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The Idea of Repetition in Marx, Nietzsche and Freud, and
Problems of Modernity

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree Master of Arts

in

Literatures in English

by

Pokeung Wu

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Chair

University of California, San Diego

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

The Idea of Repetition in Marx, Nietzsche and Freud, and
Problems of Modernity

by

Pokeung Wu

Master of Arts in Literatures in English

University of California, San Diego, 2010

Professor William O'Brien, Chair

The purpose of this study is to examine what Marx, Nietzsche and Freud make of the idea of repetition, and how their concepts of repetition relate to what they perceive as problems of modernity, in a selection of their works.

This thesis first looks at how teleology, a concept of time characteristic of the Enlightenment, faced competition from other temporal ideas like repetition during the nineteenth century, and the interrelationship between repetition, modernity's relentless

aspiration towards newness, and memory as a means of mediating between past and present.

Chapter 1 explains three different meanings of repetition for Marx: the recurrent use of the past in history for political purposes, the repeated failures of a proletarian revolution in France from 1830 onwards, which also poses the problem of modernity for Marx, and his rhetorical textual repetition as a means of inspiring proletarian revolutions.

For Nietzsche, repetition plays a formative role in language and metaphysical entities. Chapter 2 explains how the bankruptcy of metaphysics results in nihilism, and how the eternal return upsets teleology, typically realized in the Christian assumption about sins and sufferings.

Chapter 3 discusses how Freud assaults teleology by reversing the chronological order of a trauma and its ensuing neurotic symptoms, and how the compulsion to repeat, which seeks death, casts serious doubts on the supposed progress of humans the Enlightenment promises.

Finally, the conclusion highlights the anti-foundationalism in the three thinkers' concepts of repetition in face of problems of modernity in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Introduction

This essay aims to investigate the understandings of the idea of repetition by Marx, Nietzsche and Freud and their relation to what they perceive as problems of modernity, in a selection of their works.

Modernity has always been marked by an intense sense of temporality featuring the idea of newness. The discovery of the “new world” during the course of the eighteenth century and the perception of the Renaissance and the Reformation as inaugurating modernity, for example, also conduced to the sense of a new beginning in the concept of modernity. Hegel attaches to words like “new” and “modern” the meaning of a distinctly new age, as opposed to a merely chronological meaning. In his preface to *The Phenomenology of Mind*, Hegel says, “It is surely not difficult to see that our time is a birth and transition to a new period. The Spirit has broken with what was hitherto the world of its existence and imagination and is about to submerge all this in the past; it is at work giving itself a new form [. . .]. [T]he break of day, like lightning, all at once reveals the edifice of the new world.”¹ Hegel’s use of words like “birth”, “new”, “break of day” and elsewhere “glorious sunrise” all points to the idea that modernity is a complete break with the past. In Habermas’s words, “[b]ecause the new, the modern world is distinguished from the old by the fact that it opens itself to the future, the epochal new beginning is rendered constant with each moment that gives birth to the new” (Habermas 6).

¹ “The Preface to *The Phenomenology*”, in Walter Kaufmann, ed., *Hegel: Texts and Commentary* (New York, 1916) 20, quoted in Habermas 6.

Hegel's sense of modernity as a brand new beginning is, according to Ronald Schleifer, in turn premised upon Isaac Newton's formulation of time as an "absolute, true, and mathematical time, [that] of itself, and from its own nature flows equably without relation to anything external."² The Newtonian model of time can be summarized thus:

- (1) The sequence of time is absolute. This leads to the idea that people are separated absolutely from the past.
- (2) Time is always and everywhere the same. This homogenization of time leads to the formation of the idea of atemporal essences, which means scientific laws.
- (3) Time has effects neither on what happens in it nor on the individual reasoning subject, who is the source of knowledge and hence fully conscious.
- (4) The idea of atemporal essences, which are to do with scientific laws, and the idea of a fully conscious atemporal reasoning subject, means the binary opposition between unconscious matter and conscious spirit.

The implication of this understanding of time is twofold. For Schleifer, it encapsulates the Enlightenment criteria for scientific "truth": truth is accurate, general, atemporal and simple. This is actually another way to express binary thinking, the hierarchization of a privileged term over an unprivileged one. As I will show later, this is central to Nietzsche's critique of western metaphysics. Secondly, the absolute sequence of time mentioned above is in fact teleology, which attributes a forward-moving and goal-oriented temporality to existence: the meaning of human life lying in

² *The Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy* (New York: Citadel Press, 1984) 17, quoted in Schleifer 37.

its movement towards a telos. According to Stuart Hall, et al., the most distinctive characteristic of modernity is precisely its assumption of teleology: “[. . .] what is quintessentially ‘modern’ is not so much any one period or any particular form of social organization so much as the fact that a society becomes seized with and pervaded by this idea of ceaseless development, progress, and dynamic change; by the restless forward movement of time and history [. . .]” (17).

During the course of the nineteenth century, however, the proliferation of commodities, population, different points of view rendered problematic the simple, reductive Enlightenment criteria for truth in explaining realities. Behind these lies what Ronald Schleifer calls the “logic of abundance” (Schleifer 23). It does not mean that atemporal laws became obsolete overnight; it is rather that the co-existence of varied understandings of the same events and phenomena became increasingly the order of the day, and nothing remained true once and for all. Hence, there arose “the pursuit of multiple ‘alternating’ descriptions and ‘retrospective’ descriptions rather than categorizing phenomena in terms of simple reductive principles” (Schleifer 48).³

Take, for example, the Enlightenment conception of time, which was increasingly problematized as the nineteenth century wore on. Scientific, social and political developments during the nineteenth century spawned in people a distinctively modernist consciousness of time. While the Old Testament provided a reassuring point of reference, regarding the time of the beginning of the human race, Charles Lyell, Lord

³ It is not difficult to see that there are clear parallels in the arenas of literature and art at the time, for instance, the multi-layered narrative structures of Conrad’s novels, the multiple perspectives on events made possible by a plethora of narrators in Falkner’s novels, and the juxtaposition of human faces as seen from different angles in Picasso’s paintings.

Kelvin, Charles Darwin, Thomas Chamberlain by turns propounded theories which either hugely stretched or vastly cramped the age of the earth, resulting in a disorientating sense of time.⁴ The steam engine was arguably the most powerful influence on the human consciousness of time: the mail-coach's fifteen miles an hour gave way, by the mid-nineteenth century, to the express train's up to fifty miles. The electric telegraph made the transmission of messages across hundreds of miles a matter of seconds.⁵ The developments of the city and industries brought about a new social order, which was absent from the disappearing organic communities; it was a world based on the free movement of individuals motivated by self-interest. What is more, one important factor in the industrial and commercial world was the punctuality of employees arriving at the workplace. The lives of a large number of people, especially the proletariat, were becoming increasingly dictated by public time. Having said that, it is not true, it must be emphasized, that the Enlightenment concept of time was eventually jettisoned. Rather, it ceased to be the predominant way of thinking about time and was now joined by an abundance of newly formulated ideas of temporality.

Ideas of temporality necessarily entail the issue of memory. For one thing, memory allows one to negotiate one's relationship with the past, present and future, which is fundamental to one's stable sense of identity and hence to life itself. As Jeffrey Prager says,

Memory establishes a framework of understanding by which the rememberer constitutes himself or herself as occupying a specific place at a particular time, always in relation to others and to a past as well as

⁴ See Kern 37-38 and Altick 98-100.

⁵ See Altick 96-97.

a future. [. . .] The construction of self depends upon our capacity to provide a coherent, consistent, cohesive, continuity-producing account that, partly by reference to the past, locates us meaningfully in the present: situated in relation to ourselves and to others, and poised to reckon with the future. (91)

For another thing, there is modernity's distinct consciousness of trying to ground itself out of itself. As Hegel says, "The Spirit [. . .] is at work giving itself a new form" (Habermas 6). This stems from modernity thinking of itself as the dawn of a new age ("glorious sunrise"). Also, Paul de Man remarks, "Modernity exists in the form of a desire to wipe out whatever came earlier, in the hope of reaching at last a point that could be called a true present, a point of origin that marks a new departure" (148). The obsession with being new points to modernity's profound suspicion of the excessive burden of remembrance and hence its complicated relationship with the past. Memory obviously is crucial to modernity's negotiation with the past and present. Andreas Huyssen comments on the problematic relationship between past and present and the role of memory in it: "The temporal status of any act of memory is always the present and not, as some naive epistemology might have it, the past itself, even though all memory in some ineradicable sense is dependent on some past event or experience. It is this tenuous fissure between past and present that constitutes memory [. . .]" (Huyssen 3).

The multiple understandings of time in nineteenth-century modernity include two forms of anxiety over memory in relation to the present-past relationship: the sense of alienation of the present from the past (i.e. the loss of memory) and the sense of the present under too much influence of the past (i.e. too much memory). What gave rise to

the anxiety over the loss of memory? It was due to the social and cultural changes that came with the revolutions in the late eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries. Before these revolutions, there was a strong sense that one had no problems connecting past and present. Consider what Goethe once said, “Whatever we encounter that is great, beautiful, significant need not be remembered from the outside; need not be hunted up and laid hold of [. . .]. Rather [. . .] it must be woven into the fabric of our inmost self, must become one with it. [. . .]. There is no past that one is allowed to long for.”⁶ Goethe sees no trouble remembering the past and his memory is an organically integrated part of his self. But as the century wore on, the anxiety over the past-present relationship gathered momentum: the pre-Revolutionary era was becoming increasingly unrecognizable for those living in the post-Revolutionary nineteenth century; in other words, they felt that their past had slipped out of their memory. With the ability to perceive a continuous flow between past and present being integral to one’s sense of stable identity, this “loss” of memory resulted in anxiety over one’s identity and connection with the originally familiar past and memory. In *Memoires d’outretombe* (1841), François-René de Chateaubriand, one of the first French Romantic writers, concludes by talking about his sense of alienation from the past: “If I compare the two terrestrial globes, the one I knew at the beginning of my life and the one I now behold at the end of it, I no longer recognize the one in the other.”⁷

The other form of the nineteenth-century concern with memory – anxiety over

⁶ *Goethes Gespräche*, 4 November 1823, quoted in Terdiman 21.

⁷ Quoted in Terdiman 4.

an excess of memory – came from what critics have identified as the epochal change in the mode of social control in the period. After the revolutions, with the abolition of divine right, aristocratic privileges and unjust requirements for political participation, and the total prohibition of women from civil and political constraints, people nominally enjoyed a great deal more freedoms. Nevertheless, the revival of conservative regimes at the expense of the revolutions in France and nationalist movements elsewhere bore ample testimony to the idea that the present was enslaved and colonized by the past. Studies in geology and evolution not only radically changed people's consciousness of time but also provided convincing proof of the determining influence of the past on the present. Darwin's evolution theory, in particular, that humans were nothing more than descendents of the kinds of animals which had happened to be stronger than others to survive, certainly intensified the perception of the present being totally saturated by the past.

In this light, a host of nineteenth century phenomena such as the fascination with keepsakes and souvenirs, social theory speculating on the relationship between past and present and the establishment of history as a formal mode of academic inquiry were all, in one way or another, responses to this precarious mentality over the temporal problematic. It was because the past had proved to be such a straitjacket on the present that Modernism was so preoccupied with achieving a total break with it. Keepsakes and souvenirs were needed because of the fear of the loss of memory. History was studied precisely because history itself had become a problem, whether the fear was the loss of it, or being overwhelmed by it.

The issue of memory, as we will see, features heavily in my discussion of the idea of repetition in Marx, Nietzsche and Freud. This should come as no surprise since the repetition of the past and the refusal to repeat the past are alternative ways to denote respectively an excess of memory and the loss of memory. Teleology, which had always been a key feature of the Enlightenment model of time, was now joined by an abundance of alternative understandings of time including repetition. More importantly, fundamental to life, repetition itself gathered multifarious meanings as the nineteenth-century underwent radical cultural change. Repetition as a temporal concept is obviously the diametrical opposite of teleology. As far as human life is concerned, repetition, a basic feature of the biological working of organisms, can also be seen as going against teleology, in that the attainment of the telos is synonymous with the termination of repetition, that is, death. As far as memory is concerned, repetition is just another way to denote the sense of the present being overshadowed by the past, that is, the problem of there being too much memory.

Marx, Nietzsche and Freud ascribe different meanings to and make different use of the notion of repetition. Each of them observes phenomena of repetition, and/or constructs ideas of repetition in their respective main concerns – politics for Marx; philosophy, or more generally, culture for Nietzsche; and psychoanalysis for Freud. As I argue, their responses to these phenomena of repetition constitute their critiques of what they see as problems of modernity.

Marx has three different conceptions of repetition. The first is the recurrent use of the past he observes in history to promote the cause of an emergent revolutionary

class. This use of the past, however, produces two diametrically different results – one revolutionary and epoch-making, the other reactionary. The second meaning of repetition refers to what he sees as the repeated failures of a proletarian revolution in France from 1830 onwards as a consequence of the bourgeoisie's reactionary appropriation of the past. And it is exactly these failures which constitute the problem of modernity for Marx. The idea of repetition takes on a third meaning when it comes to Marx's attempt to resolve the problem of modernity. Here repetition is a literary means for Marx to inspire the proletariat to further revolutions.

There are two different meanings of repetition for Nietzsche. He sees repetition at work at a very fundamental level – in the formation of language – arguing that from the reception of an external physical stimulus to the formation of a linguistic signifier in the human brain, processes of metaphorization are every step in operation, that is, an arbitrary sign from one sphere repeating an arbitrary sign from another sphere. When metaphysical ideals, into which linguistic concepts are projected also through a process of repetition, are finally exposed as nothing but human constructions with no truth, nihilism results – a situation in which there is a readiness to accept any value or to reject all values because previously treasured values have been found groundless. Interestingly, while for Nietzsche, repetition plays an essential role in the formation of metaphysical entities, the bankruptcy of which finally leads to nihilism, the notion too serves as a powerful strategy for him to tackle the oppressive teleology integral to the Christian worldview. The eternal return of the same – the second meaning of repetition for Nietzsche – which rules out any possibility of single identity and confounds the

chronology of cause and effect, allows one to adopt multiple identities to enhance life as will to power and invalidates the Christian assumption that one's present ineluctable sufferings are a corollary of one's sins in the past.

A large part of Freud's career is devoted to his treatment of and his writing on various types of neuroses. On the surface, each outbreak of neurotic symptoms can be read as a repetition of the original trauma, but of course Freud is subtle enough not to subscribe only to this view of the casual and temporal relationship between the original trauma and its later physical manifestations in the form of bodily disorders, as he does in *The Case of Dora*. Rather, in *The History of an Infantile Neurosis* (the case of the "Wolfman"), he regards a psychologically powerful experience that bears similarity to the original trauma and hence triggers bodily disorders as an "antecedent" to the trauma. This is because this later event in real time, without which the original trauma would remain in limbo, unleashes the negative energy of the latent trauma as if it were chronologically and causally prior to this trauma. His theorizing on this relationship and his intricate and intriguing speculations on the nature of the compulsion to repeat in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, as I argue, go so far as to challenge the Enlightenment ideal of human societies' ceaseless progress.

Chapter 1 Marx

1.1 Two Types of Repetition of the Past for Political Purposes

There are two different senses of repetition in Marx's *Class Struggle in France* (1850) and *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852). One refers to what Marx sees as the recurrent use of the past in history to advance the political cause of an emergent revolutionary class. The other concerns the repeated failures of a proletarian revolution in France from 1830 onwards. Considering the importance Marx attaches to defining the problems of modernity as he does in the founding document of Marxism – *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) – I argue that Marx has two objectives in writing *Class Struggle in France* and *Eighteenth Brumaire*: to diagnose the problem of modernity in the political events in France from July 1830 to December 1851, and to resolve this problem. As will be closely examined below, the problem is exactly the repeated failures of a proletarian revolution.

Eighteenth Brumaire is Marx's scathing attack on the reactionary bourgeoisie in the June 1848 revolution in France and Louis Bonaparte, whose coup d'état ended the Second Republic. To understand Marx's anger and his idea of repetition, a brief account of the succession of regimes in France in the first half of the nineteenth century is crucial.⁸ From 1789 – the year of the French Revolution – to the middle of the nineteenth century, France witnessed a series of revolutions. In 1815 the French monarch returned in the person of Louis XVIII. The July Revolution of 1830 disposed

⁸ My account of the French history of the period throughout this paper is based on Marx's *The Class Struggles in France* and *Eighteenth Brumaire*, Sperber's *The European Revolutions, 1848-1851* and *Revolutionary Europe 1780-1850*, and "History of France," *Encyclopædia Britannica*,

of Charles X. And Louis Philippe, the last monarch of France, was put into power and tried to be a bourgeois king. In February 1848 the French rose up against Louis Philippe. With the middle class utilizing the working class, it was a solidly bourgeois revolution. However, a few months later, in June 1848, the working class was bloodily suppressed by the bourgeoisie, who had been the revolutionary class in February but now were the reactionary class in an attempt to defend their middle-class privileges. The bourgeoisie also used as a tool the figure of Louis Bonaparte (the nephew of Napoleon I), who eventually took over and set up a dictatorship on 2 December, 1851. While Napoleon I utterly captured the imagination of Europe, causing both allegiances and hostility, and evoking widespread nationalist passions wherever he went, his nephew Louis Bonaparte, who had once served as a policeman in Britain and was basically an adventurer, was untalented and finally brought to his end by the Franco-Prussian War.

In this period of history in France – from 1789 to the mid-nineteenth century – Marx distinguishes between two kinds of repetition. The first kind is that which is used for genuine, path-breaking revolutionary purposes. The second kind is that which is used for reactionary purposes and maintaining the status quo of middle-class privileges. Now let us deal with the first kind.

1.1.1 Revolutionary Repetition

In Part One of *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx deals with the history of the rise of the bourgeoisie and its relation to the proletariat. For Marx, the bourgeoisie and

capitalism are not simply something bad; rather, he acknowledges the pivotal role the bourgeoisie has played in history: “The bourgeoisie, historically, has played a most revolutionary part” (CM 5) and “[. . .] during its rule of scarce one hundred years, has created more massive and more colossal productive forces than have all preceding generations together” (CM 7). In the same vein, Marx, in *Eighteenth Brumaire*, pays tribute to the revolutionaries of the 1789 French Revolution for accomplishing “the task of their epoch, which was the emancipation and establishment of modern bourgeois society, in Roman costume and with Roman slogans” and smashing “the feudal basis to pieces” (EB 147).⁹ Napoleon was no less important in this respect because he created the conditions that made possible the development of capitalism in France and beyond. Marx sets a criterion for judging whether a revolution is a genuine one; namely, whether it is able to break with the past. He compares a revolution to a person learning a new language: a person can be said to have assimilated the new language successfully only if he can express himself in it without being constrained or affected by his mother tongue: “[. . .] he can only be said to have appropriated the spirit of the new language and to be able to express himself in it freely when he can manipulate it without reference to the old, and when he forgets his original language while using the new one” (EB 147). In this light, the 1789 revolutionaries and Napoleon, for Marx, were genuine revolutionaries because of their huge contributions to the making of a new epoch – the bourgeois social order - and because their repetition of the Roman rhetoric simply served their cause by invoking the heroic past and thus inspiring people to revolution,

⁹ All citations of *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, abbreviated as *EB*, are from *Surveys from Exile: Political Writing Vol.2*, edited and introduced by David Fernbach.

without the new social order being bogged down by things past: “In these revolutions, then, the resurrection of the dead served to exalt the new struggles [. . .] to exaggerate the given task in the imagination [. . .] and to recover the spirit of the revolution [. . .]” (EB 148). When they had achieved their aims, therefore, the old rhetoric was simply left behind and the break with the past is complete: “Once the new social formation had been established, the antediluvian colossi disappeared along with the resurrected limitations of Rome [. . .]. Bourgeois society was no longer aware that the ghosts of Rome had watched over its cradle, since it was wholly absorbed in the production of wealth and the peaceful struggle of economic competition” (EB 147-8).

Another example of repetition in the revolutionary sense is Marx’s treatment of the revolution in seventeenth-century England: “When the actual goal had been reached, when the bourgeois transformation of English society had been accomplished, Locke drove out Habakkuk” (EB 148). Habakkuk, a prophet in the Old Testament, could be useful in lending a mythical aura to the English bourgeois revolutionaries. But when they had succeeded in overthrowing the old regime, Habakkuk was replaced by the real spokesman for the bourgeoisie – the English philosopher John Locke - whose *Treatises of Government* (1690) was a founding document of early modern bourgeois England.

1.1.2 Reactionary Repetition: the Problem of Modernity

The second kind of repetition of the past for political purposes, however, is reactionary and it is this kind of use of the past that eventually leads to what Marx perceives as the problem of modernity at that specific historical moment. Marx applies this kind of repetition to the historical phenomena he critiques at two different levels. At

one level, Marx contrasts the revolution of 1789 with the events in France from 1830 to 1852 as a whole, arguing that the latter are a degraded repetition of the former. Marx sees the events in France from 1830 onwards as a repetition of 1789, yet as a degraded form of repetition. Looking at the trajectory of the 1789 French Revolution, Marx finds that each of the parties in power was succeeded by a more progressive one: the Constitutionals, the Girondins, the Jacobins: “As soon as it had brought the revolution to the point where it was unable to follow it any further, let alone advance ahead of it, it was pushed aside by the bolder ally standing behind it and sent to the guillotine” (*EB* 169). For Marx, the 1789 revolution was genuinely revolutionary since it “moved in an ascending path” (*EB* 169). By contrast, although it was also the case that in the events in 1848 and after, one party was replaced by another, this time “the revolution moved in a descending path” (*EB* 170): the proletariat, the bourgeois republicans, the party of Order and finally Louis Bonaparte.

At the other level, Marx focuses only on the events from the July 1830 revolution onwards, which he also sees as a series of repetitions. In the following I want to take a closer look at the major political events from July 1830 to June 1848 to show that the period in question was one of continual class struggles without, in terms of Hegelian dialectic, synthesis; that is, repetition of antagonistic forces and of the proletariat’s defeat without resolution. But before that, we need to understand the connection between Hegelian dialectic, Marx’s theory of historical change (from feudalism, to capitalism and finally to socialism), and his notion of repetition.

Hegel regards “Mind” – the human spirit – as developing in history and realizing itself in the forms of cultures, nations and social institutions, just as consciousness develops in the individual. The logic of this process is Hegel’s dialectic. In dialectical logic, we start with a given position (thesis). Then this initial position is found to contain its own contradictions (antithesis). Eventually a third position combines the positive sides of the two previous positions (synthesis). Marx takes up this notion of historical contradictions and places it in a materialist perspective, substituting logical contradiction with economic conflict. Economic conflict stems from contradictions inherent in the economic base, which constitutes the driving force of history: “At a certain stage of their development, the material productive forces of society come in conflict with the existing relations of production, or – what is but a legal expression for the same thing – with the property relations within which they have been at work hitherto. From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an epoch of social revolution” (CCPE 4-5).¹⁰ In *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx applies this theory to his analysis of the actual historical transition from feudalism to capitalism. Again, movements of history are results of the ever-developing forces of production coming into conflict with relations of production:

We see then: the means of production and of exchange, on whose foundation the bourgeoisie built itself up, were generated in feudal society. At a certain stage in the development of these means of production and of exchange, the conditions under which feudal society produced and exchanged, the feudal organization of agriculture and manufacturing industry, in one word, the feudal relations of property became no longer compatible with the already developed productive

¹⁰ All citations of *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, abbreviated as CCPE, are from *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd ed., edited by Robert Tucker.

forces: they hindered production rather than advancing it; they became so many fetters. They had to be burst asunder; they were burst asunder.

Into their place stepped free competition, accompanied by a social and political constitution adapted to it, and by the economical and political sway of the bourgeois class. (*CM* 8)¹¹

But capitalism normally and necessarily runs into recurring crises, which are inherent in its structure and involve such factors as over-production. Crises temporarily resolved only put capitalism in an even more precarious position.¹² Of even more paramount importance is capitalism's bringing into existence the proletariat, on whose labour force capitalists rely, for "the condition for capital is wage labour" (*CM* 15). Eventually, capitalist society, Marx predicts, is to give way to classless society, with the proletariat triumphant: "The development of Modern Industry, therefore, cuts from under its feet the very foundation on which the bourgeoisie produces and appropriates products. What the bourgeoisie, therefore, produces, above all, is its own grave-diggers. Its fall and the victory of the proletariat are equally inevitable" (*CM* 15-6).

I read Marx's analysis of the historical transition from feudalism, to capitalism and finally to socialism as a concrete working out of the Hegelian dialectic. Since "every form of society has been based [. . .] on the antagonism of oppressing and

¹¹ Although Marx seems to suggest a one-way relationship between the base and the superstructure, with the former determining the latter, Engels emphasizes in his letter to Bloch of September 1890 that there has got to be interaction between the base and the superstructure, and that the base is only the ultimate determinant. Raymond Williams argues convincingly that the idea that the base and the superstructure are two discrete spheres without reciprocity runs counter to Marx's argument against the separation of thought from activity in division of labor. See Raymond Williams 78-79.

¹² "And how does the bourgeoisie get over these crises? On the one hand by enforced destruction of a mass of productive forces; on the other, by the conquest of new markets, and by the more thorough exploitation of the old ones. That is to say by paving the way for more extensive and more destructive crises, and by diminishing the means whereby crises are prevented" (*CM* 9).

oppressed classes” (CM 15), both feudalism (thesis) and capitalism (antithesis) are internally contradictory, thus giving rise to class struggles and their eventual destruction. The synthesis, in Marx’s vision, then, is the victory of the proletariat and socialism. But the problem of modernity as Marx diagnoses in *Class Struggle in France* and *Eighteenth Brumaire*, is precisely the disappearance of this synthesis. Marx argues that “[t]he history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles” (CM 3). Presumably, according to Marx, with capitalism overthrown by the proletariat, capitalist society is to be succeeded by classless society. But the history of the period Marx discusses in *Eighteenth Brumaire* flatly contradicts this; it seems to suggest only the repetition of class struggles and the defeats of the working class, the continued dominance of the bourgeoisie and France’s eventual fall back into dictatorship.¹³

Now let us examine more closely the major political events from July 1830 to June 1848 to see how they are a sequence of repetitions. The July monarchy of Louis Philippe was bourgeois through and through, with the real power shifted from the landed property of the aristocracy to the capital of the financial bourgeoisie (i.e. “financial aristocracy” in Marx’s terminology). This is best captured in the then Prime Minister Francois Guizot’s reply to those complaining about being excluded by the property qualification for voting and seeking office: “Enrichissezvous!” (“Get rich!”). In Marx’s words, the July monarchy “was nothing more than a joint-stock company for

¹³ Terry Eagleton comments in a discussion of *Eighteenth Brumaire*, “History may be ‘difference’ for the intellectuals, but it is most certainly identity and repetition for the oppressed” (Eagleton 274).

the exploitation of France's national wealth" (CSF 38).¹⁴ The general economic situation in France in the 1840's conduced to the conflict between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. While it was true that the capitalist mode of production in the sense of large-scale factories did not yet exist in France¹⁵, there was a steady growth of capitalist forms of production accompanied by the gradual decline in the living standards of the urban lower classes and in craftsmen's control over their own labor.¹⁶ In the July Revolution, according to Marx, the main force was workers, whose republican aspirations were brushed aside by the financial bourgeoisie.¹⁷ This class struggle was repeated in 1848. The protesting students and workers thought that they had won a republic for themselves but the Provisional Government after February 1848 "could be nothing other than a compromise between various classes who together overthrew the July monarchy, but whose interests were mutually hostile" (CSF 41). Moreover, as far as the bourgeois republicans were concerned, the February revolution was directed against the financial bourgeoisie to extend political privileges to the middle bourgeoisie only: "[. . .] if a limited section of the bourgeoisie previously ruled in the name of the king, the whole of the bourgeoisie would now rule in the name of the people" (EB 154). Therefore, it comes as no surprise that for the bourgeois republicans, "the republic was only a new evening dress for the old bourgeois society" (CSF 48) and the Provisional

¹⁴ All citations of *The Class Struggles in France: 1848-1850*, abbreviated as *CSF*, are from *Surveys from Exile: Political Writing* Vol. 2, edited and introduced by David Fernbach.

¹⁵ Marx points this out in *The Class Struggles in France*: "The struggle against capital in its highly developed modern form – at its crucial point the struggle of the industrial wage-labourer against the industrial bourgeois – is in France a partial phenomenon, which, after the days of February, was not able to provide the national substance of a revolution" (46).

¹⁶ See Sperber 85.

Government soon began “to strip the republic of its anti-bourgeois appearance” (*CSF* 49). The establishment of the National Assembly was soon followed by the abolition of the National Workshops, an emergency-relief agency for workers and the Luxembourg Commission, responsible for the study of social reform headed by Louis Blanc. The immediate consequence was the June Days (June 23-26, 1848) when thousands of protesting workers were violently suppressed by the bourgeoisie, with 1,500 killed and 12,000 arrested.

In a passage in *Eighteenth Brumaire* which I find highly pertinent to Marx’s idea of repetition, Marx catalogues a long series of “crying contradictions” he sees in the period he is discussing, for example, “constitutionalists who openly conspire against the constitution”, “a republic with imperialist trappings, which is nothing but the combined infamy of two monarchies”, “heroes without deeds of heroism” and “history without events” (*EB* 170). Quite obviously, Marx sees history working dialectically here with each historical phenomenon carrying within itself its inherent contradictions. We have already seen that from a broader angle, the events in 1848 is a degraded form of repetition of the 1789 French Revolution. Both have a similar trajectory in the sense that one party was replaced by another but, the 1848 revolution, unlike the earlier one, regressed to increasingly conservative parties, ending up in Louis Bonaparte’s dictatorship. While the 1789 Revolution eventually led to Napoleon’s putting conditions for capitalism firmly in place in France and beyond, the events in 1848 came

¹⁷ See *CSF* 42, note 32.

to a blind ally; that is, the internal contradictions of capitalism did not resolve into, in terms of Hegelian dialectic, synthesis.

Marx then goes on to say, even more suggestively, that the events in France in the several years from July 1830 on were “a course of development apparently only driven forward by the calendar, and made wearisome by the constant repetition of the same tensions and relaxations; antagonisms which seem periodically to press forward to a climax, but become deadened and fall away without having attained their resolution [. . .]” (*EB* 170). In July 1830 and February 1848, as we have seen, it was the proletariat who carried history forward but on both occasions they were brushed aside by the bourgeoisie. This continued to be repeated in June 1848, when the workers’ uprisings were bloodily suppressed. So, from July 1830 to June 1848, workers were defeated by the bourgeoisie each time they tried to bring in socialism (“antagonisms which seem periodically to press forward to a climax, but become deadened”). From a broader perspective, as we have seen, the problem of modernity as shown in *Class Struggles in France* and *Eighteenth Brumaire* is the failure of a socialist revolution – the disappearance of a synthesis, which, according to Marx’s theorizing in *The Communist Manifesto*, should ensue from the conflict between feudalism (thesis) and capitalism (antithesis). The cause of this failure is the repetition of the proletariat’s defeat and the continued dominance of the bourgeoisie. In the jargon of Hegelian dialectic, there were only thesis (the bourgeoisie) and antithesis (the proletariat) without synthesis (“without having attained their resolution”). This was “a course of development apparently only driven forward by the calendar” because the events from July 1830 onwards, for Marx,

are simply a series of repetitions, running counter to the idea of this sequence of events as teleological developments in history. In *Class Struggle in France and Eighteenth Brumaire*, repetition is for Marx the problem of modernity.¹⁸

1.2 Marx's Solution to the Problem of Modernity

Now that I have discussed Marx's first objective in writing *Class Struggles in France and Eighteenth Brumaire* of diagnosing the problem of modernity as repetition, let us look at his second objective: to tackle repetition as the problem of modernity. I shall start with an examination of aspects of formal repetition in the work. Obviously, the formal repetition is important in reinforcing the theme of repetition; furthermore, one particular aspect of the formal repetition in *Class Struggles in France and Eighteenth Brumaire*, as I will show, has much to do with Marx's second objective.

1.2.2 Formal Repetition in Class Struggles in France and Eighteenth Brumaire

One of the devices of formal repetition in *Eighteenth Brumaire* is allusion. Allusion, an implied or indirect reference to a person, event, thing, of another text, can be seen as an oblique form of repetition. Part of the work's title – "The Eighteenth Brumaire" – is already an allusion to November 9, 1799 in the French Revolutionary Calendar – the day Napoleon I made himself a dictator with a coup d'état. Through the

¹⁸ In discussing Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1856), Dominick LaCapra argues that for Marx and Flaubert, the June 1848 Revolution was "a revolution of false expectations – a blindly self-parodic imitation of the past or a hysterical pregnancy. Its idealism was hopelessly compromised by the objective condition of the time and by the pettiness of certain of its actors" (203). There are indeed interesting parallels between Marx's work and Flaubert's novel in respect of repetition. Just as Roland Barthes says that "those who fail to reread are obliged to read the same story everywhere" (16), so Emma is blind to her condemnation to repetition: "This was the fourth occasion on which she had gone to bed in a strange place [. . .]. Each had, as it were, marked the beginning of a new phase in her life. She could never believe that things were going to be the same in one place as they had been in another [. . .]." (Flaubert 80).

allusion, Marx juxtaposes Napoleon I and his nephew to highlight the latter's mediocrity.

Another instance of allusion is found right at the beginning of *Eighteenth Brumaire*: "Hegel remarks somewhere that all the great events and characters of world history occur, so to speak, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second as farce" (EB 146). The famous allusion is made to a passage on the Roman world in *The Philosophy of History* (1837), where Hegel argues that "[b]y repetition that which at first appeared merely a matter of chance and contingency becomes a real and ratified existence."¹⁹ Here, Marx is, again, formally enacting his theme of repetition. But why does Marx not quote Hegel directly then? The answer, I think, is that Marx wants to drive home his point that the 1848 revolutions in France and Louis Bonaparte (identified with farce) are degraded forms of repetition of the 1789 Revolution and Napoleon I (identified with tragedy) respectively. If Marx quoted Hegel, that would be exact repetition. But by means of allusion, Marx produces a repetition with a difference, which parallels the difference between, on the one hand, 1789 and 1848; and between Napoleon and Louis Bonaparte on the other, thus driving home the irony targeted at the reactionary bourgeoisie and Louis Bonaparte.

Another way in which the allusion to Hegel's *The Philosophy of History* is significant is that Marx subverts Hegel while alluding to his work at the same time. For Marx, Hegel is ignorant of history repeating with a difference. ("He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second as farce" (EB 146). This subversive repetition of Hegel

by means of allusion corresponds to Marx's subversive repetition of Hugo and Proudhon regarding the nature of historical writing, to which I will now turn.

A close examination of the Preface to the second edition (1869) of *Eighteenth Brumaire* will suggest that Marx may have very much in his mind the idea of formal repetition in his work. Marx tells us that his project is to show how “the class struggle in France created circumstances and conditions which allowed a mediocre and grotesque individual to play the hero's roles” (EB 144). At stake here is what Marx thinks to be the correct way to interpret history – one in which emphasis is given to the interplay between historical circumstances and human agency: “Men make their own history, but not of their own free will; not under circumstances they themselves have chosen but under the given and inherited circumstances with which they are directly confronted” (EB 146). Here, Marx is arguing for a historiography which gives primacy to the interaction between historical forces and human action, instead of placing a lopsided emphasis on either alone. With reference to Hugo's and Proudhon's histories, also on the 1840's in France, Marx argues that Hugo unjustifiably glorifies Louis Bonaparte by attributing historical change to human agency: “Victor Hugo confines himself to bitter witty invective against the responsible author of the coup d'état. With him the event itself appears like a bolt from the blue. He sees in it only a single individual's act of violence. He does not notice that he makes this individual great instead of little by ascribing to him a personal power of initiative which would be without precedent in world history” (EB 144). By contrast, Proudhon emphasizes the forces of historical

¹⁹ This is the last sentence of Section 2, in Part 3: The Roman World, of *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree, *Hegel by Hypertext*, 6 March, 2010

circumstances in the making of Bonaparte as a dictator: “Proudhon, for his part, seeks to portray the coup as the result of the preceding historical development. But his historical construction of the coup imperceptibly turns into a historical apology for its hero. Thus he falls into the error of our so-called *objective* historians” (EB 144; original emphasis).

For Marx, it is unacceptable to explain, as Proudhon does, a historical event as an inevitable consequence of what occurred prior to it without taking into account the impact of human action. Pitting his own theory of history against Hugo’s and Proudhon’s, Marx is writing a history on the same period in competition with them. The relationship of these three histories can be elucidated with reference to Hayden White’s theory of the deep structure of historiography, advanced in his *Metahistory* (1973) and other essays. White argues that since historical events, which were lived experiences, are fundamentally different from language, in which history is made available to us, all historians can do is to exploit language, which is always figurative, to represent historical events, and that such representations of events in history are then emplotted into a narrative. Here is White’s explanation of emplotment: “Emplotment is the way by which a sequence of events fashioned into a story is gradually revealed to be a story of a particular kind” (White 1973, 7). Events in history are represented in the form of narrative with a coherent structure of a beginning, middle and end. One paramount premise is that narrative is basic to how humans make sense of reality. White captures the relationship between real events and narrative this way: “Precisely in so far as the

historical narrative endows sets of real events with the kinds of meaning found otherwise only in myth and literature, we are justified in regarding it as a product of allegoresis” (White 1987, 45). Notice White’s characterization of the nature of representation in historical narrative as “allegoresis”. In an allegory – an extended metaphor – the use of a narrative with a literal meaning standing for a secondary meaning to be extracted by the reader is also a kind of repetition. In this light, *Class Struggles in France* and *Eighteenth Brumaire* may well be self-conscious repetitions of Hugo’s and Proudhon’s works – and crucially, repetitions with a difference.

One critical point White makes about emplotment is that an historian is free to emplot a set of events in a variety of story types, depending on his or her ideological position. The rationale behind this is that, for White, there is no single “truth” to be revealed by a historical narrative; on the contrary, it is a historical narrative which endows a set of past events with meaning. What does this have to do with Marx’s second objective in *Class Struggles in France* and *Eighteenth Brumaire*? Marx says in *Theses on Feuerbach* that “philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways, the point is to change it” (TF 145).²⁰ With the idea in mind that Marx was a political activist aiming to change the world, we may rest assured that for him, it is not enough to only diagnose problems of modernity and explain their causes. Rather, he finds it necessary to resolve the problem of repetition, which, I have been arguing, is Marx’s second objective in *Class Struggles in France* and *Eighteenth Brumaire*. Marx’s way to confront the problem of repetition is to emplot the events in France from 1830-

²⁰ All citations of *Theses of Feuerbach*, abbreviated as TF, are from *The Marx-Engels Reader* 2nd ed., edited by Robert Tucker.

1852 in the mode of his theory of historical change outlined in *The Communist Manifesto*, in contrast to the ways in which the same events are emplotted by Hugo and Proudhon. In the narrative Marx thus constructs, the proletariat is glorified as heroes amid repeated defeats, which are construed to be a necessary prelude to a successful proletarian revolution and subsequently a classless society. Here Marx is as rhetorical as in *The Communist Manifesto*: he seeks to present a picture in which a successful proletarian revolution and the coming of communist society are imminent: “They fall, the more the passion and potency of the revolution rises” (CSF 49). The opening paragraphs of *The Class Struggles in France* already present Marx’s emplotment at work:

What was overcome in these defeats was not the revolution. It was the pre-revolutionary, traditional appendages, the products of social relationships which had not yet developed to the point of sharp class antagonisms – persons, illusions, ideas and projects from which the revolutionary party was not free before the February victory, from which it could be freed not by the *February victory*, but only by a series of *defeats*. In a word: revolutionary progress cleared a path for itself not by its immediate, tragic-comic achievements, but, on the contrary, by creating a powerful and united counter-revolution; only in combat with this opponent did the insurrectionary party mature into a real party of revolution. (CSF 35; original emphasis)

Marx has a point in saying the revolutionary party was not yet free from certain “illusions” in the apparently victorious uprising in February 1848, because it was not until the June days that the proletariat realized that many of the bourgeoisie in the Republic were not republicans at all, aiming only to protect their vested interests. It should be noticed, however, that the events from 1848-1849 are here presented as necessities within a preconceived vision of historical movement. The revolutions

constitute a “progress,” which means, as in *The Communist Manifesto*, history is directed towards a specific goal. Events, despite their “immediate, tragic-comic achievements,” the argument goes, cannot be taken at their face value because they are subsumed in a larger scheme of things. Similarly, the defeats suffered by the proletariat are necessary in making them “a real party of revolution.”

Another thing to note regarding Marx’s emplotment is his endowing the class struggles in France, through his use of language, with a historical directionality and necessity and removing human agency, which seems to contradict the equal importance he lends to human agency and historical circumstances in history:

But the revolution is thorough. It is still on its journey through purgatory. It goes about its business methodically. By 2 December 1851 it had completed one half of its preparatory work; it is now completing the other half. First of all it perfected the parliamentary power, in order to be able to overthrow it. Now, having attained this, it is perfecting the executive power, reducing it to its purest expression, isolating it, and pitting itself against it as the sole object of attack, in order to concentrate all its forces of destruction against it. And when it has completed this, the second half of its preliminary work, Europe will leap from its seat and exultantly exclaim: ‘Well worked, old mole!’ (CSF 237)

The word “journey” suggests the teleology of the revolutionary events. The comparison of the course of events to purgatory – the interim realm between heaven and earth – means that, for Marx, the proletariat’s repeated defeats were only an intermediate stage prior to a successful proletariat revolution and communist society. The use of “the revolution” as the grammatical subjects of the sentences here, while removing human agency, reinforces the idea of history moving autonomously towards a predestined goal. Even Louis Bonaparte’s reactionary Second Empire is regarded as a necessity within

Marx's scheme of things: "This parody of the empire was necessary to free the mass of the French nation from the burden of tradition and to bring out the antagonism between the state power and society in its pure form" (*CSF* 244).

Revolution, for Marx, cannot be independent of human agency. In a passage in *Eighteenth Brumaire* I have already discussed, Marx gives us a view of history, according to which historical circumstances and human agency are equally significant interactive factors in determining the outcome of a certain course of events: "Men make their own history, but not of their own free will; not under circumstances have chosen but under the given and inherited circumstances with which they are directly confronted" (*EB* 146). It seems, therefore, that Marx's emphasis on the autonomy of the revolution, which deviates from his view of history where structure and agency are of equal importance, is due to his strategic objective of demonstrating the imminent inevitability of a proletarian revolution and classless society and of inspiring the proletariat.

This objective can be further seen in different ways in which Marx and other historians present the proletariat and their class struggle with the bourgeoisie. In Marx's narrative, the June days were the proletariat's response to the bourgeois republic's "attempt to reduce the results of the revolution to the standards of the bourgeoisie" (*EB* 153). And this receives praise from Marx: "But at least it was defeated with the honours attaching to a great world-historical struggle [. . .]" (*EB* 155).

Jonathan Sperber, however, points out that the proletariat was not thought of as glorious as Marx makes them: "Most democrats of 1848 did not share Marx's view that

the June Days pointed the way toward future political struggles. Some leftists shared the more conservative attitude that the insurgents were enemies of property and civilization, and supported the authorities of what was, after all, a republican government, in their attempt to repress the uprising” (Sperber 1994, 201).

Again, Marx’s point in glorifying the proletariat is to sustain the passion for revolution and for the occurrence of another proletarian revolution.

Another point concerns the nature of the then class struggle as such. As in *The Communist Manifesto*, the major motivating force in history in *Class Struggle in France* and *Eighteenth Brumaire* is class struggle; in capitalist society, it takes place between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. But whether the class struggles discussed in the two works can be called class struggles is debatable. Marx portrays the proletariat as heroes, pitting themselves against the bourgeoisie and the other classes: “The bourgeois republic was victorious. It had on its side the financial aristocracy, the industrial bourgeoisie, the middle class, the petty bourgeoisie, the army, the Mobile Guard middle class, the petty bourgeoisie, the army, the Mobile Guard (i.e. the organized lumpenproletariat), the intellectual celebrities, the priests, and the rural population. On the side of the Paris proletariat stood no one but itself” (CSF 54). But the fact is, as Sperber points out,²¹ that the Mobile Guard, chiefly responsible for crushing the uprising, were recruited from unemployed Parisian workers, that is, the same kind of people as the insurgents. Besides, the two leftist forces – the Parisian labor movement, represented by the trade associations and the Luxembourg Commission, and the

²¹ See Sperber 1994, 200-01.

radicals in the political clubs – failed to cooperate because of the former’s suspicion of the latter’s extreme politics bringing about another Jacobin party. As a result, the workers did not participate in the demonstration of 15 May and the radicals played no role during the June Days. Last but not least, the Commander of the government forces, Cavaignac, was himself a veteran Republican oppositionist. With such a division among the leftists, with workers fighting workers, can the conflicts be called class struggles? This is not to say that Marx is necessarily wrong – he may well argue that both the workers and the radicals are opposed to the bourgeoisie, despite their differences as to tactics. What is important for Marx is not whether he is right to describe the situation as class struggles, but his strategic objective of emplotting the events in *Class Struggles in France* and *Eighteenth Brumaire* in such a way that the class struggles between the bourgeois and the proletariat can be shown to be well under way, which can in turn inspire the proletariat to further revolutions.

1.3 Repetition and Memory in Marx

Now that the two meanings of repetition in Marx have become clear – repetition as a means of political action and repetition as the problem of modernity – it is time to get a deeper understanding of the nature of repetition by relating it to the issue of memory. As I said in the Introduction, repetition denotes a particular kind of relationship between past and present. As we have seen, Marx pays tribute to the bourgeoisie’s role in advancing the course of human history as they break down the feudal social order. He is, therefore, far from damning the bourgeoisie’s use of the past during the 1789 revolution. On the other hand, however, Marx regards it as of

immense necessity that under specific historical circumstances, the present must break with the past; that is, the present must throw off the shackles of past influences: “The social revolution of the nineteenth century can only create its poetry from the future, not from the past. It cannot begin its own work until it has sloughed off all its superstitious regard for the past” (*EB* 149). The reactionary kind of repetition results when the proletariat suffers repeated setbacks from 1830 onwards and the bourgeoisie holds on to their vested interests. Historian Jonathan Sperber, in a discussion of why the 1848 French revolution ended up differently from the one in 1789, has this to say about the importance of memory to history:

Many of these [theories of revolution], whether deriving from some variant of Marxism or from anti-Marxist modernization theories, understand revolutions as occurring in a given set of social circumstances, independent of time and place. Such general theories of revolution have always had a hard time explaining the outcome of 1848, and this difficulty reveals their ahistorical character, their unwillingness to consider the role of *memory* and experience in human events. What made 1848 different from 1789 was above all that in 1848 people remembered what had happened in 1789 and acted on those *memories*, thus creating a different outcome. (Sperber 1994, 249; my emphasis)

As we have seen, the bourgeois of 1848, sought a compromise with the pre-1848 authorities precisely because of their memory of the 1789 and early 1790’s, when the middle class’s enlistment of the masses’ support led to the Reign of Terror. Elsewhere Sperber talks about the spectral nature of the 1789 Revolution and its haunting influence on the following generations, referring to Stendhal’s *The Red and the Black* (1830):

These men [conservative extremists and religious manipulators], while holding the reins of power, are obsessed with the fear of a *repetition* of the French Revolution, the Reign of Terror and the Napoleonic Wars; they devise one scheme after another to return France to the way it was

before 1789, or, more precisely, to the way they imagine it to have been. Their fears, Stendhal tells us, are not unjustified; common people – peasants, masons – make brief appearances in the novel, hoping for a *return* of Napoleon, a figure who exemplifies for them the whole revolutionary regime. [. . .] The story of the *Red and the Black* tells is of an age of epigones, of people *living in the shadow of the past*. The *repetition* of the events of 1789 – 1815 is simultaneously a hope, a fear, and an obsession; whether seeking to emulate them or avert them, *no one can avoid their impact*. (Sperber 2000, 323-24; my emphasis)

Nietzsche's *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*, where the discussion of history is tied up with the issue of memory and forgetting, can shed a great deal of light on Marx's *Class Struggles in France* and *Eighteenth Brumaire*. In *Eighteenth Brumaire*, Marx says, "The tradition of the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the minds of the living" (146). Here, Marx acknowledges the past's possible influence on the present. Interestingly, in *On The Advantage and the Disadvantage of History for Life*, it is almost as if Nietzsche echoed Marx's views on history. Consider this:

But he [a man] also wondered about himself, that he cannot learn to forget but always remains attached to the past: however far and fast he runs, the chain runs with him. It is astonishing: the moment, here in a wink, gone in a wink, nothing before and nothing after, *returns* nevertheless as a *spectre* to disturb the calm of a later moment. [. . .] Man on the other hand resists the great and ever greater weight of the past: this oppresses him and bends him sideways, it encumbers his gait like an invisible and sinister burden [. . .]. (ADHL 8-9; my emphasis)²²

Here, Nietzsche is meditating on the haunting nature of the past, which is always ready to return and intrude on the present. In other words, people often find it difficult to forget the past. In the same vein, the failure of the revolutions after 1830 and the Second Empire can be imputed to the bourgeoisie's and Louis Bonaparte's inability to

forget, that is, their inability to break out of the straitjacket of the past: “An entire people [. . .] suddenly found itself plunged back into a already dead epoch. It was impossible to mistake this relapse into an already dead epoch. [. . .] As long as the French were engaged in revolution, they could not free themselves of the memory of Napoleon” (*EB* 148-49).

Sperber also remarks on the various ways in which the 1789 revolution and Napoleon hold a spell over subsequent revolutions. The rather simple fact is that, in order to maintain a sense of stable identity, one must have a sense of continuity between past and present, which is enabled by memory. With memory being a fundamental faculty to humans – so much so that it is what distinguishes humans from animals according to Nietzsche – the past is in many ways unavoidable.

²² All citations of *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*, abbreviated as *ADHL*, are from *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*, translated by Peter Preuss.

Chapter 2 Nietzsche

2.1 Repetition as the Problem of Modernity

Curiously, for Nietzsche, the notion of repetition is deeply imbricated with both the crisis of modernity and a solution he attempts. I will start with the idea that, for Nietzsche, repetition is integral to the formation of language, concepts and metaphysics. In the formation of language, a word arbitrarily repeats a physical stimulus; in that of concepts, a concept repeats actual things; in that of metaphysics, a metaphysical entity repeats a human concept. When the seemingly natural bond between these binary terms is exposed as arbitrary repetitions and nothing short of human fabrications, metaphysics is exploded and nihilism results – which is for Nietzsche the crisis of modernity. After a discussion of various responses to nihilism, I will examine Nietzsche’s idea of the eternal return, which is itself a form of repetition, as a solution to the crisis of modernity.

2.1.1 Linguistic Signs

The notion of repetition already plays a pivotal role in Nietzsche’s early writings, much earlier than *Gay Science*, where the eternal return makes its first appearance in his corpus. More importantly, his theory of knowledge and language underpins his whole philosophical outlook. In *On the Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense* (1873),²³ where metaphor is of paramount significance, Nietzsche argues for the deceptive and illusory nature of “truth” that human knowledge strives for, the functions

²³ All citations of *On the Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense*, abbreviated as *TL*, are from *Philosophy and Truth*, translated and edited by Daniel Breazeale.

of which are for humans to “exist socially and with the herd” (TL 81) and “to treat man as the measure of all things” (TL 86). As such deceptiveness and illusoriness stem from arbitrary linguistic conventions, Nietzsche’s epistemology is also a theory of language. And it is in his theory of language that Nietzsche’s early idea of repetition can be seen working at two different levels. Firstly, Nietzsche traces the origin of words. When a nerve stimulus moves through one’s nerve into one’s brain, one gets, for example, a visual or acoustic image. When one imitates an acoustic image in a sound, one produces an acoustic image in the mouth from an acoustic image in the brain. Nietzsche calls these two processes metaphorization in the sense that from a nerve stimulus to a sound produced in the mouth, one has crossed several entirely different spheres. It can be remembered that, in my discussion of allegory as a formal device for repetition in Marx’s *Eighteen Brumaire*, where one thing (tenor) is described as being another thing (vehicle), metaphor is essentially a matter of repetition in that the tenor carries over – “carrying over” being the original meaning of the Greek word for metaphor – to the vehicle, which is in a different sphere of reference from that of the tenor. Now, with a visual or acoustic image in the brain repeating a nerve stimulus (namely, a visual or acoustic image in the brain is carried over from a nerve stimulus), and with an acoustic image in the mouth repeating this image in the brain, language can be treated as a product of a series of (metaphorical) repetitions. What is more, the acoustic or orthographic representation that each language chooses to repeat the same nerve

stimulus is different. Thus Nietzsche concludes that “we possess nothing but metaphors for things – metaphors which correspond in no way to the original entities” (TL 83).

While it is abundantly clear to us that linguistic signs are different from their referents in kind, and hence Nietzsche does not seem particularly original here, we should bear in mind that he is refuting a long established theory expounded by Socrates that there is a natural bond between linguistic signs and their referents.²⁴

2.1.2 Concepts

The second level at which Nietzsche’s early notion of repetition functions in his theory of language is the formation of concepts. Nietzsche explains the formation of concepts by way of the concepts of leaf, arguing that the concept of leaf comes into being through human perception of a certain similarity between each actual leaf while suppressing the individual characteristics of each: “Every concept arises from the equation of unequal things. [. . .] We obtain the concept, as we do the form, by overlooking what is individual and actual [. . .]” (TL 83). In other words, the concept of leaf is used to repeat all individual entities that one has seen as belonging to the same concept. The metaphoricity of concept formation in language is also patent: each individual leaf (tenor) is described as being the concept ‘leaf’ (vehicle), with the latter carrying over and, more importantly, overlooking, the heterogeneity of different leaves. For Nietzsche, the crux of this idea of repetition is to attack the metaphysical belief in being, supposedly hidden behind appearance. A linguistic sign does nothing more than repeating a nerve stimulus and does not form an innate relationship with its referent.

²⁴ This point is made by the editor of *Philosophy and Truth* in a footnote on p. 82.

The naïve linguistic and epistemological essentialist idea that behind a linguistic sign is the real thing is thus exploded. Equally invalid is the claim that behind the linguistic sign ‘leaf’ stands one single, stable referent. For the word can refer to each of an immense variety of actual leafs, whose similarities are violently reduced to identity in the formation of the concept.

2.1.3 Repetition in the Formation of Metaphysics

The human tendency to treat the merely similar as identical and equal is a life-preserving error that Nietzsche reiterates throughout his career. In *Gay Science* (1887), for example, he speaks of the importance of this fundamentally illogical human means of survival in the natural world, arguing that it is through a process of identification that animals can secure nourishment and avoid enemies similar to what they have encountered before: “The dominant tendency, however, to treat as equal what is merely similar – an illogical tendency, for nothing is really equal – is what first created any basis for logic” (*GS* #111).²⁵ It is an easy step to move from concept formation, where a concept is used to unify superficially similar entities, to metaphysics. Platonic philosophy came into being when concepts, originated in the human mind, were turned into abstract objects existing in a supernatural realm – the Platonic forms or ideas. Just as the concept of leaf is an overarching term governing all individual leafs, the Platonic forms or ideas, whose physical realizations in the empirical world are transient and imperfect, are regarded as the real, unchanging and eternal. In a note from 1883-1888

²⁵ All citations of *The Gay Science*, abbreviated as *GS*, are from *The Gay Science*, translated by Walter Kaufmann.

which is a typically Nietzschean attack on Platonic philosophy, Nietzsche imagines an artist who believes that the value of a thing belongs to the realm of the abstract:

[. . .] the more subtilized, attenuated, transient a thing or a man is, the more valuable he becomes; the less real, the more valuable. This is Platonism, which, however, involved yet another bold reversal: Plato measured the degree of reality by the degree of value and said: The more “idea,” the more being. He reversed the concept “reality” and said: “What you take for real is an error, and the nearer we approach the ‘Idea,’ the nearer we approach ‘truth’” [. . .]. (WP #572)²⁶

Metaphysics, which posits a supernatural realm presumably real, good and eternal as against the physical world, which is debased as unreal, evil and ephemeral, is right at the heart of nihilism – a term which encapsulates for Nietzsche the crisis of modernity. It is now time to look at the nature of nihilism as the crisis of modernity and its interconnection with metaphysics and the idea of repetition.

2.2 Nihilism and its Relation to Repetition and Metaphysics

Nihilism, as Nietzsche defines it, is the moment when ‘the highest values devalue themselves’: “When we have sought a “meaning” in all events that is not there: so the seeker eventually becomes discouraged” (WP #1). That is, nihilism comes about when the interpretations of man, morality and the world, etc from the perspective of Christianity, in which “nihilism is rooted” (WP #1), are found to be false²⁷ and nothing more than anthropomorphic fabrications, resulting in a sense of confusion, disorientation and meaninglessness of life: “The feeling of valuelessness was reached

²⁶ All citations of *Will to Power*, abbreviated as *WP*, are from *Will to Power*, translated by Walter Kaufmann.

²⁷ There were multiple causes of the bankruptcy of the incredibility of Christianity. Among them are the German High Criticism of the Bible, which treats Jesus as a normal human being.

with the realization that the overall character of existence may not be interpreted by means of the concept of “aim,” the concept of “unity,” or the concept of “truth.” Existence has no goal or end; any comprehensive unity in the plurality of events is lacking [. . .]” (WP #12). Nietzsche’s fable of the madman, who proclaims the death of God, in *Gay Science*, provides a hugely vivid illustration of the circumstances surrounding the advent of nihilism:

“Whither is God?” he cried; “I will tell you. We have killed him – you and I. All of us are his murderers. [. . .] What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there still any up or down? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space? Has it not become colder? Is not night continually closing in on us? [. . .].” (GS #125)

Nietzsche contends that the challenge of nihilism can be interpreted differently for two types of people, either as “the over-fullness of life” or as “the impoverishment of life” (WP #1). These two types can be named respectively active nihilists and passive nihilists. Those who are denounced by Nietzsche for being passive nihilists encompass several types of people who react differently to nihilism.²⁸ In what follows, I will focus

²⁸ The other reactions to nihilism are these. Firstly, the loss of the highest values, i.e. those espoused by Christianity such as eternal life, leads to the rejection of all values. Nietzsche makes this very clear in a note from 1885–1886: “Everything lacks meaning” (the untenability of one interpretation of the world, upon which a tremendous amount of energy has been lavished, awakens the suspicion that all interpretations of the world are false) (WP #1).

Some passive nihilists, who see the challenge of nihilism as “the impoverishment of life” rather than “the over-fullness of life” (WP #1), “destroy, must destroy because what exists, indeed all existence, all being, outrages and provokes them” (GS #370). Nietzsche here is referring to the “anarchists”. This desire for destruction stems from the weakness of the will of and “the hatred of the ill-constituted, disinherited and underprivileged” (GS #370), who, like the priestly caste in *On The Genealogy of Morals*, seek revenge on the noble. In saying this Nietzsche has Mikhail Bakunin in mind particularly, having earlier criticized “Bakunin, who, in his hatred for the present intends to destroy history and the past.”

on the responses of those who counter nihilism with metaphysics since metaphysics is hugely pertinent to my discussion of repetition in relation to the crisis of modernity for Nietzsche.

2.2.1 New forms of Metaphysics versus Nihilism

In Nietzsche's fable just quoted above, the crowd in the market place, who, in either amusement or astonishment, fail to understand the madman's seeming ravings, may refer to two types of people: those who have unwittingly contributed to the collapse of the Christian faith, and those who nostalgically pursue "truth" beyond the earthly world while suffering the loss of their faith and the sense of meaninglessness without realizing the part they play in its demise. Natural science is a good case in point to illustrate the first type. On the face of it, science, which insists that "mechanics is the doctrine of the first and last laws on which all existence must be based as on a ground floor" (GS #373), goes against Christianity by exposing the emptiness and invalidity of the assumption of an after-world. But a closer examination reveals that science is nothing short of a modern descendent of Christianity in their shared conviction of a

Another response to nihilism, in diametrical contrast to the first response, is the ready acceptance of any values - as a result of the absence of absolute values - which is manifested in the rise of a variety of contemporary popular forms of art. In *Wagner in Bayreuth*, Nietzsche complains that "[a]ll the modern arts have until now been gradually debased, either as narrow and atrophied or as luxury items" (UM 4 #1).

In an aphorism from *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche remarks on the emotional and moral void of modern people, who are "like tired mules [. . .] whipped too much by life" and "who are not capable of ideas and passions but only of intoxication" (GS #86). The kind of popular music and art for mass consumption that Nietzsche is attacking is intended precisely to fill this void: "[. . .] I know very well what sort of music and art I do not want - namely, the kind that tries to intoxicate the audience and to force it to the height of a moment of strong and elevated feelings" (GS #86). Nietzsche's use of words like "intoxicate", "force", "elevated", "moment" all point to the artificial, sentimental and ephemeral nature of emotional responses fabricated by such forms of mass entertainment. It is little wonder that Nietzsche refers to those art forms which function as an anesthetic to people suffering from spiritual sterility as "narcotica" (GS #86).

“real” world beyond. Nietzsche argues that scientific explanatory concepts such as cause and effect and theoretical entities like lines, planes, bodies, atoms are all as much fictions as linguistic signs and concepts, which he discusses in *Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense*.

This nostalgic longing for metaphysical truth takes other forms, too. In a note from 1883-1888, Nietzsche lists modernity’s varied means of overcoming the malaise of emptiness, some of which have already been discussed: “The ways of self-narcotization – deep down: not knowing whither. Emptiness. Attempt to get over it by intoxication: intoxication as music; intoxication as cruelty in the tragic enjoyment of the destruction of the noblest; [. . .] art “for its own sake” (“le fait”) [. . .]” (WP #29). The mention of art for art’s sake invokes of course the characteristically Romantic tenet that art is practised for its intrinsic value without extrinsic concerns or motives. This is the contemporary artist’s major weapon to counteract an increasingly commodified culture whose logic of utility and instrumentality sees everything as a means to profit-making and threatens to render art works trivial and obsolete. As we have seen, Nietzsche concurs with Romanticism in their shared hostile and embattled stance towards mass art. He never tires of giving prominence, however, to his profound distance from Romanticism in that the latter, despite its reaction against the instrumental rationality of the Enlightenment, is still firmly lodged in metaphysics for its quest of value in a supernatural realm instead of the mundane world presumably contaminated by the commodity fetishism. For Nietzsche, Romanticism is no less objectionable than science and Christianity. Their metaphysical logic of meaning and value of life residing in a

supernatural domain is critically flawed at the outset because such a perspective on life is no will to power; that is, it is life-denying for its negation of the significance of earthly existence.

Nietzsche in his early years was an admirer of Arthur Schopenhauer, whom he came to reject afterwards, however. Nietzsche's rejection is due to his increased awareness of the metaphysical underpinnings of Schopenhauer's philosophy. The metaphysical dualism in Schopenhauer rests in the opposition between a noumenal world and a phenomenal world. The phenomenal world, where ideas, material objects, sense perceptions are experienced every day, is governed by the noumenal world (corresponding to the Kantian thing-in-itself), where the Will, the irrational forces of which embody man's emotions, desires and drives, resides behind the phenomenal world. Schopenhauer sees life as inherently evil and meaningless. As "the immediate language of the Will (*BT* #16)²⁹, music, the highest form of art for Schopenhauer, puts the audience in an aesthetic state of disinterestedness, which means the extermination of the will to live so as to escape suffering experienced in the phenomenal world at least briefly, by seeing through its illusory nature. For all the stress placed on resignation to the evil nature of life, namely, the suspension of the will to live, it is certainly arguable that metaphysics persists in his philosophy. The extent to which the early Nietzsche is influenced by Schopenhauer can be seen in the Schopenhauerian vocabulary in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872):

²⁹ All citations of *The Birth of Tragedy*, abbreviated as *BT*, are from *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, translated and edited by Walter Kaufmann.

[. . .] it is only through the spirit of music that we can understand the joy involved in the annihilation of the individual. For it is only in particular examples of such annihilation that we see clearly the eternal phenomenon of Dionysian art, which gives expression to the will in its omnipotence, as it were, behind the *principium individuationis*, the eternal life beyond all phenomena, and despite all annihilation. (*BT* #16; original emphasis)

Dionysian art, too, wishes to convince us of the eternal joy of existence: only we are to seek this joy not in phenomena, but behind them. (*BT* #17)

Nietzsche later of course became aware that metaphysical ideas like “the annihilation of the individual”, “the eternal life beyond all phenomena” are fundamentally at odds with his task of debunking the metaphysics in various aspects of contemporary culture. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that in the last section of “Attempt at a Self-Criticism”, added to the 1886 edition of the book, Nietzsche presents an interlocutor launching a vehement assault on the book’s Romantic metaphysics: “But, my dear sir, what in the world is romantic if your book isn’t? Can deep hatred against ‘the Now,’ against ‘reality’ and ‘modern ideas’ be pushed further than you pushed it in your artists’ metaphysics? Believing sooner in the Nothing, sooner in the devil than in ‘the Now’? (“Attempt at a Self-criticism” #7 in *BT*). In response to a quote from Section 18 of *The Birth of Tragedy* – “Would it not be necessary for the tragic man of such a culture, in view of this self-education for seriousness and terror, to desire a new art, the art of metaphysical comfort [. . .]” – the imaginary interlocutor spells out the problem with the following statement, condemning the tenability of rejecting the earthly word in favor of a word beyond as Romantic and Christian:

“Would it not be *necessary*?” – No, thrice no! O you young romantics: it would not be necessary! But it is highly probable that it will *end* that

way, that *you* end that way – namely, “comforted,” as it is written, in spite of all self-education for seriousness and terror, “comforted metaphysically” – in sum, as romantics end, as *Christians*.

No, you ought to learn the art of *this-worldly* comfort first; you ought to learn to laugh, my young friends, if you are hell-bent on remaining pessimists. Then perhaps, as laughers, you may someday dispatch all metaphysical comforts to the devil – metaphysics in front. (“Attempt at a Self-Criticism” #7 in *BT*; original emphasis)

Nietzsche’s critique of Romanticism in music is largely leveled at Richard Wagner, whom the young professor at Basel admired due to their shared enthusiasm for Schopenhauer and to his initial understanding of Wagner’s music as an antidote to the Socratic rational culture. Nietzsche has several specific complaints about Wagner. One of them is Wagner’s lack of will to power, manifested in his reduction of melodic structure to the single tonal unit, with every individual note given equal significance. Of greater significance to the idea of repetition is Nietzsche’s criticism that Wagner’s works are concerned with redemption with a search for transcendental meaning. As in Schopenhauer’s asceticism, Wagner sees the meaning of life consisting in resignation, that is, the elimination of the will to live, or the dissolution of subjectivity. A prime example is Siegfried, the hero of Wagner’s *Ring*, whose inability to remember the past is synonymous with resignation. A more general critique of contemporary music by Nietzsche for its metaphysical concern with searching for meaning behind the material texture of music, can be found in an aphorism in *Human, All-too-human*: “Because they [our ears] at once inquire after the reason, the ‘meaning’, and are no longer content to know that a thing ‘is’, all our senses have in fact become somewhat blunted [. . .]” (*HATH I* #217). Of course, Nietzsche’s most scathing castigation of Wagner comes in *The Case of Wagner* (1888), where “[Wagner] flatters every nihilistic (Buddhistic)

instinct and disguises it in music; he flatters everything Christian, every religious expression of decadence. Open your ears: everything that ever grew on the soil of *impoverished* life, all of the counterfeiting of transcendence and beyond, has found its most sublime advocate in Wagner's art" ("Postscript" in *CW* 639; original emphasis).³⁰

The bearing of the notion of repetition on metaphysics should be clear by now. Nietzsche's linguistic and epistemological theory expounded in *On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense* reveals the repetitive and metaphoric nature of language. A linguistic sign is nothing more than a repetition of an image in the brain, which is in turn a repetition of a nerve stimulus from the outside. Without any innate connection between the representation and the represented, language cannot be said to be able to show the essence of things. More importantly, the formation of concepts in language exposes the immense discrepancy between a concept and its multifarious referents that the concept claims to be capable of representing. Nietzsche's critique of language forms the basis for his demolition of metaphysics. Metaphysics bears the brunt of Nietzsche's relentless attack throughout his life because for Nietzsche, the transcendental arena that metaphysics posits – whether it is eternal life in Christianity, the Forms in Platonism, the elimination of the will to live in Schopenhauer and Wagner, or the "truth" beneath the empirical world that natural science seeks to uncover – has been exposed as an invalid and meaningless perspective, thus engendering nihilism, a state in which the collapse of a perspective goes hand in hand with the void of meaning in life. Nietzsche

³⁰ All citations of *The Case of Wagner*, abbreviated as *CW*, are from *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, translated and edited by Walter Kaufmann.

constantly stresses the importance of adopting a certain perspective in life. What is wrong with metaphysics is not that it is a perspective but that it claims to be the only perspective and yet is founded on sand. What is more, metaphysics is life-denying for placing all value in a supernatural domain. To demonstrate the invalidity of metaphysics, Nietzsche time and again argues that metaphysical ideas like eternal life, scientific “truth,” Schopenhauerian resignation, the Platonic Forms are downright human fictions projected onto a transcendental world where redemption can supposedly be found. Just as linguistic signs are repetitions of brain images, which are themselves repetitions of nerve stimuli, so the transcendental ideas are repetitions of human ideas. Just as linguistic signs and concepts are merely arbitrarily chosen entities that repeat their corresponding referents, so the transcendental ideas just mentioned are sheer repetitions of human ideas. Thus Nietzsche’s idea that repetition underpins the formation of language and knowledge constitutes the first step towards his exposition of the workings of metaphysics and his wider critique of nihilism – the crisis of modernity – embodied in different aspects of contemporary culture.

2.2.2 The Eternal Return versus Nihilism as the Problem of Modernity

The eternal recurrence, a notion of repetition conceived differently from that in Nietzsche’s theory of language, constitutes a critique of nihilism towards the end of the nineteenth century. Since Nietzsche says in *Ecce Homo* that the eternal recurrence is the fundamental conception of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*,³¹ I will focus mainly on the latter work. I contend that Nietzsche’s eternal return is posited to counter the thinking in

³¹ All citations of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, abbreviated as *TSZ*, are from *The Portable Nietzsche*, edited and translated by Walter Kaufmann.

terms of the identical and the modern conception of linear time, inscribed in both teleology and Christianity.

“On Redemption” is a crucial section in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* as far as Nietzsche’s attack on the Christian conception of time is concerned. The section elaborates the linear conception of time espoused by Christianity, in accordance with which Christian believers achieve redemption. Also, it paves the way for Nietzsche’s idea of the eternal recurrence, which is his approach to redemption. Not surprisingly, we see Zarathustra cross over a bridge, which figures the transition to the eternal recurrence.

One of the key ideas here is the will. There are two facets of the will: the will as prisoner and the will as liberator. While Zarathustra says that the will is a “liberator and joy-bringer”, he goes on to say that it is also “a prisoner”: “Willing liberates; but what is it that puts even the liberator himself in fetters? ‘It was’ – that is the name of the will’s gnashing of teeth and most secret melancholy” (*TSZ* 251). The will to power can be said to characterize Nietzsche’s conception of man’s life activity and creative force. But there is nothing the will can do about the past (“It was”). Since “time does not run backwards,” the will, being “[p]owerless against what has been done,” is “an angry spectator of all that is past” (*TSZ* 251): “The will cannot will backwards: and that he cannot break time and time’s covetousness, that is the will’s loneliest melancholy” (*TSZ* 251). This split between the past and the present is clearly a linear conception of time. What Nietzsche is doing here is to arrive at an understanding of how the linear

conception of time is related to the Christian doctrines of sin and salvation. Yet to fully understand what Zarathustra is saying here, we need to take a look at some basic tenets of Christianity regarding sin and redemption.

In Medieval Catholicism, there was a great deal of harmony between God and man; that is, God's Grace and man's merit were equally important to the latter's salvation. In reaction to the fact that the masses were denied access to the Holy Scripture, Protestantism placed accent on the individual's personal relationship with God. Calvinism, a religious system propounded by the French Protestant reformer John Calvin, was hugely influential. His doctrine of Predestination emphasized man's radical innate depravity and sinfulness consequent on the Fall. Only the Elected would be salvaged from eternal damnation but the important thing was that one could rely, not on one's moral action or good work, but entirely on God's Grace for salvation. But since one was never sure whether one was among the Elected, one constantly underwent self-examination and interrogation in search of signs of God's Grace, thus contributing to a tormented self. At the same time, one constantly sought evidence of guilt in others to alleviate one's own sense of worthlessness stemming from the Calvinist doctrine of man's inherent sinfulness. But when the Christian finds that other people do not "feel wrath and displeasure as he does" (*TSZ* 252), this eventually leads to "revenge," which is another key idea in this section. The revenge that the Christian seeks on those who do not feel the same degree of self-doubt and torture as he or she does takes the form of devaluing the present and of justifying suffering in the present by positing sin in the

past, which, for the Christian, has become universal for all. In this way, this doctrine of sin may be able to involve others in the Christian's sense of unworthiness as a revenge.

Furthermore, since suffering is almost always part of life, the Christian can relieve his sense of guilt and worthlessness (“[. . .] with a hypothetical lie it creates a good conscience for itself” (*TSZ* 252)) by seeing suffering in the present as inevitable punishment of his sin in the past (“[. . .] where there was suffering, one always wanted punishment, too” (*TSZ* 252)). That is, the relation of the past and the present is interpreted as one of cause and effect. Whatever happens in the present is justified in accordance with the Christian's assumption about the past, therefore, people deserve to suffer: “Everything passed away; therefore everything deserved to pass away” (*TSZ* 252). The notion of after-life or eternal damnation works in a similar way: the prospect of eternal salvation depends on one's confession to one's own sin in the past and repudiation of the earthly life and world for their being transitory. But whether eternal salvation or damnation, the future is seen as a consequence of the past. Nietzsche's critique of Christianity's imposition of this cause-effect logic comes out very clearly in *The Antichrist* (1895): “The concept of God becomes a tool in the hands of priestly agitators, who now interpret all happiness as a reward, all unhappiness as punishment for disobeying God, as ‘sin’: that most mendacious device of interpretation, the alleged ‘moral world order,’ with which the natural concepts of cause and effect are turned upside down once and for all” (*AC* 595).³² Again, Nietzsche is saying here that “sin” is constructed by the Christian as the cause of “unhappiness” in Christianity's teleological

³² All citations of *The Antichrist*, abbreviated as *AC*, are from *The Portable Nietzsche*, translated and edited by Walter Kaufmann.

moral system. It is abundantly clear that Christianity's understanding of the past, present and future in relation to man's sinfulness and potential redemption fits in completely with the notion of teleology.

Nietzsche has more than one response to this problem of teleology in modernity. One of them, which bears upon the will as also a "creator" (TSZ 253), specifically targets a premise of the Christian teleology: the belief in the wholeness of things, or more particularly, the idea that history is a natural, coherent whole, with a beginning, middle and end.

Nietzsche counters the linear conception of time by embracing a new understanding of the meaning of history. This new understanding involves an intense interest in fragments,³³ emerging towards the end of the nineteenth century: "All 'it was' is a fragment, a riddle, a dreadful accident – until the creative will says to it, 'But this I will it; thus shall I will it'" (TSZ 253). Earlier in "On Redemption", Zarathustra says, "I walk among men as among the fragments and limbs of men. [. . .] And when my eyes flee from the now to the past, they always find the same fragments and limbs and dreadful accidents – but no human beings" (TSZ 250). For Nietzsche, events in history

³³ As the Enlightenment ideals, including the ideal of inevitable progress, came under intense scrutiny among the more radical brand of intellectuals, due to the dark social realities that the processes of modernization had brought about, representation of the whole became increasingly problematic. For example, Freud's famous case history of Dora (1901, 1905) is subtitled *Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria*. Given Freud's argument that the conscious mind is only a fragment of the whole mental activity of a person, it comes as no surprise that he casts doubts on the representability of the whole and is interested in the idea of fragments. Another well-known example that immediately springs to mind is T.S. Eliot's *The Wasteland* (1922), which is to a large extent formally composed of disjointed references to the western literary tradition. The formal fragmentation of the poem, written in the wake of the first World War, can be read as a commentary on the disillusionment with the Enlightenment ideal of history that humans inevitably leading to a better state as their goal. This was, of course, blatantly contradicted by the devastating effects of the war on Europe. I read Nietzsche as advocating an idea similar to Freud's and Eliot's here.

are fragments and random (“a dreadful accident”). This means they cannot be explained in terms of cause and effect, hence “a riddle”. Now that events in history cannot be related causally, their meanings, no longer fixed once and for all, have become a matter of interpretation. Notice Zarathustra’s use of words referring to the interpretative nature of history: “I walk among men as among the fragments of the future – that future which I *envisage*. And this is all my *creating* and striving [. . .]” (TSZ 251; my emphasis). History is no longer seen as a coherent whole; its meaning depends on how one fits together fragments – random events in history - and creates meaning out of them: “I create and carry together into One what is fragment and riddle and dreadful accident” (TSZ 251).

We should also notice that the act of putting together fragments to make sense of them involves a yes-saying attitude to life, including the past, however undesirable it is: “[. . .] when my eyes flee from the now to the past, they always find the same: fragments and limbs and dreadful accidents – but no human beings. [. . .] To redeem those who lived in the past and to recreate all ‘it was’ into a ‘thus I willed it’ – that alone should I call redemption” (TSZ 250-51). “[T]hus I willed it” may mean asserting that what happened was what one wanted, or one accepts the past, desirable or not. Nietzsche’s understanding of the meaning of history, of which this yes-saying attitude is an integral part, paves the way for his idea of the eternal return. As we will see, the will as a creator which resists positivist history finds its parallel in the idea of multiple identities, which is made possible by the elimination of single identity during the eternal return.

Further to his negating the Enlightenment idea of wholeness with the aesthetics of fragments, Nietzsche replaces the linear model of time, on which the Christian moral system is founded, with the notion of the eternal recurrence, which is fully announced in the section entitled “On the Vision and the Riddle,” in Part 3 of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Zarathustra tells the sailors his vision of his ascending a mountain with a dwarf – the spirit of gravity – on his back. The dwarf’s comparing Zarathustra to a stone that will eventually fall as he goes up recalls other passages in the book:

He who will one day teach men to fly will have moved all boundary stones; the boundary stones themselves will fly up into the air before him and he will rebaptize the earth – “the light one.” [. . .] Earth and life seem grave to him; and thus the spirit of gravity wants it. (TSZ 304)

When I saw my devil I found him serious, thorough, profound and solemn: it was the spirit of gravity – through him all things fall. (TSZ 153)

The heaviness suggested by the dwarf may refer to the force that fixates people to the earth, and thus may imply God, who is supposed to be the centre of things.³⁴ It is also connected to the idea of single identity. The spirit of gravity, therefore, represents many of the things to which Zarathustra is diametrically opposed. Zarathustra challenges the dwarf to embrace the notion of the eternal recurrence. When they stop at a gateway, Zarathustra explains that there are two long paths that intersect at the gateway and yet contradict each other: “Two paths meet here; no one has yet followed either to its end. This long lane stretches back for an eternity. And the long lane out there, that is another eternity” (TSZ 269). Since the gateway itself is called “Moment,” namely, the present,

³⁴ See Solomon and Higgins 237.

presumably one of the paths leads back to the past and the other forward to the future. In response to Zarathustra's question of whether the paths contradict each other eternally, the dwarf expresses the same conception of time as Zarathustra does later: "All that is straight lies. All truth is crooked; time itself is a circle" (*TSZ* 270). Zarathustra's angry reply that the dwarf takes the eternal return too lightly testifies to Nietzsche's idea that the eternal return should not be taken at its face value; that is, it is not a cyclical model of time. Then Zarathustra explains how the eternal recurrence works: "From this gateway, Moment, a long, eternal lane leads backward: behind us lies an eternity. Must not whatever can walk have walked on this lane before?" (*TSZ* 269).

On the other path, what has happened will continue to recur ("all that is to come"): "[. . .] must not all of us have been there before. And return and walk in that other lane, out there, before us, in this long dreadful lane – must we not eternally return?" (*TSZ* 270). Bernard Pautrat argues that since the doctrine of the eternal return is a void in *Zarathustra*, we have to turn to the conjecture that, in light of Nietzsche's adherence to the idea that there is no thing-in-itself, "the eternal return is a thought of the non-identical."³⁵ The eternal return of the same can be seen as an idea to exploit the issue of identity. Identity here applies not only to the notion of the self as opposed to the other, but also to all other binary oppositions. According to Nietzsche, life is a ceaseless and inhuman struggle for power and dominion. The production of anthropomorphic metaphysical entities that thwart life as will to power can be traced to the structure of language, where grammar always posits a doer behind an action: "We

³⁵ Bernard Pautrat, "Nietzsche Medused," in Rickels 164.

are not getting rid of God because we still believe in grammar” (*TL*). This binary opposition between subject (doer) and object (action or external world), which is aimed at a sense of security by rendering life humanly conceivable, finds its variations in dualisms like “being/becoming”, “Heaven/earth”, “moral/immoral”. As long as we believe in God, we believe in the notion of origin. An origin is supposed to guarantee the purity and fixity of identity because nothing comes before it and it is not yet marked by subsequent moments. The issue of identity is in fact another way to pose the problem of nihilism for Nietzsche. Because of the belief in single identity and God, Christians trace everything in the earthly life to God, who is supposedly the ultimate origin of all beings. Metaphysical thinking is actually thinking in terms of the identical: while there is a correspondence between copies and their original, the former are always suppressed in favor of the latter. The adherence to single identity results in preventing people from seeking what Nietzsche calls a higher form of life. The Christian self, as we have seen earlier, owing to its belief in the metaphysical world of the Christian after-life (that is, the origin), is overwhelmed with a sense of guilt and thus denigrates the earthly life. The spirit of gravity, as said above, is closely related to God. In “The Vision and the Riddle”, Zarathustra talks about his seeing a heavy black snake crawling down a young shepherd’s throat, with much nausea and dread on his (the shepherd’s) face (*TSZ* 271). In “The Spirit of Gravity”, Zarathustra also describes the spirit of gravity as “nauseating”: “Yes, life is a grave burden [. . .]. And much that is inside man is like an oyster: nauseating and slippery and hard to grasp [. . .]” (*TSZ* 305). The snake and the Spirit of Gravity can be taken as images of single identity. All forms of identity

are self-imposed and ways of subjectification and there is no pre-given, natural identity. Therefore, Nietzsche seeks to show by means of the eternal return that identities, due to the nature of identity, cannot be static and are ever-changing. The doctrine of the eternal return of the same mocks the notion of single identity. According to Nietzsche's idea of becoming and his rejection of the notion of thing-in-itself, the person who has experienced the eternal return of the same would not be the same person. Neither would events be the same. Apparently, during the eternal return of the same, events and the subject will come back to where they are – the present. But the present is always an abstraction; there is no such thing as the present unless it is arbitrarily marked off from its continuum with past and future. As soon as the present is thought of, it disappears into the past. Therefore, events and the subject can never return to the present because there is not a present for them to come back to. If they return to the present, they have to be different from before. This is a point made by Maurice Blanchot, who follows Pierre Klossowski's idea of multiple alterity in the Eternal Return:

The Eternal Return of the Same: the same, that is to say, myself, in as much as it sums up the rule of identity, that is, the present self. But the demand of the return, excluding any present mode from time, would never release a now in which the same would come back to the same, to myself. (Blanchot 11)

[. . .] identity in the eternal return does not designate the nature of what comes again, but, on the contrary, the fact of coming again for that which differs.³⁶

The eternal return of the same turns out to be the eternal return of difference. As Klossowski says, "We are other than what we are now: others that are not elsewhere, but

³⁶ *Nietzsche et la philosophie*, Gille Deleuze (PUF, 1962) 54-55, quoted in the Introduction to Blanchot xiii.

always in this same life” (Klossowski 54). For Nietzsche, subjectification through identity results in the repression of the will to power. People are subject to demands imposed on them by, for example, their national identity (which can mean dying for one’s country whatever the cause is), their sexual identity (which can mean denigrating the other sex or those with a different sexual orientation), their identity as a moral being (which can mean attacking those with a different moral outlook).

Moreover, the eternal return of the same makes impossible the notion of an origin. Zarathustra touches upon this immensely crucial issue when he says “Must not whatever can walk have walked on this lane before?” (*TSZ* 240). If what is happening and what will happen has happened before, how can we locate the “original” series of events, or the “original” subject that experienced them? Similarly, there is no original, pure identity. As Blanchot says, “in the beginning was the return” (Blanchot 181). All identities must necessarily have been carrying difference within them all along.

The ultimate origin of single identity is of course God. Without God, people can adopt different identities in accordance with circumstances to maximize their life force.³⁷ That is why Klossowski makes the following points:

³⁷ Linda S. Bishai explains that the benefit of this kind of self is that it “allows for multiple loyalties and identities which reflect the true possibilities of modern lifestyles”:

Individuals may identify with the group into which they were born, or associate more closely with one of several cultural groups of which their extended family is made, or feel truly ‘multicultural’ on the individual level. In addition, a person might ‘go native’ through marriage or business or educational associations. This diversity of valid possibilities allows for a confusing but appealing contingency in the making of the self and the collective. But it also provides a kind of freedom in its very indeterminateness. (103)

The emphasis must be placed on the loss of a given identity. The death of God' (The God who guarantees the identity of the responsible self) opens up the soul to all its possible identities, [. . .]. The revelation of the Eternal Return brings about, as necessity, the successive realizations of all possible identities [. . .]. (Klossowski 57)

[. . .] the rewilling has as its object a multiple alterity inscribed within an individual. (Klossowski 69)³⁸

Nietzsche's use of the idea of the eternal return is thus intended to explode the illusory pureness of the notion of single identity inherent in metaphysics in order to fulfill the potential of life as will to power.³⁹

Just as God, or the notion of single identity, represses one's potential multiple identities, so the Christian life narrative reduces one's life story to a matter of cause and effect. For Nietzsche, the immanence of life is of central importance; life should not be judged from the angle of anything that is external to life and raised above it. He is against the idea of using the outside (e.g. Christian metaphysics, historicism) to explain

³⁸ Other passages in Klossowski's work referring to the idea of multiple identities include these:

The Eternal Return suppresses enduring identities. Nietzsche urges the adherent of the Vicious Circle to accept the dissolution of his fortuitous soul in order to receive another, equally fortuitous. (71)

[. . .] the Vicious Circle, as Eternal Return, is presented as a chain of experiences that forms the individuality of the doctrine's adherent, who knows that he has pre-existed otherwise than he now exists, and that he will yet exist differently, from one 'eternity to another'. (70)

³⁹ Gary Shapiro provides another formulation of how the eternal return of the same destabilizes identity. The adoption of a religious or metaphysical creed signals one's commitment to its logic (cause and effect in teleology, as in Christianity, and that of the eternal and the temporal, as in Platonism) and therefore strengthens one's identity as a believer. However, there may well be moments in one's life when one has not yet been convinced of the creed, rejects it or forgets it. With the acceptance of the thought of the eternal return, all these moments of hesitation, rejection and relapses are affirmed and recur eternally, thus rendering impossible any notion of progressive spiritual ascendancy and any sense of one's stable identity as a belief of the creed. Following this, with the repetition of all one's life, there is no way to locate a point at which the "original" self can be found because all the moments are affirmed according to the doctrine. See Shapiro 89-92.

the inside (e.g. life, events). Cause and effect are nothing more than human concepts that form an interpretative grid on events which have no meaning in themselves:

Two successive states, the one “cause”, the other “effect”: this is false. The first has nothing to effect, the second has been effected by nothing. (WP #633)

Critique of the concept: cause. – From a psychological point of view the concept “cause” is our feeling of power resulting from the so-called act of will - our concept “effect” the superstition that this feeling of power is the motive power itself – (WP #689)

The eternal return undermines the Christian life narrative, founded on the linear conception of time. As we have seen, in the Christian notion of temporality, just as one’s past is constituted as sinful and hence as the cause of human suffering in the present, so future reward or punishment hinges on what one does now. In other words, the cause-effect logic is tied up with the conception of linear time. This allows the present to be denied significance: man deserves suffering now because of his past sin; to achieve eternal salvation, one must ascetically deny the present and the earthly life. This is what Nietzsche calls the ascetic ideal. Zarathustra’s eternal recurrence wipes out the Christian concepts of sin and the Final Judgment.⁴⁰ It eliminates the grounds for justifying suffering in the present and eternal salvation or damnation in the future in the Christian moral system because the eternal return, as we have seen, dissolves any notion of an origin, thus rendering it impossible to interpret an event as a cause. Without sin in

⁴⁰ Higgins has a similar view on this. See Higgins 185-87.

the past, which weighs upon the present like a nightmare and without an afterworld, in favor of which the present is denigrated, the earthly life is affirmed.⁴¹

For Nietzsche, the will to power is man's essential life activity and productive force but in modern society it is often strangled by the ascetic ideal, which disseminates the idea of resignation to suffering and rejection of life. Nietzsche attributes the ascetic ideal to the linear conception of time exemplified in the Christian moral worldview. Its cause-effect logic posits man's sin in the past as a cause of his suffering and the afterworld as its *telos*, whereby the significance of the earthly life is dismissed. Nietzsche's eternal recurrence knocks out the notions of cause and effect, thus removing any possibility of *telos*.

2.3 Repetition and Memory in Nietzsche

By now it should be clear that Nietzsche's two different ideas of repetition are both underlined by the issue of memory, and that, like Marx's, his understanding of the relationship between memory and repetition, between past and present is highly mobile.

In *Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense*, Nietzsche is in line with what he says about the importance of forgetting in *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*. People need a horizon so as not to be overwhelmed by endless images inundating them. So people can live healthily only when they have forgotten a host of rather disturbing thoughts – that the human perception of the world is only one among innumerable others to perceive the world, that there is no qualitative difference between

⁴¹Pierre Klossowski makes the same point, saying that Nietzsche “developed a new version of fatality – that of the vicious circle, which suppresses every goal and meaning, since the beginning and the end always merge with each other” (30).

the human perspective and other animals' perspectives, that to use language, people are in fact "lying" in the sense that they pretend language can point to the real, and above all, that all things in the world are inevitably human constructions –

Only by forgetting this primitive world of metaphor can one live with any repose, security, and consistency: only by means of the petrification and coagulation of a mass of images which originally streamed from the primal faculty of human imagination like a fiery liquid, only in the invincible faith that *this* sun, *this* window, *this* table is a truth in itself, in short, only by forgetting that he himself is an *artistically creating* subject, does man live with any repose, security, and consistency. (TL 86; original emphasis)

For all that it is indispensable for a healthy sense of identity, forgetting – or having too little memory – arguably plays a significant role in the formation of metaphysical ideals, the bankruptcy of which eventually leads to nihilism. By contrast, the problem for Nietzsche in *Zarathustra* is the excessive burden of memory. Paul de Man is quite right to draw attention to a rather oblique connection between the disabling effect of too much memory,⁴² which Nietzsche discusses in *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*, and modernity's obsession with being new. In stressing the importance of the ability to forget the past, Nietzsche, says de Man, is simultaneously announcing the defining feature of modernity:

All acting requires forgetting [. . .] it is possible to live with almost no memories, even to live happily as the animal shows; but without forgetting it is quite impossible to live at all. (ADHL 10)

We must then consider the capacity to perceive unhistorically to a certain degree as the more important and fundamental so far as it provides the foundation upon which alone something right, healthy and great, something truly human may grow. [. . .] without that cloak of the unhistorical he would never have begun and dared to begin. (ADHL 11)

⁴² See de Man 145-47.

Modernity's drive towards newness is, therefore, synonymous with the problem of modernity for Nietzsche: the failure to forget the past in the backward-looking view of life in Christianity, the demise of which goes a long way towards the advent of nihilism. And it is against this tenacious hold of the past over the present that Nietzsche's conception of the eternal recurrence reacts.

Chapter 3 Freud

Freud's notion of repetition is both a manifestation of what he sees as problems of modernity, and a critique of these problems. His discussions of repetition in the works I will examine are concerned with two unmistakably modern phenomena – hysteria and neurosis, and the First World War. Hysteria, deriving from the Greek word “hysteria” meaning “uterus,” of course, dates much earlier than the nineteenth century. Hysteria and neurosis, on which Freud spills a large amount of ink throughout his career has been regarded by critics as both class- and historically-specific diseases. For they stemmed from the middle class's inability to adapt to the changes that came with the late eighteenth and the nineteenth century industrialization and commercialization of social life, which was a salient feature of modernity.⁴³ The case of the First World War is even more obvious. The war was the disastrous culmination of the Enlightenment belief in the omnipotence of scientific instrumentality, which was a hallmark of modernity. In this light, Freud is committed to marking the deteriorating illness of civilization, which is manifested in the increasingly debilitating series of hysteria, melancholia and traumatic neuroses.

In my view, Freud's idea of repetition can be understood in three different ways. One way is to look at how it works in Freud's theory of the mechanisms of neurosis and hysteria, and this articulates Freud's concern with the problems of origin and linear temporality. I will explicate this using *The History of an Infantile Neurosis* (1918

⁴³ See Logan 1-9. Nineteenth century English novels, for example, are brimful of hysterical characters: Maria Dashwood in Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), Lucy in Charlotte

[1914]), popularly known as the case of the “Wolfman.” Another way is to examine the link between the idea of repetition and the death drives, which is found in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920). And this issue represents Freud’s questioning of the Enlightenment ideal of ceaseless progress. A third way is to study the link between the formal repetition of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and the idea of repetition in the sense of the continuation of humanity as used by Edward Said. A case can be made for Freud’s concern in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* over the viability of the family’s capability of passing on human legacies. If the repetition of the human race by means of the family becomes problematic, there is a need for human beings to compensate it with another kind of repetition, that is, repetition of the human race by means of social institutions, for instance, an academic discipline like psychoanalysis.

3.1 Repetition and Memory in Freud

Let us bear in mind at the outset that the dynamics of memory are constitutive of the whole business of psychoanalysis. Freud constantly lays emphasis on the importance of memory for his field: “A psychological theory deserving of any consideration must furnish an explanation of ‘memory.’”⁴⁴ Elsewhere, he says, “For him [the physician] recollection in the old style, reproduction in the mind, remains the

Brontë’s *Villette* (1853), Mrs Jazeph in Wilkie Collins’s *The Dead Secret* (1857) and Gwendolen Harleth in George Eliot’s *Daniel Deronda* (1876), to name just a few.

⁴⁴ *Project for a Scientific Psychology* (1895), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1953-74)1: 299, quoted in Terdiman 240.

goal of his endeavours [. . .]” (RRWT 373).⁴⁵ The following are the most typical origins of psychic disorders; I will look at the role that memory plays in each case:

- (1) As is the most typical of psychic illness, socially forbidden wishes that are repressed into the unconscious as if forgotten can stage a comeback into the conscious in disguised form such as a physical disorder.
- (2) A traumatic event, whose implications are not fully absorbed by the patient at an early age, is registered by the unconscious and lies dormant there as if it were forgotten.
- (3) A traumatic event, for which the ego initially had no preparation, produces compulsively repeated behavior, or traumatic dreams which the patient cannot get out of.

In the first two cases, the problem of the “loss” of memory needs to be addressed by recovering the patient’s memory of the original forbidden wishes or trauma. By contrast, the problem in the third case above is not forgetting, but having too much memory because patients exhibiting the compulsion to repeat constantly undergo the same traumatic experience; in other words, they remember the past too well. To wrench them out of the grip of these traumatic recollections, on the other hand, they need to be made to remember the origin of the problem. Taken altogether, the situation is actually more complicated than this. For the memory of a traumatic event may evade the conscious mind as if forgotten so that the trauma is rendered meaningless at the time of its happening. And it remains a non-event until a later event takes place which is somehow

⁴⁵ All citations of *Recollection, Repetition and Working Through*, abbreviated as *RRWT*, are from *Collected Papers* Vol. 2.

similar and powerful enough to bring it into life and make it meaningful to the patient. As I will seek to demonstrate, the tricky workings of memory have profound implications for Freud's notions of time and causality and his critique of modernity.

3.2 Repetition in Neurosis and Hysteria: the Case of the Wolfman and the Question of Origin and Linear Temporality

Repetition is ubiquitous in Freud's psychoanalytical theory.⁴⁶ In *The History of an Infantile Neurosis*, where Freud meticulously analyzes the Russian patient Sergei Pankeiev's experience of seduction by his sister, an anxiety dream and an obsessional neurosis with a religious content, repetition is manifested in two things. One is the Wolfman's animal phobia and obsessional neurosis. The other is the anxiety dream and its subsequent repetitions during his treatment by Freud. Similar to the case of Anna O, each outbreak of animal phobia and obsessional neurosis and each of his repeated

⁴⁶ There is a case for saying that repetition began to play a part in Freud's psychoanalytical theory as early as when he worked on hypnosis to study hysteria. His famous case history of Anna O details how Breuer successfully cures the hysterical patient. In *Five Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*, Freud pinpoints the cause of hysteria this way: "Our hysterical patients suffer from reminiscences. Their symptoms are residues and mnemonic symbols of particular (traumatic) experiences" (12).

Hysterical patients are held by painful experiences of the past which they cannot get out of, thus mistaking what is past for the real and present. These repressed painful experiences, having undergone "hysterical conversion" (*FLP* 15) under the censorship of the ego, find their way back to the conscious mind in the form of physical disorders. The point here is that each outbreak of hysterical or neurotic symptoms is a repetition of the original trauma.

In addition to repeating the repressed in behavior or in dreams, traumatic neurotics demonstrate repetition in yet another way. It happens when the earlier neurosis becomes transference neurosis. In his case history of Dora, Freud defines transferences as "new editions or facsimiles of the impulses and phantasies which are aroused and made conscious during the progress of the analysis" and "replace some earlier person by the person of the physician" (*Dora* 157). The word "editions" here recalls the famous opening paragraph of Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire*, where he calls Louis Napoleon's coup d'état "the second edition" of Napoleon I's eighteenth brumaire. Indeed, during transference patients transfer onto the analyst attitudes, ideas and emotions they invested in people important in their lives, particularly their parents. That is, transference is a process of patients' repetition of all the attitudes that they held towards these figures, for whom the analyst has now become a substitute. Thus, transferences are not "new impressions, but revised editions" (*Dora* 158).

anxiety dreams were repetitions of his original traumatic experience. I will concentrate on the anxiety dreams and its repetitions, which were the Wolfman's repetitive symptoms during treatment.

Freud's job is to find out for the Wolfman what caused his psychic problems as the removal of a symptom requires a conscious understanding of it in relation to its origin. Curiously enough, Freud allows his initial interpretation of the origin of the Wolfman's trauma to be compromised by subsequent interpretations added to the text. He interprets the primal scene in three epistemologically different ways: as a real event, as the Wolfman's fantasy, and as the analyst's construction. My argument is that, in whichever of Freud's interpretations, which I will detail below, the nature of the traumatic origin and its relationship with its subsequent manifestations in the form of anxiety dreams run counter to modernity's models of time and causality.

3.2.1 The Primal Scene as a Real Event and as the Wolfman's Fantasy⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Let us make clear the circumstances surrounding the Wolfman's anxiety dream. The Wolfman was sexually seduced by his sister at about three and a quarter years old. As his sister was his rival for their parents' attention, the Wolfman rejected his sister and turned to his nurse, Nanya, of whom he was very fond. Having been offered a passive sexual aim by his sister's allurements, the Wolfman, in face of his Nanya's threat of castration (in response to his masturbation as a form of seduction), regressed to the sadistic-anal organization and now saw his father as a sexual object, who had long been his admired model. His desire for his father was realized in his wanting punishments from him through his naughtiness. In the dream, the Wolfman was horrified by the sight of six or seven white wolves perching on the branch of a walnut tree staring at him outside his bedroom window. Seeing the dream as key to his neurosis, Freud treats the manifest content as the opposite of the latent content. He takes the wolves sitting on the tree in the dream as coming from his grandfather's story in which a pack of wolves climbed upon one another, that is, in an upright position, and from a picture of a wolf standing upright used by his sister to frighten him. Freud regards his fear of the wolf originating from fear of his father, with the wolves in the dream being his father-surrogate. Most importantly, the pulling off of one of the wolves' tail is interpreted by Freud as pointing to the castration complex.

Freud infers that the origin of the wolf dream, its repetitions, his animal phobia and obsessional neurosis was connected with the theme of castration, with his desire for his father, his later fear of his father, the upright position of the wolves in his memories being all relevant components in the dream-work. His conclusion is that the Wolfman, at about the age of one and a half, witnessed his parents' sexual intercourse from behind. (The father's position is related to the wolves'.) Despite his sexual desire for his father, the Wolfman mistakenly thought that, to be sexually satisfied by his father, he must become castrated like his mother, as he saw during their sexual act. So Freud imagines the Wolfman saying to himself: "If you want to be sexually satisfied by Father, [. . .] you must allow yourself to be castrated like Mother; but I won't have that" (WM 208).⁴⁸ His animal phobia arose from his rejection of sexual desire for his father because of his fear of castration: "His last sexual aim, the passive attitude towards his father, succumbed to repression, and fear of his father appeared in its place in the shape of the wolf phobia" (WM 279).

Given the importance he ascribes to infantile experiences, Freud argues that the Wolfman at the age of one and a half was able to "take in the perceptions of such a complicated process [his parents' copulation] and to preserve them so accurately in his unconscious" and "it is possible at the age of four for a *deferred revision* of this material to penetrate the understanding [. . .]" (WM 281; my emphasis). At the time of his witnessing the scene, no apparent effects were exerted on the Wolfman. He did not acquire a deeper understanding of the primal scene until about two years and a half later,

⁴⁸ All citations of *The History of an Infantile Neurosis*, abbreviated as WM, are from *The Penguin Freud Library* Vol. 9.

and he did so mainly through his sister's seduction (which, as we have seen, led to his sexual desire for his father). Freud highlights the importance of the sister's seduction and, again, the deferred effects of the primal scene on the Wolfman: "It [the sexual development of the case] was first decisively influenced by the seduction, and was then diverted by the scene of observation of the coitus, which in its deferred action operated like a second seduction" (WM 280). The idea that the observation of the primal scene had no immediate influence on the Wolfman raises questions about causality and linear time. Freud believes that the sense of reality the Wolfman experienced in the anxiety dream points to "an occurrence that really took place and was not merely imagined" (WM 264). But not much later, in an additional passage in Section 5, he seems to contradict himself by advancing another view of the primal scene: the copulation of the Wolfman's parents was a transference from a copulation of sheep-dogs that he witnessed on the farm he used to visit. In fact, in Section 8, Freud refuses to decide whether the primal scene was a real event or simply a fantasy: "I must admit that the answer to this question is not in fact a matter of very great importance" (WM 337).⁴⁹

The reason why Freud thinks the question is of no consequence is this. If we look at the chronology of the events leading to the Wolfman's onset of animal phobia, we have this sequence: the primal scene (at one and a half years), his seduction by his sister (at three and a quarter years), and the wolf dream (before four years). Yet, whether the primal scene was real or merely the Wolfman's fantasy, it is impossible to

⁴⁹ Freud's refusal to determine the nature of the primal scene is another manifestation of the "logic of abundance", which I discussed in the Introduction, namely, the idea that there were different explanations of the same phenomenon was gathering force during the nineteenth century.

say the scene was the cause of the subsequent events – the Wolfman’s seduction by his sister, his rejection by Nanya, his passive sexual aim of getting masochistic satisfaction from his father, and the anxiety dream – because the witnessing of the scene had no immediate traumatic effects. On the contrary, it is these later events which decided the meaning of the primal scene. At one a half years old, the Wolfman, though able to take in the perceptions of his parents’ intercourse, probably could not absorb fully its implications for himself. It was his later sexual development, influenced chiefly by his sister’s seduction, Nanya’s rejection and his sexual, masochistic desire for his father, which prompted his delayed horrified understanding of the primal scene that castration was a prerequisite for obtaining sexual satisfaction from his father. In his recapitulation of the case in Section 9, Freud puts the relationship between the primal scene and the subsequent events this way: “[. . .] it was at that point [the boy’s fourth birthday] that the dream brought into *deferred operation* his observation of intercourse at the age of one a half. [. . .] The activation of the picture, which, thanks to the advance in his intellectual development, he was now able to understand, operated not only like a *fresh event*, but like a *new trauma*, like an interference from outside analogous to the seduction” (WM 351; my emphasis). Thus, the meaning of the primal scene came into being only after the Wolfman’s later sexual development. In *Recollection, Repetition and Working Through* (1914), Freud speaks of internal mental activities like fantasies, and relations between ideas, impulses and feelings: “With these processes it particularly often happens that something is ‘remembered’ which never could have been ‘forgotten,’ because it was never at any time noticed, never was conscious [. . .]” (368).

Repetition, by definition, is a reproduction of an antecedent. In Freud's meticulous analysis, the anxiety dream was a distorted repetition of the primal scene. But it should be borne in mind that the full implications of the primal scene were not conscious to the Wolfman until his later sexual vicissitudes. In this light, the anxiety dream was not really a repetition of something preceding it, but the staging of a new experience for the first time ("not only like a fresh event, but like a new trauma"); in other words, it was only after the anxiety dream that he realized for the very first time the threat of castration embodied in the primal scene. Rimmon-Kenan puts this problematic relationship between repetition and its origin succinctly: "The first time is already a repetition, and repetition is the very first time" (155). "The first time" means the "initial" onset of a neurotic symptom. Though it looks to be the first time the symptom has appeared, for Freud and Rimmon-Kenan, the symptom is actually a residue of the past trauma in a repressed form, hence a repetition of the trauma. On the other hand, this repetition can be said to occur for the very first time, in the sense that the onset of the neurotic symptom is what provokes in the patient for the first time his or her conscious realization of the existence of the past trauma.

3.2.2 The Primal Scene as the Analyst's Construction

Freud's third view of the primal scene is that it is a construction by the analyst. Freud's short paper *Constructions in Analysis* (1937) is a succinct exposition of the nature of constructions in psychoanalysis. Psychoanalytical therapy, of course, "aims at

inducing the patient to give up the repressions” (CA 257)⁵⁰, which is achieved by having the patient “brought to recollect certain experiences and the affective impulses up called by them which he has for the time being forgotten” (CA 257-58). Since the repressed is forgotten, all the analyst can do is to pay attention to “[a]ll kinds of things” that the patient gives him like “fragments of these memories in his dreams” (CA 258) and “make out what has been forgotten from the traces which it has left behind or, more correctly to *construct it*” (CA 258-59; original emphasis).

In the Wolfman’s case, Freud makes a similar point, saying that infantile scenes cannot be recollected and therefore have to be constructed: “[. . .] scenes, like this one in my present patient’s case [. . .] are as a rule not reproduced as recollections, but have to be divined, constructed gradually and laboriously from an aggregate of indications” (WM 284-85). The idea that the past needs to be constructed is comparable to what Freud says in the paper of how to treat patients exhibiting the compulsion to repeat: “[. . .] while the patient lives it [the repressed] through as something real and actual, we have to accomplish the therapeutic task, which consists chiefly in translating it back again into terms of the past” (WM 371). Patients suffering from the compulsion to repeat need to be made to realize that their compulsively repetitive behavior, rather than being new and present, has an origin in the past. Similarly, Freud seeks to show the Wolfman that his problems stem from the past. He admits that his idea of the Wolfman

⁵⁰ All citations of *Construction in Analysis*, abbreviated as CA, are from *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1953-74) Vol. 23.

witnessing a primal scene is necessarily constructed because infantile scenes from an early period cannot be recollected.

There is another connection between the paper and the Wolfman's case. In the latter work, Freud remarks that "[. . .] in the course of the treatment the first dream [the wolf dream] returned in innumerable variations and new editions" (WM 268). Unlike his patients suffering from the compulsion to repeat who reproduce what is repressed in behavior according to his *Recollection, Repetition and Working Through*, here it is in dreams that the Wolfman reproduced the repressed material. And he draws a parallel between recollections and dreams:

It seems to me absolutely equivalent to a recollection, if the memories are replaced (as in the present case) by dreams the analysis of which invariably leads back to the same scene and which reproduce every portion of its content in an inexhaustible variety of new shapes. Indeed, dreaming is another kind of remembering, though one that is subject to the conditions that rule at night and to the laws of dream-formation. It is this recurrence in dreams that I regard as the explanation of the fact that the patients themselves gradually acquire a profound conviction of the reality of these primal scenes, a conviction which is in no respect inferior to one based on recollection. (WM 285)

The repetition of the anxiety dream is to the Wolfman what repetitive behavior is to people suffering from the compulsion to repeat. More crucially, the constructedness of the primal scene and its relationship with the repetition of the anxiety dream has profound implications for questions of causality and linear time. Chronologically, the primal scene of course preceded the anxiety dream and its repetitions during the course of Freud's treatment. But in the passage just quoted above, Freud is saying that it was not the Wolfman's recollection of the primal scene, but the anxiety dream and its subsequent repetitions which convinced the Wolfman of the reality of the primal scene.

This is in line with what Freud says in *Constructions in Analysis* about what a correct construction will lead to – either the patient’s recovering the forgotten memory, or his or her conviction of the truth of the construction –

The path that starts from the analyst’s construction ought to end in the patient’s recollection; but it does not always lead so far. Quite often we do not succeed in bringing the patient to recollect what has been repressed. Instead of that, if the analysis is carried out correctly, we produce in him an assured conviction of the truth of the construction which achieves the same therapeutic result as a recaptured memory. (265-66)

Given that both the recollection of repressed material and the conviction of the construction are seen as signs of a successful treatment, it comes as no surprise that in the Wolfman’s case, Freud equates remembering with dreaming, which is proof of the Wolfman’s belief in the existence of the primal scene.

The impact of the past – the Wolfman’s observation of the primal scene – therefore set in only after its repetitions through Freud’s construction. And it was the repetitions of the anxiety dream that bore witness for the Wolfman to the existence of the primal scene – their supposed antecedent.

There is a parallel idea in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, to which I will soon turn, where Freud at one point explains that the dreams of patients suffering from neurosis are not aimed at bringing the patients pleasure: “These dreams are endeavoring to master the stimulus *retrospectively*, by developing the anxiety whose omission was the cause of the traumatic neurosis” (*BPP* 304; my emphasis).⁵¹ Contrary to the function of wish-fulfillment in Freud’s dream theory, traumatic dreams set out to create

⁵¹ All citations of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, abbreviated as *BPP*, are from The Penguin Freud Library Vol. 11.

anxiety, whose presence would have prevented the onset of traumatic neurosis. So it looks as though the repetition of traumatic dreams seeks to recreate their absent “cause.” Again, this complicates the relationship between repetition and its antecedent. The question of origin in the case of the Wolfman, whether the primal scene was the origin of the anxiety dream and its repetitions or these repetitions made possible the belief in the existence of the primal scene, is made highly problematic by Freud’s idea of the past as an invention.

Before looking at *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, I want to look briefly at Freud’s formulation of repetition in his paper *The Uncanny* (1919), which was published just a year earlier, in order to show what is special about the former work. In *The Uncanny*, Freud discusses how the old and long familiar can become unfamiliar and terrifying, which constitutes the uncanny. Freud’s explanation of the uncanny is, to put it simply, the return of the repressed – the conscious mind is taken aback by its confrontation with a wish supposedly repressed long since: “[. . .] everything is *unheimlich* [uncanny] that ought to have remained secret and hidden but has come to light” (TU 345).⁵² In fact at one point in this paper, Freud describes the mechanism of the uncanny in terms of repetition, although the context here is one in which he is trying to disentangle the repression of desires which effects the uncanny from that which does not: “And the resuscitation of the dead in accounts of miracles, as in the New Testament, elicits feelings quite unrelated to the uncanny. Then, too, the theme that achieves such an indubitably uncanny effect, the *unintended recurrence of the same*

⁵² All citations of *The Uncanny*, abbreviated as TU, are from *The Penguin Freud Library* Vol. 14.

thing, serves other and quite different purposes in another class of cases” (TU 369; my emphasis).

Freud distinguishes between two classes of uncanny experiences - that associated with infantile wishes and that associated with primitive beliefs. Several paragraphs later, he comes to "the uncanny associated with the omnipotence of thoughts, with the prompt fulfillment of wishes, with secret injurious powers and with the return of the dead"(TU 370). This is how Freud describes the process of uncanny feeling:

Nowadays we no longer believe in them [primitive beliefs], we have surmounted these modes of thought; *but we do not feel quite sure of our new beliefs, and the old ones still exist within us ready to seize upon any confirmation.* As soon as something actually happens in our lives which seems to confirm the old, discarded beliefs we get a feeling of the uncanny [. . .] The most remarkable coincidences of wish and fulfilment, the most mysterious *repetition* of similar experiences in a particular place or on a particular date, the most deceptive sights and suspicious noises [. . .] (TU 371; my emphasis)

The uncanny functions under the pleasure principle – like dreams, the uncanny, which represents fulfillment of wishes in distorted form, provides satisfaction for people.

While the uncanny works in accordance with the pleasure principle, Freud, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, talks about a kind of repetition which on no account can bring pleasure, thus violating the pleasure principle. Traumatic neurotics are among several groups of people – including people who repeat certain obsessional behavior for no good reason and children at play – that Freud has found exhibiting the compulsion to repeat, which apparently overrides the pleasure principle. We have examined repetition

in traumatic neurotics in the example of the Wolfman. Now let us look at Freud's patients suffering from war neurosis.

3.3 The Compulsion to Repeat: Repetition of Traumatic Experiences in Dreams, Play and Others

It is well-known that Freud's psychoanalytic theory underwent constant revision throughout his career, including his pairing of instincts in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. The old pair - the ego instincts and sexual instincts – both of which are positive in their effects, is superseded by a contrasted pair: life instincts and death instincts. We have good reason to believe that it was the World War which occasioned Freud's revision of his theory of instincts because, as Peter Gay notes, Freud, in talking about aggression, insists that the war “had not created the interest of psychoanalysis in aggression; rather, it had only confirmed what analysts had been saying about aggression all along” (396).⁵³ Indeed, the First World War is a highly significant backdrop for any discussion of the relationship between Freud's theory of repetition and the question of modernity.

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, where he also refers to his and Breuer's collaborative work on hysteria, Freud talks at length about war neurotics (598). In fact, the mechanisms of hysteria are very similar to those of Freud's patients suffering from war neurosis. The German cultural critic Walter Benjamin, in his essay “The

⁵³ In the same book, Gay also cites in a footnote (396) Freud's letter of December 1914 to the Dutch poet and psychopathologist Frederik van Eden to the effect that the war confirmed the “primitive, savage and evil impulses of mankind have not vanished in any individual, but continue their existence, although in a repressed state” and “wait for opportunities to display their activity” (originally quoted in Ernest Jones' *The Life and Work of Sigmund Freud Vol. 2, Years of Maturity, 1901-1919* (New York: Basic Books, 1955)).

Storyteller,”⁵⁴ points out that the twentieth century breakdown of narrative has its first manifestation in the century in the soldiers who came back from the Great War: “Was it not noticeable at the end of the war that men returned from the battlefield grown silent – not richer, but poorer in communicable experience?” (84). Tremendously horrified by the overwhelming power of modern technology in the War against humans, these soldiers virtually could not speak their war experiences until years later. Much more recently, Helene Cixous too draws a connection between psychic illness and the inability to speak: “Silence: silence is the mark of hysteria. The great hysterics have lost speech, they are aphonic.”⁵⁵ Freud’s account of Anna O’s case, in *Five Lectures of Psychoanalysis*, reflects a similar breakdown in communication: “Her powers of speech were reduced, even to the point of her being unable to speak or understand her native language” (4-5).

Another similarity is that Freud’s patients suffering from traumatic neurosis may go round and round the painful experience in reminiscence or in dreams and are not able to speak it:

I am not aware, however, that patients suffering from traumatic neurosis are much occupied in their waking lives with memories of their accident. Perhaps they are more concerned with not thinking of it. Anyone who accepts it as something self-evident that their dreams should put them back at night into the situation that caused them to fall ill has misunderstood the nature of dreams. It would be more in harmony with their nature if they showed the patient pictures from his healthy past or of the cure for which he hopes. (*BPP* 282-83)

⁵⁴ Collected in *Illuminations* 83-107.

⁵⁵ “Castration or Decapitation,” in *Signs* 7 (1981) 49, quoted in Logan 9.

Freud is saying here that there is no reason to believe that these neurotics would want to think about their traumatic experiences. Nor is there reason why they should often dream about them, despite the fact being otherwise. Freud's problem here is how to reconcile his original theory of dreams with what he observes in the shell-shocked war neurotics. According to his dream theory, wishes incompatible with the ego and thus repressed into the unconscious under the reality principle, are always ready to break through the resistance put up by the ego and sneak back into the conscious mind. When the resistance is at its weakest, for example, when one is asleep, the unfulfilled wishes can go back into consciousness in disguised form serving as substitutes for what have been repressed. Thus, what one experiences in dreams is the fulfillment of one's repressed wishes in unrecognizable form. This working of dreams conforms to Freud's pleasure principle; that is, dreams function to increase one's pleasure. But Freud's observation that his patients suffering from war neurosis in reminiscence or in dreams, which flatly contradicts the principle that human life is a matter of pursuing pleasure,⁵⁶

⁵⁶ Another way in which Freud's pleasure principle is violated is transference, which, for Freud, is psychoanalysis's "most powerful ally" (*Dora* 159). During transference, the part of the patient's emotional life which has undergone repression and become unconscious due to traumatic experiences or repressed infantile impulses can be reproduced and re-experienced by the patient using the analyst as a substitute figure. This allows the analyst to pinpoint the causes of neurosis and convert the repetition in transference into the recognition that what is repeated during transference belongs, not to the present, but to the past. Earlier in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud cites the example of some patients during transference deliberately making the analyst treat them scornfully and coldly in a bid to repeat what others did to them in the past. Freud seems puzzled that this phenomenon occurs without any possibility of giving the patients pleasure:

None of these things can have produced pleasure in the past, and it might be supposed that they would cause less unpleasure to-day if they emerged as memories or dreams instead of taking the form of fresh experiences. [. . .] no lesson has been learnt from the old experience of these activities having led instead only to unpleasure. In spite of that, they are repeated, under pressure of a compulsion (22).

necessitates his modification of his theory of instincts, by positing the death drives, which have a paradoxical relationship with the life instincts.

These death drives are manifested in the compulsion to repeat, whereby an organism seeks to reduce its stimuli in an attempt to return to the pre-organic state, that is, death. In explaining war neurotics' paradoxical repetition of traumatic experiences, Freud details his observation of his own 18-month-old grandson's response to his mother's absence. Greatly attached to his mother, the child finds her absence a traumatic experience to which he cannot but be a helpless victim. Freud observes that the child, with his mother away, plays with a wooden reel tied to a long string by repeatedly throwing it away and retrieving it: "What he did was to hold the reel by the string and very skilfully throw it over the edge of his curtained cot, so that it disappeared into it, at the same time uttering his expressive 'o-o-o'. He then pulled the reel out of the cot again by the string and hailed its reappearance with a joyful 'da' [there]" (*BPP* 284). Freud and his daughter both interpret the child's "o-o-o" to be the German word "fort" (which means "gone"). The theorizing of this famous Fort-Da game is Freud's early attempt to explain the idea of repetition. Paralyzed by the mother's going away, the child finds it difficult to rationalize her absence. In order to turn his own helplessness into mastery, the child repeats his traumatic experience using the cotton reel as a substitute for the mother. Through repeating the act of throwing away the wooden reel as a revenge on the mother, the child manages to rationalize the mother's absence, coming to feel itself in control of the situation as if it were he who wills the mother

away and thinking: “All right, then, go away! I don't need you. I'm sending you away myself” (*BPP* 285).

Freud then goes on to speculate on this urge to repeat undesirable experiences in other aspects of everyday life, for example, children's play in which they turn their passivity into activity and pass the disagreeable experiences to their playmates. He also discerns in some people “an essential character-trait which always remains the same and which is compelled to find expression in a repetition of the same experiences” (*BPP* 604). A person who finds it necessary to go through failed relationships of various kinds, for example, does so because he or she finds it necessary.

At this point of the essay, Freud is at best ambivalent about the nature of the compulsion to repeat. On the one hand, he says in the cases of transference, people who seek to repeat certain obsessional behavior, war neurotics and children at play, “there really does exist in the mind a compulsion to repeat which overrides the pleasure principle” (*BPP* 293). On the other hand, he immediately qualifies what he has just said by noting that the compulsion to repeat is often merged with other motives which seek instinctual satisfaction. For example, he says that the ego makes use of the compulsion to repeat to gain pleasure: “[. . .] the compulsion to repeat, which the treatment tries to bring into its service is, as it were, drawn over by the ego to its side (clinging as the ego does to the pleasure principle)” (*BPP* 294), adding that “[e]nough is left unexplained to justify the hypothesis of a compulsion to repeat – something that seems more primitive, more elementary, more instinctual than the pleasure principle which it over-rides” (*BPP*

294). And it is to the relationship between the nature of instincts and the compulsion to repeat that we will now turn.

3.3.2 The Death Drives and the Freedom from Trauma

Although in Section 5 of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* Freud asks “how is the predicate of being ‘instinctual’ related to the compulsion to repeat?” (308), he does not seem to bring the compulsion to repeat to bear directly on the opposition between the sexual instincts and death instincts in organisms, which is supposed to be the subject of that section. In the following I will attempt to unravel the often difficult biological material that packs the section and its relation to the compulsion to repeat. My argument is that Freud’s speculation that an organism’s urge to return to the inanimate state is a manifestation of the death drive, and this in turn supports an idea of which he became increasingly convinced in his later years: human societies are not progressing at all; the idea of humanity’s marching towards a telos is merely an illusion.

Freud puts forward a new hypothesis about instincts. According to common wisdom, instincts have “in them a factor impelling towards change and development” (*BPP* 309). But Freud argues that “all the organic instincts are conservative” and “tend towards the restoration of an earlier state of things” (*BPP* 310). He illustrates the conservative nature of all instincts with his speculations on the elementary living entity. He maintains that, contrary to the common notion that organisms tend inherently to change and develop, elementary organisms would remain static and only repeat their course of life if there were no external stimuli, and that at this elementary stage, living substance lived ephemerally and died easily because of “the instinct to return to the

inanimate state” (*BPP* 311). But the simple repetition of life in primitive organisms was interfered with by their physical environment. For Freud, the life phenomena were nothing more than organisms’ responses to external environments and their instincts remained such that they wanted to return to the inorganic state. Therefore, for all that organisms now had a longer life span, giving the deceptive appearance that they have a tendency to develop, this means only that the organisms would have a roundabout way to their death:

For a long time, perhaps, living substance was thus being constantly created afresh and easily dying, till decisive external influences altered in such a way as to oblige the still surviving substance to diverge ever more widely from its original course of life and to make ever more complicated detours before reaching its aim of death. These circuitous paths to death, faithfully kept to it by the conservative instincts, would thus present us to-day with the picture of the phenomena of life. (*BPP* 311)

Another instance that Freud uses to demonstrate that all instincts have a tendency to restore an earlier state of things is that of the germ-cells. Each organism has in it germ-cells and it is the germ-cells which carry out reproduction and eventually develop into a new organism. So, if we compare the germ-cells with the other cells in an organism, it is as if the latter will follow their natural course to death whereas the former work against it by means of their reproductive functions:

[. . .] one portion of their substance pursues its development to a finish, while another portion harks back once again as a fresh residual germ to the beginning of the process of development. These germ-cells, therefore, work against the death of the living substance and succeed in winning for it what we can only regard as potential immortality, though that may mean no more than a lengthening of the road to death. (*BPP* 312-13)

Freud associates the reproductive functions of the germ-cells with the sexual instincts (*BPP* 313), maintaining that they are “the true life instincts” (*BPP* 313). What is important for my argument that for Freud, human societies are on a descending trend towards self-destruction, is that, despite the difference between the sexual instincts (associated with the germ-cells) and the death instincts (that is, all instincts except the sexual instincts), Freud points out that the two groups of instincts are equally conservative in that both “bring back an earlier state of living substance” (*BPP* 313). All the other instincts than the sexual instincts, as we have seen, have an inbuilt tendency to return to the inorganic state, namely, death. We have also noted that organisms, which themselves develop from the germ-cells, develop part of their cells into germ-cells to achieve reproduction. It is, therefore, as if the germ-cells of each organism are able to re-create a new life when the organism dies. (This is what Freud means when he says “the other group [the life instincts] jerk back to a certain point to make a fresh start and so prolong the journey” (*BPP* 313).) The sexual instincts, therefore, also tend to restore an earlier state of things, the difference being that the sexual instincts prolong life by returning to an earlier phase of it, not to death.

I have found there to be a parallel between the examples of the compulsion to repeat and the life phenomenon of primitive organisms that Freud discusses. Let us recall Freud’s war neurotics and his grandson’s play with the wooden reel on a string. The war neurotics experienced repetition of their traumatic dreams, which apparently brought them no pleasure. Freud’s grandson repeated his traumatic experience of his mother’s departure in the fort-da game, with “the first act, that of departure [. . .] staged

as a game in itself far more frequently than the episode in its entirety” (*BPP* 285), despite it being unpleasurable, as Freud acknowledges. When there is an overpowering external stimulus threatening a person, he will repeat the traumatic experience so as to master it. Freud argues that without external stimuli, primitive life would not develop and remain static and repeat its course of life. So, it is as if by calling on the instinct to repeat that the traumatized person can create a situation – crucially, an earlier state of things in terms of Freud’s discussion of primitive organisms – in which he is free of trauma. To put it another way, for primitive organisms, the absence of external stimuli would lead to repetition of life. Traumatic neurotics attempt a reverse process: to achieve the absence of trauma (i.e. the absence of external stimuli) by means of repetition. Repetition, then, is innate to all instincts, including (1) the sexual instincts, which exhibit repetition in the sense that their reproductive functions keep renewing the life of an organism, and (2) the death instincts, some of which are realized in the compulsion to repeat. The compulsion to repeat is as instinctual and conservative as the death drives.

We have seen that one of the tenets of the Enlightenment is the belief in human beings’ and societies’ capabilities for unlimited progress. This means that modernity’s view of time and history and of the human destiny is founded on teleology. But the compulsion to repeat, whose function is to release one from traumatic experiences by imitating the repetitive state of life in which primitive organisms were still unaffected by external stimuli, represents Freud’s frontal assault on the Enlightenment ideal of inevitable progress. For, firstly, repetition clearly means time at a standstill rather than

time in progress. Secondly, the return to an earlier state of things, at which the compulsion to repeat aims, is antithetical to linear time. Any doubt lingering as to Freud's critique of the Enlightenment ideal of inevitable progress will be laid to rest if we take a look at what he says about the organism's capabilities to develop:

There is unquestionably no universal instinct towards higher development observable in the animal or plant world [. . .] higher development in one respect is very frequently balanced or outweighed by involution in another. [. . .] It may be difficult, too, for many of us, to abandon the belief that there is an instinct towards perfection at work in human beings [. . .]. I have no faith, however, in the existence of any such internal instinct and I cannot see how this benevolent illusion is to be preserved. (*BPP* 314)

The compulsion to repeat is a critique of modernity and represents what Freud thinks to be the actual human condition: human societies do not develop in an ascending trajectory but only undergo repetition.

3.4 Formal Repetition and Repetition as Continuation of Humanity in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*

A third way to understand repetition in Freud is to study the link between the formal repetition in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and the idea of repetition in the sense of the continuation of humanity as suggested by Edward Said. I will take these two aspects of repetition one by one before showing their interconnection, which can throw a lot of light on both the notion of repetition and modernity in the late nineteenth century.

The way Freud conducts his arguments in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* has received ample attention from a number of commentators like Jacques Derrida and Leo Bersani. The formal repetition in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* cannot be separated

from Freud's intricate meandering meditations on a range of related subjects like the dominance of the pleasure principle, the supposed existence of an instinct beyond the pleasure principle, the nature of instincts such as the ego instincts, self-preservative instincts, sexual instincts, life instincts and death instincts. More crucially, Freud repeatedly propounds a speculation and retracting it before long. When we focus on the content of these speculations, we will find that he perhaps unwittingly deconstructs his own binary oppositions. This setting up of a hierarchy and its subsequent deconstruction, and Freud's oscillation between two different positions on a subject is actually a manifestation of the "alternating" and "multiple" perspectives that came into being during the nineteenth century. This in turn points to the "crisis of abundance" (Schleifer 35) in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century modernity: no explanatory model or "truth" can be valid once and for all, simply because there was a plethora of options, opinions and things for one to choose from.

The title of the work – *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* – would naturally lead one to expect a discussion of what is not in line with the pleasure principle. Freud starts, however, by asserting the importance, if not the dominance, of the pleasure principle: "[. . .] the course taken by mental events is automatically regulated by the pleasure principle" (*BPP* 275). Curiously, in tracing the credibility of the pleasure principle, as Bersani points out,⁵⁷ there is already a kind of circularity at work in Freud's explanation. Firstly, it is the "facts" (relating to "the hypothesis that the mental apparatus endeavours

⁵⁷ Leo Bersani says his own reading, like Derrida's, "emphasizes the lack of any progress in the argument being made in these early chapters, the failure of a thesis to be developed [. . .] (Bersani 341).

to keep the quantity of excitation present in it as low as possible or at least to keep it constant”) which entails the belief in the pleasure principle. The quote in the preceding sentence is actually the principle of constancy. Then the principle of constancy is said to have been inferred from the “facts”, which we are not exactly told. Freud does go on to talk about “what circumstances are able to prevent the pleasure principle from being carried into effect” (*BPP* 278). The first circumstance is one in which the reality principle is working: “Under the influence of the ego’s instincts of self-preservation, the pleasure principle is replaced by the reality principle” (*BPP* 278). But Freud immediately qualifies this statement by saying that the ultimate result is still the production of pleasure, though its by-product is temporary unpleasure. This means only that the pleasure principle still dominates. Similarly, the sexual instincts can overcome the reality principle, with the aid of the pleasure principle. At the end of Chapter One, though Freud concludes that the presence of the majority of unpleasurable experiences “does not contradict the dominance of the pleasure principle, he prepares the reader for a discussion of what really goes beyond the pleasure principle in the next chapter: “Nevertheless the investigation of the present problem” (*BPP* 280).

In Chapter 2 Freud continues this repetition of propounding and retracting. The chapter begins with a discussion of traumatic neuroses, which Freud cannot bring into harmony with the idea of dreams aimed at fulfilling repressed wishes (see Section 3.3 above). This seems to be something beyond the pleasure principle. But Freud at this point chooses “to leave the dark and dismal subject” (*BPP* 283). For Derrida, it is Freud’s first dismissal of his own speculation about what violates the pleasure principle

(Derrida 295). After saying that his grandson repeats more frequently the throwing away of the reel, which is certainly the more distressing part of the game, Freud halts himself again: “No certain decision can be reached from the analysis of a single case like this” (*BPP* 285). Freud’s explanation of his grandson’s repetition of the game, especially the first part – that the child gains pleasure from turning from passivity into activity through repeating the game and hence mastering the traumatic experience, and from the revenge he inflicts upon his mother through the throwing of the reel – leads only to another confirmation of the pleasure principle, “because the repetition carried along with it a yield of another sort but non the less a direct one” (*BPP* 286). Due to their yield of pleasure as their final outcome” (*BPP* 287), the ensuing mention of children’s play involving unpleasurable experiences and spectators’ experience of unpleasure in art is, Freud says, “of no use for our purposes, since they presuppose the existence of tendencies beyond the pleasure principle (*BPP* 287).

Chapter 3 does not take Freud ahead either. After surveying the repetition of unpleasurable experiences in psychoanalytic transference during treatment and people exhibiting a certain character trait, Freud says, “we shall find courage to assume that these really does exist in the mind a compulsion to repeat which over-rides the pleasure principle” (*BPP* 293). But almost immediately, he comes to regard transference during treatment as a manifestation of the pleasure principle: “[. . .] the compulsion to repeat, which the treatment tries to bring into its service is, as it were, drawn over by the ego to its side (cling as the ego does to the pleasure principle) (*BPP* 294). Like his grandson’s fort-da game, Freud is back to his original position: “Enough is left unexplained to

justify the hypothesis of a compulsion to repeat something that seems more primitive, more elementary, more instinctual than the pleasure principle which it over-rides" (*BPP* 294). The dominance of the pleasure principle is yet to be challenged seriously.

The evolution of Freud's theory of instincts as seen in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is extremely involved to the point of being confusing. Even with Freud's own footnote summary intended to help the reader follow the development of the theory, it requires a great deal of effort to construe the links between its developmental stages. As Freud says, his theory of instinct begins with the opposition between the ego instincts and the sexual (i.e. libidinal) instincts, the former including the self-preservative instincts and all other instincts as opposed to the sexual instincts. Things are clear at this stage, with the ego instincts' attention directed inwards to the protection of the ego, and the sexual instincts directed outwards to external objects. Freud's essay *On Narcissism* (1914), however, alters this picture of the instincts in a rather radical way. *Narcissism* posits the co-existence of the self-preservative instincts and the sexual instincts in the ego; that is, the ego sees itself as a sexual object, hence love of itself. Now, the difference that has resulted from his work on narcissism is that the ego instincts are found to be of a sexual, libidinal nature as well.

The oppositional pair now has become the ego-instincts and the object instincts. The replacement of the sexual instincts by the object instincts in the new pair is clearly aimed at attributing the sexual/libidinal to the ego instincts in addition to the object instincts. But this poses an intractable problem for Freud in that, in view of his self-confessed dualistic thinking, the presence of sexual libidinal instincts among the ego-

instincts would deconstruct the binary opposition he has set up between the ego-instincts (initially non-libidinal) and the object instincts (initially called the sexual instincts). That is why Freud asks himself: “If the self-preservative instincts too are of a libidinal nature, are there perhaps no other instincts whatever but the libidinal ones?” (*BPP* 325). Freud is torn between his realization, through his theory of narcissism, of the ubiquity of the sexual/libidinal instincts, now inhabiting both the ego instincts and object instincts, and his almost irrational insistence upon the existence of non-libidinal instincts in the ego. While he admits that there are no non-libidinal instincts visible, he dogmatically adheres to the possibility of their existence: “[. . .] psychoanalysis has not enabled us hitherto to point to any [ego] instincts other than the libidinal ones. That, however, is no reason for falling in with the conclusion that no others in fact exists” (*BPP* 326). Here, Freud’s self-avowed dualism clashes with his insistence upon the category of the non-libidinal, hence his oscillation between the pair of the ego versus sexual instincts, and the pair of the ego versus object instincts.

Freud’s hypothesis in Chapter 5 of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* that “all the organic instincts are conservative, are acquired historically and tend towards the restoration of an earlier states of things” (310) is yet another case in point demonstrating his wavering between two different theoretical models. Freud initially states that: “It seems, then, that an instinct is an urge inherent in organic life to restore an earlier state of things which the living entity has been obliged to abandon under the pressure of external disturbing forces [. . .]” (*BPP* 308). Then he qualifies himself thus: “There may be others which push forward towards progress and the production of new forms” (*BPP*

309). Freud goes on to discuss the self-preservative instincts, which “are component instincts whose function it is to assure that the organism shall follow its own path to death, and to ward off any possible ways of returning to inorganic existence other than those which are immanent in the organism itself” (*BPP* 311). This means that, for Freud, the self-preservative instincts, which apparently protect the organism, are nothing more than death instincts in disguise – “originally the myrmidons of death” (*BPP* 310) – because the ultimate aim of the former is still death. But once again, the fort-da movement sets in, with Freud now saying: “It cannot be so. The sexual instincts [. . .] appear under a very different aspect” (*BPP* 312). Now Freud opposes the sexual instincts, which “are the true life instincts”, to the death instincts including the self-preservative instincts: “The other instincts which lead, by reasons of their function, to death” (*BPP* 313).

In the last section, I showed that the repetition to restore an earlier state unites the life/sexual instincts and the death instincts, the former, as seen in the germ-cells, aiming to go back to an earlier state to start afresh so as to continue the life of the organism, the latter aiming to ultimately bring the organism back to stasis. Despite Freud’s effort to keep the life/sexual instincts and the death instincts apart, the deconstruction import is quite clear: the compulsion to repeat to an earlier state of things dissolves the opposition between the life/sexual and the death instincts.

Freud continues this fort-da rhythm in Chapter 6, where he questions the assumption he has just made about the immanence of death. Considering Weismann’s view that unicellular organisms may be immortal without being subjected to an internal

death drive, Freud now thinks that death “from internal causes [. . .] cannot be regarded as an absolute necessity with its basis in the very nature of life” and that death may be “a late acquisition of organisms” (*BPP* 319). The oscillation that follows is even more poignant. At one point, he says certain research results contradict Weismann’s idea that death is a late acquisition of living organisms. Later on, he finds, however, that “our expectation that biology would flatly contradict the recognition of death instincts has not been fulfilled” (*BPP* 322).

Freud’s last explicit reference to the compulsion to repeat in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is clearly on the side of saying that it is what is beyond the pleasure principle: “[. . .] the compulsion to repeat the events of his childhood in the transference evidently disregards the pleasure principle in every way” (*BPP* 308). But there is a case for saying that Freud’s subsequent hypothesis that all the organic instincts “tend towards the restoration of an earlier state of things” renders the compulsion to repeat conform to the pleasure principle in the last analysis. For, according to the pleasure principle, pleasure results from the lowering of excitation whereas unpleasure is consequent upon tension. The compulsion to repeat can be viewed as a way to master a past unpleasurable experience, to bind the unwelcome stimuli, to lower the excitation in order to achieve pleasure. The same forward-backward rhythm underlies Freud’s hesitation between the new pair of the ego versus sexual instincts, and the old pair of the ego versus object instincts. That the sexual/libidinal pervades both terms of the latter pair (i.e. the ego instincts and object instincts) through his positing of narcissism has the potential to dissolve the binary opposition, thus rendering Freud’s dualism untenable.

With the sexual instincts being tied up with Eros, Freud seems to be concerned to ensure that its opposite is emptied of the sexual/libidinal: “We suspect that instincts other than the libidinal self-preservative ones operates in the ego [. . .]” (*BPP* 326). This leads Freud to his meditations on the nature of the death instinct in sadism. It can be inferred that this death instinct is originally non-libidinal because Freud says it is only at a latter stage that this death instinct comes to serve the sexual function (*BPP* 327). The repeated emphasis Freud gives to the hypothesis that all instincts tend towards the inanimate can undermine the Eros-Thanatos opposition.

As many commentators note, what Freud says in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is imitated by the way he says it. That is, the theme of the compulsion to repeat is formally repeated by the fort-da movement of Freud’s arguments, that is, the alternate propounding and withdrawal of a hypothesis. This formal repetition of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is of great significance in two ways. Firstly, it bears a lot of similarity to what, according to Schleifer, characterizes late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century modernity: “truth” became temporalized and did not count once and for all. Freud’s repeated assertion of a viewpoint and his almost immediate retraction of it is tantamount to saying that there are multiple, alternating “truths” or explanations. Secondly, this bears on repetition in the sense of the continuation of humanity by two different means: the family and social institutions. Let us look at the significance of the formal repetition in greater detail.

The fort-da movement in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and his shifting perspectives concerning the dominance of the pleasure principle, the compulsion to

repeat and the nature of instincts, reveals a great deal about late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century modernity. The principle of simplicity, which governed Enlightenment atemporal truths, for example, the binary oppositions conscious versus unconscious, heaven versus hell, origin versus repetition, gave way to the idea that no “truth” or explanations could remain valid once and for all. It does not mean, however, that what used to be believed suddenly evaporated. Rather, there is an alternation of ideas, for instance, the idea that the past and the present are interpenetrated. This can be seen most prominently in Freud’s theory of neurotic symptoms, which do not obey chronology. These multiple, alternating perspectives on things are further signposted by an analogy between the family and social institutions in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.

Self-reflexivity and formal repetition abound in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. As we have seen, the proceeding of the arguments reflects the ideas of repetition and the fort-da game. This leads Derrida to speculate that, just as the formally repetitive structure of the book repeats the nature of the fort-da game, so the issue of the survival of the child’s ego while his mother is away in the description of the fort-da game in turn points to Freud’s concern over the survival of psychoanalysis as an institution. In other words, there is an analogy between the formally repetitive way in which Freud asserts and withdraws his points and the repetitive nature of the fort-da game, and Freud’s concern over whether psychoanalysis as his legacy can be continued, or repeated, in the human history to come. This, Derrida also points out, is partly reflected by his grandchild not bearing his surname. Further, Derrida argues that the act of writing *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is Freud’s means of establishing psychoanalysis as an

institution: “*Beyond*, therefore, is not an example of what is allegedly already known under the name of autobiography. It writes autobiography [. . .]” (Derrida 322).

The connection between the survival of Freud’s grandson’s ego and that of psychoanalysis as Freud’s legacy can be further understood by turning to Edward Said’s “On Repetition.” In this essay, Said discusses two different forms of repetition in the sense of the continuation of humanity in nineteenth-century modernity – filiation and affiliation – the former referring to the family, the latter to social institutions. Said argues that owing to a disorientating range of social change, concern over the viability of the family as the principal means by which human legacy was inherited came to the fore: “[. . .] in a large group of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century writers [. . .] the failure of the generative impulse – the failure of the capacity to produce or generate children – is portrayed in such a way as to stand for a general condition afflicting society and culture together [. . .]” (Said 16).⁵⁸ In response to this, there arose an alternative means of inheritance in the form of social institutions like academic, professional disciplines, that is, affiliation, which is “a kind of compensatory order that, whether it is a party, an institution, a culture, a set of beliefs, or even a world-vision, [which] provides men and women with a new form of relationship [. . .]” (Said 19). For Said, the familial conflict in Freud’s Oedipus Complex is a prime example of the failure of filiation. On the other hand, Said finds in Freud’s psychoanalysis the “new affiliative

⁵⁸ Related unmistakably to this is the pervasive theme of anxiety over inheritance and its accompanying issue of the illegitimate child in a good number of nineteenth-century novels such as Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* (1847) (Heathcliff’s possible status as Mr Earnshaw’s illegitimate son), Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) (Hester Prynne’s illegitimate daughter) and Dickens’ *Bleak House* (1853) (the illegitimacy of Esther).

mode of relationship,” which is a “new order to reinstate vestiges of the kind of authority associated in the past with filiative order” (Said 19).

But I do not think the family simply went away. Again, as this was a time when alternate modes of explanations or “truth” co-existed, so affiliative bonds supplemented filiation rather than supplanted it. One can argue that the centrality of Freud’s grandson, the child’s mother and the famous fort-da game in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* are ample proof of the continued significance of the family. In the light of Derrida’s argument, and the interconnection between the family as filiation and psychoanalysis as an affiliative social institution carrying Freud’s legacy, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* arguably both epitomizes the concern over repetition in the sense of continuing humanity (whether by means of the family or by means of the family or social institutions), and reveals, by way of its repetitive formal structure, the collision of past and present, and multiple, alternating explanations in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century modernity.

Conclusion: Repetition as Anti-Systematic Thought

The relationship of repetition to modernity, especially nineteenth- and early twentieth-century modernity, cannot be emphasized too much. That Marx, Nietzsche and Freud – three of the most influential thinkers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries – all make use of the idea, albeit in different ways, is due to modernity's distinct consciousness of time, which I discussed in the Introduction, and to the multifarious nature of repetition. Here, I would like to emphasize how fundamental the idea of repetition is to the problems of modernity for Marx, Nietzsche and Freud, and its anti-foundationalism – arguably the most important aspect of the multifarious nature of their ideas of repetition.

Repetition, as in our mundane daily routines and habits, is fundamental to life. Very often a life with recurring patterns is synonymous with a general sense of security. Besides, as I have said, our stable sense of identity depends on the continuity between our past and present. If our memory of yesterday could not recur today, we would have no sense of who we are. In this regard, repetition is something that happens at all times without our being conscious of it and is hence taken for granted. Furthermore, probably because repetition is so fundamental to life, when culture has gone awry, repetition becomes a problem at the same time. That is why repetition can pose urgent problems for Marx, Nietzsche and Freud.

Interestingly enough, as a temporal concept, repetition is the diametrical opposite of teleology. In addition to making use of this critical side of repetition against the progressive view of history exemplified in teleology, Marx, Nietzsche and Freud all

attempt to critique nineteenth-century modernity by denaturalizing repetition. Paul Ricoeur calls Marx, Nietzsche and Freud “masters of suspicion” for “their common opposition to a phenomenology of the sacred” (Ricoeur 32-33). This means that they often see problems in what is taken for granted. Nietzsche and Freud discard the everyday understanding of repetition – repetition of the same, where there is an antecedent to which all its repetitions refer – in favor of repetition of difference, which means that repetition cannot refer to and is not governed by any antecedent. The disappearance of the origin means identity always starts with difference. This denaturalizing tendency may be less pronounced in Marx, but he does distinguish between the conservative use and the revolutionary use of repetition in revolutions.

Thus it is precisely due to the fluid nature of repetition that Marx, Nietzsche and Freud all latch on to the idea: repetition is absolutely basic to human life and, partly because of this, became a problem and a source of anxiety amid radical social changes in nineteenth-century modernity; and, as a temporal concept, repetition directly challenges teleology and systematic thought. Let us first recapitulate the ways in which repetition is basic and problematic to life for the three thinkers.

Marx argues that repetition is inherent in revolutions. For him, history repeats itself in the sense that, as we have seen, participants in a revolution modeled their action on a previous one under the influence of memory. But repetition becomes a source of anxiety for Marx when repetition becomes repetition of the status quo, to the detriment of the interests of the working class.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ For Marx, there is another way in which repetition turns on humans. With industrialization and technological innovation gathering pace in the late nineteenth century, repetition began to take

For Nietzsche, repetition is pivotal to human life to a greater extent than Marx and Freud, so much so that it is constitutive of the way language and concepts work in even mundane communication. From a real thing to a sound or written symbol, from the varieties of an entity to a concept that is supposed to be able to point to these variations, from an everyday concept to the formation of a metaphysical ideal in a supernatural realm, Nietzsche finds metaphorical repetition working all the way through. When metaphysical ideals, whether in Platonic philosophy, Christianity, modern science, Romanticism, Schopenhauer's philosophy or in Wagner's opera, are found to be based on nothing but metaphorical repetition, the primary problem of modernity for Nietzsche – nihilism results – where all values are jettisoned, or any values become acceptable.

For Freud, repetition is no less fundamental to the psychically healthy than to the psychically ill in that neuroses, for example, which were realized in the recurrence of

on an ominous aspect. The repetitive nature of labor at the assembly line in factories was a major culprit: "Owing to the extensive use of machinery and to division of labour, the work of the proletarians has lost all individual character, and, consequently, all charm for the workman. He becomes an appendage of the machine and it is only the most simple, most monotonous, and most easily acquired knack, that is required of him" (*The Rise of the Revolutionary Proletariat*, in Antonio 220.) One can easily think of the urbanization and mechanization of human life in T.S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*:

Unreal City
 Under the brown fog of a winter dawn
 A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,
 I had not thought death had undone so many.
 Sights, short and infrequent, were exhaled,
 And each man fixed his eyes before his feet.
 Flowed up the hill and down King William Street,
 To where Saint Mary Woolnoth Kept the hours
 With a dead sound on the final stroke of nine. (60-68)

The "crowd", presumably people going to work in the morning, appear automatic and have been drained out of life, with the clock indicating that it is a result of the nature of their work.

bodily symptoms, were rife in modern life. Here repetition is a source of anxiety for patients because they are paralyzed by the reminiscences of their traumatic past, mistaking the memories for what is happening in the present.

I said above that one of the reasons why Marx, Nietzsche and Freud all turn to the notion of repetition is that, in the temporal sense, repetition directly confronts teleology. Owing to its anti-teleological nature, it is little wonder that ideas of repetition abounded in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It can be found in Benjamin's critique of artworks' loss of authenticity owing to their mass replication, in his essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." Like Marx's critique of reactionary repetition of the past, this idea of repetition can characterize, for Benjamin, one negative aspect of nineteenth-century modernity. If we focus on views of history, for example, there are quite a few writers and thinkers – Yeats, Lawrence and Pound, for example – who are well-known for cherishing a view of history as repetition, though they usually refer to it as "cycle," "gyre" and "vortex." Similar to Marx, Nietzsche and Freud, these writers and thinkers are deeply disturbed by the disorientating changes taking place in the late nineteenth century, which seems far from promising for future humanity. To create for themselves a sense of security and optimism, they formulate their own theory of history as repetition. According to Louise Williams, their cyclical views of history include the following ideas⁶⁰:

(1) Rejection of the idea of progress and chronology, and dislike of change.

⁶⁰ See Williams 1-20.

- (2) Either the idea that history repeats itself in the sequence of growth, maturity and decay, or the idea that two distinct and constant traditions existed in the past and they recur alternately in history.
- (3) Belief in a permanent and timeless reality and an essentially constant universal order. Given the chaos generated by the rapid changes in the nineteenth century, it is not difficult to see why these writers and thinkers are so attached to the idea of a permanent and timeless reality, which provides them with a secure and unifying deep structure to the surface confusion of contemporary life and a sense of optimism for the future. This thinking is explicit in T.E. Hulme: “[. . .] if a man could go to the centre of his own mind and penetrate beneath the surface manifestations of his consciousness he would feel himself joined to a world of consciousness which is independent of matter; he would feel himself joined on to something which went beyond himself, and in no sense an isolated point at the mercy of local changes in matter.”⁶¹

However, it is abundantly evident that these cyclical views of history is fundamentally Platonic in that the recurring ages are nothing more than variations of the past, whatever number of alternate traditions there may be. It is true that these views are against chronology and teleology: the recurring present is not caused by the past, and the repetition of past ages into the present and future means the absence of telos. Despite this, history, on these views, is a closed process. Nietzsche would have disapproved vehemently of this kind of repetition. As we have seen, Platonic philosophy posits an ideal world and the phenomenal world. The everyday realities are little more than

⁶¹ Hulme, “Bergson. III,” 81, quoted in Williams 100.

secondary copies of the ideals. In the same way, the recurring ages in the cyclical views of history are merely modified replications of past times. As Williams says, the cycle's incorporation of many features of the modern world "did not mean that there would be a fundamental change from the essence of the past tradition that had returned" (11-12).

The crux of the matter is that these cyclical views imply that all values exist in the past and that no new values will or need to develop in the future. They bear a striking similarity to what Nietzsche calls "monumental history," which glorifies the past and assumes it can be repeated in other times and places. Persistence in the values of the past in this way would have been distasteful for Nietzsche, for all that these views are contrary to teleological and chronological thinking.

The hallmark of the ideas of repetition in Marx, Nietzsche and Freud is their anti-foundationalism. It is true that, in contrast to Freud's rejection of the Enlightenment ideal of endless human progress and Nietzsche's constant condemnation of the cause-effect logic, Marx's view of history is to a large extent in line with the Enlightenment's teleological orientation in that, for Marx, human societies are destined to become classless in a better future. His anti-foundationalism can be seen, however, in the doubleness of his conception of repetition in revolutions – repetition can be inhibiting or revolutionary. Also, for Marx, the revolutionary kind of repetition, which only makes selective use of the past for the benefits of the present and future, is not in thrall to the past. Marx goes against thinking about time in terms of chronology by refusing to accept the past as unquestioned ground for the present: "The social revolution of the nineteenth century can only create its poetry from the future" (*EB* 149). In saying that a

successful revolution lies in the future rather than in the past, Marx suggests that in order to break new ground in the future the present must not be encumbered by the crushing burden of the past. His mention of poetry is enormously instructive. Much of avant-garde poetry in the late nineteenth- and early-twentieth centuries seeks to break with poetic conventions in order to jolt the reader into a new consciousness – a consciousness of the seamy side of the radical changes taking place during the period. As Wallace Steven says in his poem “Man Carrying Thing,” “The poem must resist the intelligence / Almost successfully” (1-2).⁶² This mode of poetry is characterized by its nonconformity to tradition and systematic thought. Martin Heidegger, in *The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking*, also argues that rules and tradition must be renounced for thinking to be possible: “The task of thinking would then be the surrender of previous thinking to the determination of the matter for thinking” (449). Similarly, Marx, in comparing revolution to poetry, is committed to a distinctively modernist politics in terms of its determination to break with the past.

Like Freud, Nietzsche attempts to tackle the problem of repetition with repetition. Seeing the tendency in metaphysics, for instance, Christianity, to give scant value to the early life, Nietzsche develops the theory of the eternal return of the same. In saying that it is the eternal return of the same, Nietzsche is deliberately mocking the cause-effect logic in Enlightenment thinking, where a present event is necessarily formulated as the result of a past event. In the eternal return of the same, although events and the time when they happen are supposed to be able to return, they actually cannot return because

⁶² Stevens 350.

there is not a present for them to come back to. This is because the present is always an abstraction and it evaporates as soon as it is articulated. When what happens now cannot return in the future, what happens now, Nietzsche is saying, cannot possibly come from the past. Moreover, what happens now does not necessarily have a causal link with any past event. Thus, Nietzsche rejects the Christian idea that happiness in Heaven – the metaphysical realm for Christians – is preferable to one's undesirable present, which must be the result of one's sinful past. In Klossowski, Deleuze and Blanchot, as we have seen, the disappearance of the origin is applied to the issue of identity formation: there is no pure, original identity.

For all that repetition is a prominent problem for psychoanalysis, Freud, in addition to his pessimism about the direction humanity is going and his explicit rejection of the Enlightenment ideal of human progress in his later years, gets to grips with problems stemming from Enlightenment thinking by using repetition itself in three ways. The first is the analyst's use of repetitive neurotic symptoms in patients. These symptoms are what initially put patients on the road to recovery for they are among the most crucial material available to the analyst for treatment. Freud's anti-foundationalism lies, however, mainly in the other two ways. Formulating repetition as the occurrence of an event for the first time, he repudiates the absolute pastness of the past and presentness of the present. In the Enlightenment Newtonian model of time, as we have seen, the past is forever cut off from the present because the sequence of time is absolute. But not so for Freud. A traumatic event, when it happens at an early stage of life, is not registered by the conscious mind, which is not yet able to rationalize it, and

hence it becomes a non-event lying latent in the unconscious. When a later event serious enough to set in motion the unconscious's "memory" of the original trauma, with the consequence of the repetition of neurotic bodily symptoms, it can be said that the original trauma comes into being only because of the occurrence of the later event. In this sense, although the later event looks like a repetition of the original trauma because chronologically, the latter precedes the former, it is arguable that the event provoking the memory of the past is one which happens *for the first time* because causally it is this later event that engenders the unconscious's remembering the original trauma and hence the ensuing neurotic symptoms. Here, repetition is not repetition of the same, that is, of an antecedent; it is repetition of difference – one which does not refer to any past event. Finally, if we follow Said, with the human generative impulse increasingly in doubt in nineteenth-century modernity, Freud supplements the family as the principal mode of the continuation (or repetition) of human legacies with social institutions like psychoanalysis. At the same time, the formal repetition of Freud's arguments in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, where he repeatedly experiments with alternative ideas, suggests his rejection of foundational "truths", in favor of the co-existence of a multiplicity of ideas. This no doubt includes his retention of the family as a means of human continuation alongside social institutions.

The kind of repetition that Nietzsche, and to a lesser extent, Marx and Freud, advocate is that which carries no grounds at all. Indeed, it is the anti-foundationalism and counter-systematic thought in the three thinkers' concepts of repetition that distinguish them from the Platonic kind of repetition, as seen in the politically

reactionary use of the past, metaphysics, the Christian logic of sins and sufferings, the idea of a trauma as origin of neuroses, and the cyclical views of history.

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