
EROTIKON

ESSAYS ON EROS, ANCIENT AND MODERN

Edited by Shadi Bartsch & Thomas Bartscherer

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GIVE DORA A BREAK! A TALE OF EROS
AND EMOTIONAL DISRUPTION

JONATHAN LEAR

I

To hear Freud tell it, the psychoanalytic conception of the erotic comes straight from Plato.

as for the "stretching" of the concept of sexuality... anyone who looks down with contempt upon psycho-analysis from a superior vantage-point should remember how closely the enlarged sexuality of psycho-analysis coincides with the Eros of the divine Plato.¹

... what psychoanalysis calls sexuality was by no means identical with the impulsion towards a union of the two sexes or towards producing a pleasurable sensation in the genitals; it had far more resemblance to the all-inclusive and all-embracing love of Plato's *Symposium*.²

We are of the opinion, then, that language has carried out an entirely justifiable piece of unification in creating the word "love" with its numerous uses, and that we cannot do better than take it as the basis of our scientific discussions and

I first presented these ideas at a seminar I gave at the University of Chicago with the composer Richard Einhorn (who is composing an opera on Dora). I later presented them at a faculty seminar at the Institute for Psychoanalysis, Chicago. I learned enormously from both discussions. I also want to express a more general debt to Irad Kimhi and Hans Loewald for conversations about psychoanalysis, which stretched out over many years.

1. Freud, "Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality," 134. The quote is from the preface to the fourth edition, published in 1920.

2. Freud, "Resistances to Psychoanalysis," 218.

expositions as well. By coming to this decision, psychoanalysis has let loose a storm of indignation, as though it had been guilty of an act of outrageous innovation. Yet it has done nothing original in taking love in this "wider" sense. In its origin, function, and relation to sexual love, the "Eros" of the philosopher Plato coincides exactly with the love-force, the libido of psycho-analysis.³

And so, if we take Freud's word for it, the psychoanalytic conception of Eros stands squarely in the Western philosophical tradition of thinking about the human psyche. But it is also Freud who taught us to be suspicious of any tradition's account of its own development. For while the tradition will present a homogeneous story of inheritance and development, in fact that story will be covering over a series of ruptures, discontinuities, and evasions. There is no reason to think that psychoanalysis should be exempt from this tendency.⁴

If we look to what actually happened, it appears that Freud's invocation of Eros was part of a rather hasty attempt to cover over a trauma to psychoanalytic theory, for it is not an exaggeration to say that the traumas of World War I induced a trauma in psychoanalytic theory. Freud recognized that psychoanalysis—in its then current form—could not account for the so-called dreams of the traumatic neuroses. "Dreams occurring in traumatic neuroses have the characteristic of repeatedly bringing the patient back to the situation of his accident, a situation from which he wakes up in another fright. This astonishes people far too little."⁵ What was astonishing to Freud was that there seemed to be no way to account for these dreams as disguised—and perhaps conflicted—expressions of sexuality. They could not be understood in terms of the myriad mental functionings according to the pleasure principle. Each night the traumatized soldier would be brought back to the scene of utter terror, and there was no way to see such a dream as seeking pleasure in any way, however conflicted or inhibited.

But the problem was much graver than the need to extend psychoanalytic thinking to encompass a new area of psychological phenomena. The war neuroses are Freud's epistemic entrée. Once he sees an exception to the functioning of sexuality—according to the pleasure principle—he sees exceptions to it

3. Freud, "Group Psychology," 90–92.

4. It is Jean Laplanche who has systematically tried to work out what a distinctively psychoanalytic account of the history of psychoanalysis might look like. See, for example, Laplanche, *Life and Death in Psychoanalysis*, and *Entre séduction et inspiration: L'homme*.

5. Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," 3; my emphasis.

everywhere. In particular, he sees that these exceptions occur in the heart of the transference in psychoanalytic therapy. "Patients repeat all these unwanted situations and painful emotions in the transference and revive them with the greatest ingenuity. They seek to bring about the interruption of the treatment while it is still incomplete; they contrive once more to feel themselves scorned, they oblige the physician to speak severely to them and treat them coldly; they discover appropriate objects for their jealousy. . . . *None of these things can have produced pleasure in the past.* . . . In spite of that they are repeated under pressure of a compulsion" (21). In effect, Freud admits that his entire theory of the transference neuroses, his theory of psychoanalytic therapy and cure, needs to be revised. And it has to be revised to account for a fundamental force that Freud admits he doesn't fully understand.⁶ This is nothing less than a foundational crisis in psychoanalysis, and it would be hard to overestimate the importance of Freud's next theoretical step.

It is at this point that Freud covers over the crucial nugget of his own insight: that the mind can disrupt its own functioning. The reason he misses this is that he succumbs to the temptation of speculative thinking. He seems to assume that if his thinking is bold enough, it can seize fundamental truth. He posits a basic teleological principle—the death drive—running through all of animate nature, which sets "the final goal of all organic striving." "The aim of all life," Freud concludes, "is death" (37–38). His style of thinking here is like that of a pre-Socratic: by reflecting on the phenomena of life, he seeks to grasp the metaphysical principles that will explain it. Indeed, at the end of his career, Freud cites Empedocles with admiration. He takes himself to be repeating, in modern times and in a psychoanalytic context, that basic opposition between love and strife that Empedocles was the first to lay down.⁷

It is as though Kant had never written. Freud here seems oblivious to the modern idea that human thought itself stands in need of a critique. In particular, we need to know how human thought is capable of grasping such truths. I have argued elsewhere that, though Freud was right to see that existing psychoanalytic theory was inadequate to account for important psychological phenomena, and thus right to think that important revision was needed, his argument for the death drive does not succeed.⁸ I am not going to repeat the argument here, but the basic idea is that the postulation of the death drive is

6. *Ibid.*, 23.

7. Freud, "Analysis Terminable and Interminable," 245–47.

8. Lear, *Happiness, Death, and the Remainder of Life*, ch. 2.

a much more extravagant conclusion than the phenomena call for. We need to search for a more austere conclusion that nevertheless accounts for these astonishing psychological phenomena.

Before we do that, though, we should note that, when Freud invokes "the death drive," he is attempting an inaugural act of naming, which misfires. He takes himself to be naming a real thing in the world, but he is in fact injecting an enigmatic term into our discourse. There is no naming, for nothing has been genuinely isolated for him to name. His hope is to provide an explanation; in fact, all we get is the illusion of one.

Now what is striking in this context is that Freud introduces Eros not because of a deepening of the concept of sexuality but because he needs an adequate complement to his new principle, Death. Indeed, Freud first introduces the idea of Eros as a drive in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*:

Let us make a bold attempt at another step forward. It is generally considered that the union of a number of cells into a vital association—the multicellular character of organisms—has become a means of prolonging their life. . . . Accordingly we might attempt to apply the libido theory which has been arrived at in psycho-analysis to the mutual relationship of the cells. We might suppose that the life instincts or sexual instincts which are active in each cell take the other cells as their object, that they partly neutralize the death instincts . . . in those cells and thus preserve their life; while the other cells do the same for them, and still others sacrifice themselves in the performance of this libidinal function. . . . In this way the libido of our sexual instincts would coincide with the Eros of the poets and philosophers which holds all living things together. (50)

In other words, Eros is hastily invoked to be a suitable complement to Freud's new-found principle, Death. Since next to nothing is known about the death drive, it should not come as too much of a surprise to discover that even Eros is functioning mainly as an enigmatic term. The death drive is supposedly an entropic force for decomposition, so it makes sense that Eros should be an opposing force for unification. But, really, virtually nothing is known about it—because there is nothing to know. Freud is not in the process of discovering a new life force, he is in the process of trying to cover over a trauma to psychoanalytic theory. In this way, invoking Plato and the ancients gives a false sense of legitimacy and security. It lulls us into thinking we do know what we are talking about; we've always known.

Insofar as we have been living with the assumption that we do have a psychoanalytic conception of Eros, this psychoanalytically minded reconstruction of the history of Freud's thought should make us suspicious. The point is not to ditch the psychoanalytic conception of the erotic, but to free us up to formulate one. To this end, it helps to recognize that, for all practical purposes, we don't have one. Perhaps hitching ourselves up to Plato will prove fruitful, but it is important to recognize that as yet we have little more than a promissory note.⁹

II

What did Freud really accomplish? Roughly speaking, I think Freud was right to think that certain phenomena—like traumatic dreams, certain kinds of compulsive repetitions—are exceptions to the workings of the pleasure principle, but that in trying to conceptualize them, he went off the theoretical deep end. Let us simply abandon the assumption that if there are *exceptions* to workings of the pleasure principle, there must be a “*beyond*”—a hidden principle waiting to be discovered. And let us ask instead, how might we characterize austere the empirical content of Freud's important discovery? It seems to me that what Freud has shown is that, on the broadest possible scale, there are two different types of mental activity. The first comprises the by now familiar workings of the mind according to the loose associations of the pleasure principle, which Freud so brilliantly described in the *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, and *Studies on Hysteria*. Here we have displacement and condensation, as well as various forms of inhibition and repression, which together serve to diffuse our associations as well as express them in dreams, bodily expressions, and other symptomatic acts. These are, of course, themselves all sorts of different mental activities, but they can all be summed up under one grand type: the functionings of the mind according to the pleasure principle (and its variant, the reality principle). I call this type of mental functioning *swerve* because it exercises a kind of gravitational pull on the entire field of conscious mental functioning, bending it into idiosyncratic shapes. By way of analogy, we detect the existence of black holes by the way light swerves toward them. We detect this type of unconscious process by the ways our conscious reasoning, our bodily expressions, our acts, and our dreams swerve toward them.

Before 1920, Freud thought he could account for all relevant pathology in terms of psychological conflicts that were themselves all instances of

9. I made my own first attempt in *Love and Its Place in Nature*. See also Loewald, *Essential Loewald*. Hans Loewald, I think, is the first psychoanalytic thinker to take Eros seriously.

swerve-like mental phenomena. The kernel of Freud's discovery in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is that this is not so. There are significant psychological phenomena that cannot be understood in terms of any type of swerve. We need to recognize a fundamentally different type of mental activity, which is in fact the *disruption* of primary-process mental activity itself. I give the generic name *break* to all types of mental activity that serve to disrupt—or break apart—the ordinary functionings of the mind. So, for instance, the so-called dreams of the traumatic neuroses are instances of break because, as Freud showed, they are not really dreams. That is, they are not an ordinary manifestation of the wish-fulfilling capacity to dream; rather, they are a disruption of that capacity. In traumatic neuroses, the ordinary swerve-like capacities of the mind are repeatedly disrupted, and the mind gets stuck in repeated disruptions.

There are three features of break that need to be emphasized. First, break is a *genus* concept, not a species concept. This is important. In conversation, colleagues have assumed that I am trying to introduce a new mental force, and their natural response is, “Why do we need it? Don't we already have the concept of trauma?” That is like saying, “Why do we need the concept of animal when we already have the concept of human being?” The point of the concept of animal is not to introduce a new species—as though we have humans and chimps and now we also have animals—nor is it to say, now that we have the concept of animal, we no longer need the concept of human being. Rather, the concept of animal allows us to see, at a higher level of generality, that there might be some salient things in common between humans and, say, ant eaters. With the concept of animal we can see a certain unity where before we saw only differences.

Similarly with break. The point is not to introduce it as something at the same level as trauma, nor is the point to replace the concept of trauma with the concept of break. Rather, the point is to divide mental activity into two broad categories: those which manifest the ordinary functionings of the mind, and those which disrupt them. In the broad genus of break, there are myriad species: trauma is the obvious example, but included in this category are also “attacks on linking,” projective identification, introjection, and various forms of acute bodily attacks and spasms, as well as certain kinds of moments of dissociation and fugue states. In particular, they are extremely minor, nontraumatic, and difficult to detect.¹⁰ I do not pretend to be able to give a complete

10. These are the sorts of break Paul Gray listens for in his close process attention. See Gray, *Ego and Analysis of Defense*. One of the values of the concept of break is that it encourages us to think about what one of Gray's minuscule breaks and a massive psychotic break might have in

taxonomy of all the kinds of break, but I think that that is a fruitful area for future research.

The second feature of break that needs to be remembered is that breaks can come from inside as well as from outside the individual mind. Another person or an event can inflict a trauma upon us that utterly disrupts mental functioning. But, on Freud's economic model, the human being is a repository of drives and psychic energy that can on occasion overwhelm the mind.

Third, and most important, a person can become active with respect to break. That is, in periods of stress and anxiety, a person can use the heightened psychic energy to disrupt his own mental functioning. In this way, break can become a primitive defense mechanism.¹¹ It can also be used to provoke more minor disruptions: in this way, small breaks can be incorporated into more sophisticated defenses.

III

I should now like to return to our ordinary, pretheoretical notion of erotic life and ask how the concepts of swerve and break might be useful with respect to it. I am going to focus on two brief moments in the life of an adolescent woman whom Freud came to call Dora.¹² The first moment is when Dora gave her suitor a slap across the face, thus putting an end to an erotic relationship in the making. The second is when she metaphorically repeated that act by abruptly ending her treatment with Freud. One aim is to rethink this clinical rupture in the light of our revised understanding of the theoretical rupture.

By now it is well known that Dora was treated by her adult world as an object of exchange. Her father was having an affair with a family friend, Frau K, and Dora was allowed, even encouraged, to receive the attentions of the husband, Herr K. For a while Dora collaborated with this arrangement, but there came a moment when she broke this social world apart. Herr K propositions her by a lake; she slaps him—and all the adults gang up and insist that Dora has invented this story. She writes a suicide note, faints, and her father brings her to

common. There is a tendency to assume that the primitive mental phenomena Melanie Klein describes must be utterly different from the miniscule disruptions Paul Gray describes in his close process monitoring of high-functioning neurotics. The generic concept of break enables us to see something in common.

11. What Bion calls an attack on linking is one such defense mechanism; see Bion, "Attacks on Linking."

12. Freud, "Fragment of an Analysis."

Freud—in the hope that Freud will help restore the early adulterous harmony. What broke up this harmony?

Here is Freud's first account of the moment:

None of her father's actions seemed to have embittered her so much as his readiness to consider the scene by the lake as a product of her imagination. She was almost beside herself at the idea of its being supposed that she had merely fancied something on that occasion. For a long time I was in perplexity as to what the self-reproach could be which lay behind her passionate repudiation of this explanation of the episode. It was justifiable to suspect that there was something concealed, for a reproach which misses the mark gives no lasting offense. On the other hand, I came to the conclusion that Dora's story must correspond to the facts in every respect. *No sooner had she grasped Herr K's intention than, without letting him finish what he had to say, she had given him a slap in the face and hurried away. Her behavior must have seemed as incomprehensible to the man after she had left him as to us, for he must long before have gathered from innumerable small signs that he was secure in the girl's affections.*¹³

This slap is arguably the decisive moment in Dora's life. Nothing would ever be the same again. Note that, in the moment, Freud insists on an interpretive breakdown: neither the participant in the scene nor Freud himself can make immediate sense of what Dora is doing. But as the analysis progresses, Freud comes to think that, in her slap, Dora is expressing her anger: Dora is angry because she thinks Herr K's approach is *only* a seduction.

Of course, angry outbursts are part of many an erotic relationship. And perhaps anger would have been an appropriate response for Dora in this one, but there is an important sense in which that was not Dora's response. And if Freud had understood that, he might have been able to save the analysis.

I should like to follow the account given by Jacques Lacan, not because I think it is necessarily right about Dora, but because it provides a useful framework in which to investigate her slap.¹⁴ (But the account I offer is compatible with a broad range of interpretations.) According to Lacan, Dora is in the process of becoming a woman, and this process has a significant unconscious dimension. In fantasy, Dora is trying to figure out what the erotic kernel to

13. *Ibid.*, 46, my emphasis.

14. Lacan, "Intervention on Transference" and *Psychoses*. Note: I am only following one thread of Lacan's complex presentation of the Dora case.

being a woman is—and, with fascination, she suspects that Frau K possesses the enigmatic secret. The primordial model Dora used to explore the world was through her older brother. Dora again resorts to that model, exploring Frau K's enigmatic femininity through an identification with Herr K. If this interpretation is correct, then Herr K is doubly mistaken about his relationship with Dora. First, he thinks her interest in him is primarily directed to him when in fact she needs him as a vehicle for exploring the sexualized femininity of Frau K. That is, Herr K believes himself to be Dora's erotic object, when he is in fact a vehicle for finding out what Eros is. Second, he assumes she is already a woman when her problem is that she is trying to figure out how to become one. He assumes she already understands erotic life; she is trying to figure out what it is.

In the postscript to the case study, Freud admits that, at the climactic moment of the analysis, he did not notice that Dora was in the process of transferring her feelings for Herr K onto him.¹⁵ But even in retrospect, Freud remains unaware of how much he encouraged such a transference. For in the analysis he makes the same two assumptions about Dora that Herr K did. He assumes that Dora's evident interest in Herr K is really a disguised love for him; and he assumes that the reason she does not express that love openly is because she is neurotic. The idea that she cannot express love because she is not yet ready to be in love is not one that occurs to Freud. In particular, he seems unaware that occupying a sexualized gender role is a developmental achievement that itself requires massive activity in unconscious fantasy. The point here is not to question the overall diagnosis of Dora as hysterical. The point is that Freud, like Herr K, treats her as having more erotic understanding than she does. He assumes that a certain kind of eroticized gender role has already been achieved.

This leads to a significant misinterpretation of Dora's slaps. Freud thinks that Dora slaps Herr K because she is angry, hurt, and jealous. She is in love with Herr K, but when he uses the same words on her that he used on the governess, Dora assumes that he is treating her as a seductive trifle.

It is here that Freud gets misled by the logic of the emotions. He thinks he is making an empirical discovery about the unconscious when in fact he is following out the logic of a concept. For it is constitutive of anger that if someone is angry at X, she must believe that X somehow deserves her anger.¹⁶ Anger makes an implicit claim that it is itself an appropriate response: thus it

makes a claim for its own rationality. So if Dora is angry at Herr K, it would seem that she must have a reason for it. And if that reason is not conscious, then there is *conceptual* pressure to assume that it must be unconscious. Since no one lives with a single reason, that unconscious reason must fit in with other unconscious beliefs and desires about Herr K. In this way, the unconscious begins to look as though it has to be the locus of a fair amount of rationality of its own.¹⁷

It would seem that if irrationality is going to enter at all, it cannot be because of the way unconscious beliefs and desires themselves fit together. Rather, irrationality could only appear in one of two ways. Either the unconscious would have to interact with consciousness in nonrational ways, or the unconscious reasons would have to seem—from a conscious, evaluative perspective—not to be very good reasons.

Now if the unconscious really were like this, then Freud's therapeutic technique would make sense. For if the unconscious were this hive of bad reasons, it would make sense to bring these reasons to conscious awareness: then one could evaluate them and correct them in the light of one's conscious judgment. The discovery of unconscious content would be what it meant to "make the unconscious conscious." It is clear that this is what Freud takes himself to be doing. He acts as though he were a detective cross-examining a somewhat reluctant witness.

A problem arises, though, if Dora's unconscious is not as well organized as Freud takes it to be. For if Freud is not discovering hidden contents, then he is bombarding her with them. It is not just that the contents are sexual, erotic, and aggressive; it is that Freud is making an allegation that these are *her* contents. His interpretations are allegations, and it is easy to imagine Dora experiencing this as an intrusion—for that is what it is. He, like Herr K, is treating her as though she already has these fully formed eroticized thoughts, and thus it is understandable that he should provoke a similar reaction.

But what is this reaction? How should we understand Dora's slaps? If we go back to that moment by the lake, it seems to me clear that Dora provokes a break. If we observe Herr K's pursuit, there is no doubt that the overall erotic tension was rising—and along with it, Dora's anxiety. And due to her own inhibited development, Dora had a limited number of ways of dealing with it. If we add Lacan's hypothesis that, in fantasy, Dora was using Herr K as a vehicle

15. Freud, "Fragment of an Analysis," 118–20.

16. Aristotle *Rhetoric* II.2, 1378a31–80a4. See also, Freud, "Fragment of an Analysis," 47–51.

17. See Davidson, "Paradoxes of Irrationality," and Lear, "Restlessness, Phantasy and the Concept of Mind."

for exploring Frau K's femininity, then his remark—"I get nothing from my wife" or "My wife means nothing to me"—was not merely for Dora the repetition of a cynical seductive line that he had already used on the governess. It threatened to disrupt her entire orientation to the world. For if Dora is to discover who she is—or, rather, construct who she is to become—through a fantastic exploration of Herr K's fascination with Frau K, then Herr K's lack of interest in Frau K would threaten the very core of Dora's emerging existential project. It is not because she thinks Herr K is cynical that she slaps him, but because she is threatened by being overwhelmed by his truth.

The suggestion, then, is not that Herr K traumatizes Dora, but that Dora induces a break. That is, Herr K's proposal is threatening, and Dora responds with one of the very few defenses at her disposal: she induces a break. And in this way she disrupts her own world: she avoids *being* overwhelmed by overwhelming *herself*. Break can thus be considered a defense because a person invoking it can avoid the passivity of being overwhelmed. But with this kind of a break, it must be considered a primitive defense because it is literally *self-defeating*: it inhibits psychological growth.¹⁸

As we shall see, precisely because we are trying to recognize an unfamiliar type of psychic phenomenon, it is necessarily difficult to find the right vocabulary with which to describe it. Still, it seems misleading to say that Dora slaps Herr K out of anger. For Dora is breaking apart a world in which anger might have been the appropriate response. Anger seems to require that one form reasons for one's anger, but Dora is in the process of breaking up any such psychological activity.

Ironically, if this account is correct, then Dora's "hysterical" defense has the same basic structure as the traumatic neuroses that, nineteen years later, Freud would recognize to be beyond the pleasure principle. In both cases there are active attacks on ordinary sexualized mental functioning. And once Freud does discover that there is some kind of mental activity that is "beyond the pleasure principle," there is reason to go back to the earlier cases—before he recognized this—to see if one can find it already there. My suggestion is that Dora was functioning "beyond the pleasure principle," but Freud was not yet ready to see this. And this gives us reason to suspect that *hysterics do not suffer, as Freud put it in "Studies on Hysteria," "mainly from reminiscences," but mainly from primitive*

18. As Lacan put it, "And after that what will be for her?: this puppet who has nonetheless just broken the enchantment under which she has been living for years" ("Intervention on Transference," 101).

defense mechanisms. That is, they induce break as a first line of defense then try to heal over the mental wounds with fantasies that are often experienced as reminiscences.

At this point, a moment of conceptual therapy might be in order. This very inquiry occupies some vague borderland between philosophy and psychoanalysis. Psychoanalytic thinking may well seek to introduce new vocabulary or induce a shift in ordinary usage. Philosophical activity, if we follow the example of the later Wittgenstein, does not seek to change our usage, only to describe it. This hybrid inquiry pulls us in both directions. And it seems to me that it is all right to go in either direction, even in both directions—just as long as one remains clear about what one is doing. On one hand, there is good reason not to call Dora's slap an expression of anger. For anger seems to be partially constituted by the belief that the anger is itself directed toward someone who deserves it. Anger makes a rationalizing claim that it is a response that it is merited. Dora's slap, by contrast, is an outburst that lacks this complex structure. Indeed, it is a disruptive gesture that itself inhibits the development of this very structure. Thus it can be wildly misleading to call anger the very activity that prevents the complex emotion of anger from developing.

On the other hand, anger, the full-fledged rationalizing emotion, is a developmental achievement. And it has roots going back to infancy. We say that an infant's outburst is angry even though it does not yet have the capability of thinking that its outburst is warranted. And it is from these angry outbursts that, if psychological life is not too disrupted, the full-fledged emotion of anger develops. There is a tendency in ordinary language to call any outburst along the developmental route an expression of anger. And thus there is a tendency to call a slap like Dora's an expression of anger. And, of course, one could not tell from casual inspection whether that outburst was itself on a developmental route toward the mature expression of anger—or whether it was a disruption of that very developmental process. Certainly, on the basis of the ordinary use of emotion terms, Dora looks angry. And we want our emotion terms like *anger* to be applicable on the basis of relatively casual observation. In an observationally identical moment, Dora could give a slap that was a full-fledged expression of anger. And we don't want to have to go through a whole analysis before we can say whether a slap is angry or not.

The real mistake, it seems to me, is not to opt for one use or the other, but to opt for one use and then to think that one has to find the criteria of the other. So, for example, Freud interprets the slap as an expression of anger—and then thinks he has to find reasons for it. He cannot find conscious ones, so he looks

for unconscious ones. Through a misunderstanding of grammar, a misleading picture of the unconscious begins to take shape.

This is a moment in which the psychoanalytic tradition and the philosophical tradition come together in an unfortunate way, for in the philosophical tradition there is a tendency to think that interpretation requires some kind of rationalization. If Dora's slap is to be interpreted as an expression of anger, she has to have a belief that Herr K has offended her and a belief that her anger is a justified response. And if these beliefs are not conscious, they must be unconscious. Thus philosophy itself would seem to dictate how the unconscious must be.

One antidote to this tendency is to pay attention to the phenomenon of break. On my interpretation, Dora's slap does not express her anger so much as it disrupts her life. In particular, it disrupts the development of her capacity to express anger. (Having seen this distinction, if you then want to go ahead and call Dora's slap a slap of anger, that is fine with me.) Whether or not this is right about Dora, we become aware of how easy it is to overrationalize such a moment. The disruption may be *strategic*—it disrupts a world that itself is becoming overwhelming—but it is not *intentional*.¹⁹ That is, it is not caused by Dora's beliefs about Herr K; it is a motivated disruption of the world in which she might form beliefs.

Freud insists on interpreting swerve, and he thereby precipitates a break. He is looking for hidden emotions, and he cannot see that Dora is at the precipice, ready to throw herself "beyond the pleasure principle." In the penultimate session, Freud focuses on an uncanny moment of break-like activity. Dora had had a sharp attack of stomach pains that, at the time, were interpreted as appendicitis. Freud interprets this as an attack Dora herself had induced. And upon learning that the attack came nine months after the catastrophic scene by the lake, Freud told Dora that she had in fact been enacting a fantasy of childbirth.²⁰

Now there might be occasions on which interpretive activity such as Freud's might have worked. After all, mental life itself is a symphony of swerves and

19. See Johnston, "Self-Deception." A second antidote is to insist that, insofar as the unconscious does have a content, it is to be interpreted in terms of swerve-like fantasies, and fantasies are not propositional attitudes or objects of propositional attitudes. There should be no conceptual pressure to rationalize these fantasies. See Lear, "Restlessness, Phantasy and the Concept of Mind."

20. Freud, "Fragment of an Analysis," 103–5.

breaks—and we are often trying to recover from disruptions in mental life by dreaming and fantasizing. So, for example, we can easily imagine that some inchoate sense that it was nine months later caused enough anxiety that Dora induced another break. And after that break she constructed swerve-like fantasies around it. As Freud himself would later describe it in his account of traumatic dreams, "These dreams are endeavoring to master the stimulus retrospectively, by developing the anxiety whose omission was the cause of the traumatic neurosis."²¹ In other words, after a break, the mind tries to get itself back into the swerve-like activity of sexuality, fantasy, dreaming. Had Freud proceeded more gently—or, indeed, if he had left more of the interpretive work to Dora—he might have facilitated Dora's own attempt to provide a swerve-like interpretation to her previous breaks. But his interpretations are too much too soon. Like Herr K's advances, they are genuinely intrusive—and instead of analyzing the previous breaks, they cause another.

It is this moment of break that Freud later sees as transference. Unbeknownst to him at the time, Dora is in the process of transferring her feelings for Herr K onto Freud. The irony is that this transference has been unfolding all along in swerve-like ways. The moment that Freud retrospectively identifies as transference is in fact a moment when transference is *interrupted* by a break.²² Now, of course, the break is a repetition—and it is a repetition of an act that Dora performed in the presence of Herr K. But I do not think we can understand this act if we think only of the swerve-like connections between Herr K and Freud. For although Dora may well have made certain unconscious connections between Herr K and Freud, a more salient fact is that when she is made anxious she has few psychological defenses. Herr K made her anxious; Freud made her anxious. In each case she defended herself. The repetition, in my opinion, occurred not because she unconsciously connected Herr K and Freud, but because each of them triggered one of her only defense mechanisms. Of course there is a repetition of break: what else is she going to do? (The squid squirts its ink, and it squirts again: not because it has made a deep association between the two moments, nor because it is compelled to repeat, but rather because, when threatened, it has only one defense in its repertoire. There is repetition, there may be compulsion, but there is no compulsion to repeat. That is, repetition is not the aim of the compulsion.)

21. Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," 32.

22. This, I think, is at least one of the things Lacan means when he says that transference is resistance in the analyst; see, e.g., Lacan, "intervention on Transference," 102.

Break becomes an obstacle to the analysis precisely because Freud cannot recognize it as such. For if one is aware of the phenomenon of break, one will be at least as interested in psychological *activity* as in searching for hidden psychological *content*. And one will help an analysand maintain a comfortable level of anxiety. Freud did not see the break coming—and there has to be a question of whether he didn't want to see it, for Freud says he wrote up the case history in order to validate his theory of dreams and his theory of the role dreams play in hysteria. But those theories fall within the broad domain of the pleasure principle and, as we have seen, one of Dora's favorite psychological activities lies "beyond" it. Was Freud too much caught up in his own wishes to see that, rather than confirming his theory, Dora revealed an important inadequacy in it?

Perhaps that is an unconscious reason why, when Dora returned to Freud for help fifteen months later, he refused to give it. Freud says: "One glance at her face, however, was enough to tell me that she was not in earnest over her request."²³ One glance? Obviously this is a rhetorical expression, but it makes a telling point. By now we take it as obvious that when one is convinced by "one glance"—whatever that might mean precisely—one ought to spend more time thinking about one's own emotional life. Freud continues: "I do not know what kind of help she wanted from me, but I promised to forgive her for having deprived me of the satisfaction of affording her a far more radical cure for her troubles" (122). In my opinion, this is the one and only moment in the analysis in which Freud behaves unconscionably. Freud has been much criticized in recent years over his treatment of Dora, but I think it is also important to recognize that Freud did Dora much good. He was the first adult to accept her account of family events as true; he was the first to ask her to think about what it meant to her; and he was the first to offer her a vocabulary in which she might think about it. He did it flat-footedly and intrusively, to be sure, and Dora took a break! But it is arguable that over the ensuing fifteen months Dora had recognized that Freud had helped her, that she had gathered up some strength and was ready to try again. The idea that Freud can say to himself and to his reader, "I do not know what kind of help she wanted from me" and yet refuse her request out of hand... well, it at least has to raise the question of whether Freud felt the need to *give himself a break* from this analysis.

And what of those telling words that, more than a century later, still pack an emotional wallop: "I promised to forgive her for having deprived me of the

satisfaction of affording her a far more radical cure for her troubles." Freud is furious with Dora; his pride is wounded, and he is trying to inflict revenge. But isn't the remark also a symptom? It seems to me to betray an inchoate sense on Freud's part that, even if he wanted to, he is not yet in the position to afford her a more radical cure. At some level he grasps that it is not *Dora* who is depriving him of this satisfaction.

IV

This is a moment from a case study that illustrates how erotic life and emotional life can get disrupted. It also shows how those disruptions can recur within a clinical situation. It seems that we need a distinction between those forms of mental activity which express the mind's capacities to make associations, dream, and imagine on one hand and those forms of activity that disrupt those capacities on the other. This is a theoretical difference that can be detected in a clinical setting—and it is important to do so. For overall, it seems to me, psychoanalysis is committed to facilitating the growth of the capacity to dream, to associate, to imagine. Overall, this is a commitment to facilitating erotic life—in some broad and intuitive understanding of that notion. In part, this allows for the development of emotional life. Too often what looks on the surface like the expression of an emotion—say, anger—is at the same time the disruption of the capacity to express that emotion. It is easy to see that Dora's slap is an expression of her anger; it takes psychoanalysis to realize that she is at the same time disrupting the development of her capacity to experience and express anger.

This does not mean that there is only one kind of clinical response to a moment of break, nor does it mean that swerve is "good," break is "bad." Obviously, there cannot be one type of clinical response since the concept of break covers such an extended family of phenomena: we don't treat a psychotic break in the same way as we treat a momentary disruption of conscious thought.

Less obviously: quite apart from the type of break, there is a question of the context in which the break occurs. So, for example, high-functioning neurotics tend to live with repetitive structures of unconscious fantasy that constrict their lives. And every core unconscious fantasy comes with its own implicit metaphysical theory: it sets out a field in which *all* possibilities are supposed to lie. An obsessional patient of mine inhabited a world in which everything that happened was an occasion for guilt. All his possibilities were guilty ones. And, though we don't know Dora well enough to know for sure, we can imagine that she inhabited a world in which she was constantly being disappointed

23. Freud, "Fragment of an Analysis," 120–21.

and betrayed—by loved ones, parents, authority figures. Of course, her real-world experience was like that, but there is a further question of whether she got herself trapped in a disappointing world because of those real life experiences. In such contexts, various forms of break can have a liberating effect. For although the capacity to imagine is disrupted, the disruption itself breaks the rigidity of associations. The disappointing world, the guilty world itself breaks open. This provides an occasion for the imaginative capacity itself to develop in more creative and open ways. In this way, a break can facilitate the opening up of erotic life. A break may thus become a possibility for new possibilities.²⁴

This is the kind of break Dora needed.

24. I give a clinical example in *Happiness, Death, and the Remainder of Life*, 114–18.

THE SWERVE OF THE REAL

SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK

My starting point is strategically dogmatic, if not strategically essentialist: Jacques Lacan revealed the Truth, and the task is to compare Jonathan Lear's text with Lacan's Teaching. The only decision to reach is *why* Lear's text should be burned. (Recall the old allegedly Muslim reasoning: all books except Kur'an should be burned: if they do not say the same thing as Kur'an, they are sinful and should be burned; if they say the same thing, this thing was already said better in Kur'an, so, again, they should be burned.)

Lear starts with the insight that Freud's "pre-Socratic" turn to Eros and Thanatos as the two basic polar forces of the universe is a false escape, a pseudo-explanation generated by his inability to properly conceptualize the dimension "beyond the pleasure principle" he encountered in his clinics. After establishing the pleasure principle as the "swerve" that defines the functioning of our psychic apparatus, Freud is compelled to take note of the phenomena (primarily repetitions of traumatic experiences) that disrupt this functioning: they form an exception that cannot be accounted for in the terms of the pleasure principle. For Lear, it is "at this point that Freud covers over the crucial nugget of his own insight: that the mind can disrupt its own functioning." Instead of trying to conceptualize this break (negativity) as such in its modalities, he wants to ground it in *another*, "deeper," positivity. In philosophical terms, the mistake here is the same as that of Kant according to Hegel: after Kant discovers the inner inconsistency of our experiential reality, he feels compelled to posit the existence of another, inaccessible, true reality of Things-in-themselves, instead of accepting this inconsistency. According to Lear, "Freud is not in the process of discovering a new life force, he is in the process of trying to cover over a trauma to psychoanalytic theory. In this way, invoking Plato and the ancients gives a false sense of legitimacy and security."

One cannot but fully agree with Lear: far from being the name of an unbearable traumatic fact unacceptable for most of us (the fact that we “strive towards death”), the introduction of Thanatos as a cosmic principle (and the retroactive elevation of libido into Eros as the other cosmic principle) is *an attempt to cover the true trauma*. The apparent “radicalization” is effectively a philosophical domestication: the break that disrupts the functioning of the universe—its ontological fault, as it were—is transformed into one of the two positive cosmic principles, thus reestablishing the pacifying harmonious vision of the universe as the battlefield of the two opposing principles. (And the theological implications are here also crucial: instead of thinking to the end the subversive deadlock of monotheism, Freud regresses to pagan wisdom.)

Lear introduces here the notion of “enigmatic terms,” terms that seem to designate a determinate entity while, effectively, they just stand for the failure of our understanding: according to Lear, when Freud mentions Thanatos he “takes himself to be naming a real thing in the world but he is in fact injecting an enigmatic term into our discourse. There is no naming, for nothing has genuinely been isolated for him to name. His hope is to provide an explanation, in fact all we have is the illusion of one.” Examples from the history of science abound—from flogiston (a pseudo-concept that betrayed the scientist’s ignorance of how light effectively travels) to Marx’s “Asiatic mode of production” (which is a kind of negative container: the only true content of this concept is “all the modes of production that do not fit Marx’s standard categorization of the modes of production.”) But is Lear not too dismissive of “enigmatic terms”? Are they really just indexes of our failure and ignorance? Do they not play a key structural role? “Enigmatic term” fits exactly what Lacan calls the Master Signifier (phallus as signifier), the “empty” signifier without signified: this signifier (the paternal metaphor) is the substitute for the mother’s desire, and the encounter with the mother’s desire, with its enigma (*che vuoi?* what does she want?), is the primordial encounter with the opacity of the Other. The fact that phallus is a *signifier*, not the signified, plays a pivotal role here: the phallic signifier does not provide an explanation to the enigma of the mother’s desire; it is not its signified (it does not tell us “what mother really wants”), it just designates the impenetrable space of her desire. And, furthermore, as it was developed by Claude Lévi-Strauss (on whom Lacan relies here), every signifying system necessarily contains such a paradoxical excessive element, the stand-in for the enigma that eludes it.

The homology with Lacan goes even further: in Lacanese, is Lear’s point not that the Freudian pleasure principle is “non-All”: there is nothing outside it,

no external limits, and yet it is not all, it can break down? Why, then, do breaks occur? When does our mind disrupt its own functioning? These breaks simply occur, ungrounded in any deeper principle: as a “blind” destructive *passage à l’acte* when we find ourselves in a deadlock; as a traumatic encounter. Again, what Lear calls the split between the psyche’s normal functioning (under the swerve of the pleasure principle) and its break perfectly fits Lacan’s coupling of *automaton* and *tyche* (taken from Aristotle, also Lear’s great reference); when Lear describes how, “after a break, the mind tries to get itself back into the swerve-like activity of sexuality, fantasy, dreaming,” he clearly echoes Lacan’s notion of how fantasmatic formations and symbolic fictions endeavor to patch up the intrusions of the Real. And, furthermore, when Lear emphasizes that trauma is just a species, one of the modalities, of the break, is this not strictly homologous to Lacan’s thesis that trauma is only one of the modalities of the Real?

Does this mean that Lear’s text should be burned since everything it claims is already said in Lacan? Is the misunderstanding between Lacan and Lear purely and simply terminological? In his critique of Freud’s treatment of Dora, Lear claims that Freud repeats the mistake of Herr K and “assumes [Dora] is already a woman, when her problem is that she is trying to figure out how to become one. He assumes she already understands erotic life; she is trying to figure out what it is.” In short, Freud interprets Dora as a sexually mature woman with clear (although unconscious) desires instead of perceiving her as what she was—a girl still in search of the mystery of feminine desire and projecting the solution of this mystery into Frau K, her “subject supposed to know (how to desire).” But Lear seems to miss the point here, which is that being in search of this mystery is the very definition of a feminine hysterical subject: there is no woman who really knows how to desire—such a woman would be the Lacanian Woman, *the woman*, who doesn’t exist, whose existence is a fantasy.

The more general conclusion to be drawn from this concerns the location of Eros with regard to the break. Lear tends to locate Eros within the swerve of the pleasure principle. But is love, the shattering experience of falling in love, not a break par excellence, the mother of all breaks, the opening up of the possibility of new possibilities? Consequently, is love itself not the supreme example of the “enigmatic term”? It refers by definition to an unknowable X, to the *je ne sais quoi* that makes me fall in love—the moment I can enumerate reasons why I love you, your properties that made me fall in love with you, one can be sure that this is not love. And, *mutatis mutandis*, does the same not hold also

for sexuality? Is, as it was elaborated by Jean Laplanche, the child's shattering encounter of the impenetrable enigma of his or her parents' sexuality not *the* break that disturbs the child's narcissistic closure and compels him or her to confront new possibilities?

The further conclusion to be drawn from this difference is that, perhaps, one cannot oppose swerve and break as simply as Lear tends to do. Here is how Lear defines swerve: "I call this type of mental functioning *swerve* because it exercises a kind of gravitational pull on the entire field of conscious mental functioning, bending it into idiosyncratic shapes. By way of analogy, we detect the existence of black holes by the way light swerves toward them. We detect this type of unconscious process by the ways our conscious reasoning, our bodily expressions, our acts, and our dreams swerve toward them." For Lacan, however, the Real (of a trauma) is also a "swerve," a black hole detectable only through its effects, only in the way it "curves" the mental space, bending the line of mental processes. And is sexuality (this Real of the human animal) also not such a swerve? One should endorse here Freud's fundamental insight, according to which sexuality does *not* follow the pleasure principle: its fundamental mode of appearance is that of a break, of the intrusion of some excessive jouissance that disturbs the "normal" balanced functioning of the psychic apparatus.

Does this mean that Lacan repeats Freud's mistake and again locates the cause of the break into some preexisting positive external entity, like the Thing, *das Ding*, the impenetrable substance of the Real? Since Lear himself alludes to physics (black holes), one should refer here to Einstein's passage from the special to the general theory of relativity. While the special theory already introduces the notion of the curved space, it conceives of this curvature as the effect of matter: it is the presence of matter that curves the space; that is, only an empty space would be noncurved. With the passage to the general theory, the causality is reversed: far from *causing* the curvature of the space, matter is its *effect*. In the same way, the Lacanian Real—the Thing—is not so much the inert presence that "curves" the symbolic space (introducing breaks in it) but, rather, the effect of these breaks. In contrast to Lear, for whom swerve is the swerve of the pleasure principle, acting as the force of stability and occasionally disrupted by the breaks, Lacan views swerve as the destabilizing force whose gravitational pull disrupts the psychic automaton.

Does this mean, then, that Lear's text should be burned because it does *not* say the same thing as Lacan? One should get rid of the structural illusion that

all we attributed to Lacan was already there prior to our reading of Lear: the paradox is that it was Lear himself, his perspicuous formulations, that allowed us to trace the difference between him and Lacan, and thus to clearly formulate Lacan's position. The best way to put my admiration for Lear is to say that, even when I do not agree fully with him, I need his text to articulate this very disagreement—so, perhaps, his text should not yet be burned after all.

ON THE WISH TO BURN MY WORK

 JONATHAN LEAR

One might suppose that any analyst worth his salt would welcome such a whole-hearted, as it were, expression of ambivalence. Certainly this is less boring than the overblown praise that academic friends (or the stinging critiques that academic enemies) standardly bestow on one another. Still, as I read through Slavoj Žižek's comments, I had an uncomfortable feeling, as on hearing the unfamiliar sounds of a new lover: isn't he *faking* it? Surely he doesn't really want my works consigned to the flames—the wish is uttered as a theatrical gesture—but, then, what is this drama about? Obviously, a real answer to this question would have many layers, but I want to respond by making a point about the reception of French psychoanalytic and philosophical thought in the United States.

Let's first get some preliminaries out of the way. I take Lacan to be one of the most fertile and deep psychoanalytic minds ever; and I take Žižek to be—let's stick with his language of light—a brilliant thinker. And I have, with gratitude, learned much from them both. Still, even the most enthusiastic reader of Lacan or Žižek would admit that austerity is not a characteristic of their work. Žižek expresses confusion about how my work can be distinguished from Lacan's. It is around the concept of austerity that one can make this difference clear.

My hitherto unspoken hero is Hume. Hume's standard technique would be to notice that people would seem to think they have a certain idea—say, an idea of cause—but that there wouldn't seem to be any impression from which that idea could have arisen. He would then ask how we could have acquired this supposed idea—and what would emerge would be a deflationary account. We would come to see that we didn't really have the idea that we thought we had.

Now for years I read and reread *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, utterly baffled by how Freud could get to the death drive. Yet I also didn't want simply to

dismiss Freud's argument impatiently. I finally tried an approach that was broadly Humean in spirit: Freud seems to have an idea of "the death drive," and yet there doesn't seem to be any impression from which that idea could have arisen. As Freud himself says, the death drive works in silence. So, then, how could this supposed idea have arisen?

My original training is in logic and analytical philosophy, so I decided to look at the fine-grained structure of Freud's argument to see whether there might be a step where the argument fails. It seemed to me that I found it in an unnoticed ambiguity in the expressions "repetition compulsion" and "compulsion to repeat." On one hand, there obviously are motivated compulsive repetitions: this is the stuff of psychoanalysis. On the other hand, Freud himself assumed that repetition was *the aim or goal* of the compulsion. This is an additional assumption: that the compulsion to repeat is a compulsion to repeat. In my book *Happiness, Death and the Remainder of Life*, I argue that this assumption is not justified. That is, it is not valid to infer that compulsive repetitions are actually aiming at repetition. This is a small point, but it makes a significant difference. Because if repetition is not the aim of the compulsion, one cannot go on to argue, as Freud does, that the drives are inherently conservative; and one cannot go on from there to Freud's conclusion that the aim of life is death. Freud's argument for the death drive is invalid.

Now once one sees that there really isn't anything that corresponds to our supposed idea of "the death drive," there arises the question of what empirical content our idea might actually have. This deflationary question cannot arise until one sees that the argument for the death drive fails. I argued that the empirical content of Freud's insight is that there are two different types of unconscious mental functioning, which I called *swerve* and *break*. I don't want to overdo the importance of this result. It is yeoman's work; somebody had to do it. But as far as I know, this result is not to be found in Lacan or anyone else. Of course, anyone who insists on the importance of the drives and of the economic factor, as Freud and Lacan both do, will in some sense be in the same neighborhood of concern, just as Locke and Berkeley's discussions of causation were in a similar neighborhood to Hume's—but without the Humean deflationary argument, you can't get the Humean result.¹

1. The point of the current essay was to go back to one of Freud's earlier case studies—written before *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*—and rethink it in the light of this distinction. It has long puzzled me why Freud did not revisit his case studies in the light of his later theoretical advances.

By contrast, consider this passage from Lacan (one of many that could be used):

Whatever the significance of the metapsychological imagining of Freud's that is the death drive, *whether or not he was justified in forging it*, the question it raises is articulated in the following form by virtue of the mere fact that it has been raised: How can man, that is to say a living being, have access to knowledge of the death drive, to his own relationship to death?

The answer is, by virtue of the signifier in its most radical form. It is in the signifier and insofar as the subject articulates a signifying chain that he comes up against the fact that he may disappear from the chain of what he is.²

Lacan here explicitly wants to ignore whether or not Freud was justified in postulating the death drive. He also wants to ignore the significance of his metapsychological imagining—and yet by the end of that very sentence, he is talking about our access to knowledge of the death drive and equating it with our relationship to death. By the next sentence he is equating it with an awareness of our relationship to a linguistic formation, the signifying chain. Lacan is a suggestive thinker, a pregnant thinker; yet it is also true that the quality of argument here is poor. Should this matter?

The answer must be yes. Žižek asks rhetorically whether I am “too dismissive of enigmatic terms.” My complaint is not with the use of enigmatic terms *per se*, but with a certain defensive and self-misleading use to which they can be put. There are certain terms—say, *happiness* or *freedom*—that are by their nature enigmatic but whose presence has provoked some of the deepest thinking in the philosophical tradition. But that is because the enigmatic nature of these terms is recognized as such—and it is also recognized that it matters whether or not there is something that answers to the call of “freedom.” By contrast, the invocation of “the death drive” has had the function of foreclosing questions in the name of answering them. I cannot tell you how many case-study presentations I have heard in which the speaker will say that such-and-such an aggressive act was “a manifestation of the death drive”—without the speaker realizing that with this extra phrase she has added nothing. It is *as-if*

2. Lacan, *Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 295; my emphasis. I make the slight emendation of everywhere translating “*pulsion de mort*” and “*Todestrieb*” as “death drive” rather than “death instinct.”

explanation: it is as if an explanation has been given when in fact only an enigmatic phrase has been invoked.

Now the reason it is worth spelling this out is that something funny has happened in the reception of French philosophical and psychoanalytic thought. If one looks to other disciplines, say, classics or history, one can see an astonishing influence of French thinking. But when it comes to philosophy, there is a kind of institutional splitting. Philosophy departments in America have been dominated by the analytic tradition. And while this tradition has made remarkable contributions to the philosophies of mind, language, action, logic—and while it has raised standards of argument to an impressive level—it has nevertheless proceeded largely in ignorance of the so-called Continental tradition. By and large, analytic philosophers are ignorant of the works of Hegel, Kierkegaard, Heidegger—not to mention all the French thinkers, like Lacan, who have been influenced by them. Similarly, their knowledge of Freud tends to be cursory, to the point of caricature, so there is simply no way they could responsibly interact with a thinker like Lacan. This has created a vacuum—one that has been filled largely by scholars from literature departments. A marvelous body of work has emerged, but it is nevertheless true that there has been less concern with whether an argument actually works than there would be if this had been taken up by analytic philosophers. And when it comes to philosophy, this does matter.

We need to train a generation of scholars who will overcome this split, who will be able to deploy the rigor of argument of analytic philosophy on the texts and problems of Heidegger, Freud, Lacan. One reason I need to respond to Žižek's comments is that he is such a charismatic writer that a graduate student who reads him might think it fashionable to argue, “Either it is in Lacan or it isn't: either way we can burn it.” Such an argument spares the writer from doing the work to figure out what is there, what isn't, and why it might matter.³ The other reason is that even if Žižek's call to burn is a theatrical gesture, the fact is that it is only recently (and, even now, only in a relatively

3. Here I part company with Hume as well. He famously closes the *Inquiry concerning Human Understanding* with this injunction: “If we take in our hand any volume—of divinity or school metaphysics, for instance—let us ask *Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number?* No. *Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence?* No. Commit it then to the flames, for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion” (173). Enough with the flames already! Note that he, too, invokes the image as part of a justification for the claim that we don't actually need to look any further to see what is there.

small part of the world) that one can write what one thinks without fear that one's work—or, indeed, oneself—will be burned. This is a precious achievement, and given human nature it will remain to some extent tenuous. Thus I must take explicit exception to the call to burn—even if it is made somewhat in jest. You know what Freud said about jokes.