds into the paper, with the past, the present, and a future yet to come—the eternal return of that horror of knowing horror, cemented in time and space, moving forward and backward at once. In this sense, writing trauma may not be an attempt at mastery but the ultimate manifestation of the decision to *will backwards*: “‘The will is a creator’. All ‘it was’ is a fragment, a riddle, a dreadful accident—until the creative will says to it, ‘But thus I willed it.’ Until the creative will says to it, ‘But thus I will it; thus shall I will it’” (Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* 253). It is a form of the creative will to will backward. Even if the page is immediately set ablaze, crumpled, or in my case, covered over, the will brought it into being beyond the flesh.

In writing trauma, the subject does not attempt redemption in terms of willing “it could be otherwise”, but rather, the eternal, repetitive seal of writing wills “it must

⁹ Writing trauma, though, is not an act of *ressentiment*, which is what is proposed by the demon’s question of whether you will backwards.

be". Rather, it is a form of resilience, of being-with the body. As the demon asks, "how well disposed would you have to become to yourself and to life to *crave nothing more fervently* than this ultimate and eternal confirmation and seal?" (*The Gay Science* 253). To *crave*, *desire*, and will the past through intertwining the soma, semiotic, and symbolic in the art of writing trauma is to "dispose" the self to being-with the body, despite the eternal revolt.

This revolt is experienced as repulsion, expulsion, not just a turning away, but a physical sensation to eject the eternal return, by first being alarmed of its presence, perceived as a threat, and then called to respond. Writing trauma is an act of willing the past, acknowledging the inner reality of trauma stored in the body, even though it is never assimilated in the body and sealing it into being through the symbolic.

6. Conclusion

I now return to the poem with which this article opened and reflect on the intertwining of the soma, semiotic, and symbolic. This poem is raw; it was written as if painted on canvas by one swift brush stroke, rather than being plotted and edited. Similarly to how Kristeva describes the movements of the artist, the poem is instantaneous:

No distance between the thought and the hand: their instantaneous unity grasps and redraws the most concentrated interiority into visible bodies. No trial and error: the artist's mind, identified with the gesture, trims away the expanse, carves out shadow and light, and on the flat exteriority of a medium like paper, makes an intention, a judgment, a taste appear, voluminous (*The Severed Head* 1).

Although not planned, each stanza of the poem communicates desire: *I want to say, I want to write—I want* (repeated many times)—this repetition is captured in the repeated claim to want to commit to the act of writing *before*. The word *before* functions to demarcate a threshold in which the subject anticipates an inevitable force, communicated through the semiotic. Also, in the poem are references to the specific body parts that are engaged when the autonomic nervous system detects a threat: throat, heart, and stomach. The poem metaphorically describes the soma—the inner reality of the trauma stored in the body experienced phenomenologically.

But why do I express, repeatedly, that I *want* to engage in writing trauma? Perhaps writing trauma is an attempt at mastery in that the subject wills backwards, not avoiding the inner reality of trauma in the body, and not accepting it, but voicing the internal scream. Perhaps writing trauma is an expression of that inner reality of the lived-trauma in the body experienced phenomenologically. Or perhaps it is both that attempt at mas-

tery *and* expression. The purpose or function of writing trauma is not delineated; but if anything, it is not a fleeing of the body, but rather, a being-with the body.

As disastrous as trauma shows itself to be, and although writing trauma proves to be such a risk, the body knows it will survive. There is a point when the subject absolutely enfolded into uncontrollable sobbing—an outpouring of a deepest, most painful embodied interiority, something happens which cannot be accounted for: the body recognizes that it has not been destroyed. The body annihilates the knowledge of the limitless sobbing, this relentless, resounding cry, and establishes a limit once again. It overcomes its own knowledge of the horror of the other living within; the sobbing comes to rest, and we carry on.

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