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"The trauma must remain inaccessible to memory"

Trauma–melancholia and other (ab–)uses of trauma concepts in literary theory. Part III

The concept of psycho–trauma has gained widespread currency in poststructuralist literary theory. Yet what might be sign of hope for a more interdisciplinary approach to psycho–trauma on closer inspection turns out to be ambiguous, according Harald Weilnböck. Literary theory, he writes, often distorts what psycho–trauma means in clinical terms and, while gaining interdisciplinary cachet, repeats patterns of self–protection and transference. In the third and final instalment of this long essay, the author draws some troubling conclusions from Dr Goodheart's excursus into poststructuralist trauma theory. Could it be that the poststructuralist interest in ensuring that "the trauma remains inaccessible to memory" is affiliated to institutional structures of power, control, and exclusion?

III

I — the author of this article — am the "humanities friend" Dr Goodheart has left behind while he goes on holiday. Therefore it falls upon me to sum up and draw conclusions that for my friend — good hearted as he is — would have probably been too troubling.

What happened to Dr Goodheart when trying to read philosophical and literary critical texts dealing with psycho–trauma concepts? He came across texts on trauma that were puzzling to him because they seemed to share a more or less explicit and (un–)conscious resistance to articulating psycho–traumatic experiences. They all seemed to object to trauma being put into "narrative structures" and being talked about in any concrete fashion. On the other hand, there can be no doubt that these authors meant well. The texts are permeated by signs of the utmost respect and compassion for those who suffered (in the Holocaust and/or other atrocities), as well as indications of a vocation to help maintain the legacy of the victims. Furthermore, these authors are evidently inspired by the wish to safeguard and take care, if not of the victims themselves, then of trauma itself, in the sense of wanting to prevent it from re–occurring. What complicates matters even further is that the discourse often employs complex forms of thinking that engage in systematically ambivalent and paradoxical patterns of expression, thus drawing on a tradition of Western thought that is not only one of the main characteristics of poststructuralism but can be traced back to Adorno (Kansteiner 2004a) and Heidegger.

Despite all its semantic complexities, what this discourse comes down to at the level of interactional impetus and effects still seems to be the focal demand: trauma ought not be put into narrative form — or, if at all, only under the utmost precaution (although the operating criteria are not even alluded to). Therefore, these texts can be taken quite literally: "Trauma must remain inaccessible to the memory" and "conscious representation [of] memory" is "inadequate", as Weinberg states apodictically. Philosophy and history "must

make [us] forget about the traumatic flipside of all memory"; only literary texts may "engage in the interplay of trauma and memory" (206). Psychology is not even mentioned in this panorama of the humanities. These statements are made in such categorical manner that it seems to be of little importance to ascertain whether they are meant to be imperative ontological statements, as their rhetorical form implies, or just tentative philosophical contemplations — which would at least leave the author some leeway to re-consider. This Weinberg does not do.

Moreover, it seems not only to be the act of expression, but rather the very process of "mental integration of the trauma" that is theoretically discredited: "Any integration of trauma" is to be viewed as something that is menacing and "threatening", says Roth. Caruth implies that "verbalizing and integrating traumatic experience" would not mean a gain but rather a loss in the trauma's "precision", "impact", "singularity", and so on. And even if "the terrible past could be cleansed by the existing psychic patterns [of the person]" — an idea that seems to harbour unrealistic and messianic expectations about what trauma therapy aims at and is capable of doing — then this would just "relativize" and "normalize" the trauma (Roth) or diminish its "unfathomableness" (Caruth), which is supposedly a negative consequence. Moreover, "bearing witness" to the trauma, in other words publicly verbalizing it, is, in Baer's and Braese's opinion, committing a "sacrilege against the integrity of the trauma".

In order to philosophically reinforce this disapproval of articulating traumatic experience, Caruth and Braese even come up with a conceptual distinction between "memory" and "recollection" (*Gedächtnis* und *Erinnerung*). Like many philosophical dichotomies, this distinction is basically a mental *divide et impera*, in other words a mechanism of splitting and dissociation. It evokes an antagonistic scene in which the "conserving memory", which enjoys the "conservative" respect of the authors, counteracts the "destructive" forces of narrative "recollection". This surprisingly *binary* move, something that in general is harshly critiqued in poststructuralist thought, seems to implement and act out an interactional dynamic of dissociation and control rather than contributing to the social working-through of psycho-traumatic experiences — and research of it.

Furthermore, this dichotomy, that is indirectly — via Walter Benjamin — derived from Theodore Reik, turns out to have been appropriated in a quite wilful manner. It sidesteps Reik's crucial distinction between therapeutic "remembering" and defensive "remembrance" (*Erinnern* vs. *Gedenken*) that the clinician Mathias Hirsch, in a more recovery-oriented and less melancholy manner, drew from Reik. Hirsch insists that "remembering" is by no means destructive but instead is a process of mental working-through of traumatic experience that involves gradually putting it into narrative expression (106) and thus progressing to "psychological restitution" (Adelman 86). Hirsch adds an insightful remark concerning the psychodynamic interface of "remembrance" and "resentment", in other words aggression, that sheds an entirely different light on how and where "destructive forces" might be at work in this discourse (106).

Nevertheless, the problematic conceptual dichotomy of memory and recollection appear to be quite widespread in this philosophical discourse. It also was found with Udo Hock, another psychoanalyst and author in the *Psyche* issue that contained Braese's article. Hock uses this dichotomy to sporadically engage in an anti-analytic melancholy and even in

anti-Enlightenment sentiments about Egyptian mummies, which, having been able to remain covered and keep their (family) secrets for so long, decay in the bright sunlight of analysis. (The ways in which such figures of thought are employed here does at times leave the impression that there might be a particular edutainment component in such writing — one might be tempted to call *psychoanalytic soap opera* — and which would have to be accounted for analytically.)

Could it therefore be correct to assume that poststructuralist trauma-theory, although it shows so much concern for issues of trauma and seems quite engaged in contributing to the prevention of further violence and trauma, unwittingly contributes to the build-up of defence mechanism against the narrative working-through of traumatic experiences?

Or is a more benevolent reading possible, given the authors' undoubted good intentions? One option could be to assume that these strictly anti-narrative and anti-representational restrictions are not meant to apply to individual expression — and individual psychotherapy — and that Welzer's impulse to lash out against trauma-therapy was just a singular accident of no broader significance. One could assume that these restrictions are meant to apply only to the public discourse — for instance in historiography and the arts — or else that they mean to question certain specific forms of expression. The texts do not contain any indication to this effect, however.

In a different vein, one could assume that the authors' statements are not intended to be read in a literal manner and that they are meant to be purely allegorical or metaphorical accounts. Weinberg's text could be taken as an extended allegory of the pitfalls of traumatic memory. This, however, would mean viewing it as an experimental philosophical and even poetic contemplation rather than as an analysis based, in whatever manner, on scientific method, and certainly not on the standards of scientific method employed in the empirical psycho-trauma literature these authors occasionally and/or implicitly refer to. To take such an aesthetic stance as a matter of principle is, however, hardly admissible in the sphere of methodologically profound scientific inquiry.

Moreover, if one was to concede the status of allegory and/or metaphor to this discourse, one still would have to account for the fact that poststructuralist allegory does not easily lend itself to any clear differentiation between the levels of *pictura* (image) and *subscriptio* (the spelled out meaning). In other words, the aim of the allegory or metaphor is semantically indiscernible. Thus, it appears that even the concession of allegorical status is not able to offer much of a solution. It does not help much to say, "well, it is all meant allegorically" when allegory does not seem to want to leave the realm of the *pictura* at all in order to meet with the *subscriptio*. When *pictura* and *subscriptio* never meet, one faces an allegory that has taken off but never lands — a floating, incomplete metaphor, a "traumatized allegory" if you like. This must be what Kansteiner was referring to by speaking of "metaphorical untruth". In fact, it might be better phrased as "metaphorical untruthfulness", since what is at stake here is basically an ethical issue, in other words the responsibility of a discourse (2004b, 214). All the more troubling, then, is the lingering question: Why and in what respect does poststructuralist thought disapprove of trauma experience being "accessible" and narratively expressed?

No (poststructuralist) literary theoretician would want to deprive any trauma victim of having access to trauma therapy — certainly not consciously;

poststructuralism would no doubt not want to deprive or prevent any collective of the means to therapeutically work through shared experience of violence and trauma. These scholars do mean well! It is important to reiterate this because it draws the attention towards the magnitude and the almost tragic nature of this conceptual misunderstanding. In fact, the humanities' most central impetus is to further humanism and work against violence and the obfuscation of reason. At the same time, however, the fact can hardly be ignored that literary theoreticians are "not interested" in therapy. Moreover: literary theoreticians are strongly disinterested in issues of empirical trauma and therapy — they only care about trauma's (*mis-*)*representation*. Consequently, they are strongly disinterested in any kind of joint venture with projects of empirical psychology, or of empirical studies of any kind, since these do not content themselves with social history or literary production, and thus threaten to infringe upon the *autonomy* and *meaning* of the works of art themselves.

It is in this respect honest and revealing that on the first page of his article, Weinberg emphatically expresses that aspects of suffering and healing are "what does not interest me — or if so only marginally — about the trauma" (173). The attached footnote leaves no doubt about the constitutional seriousness of this statement: while psychology must raise questions of healing, "the contemplation of the trauma as a pattern of cultural meaning and understanding has to restrict itself to determining the *function* of the trauma and its inalienable place in the 'economy of culture'". Weinberg draws the conclusion that, "while psychoanalysis by necessity is interested in healing, in other words the abolition of trauma, for the poststructuralist theorist, trauma is indispensable; he will do everything he can to prove its incurability" (173). With respect to the humanistic impetus of the poststructural approach to trauma, which I think is beyond question, one will notice that, in this case, humanism has chosen to follow a complicated path. Whatever the "*function* of the trauma [...] in the 'economy of culture'" really refers to, it clearly does not imply any consideration of processes of "healing" (or deterioration); on the contrary, it explicitly rules out such considerations. Moreover, "function" is not used in any psychological and empirical sense; were that the case, it could not have been conceptualized in isolation to psycho-social processes of working-through, healing, or deterioration.

In a rare moment of frankness, Weinberg thus exhibits the radical, even extremist impetus that is unknowingly and unconsciously inherent in this tradition of thought. He already does so at the semantic level when he labels what happens in therapy as the "abolition of trauma" (*die Abschaffung des Traumas*), which in German bears clearly ambivalent connotations. However this impetus can be called radical above all in that it declares the highest priority to be to "prove [the trauma's] incurability". Aside from the laudable philosophical intentions that such an intellectual enterprise might harbour, which in this case could be benevolently translated as wanting to keep in mind "the legacy of the history of Western atrocities under the sign of the dialectic of the Enlightenment" (Kansteiner 2004b), is it not necessary always to take into account the consequences that such philosophical speculations may have in the realm of political reality — even, and maybe especially, if one *just* intends to engage in general language philosophy. In other words, if a philosophical programme is dedicated to — and indeed cherishes — "the incurability" of "the trauma", it seems bound, in one way or another, to work against psycho- and socio-therapy.

If Weinberg and other authors are "not interested" in contributing to the healing of psycho–traumatological symptoms, but rather in proving their "incurability", then what, precisely, *are* they interested in? And how is that reconcilable with the undoubtedly humanistic impetus of poststructuralism and the Enlightenment tradition? Here, the underlying concept of interest does, of course, have to reckon with more unconscious inclinations, which any truly scientific concept of interest must do, and which is particularly necessary where paradoxical and contradictory statements abound. One of the basic elements of this interest seems to be: to idealize and celebrate trauma and to ontologize it as the very "essence" of human existence — and also somehow as the core value of all cultural and human activity. For Weinberg and others, the assumption that "trauma is always already inscribed in memory" is not remotely unfortunate. Rather, it seems to be equated with having access to "the truth", which, however, stipulates that trauma remain inaccessible and incurable. This is sometimes expressed rather directly, for instance when Weinberg says: "In short: trauma is the inaccessible truth of remembering" (77). At other times, it is expressed indirectly and enigmatically: "The presumed truthfulness of human memory hinges upon the fact that the primordial divinity of truth, in other words its inaccessibility to humans, is forgotten, and that this forgetting once again falls into forgetfulness." Thus, trauma, philosophically speaking, is believed to be "the truth" — albeit the "inaccessible truth". And therefore, "the trauma's singularity" must be kept from "[being] taken away", as happens when trauma is "trivialized" and "rendered banal" by attempting to express and/or represent it in narrative forms and render it accessible in artistic or media productions.

One does have to concede that expressing and narratively representing issues of violence and psycho–trauma is a challenging enterprise. We or somebody else might have the feeling that a certain representation — let's say of the Holocaust — has turned out unfortunately; at the same time, one will acknowledge that one still lacks any consensus on what sound criteria for evaluating aesthetic or media productions might be. Those authors who *do* embark upon deliberations about whether or not, and according to which criteria, one could call a representation of the Holocaust unfortunate, display just how difficult it is to discuss such questions, and also how affectively charged they are. One only needs to think of how Claude Lanzmann spoke of Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* (1993) ("had Spielberg really thought about the Holocaust, he would not have made his film"). Yet Lanzmann's own nine hour film *Shoah*, which is indeed quite different from Spielberg, also contains representational aspects that seem manipulative and at times even abusive (towards the interviewed persons). These aspects have hardly been recognized as such by critics and the mostly academic audiences.¹

But Weinberg does not engage in any elaborate discussion of existing narratives about contemporary trauma issues anyway. He focuses on philosophical and historiographic issues in the abstract, on some psychoanalysis, and on some texts and myths, mostly from Greek antiquity. Therefore, it still seems appropriate to conclude that the basic focus of poststructuralism's interest is, indeed, to ontologize and idealize trauma in the abstract, as the very essence of "truth" and human existence, and to infer from this restrictions as to how it may be represented.

In any event, it can be observed of this still quite vague and unspecified *interest* in philosophical issues of trauma, language and representation that it by no means follows an entirely intellectual or rational impetus. Aside from the aforementioned paradoxical figures of thought, there also seems to be a

distinctly emotional aspect involved — one that is by no means confined to the understandable anger and aggression that might arise when an author like Lanzmann speaks about a filmmaker like Spielberg. Bronfen's text, for instance, makes it quite clear that, in the eyes of poststructuralist theorists, accessing/narrativizing trauma and thus attempting to cure it also takes away a particular form of pleasure. This cherished form of pleasure is mostly referred to in poststructuralist contexts with Lacan's concept of *jouissance* and "desire", which seems to mean not so much a sexual, drive-oriented form of pleasure as a disperse, cosmic, cerebral, and in certain respects female pleasure, which, for instance, places high value in the aesthetic and contemplative joy of reading and thinking. This particular, yet still quite unspecified kind of pleasure Bronfen attributes to a "traumatic knowledge" which she also does not specify, other than by poetically implying that it coincides with processes of "dissolving" or even "wasting oneself", and that it differs from "happy genital sexuality in Freud's understanding" (156). Juranville attributes this joy to a "melancholic suffering" (145), and Weinberg's more cerebral than emotional emphasis on "truth" does show some amount of affect when it comes to the arts, which he authorizes to be playful and to "engage in the interplay of trauma and memory" (206).

Looking more closely still at this interest in the ontological "truth" of trauma and certain ensuing forms of aesthetic "pleasure", one of its characteristics may be ascertained rather easily: the strength and relentlessness of its will, which at times seems to be inclined towards irrational and resentment-like impulses and exclusionary gestures. The kind of pleasure (*jouissance*, "desire", etc.) these authors advocate claims to be an "absolute" pleasure, which implicitly renders other forms of pleasure less than true. The wilfulness, rigour, and irrationalism inherent in this "truth" and "absolute" pleasure raise questions of whether and to what extent the poststructuralist interest is affiliated to (institutional and/or interactional) structures of power, control and exclusion.

Granted, this strength of will is generally not very evident, since the broad issues are "pleasure", "truth", "representation", "trauma", "lack", "void", and the intellectual gesture in which they are invoked is mostly quite philosophical, elaborate, and moderate. Sporadically, there do appear judgemental comments, or at least allusions, about what is an (in-)adequate aesthetic representation and what is not, but most of the time the tone is soft-spoken. At certain moments, however, the full strength and emotional charge of this will seems to come to the fore; this is the case in those passages that Dr Goodheart, on the level of affective reader response, experienced as threatening. For instance, when Weinberg ominously and in a somewhat frightening manner speaks about "excorporation of the trauma"; when Caruth, Sebald, and Hock bemoan that the "memory" is unduly "destroyed" by recollection and that the "past" is "played with"; when Sebald and Braese warn against "breaches of the loyalty toward the dead"; when Roth observes something "threatening" in expressing trauma — and then becomes threatening himself, issuing implicit prohibitions on "relativizing" and "trivializing" the trauma, by rendering it "banal" by trading it in for "narrative lust". Neologisms such as "excorporation" evoke an array of negative and fearful associations, inducing anxiety in the reader as well as obedience vis-à-vis the text's ideological implications — and transference affects. Such isolated emotional outbursts are facilitated by the fact that in this ontological discourse there seems to be very little inclination to engage in self-reflexive thinking, as if thinking about "the truth" and "the Trauma" automatically grants exemption from self-critical investigation.

Therefore it is not surprising that Weinberg categorically rejects analytical psychology — a field that, of course, would strongly imply self-reflexivity. He even turns anyway from psychoanalysis, and this move can truly be called unusual for a poststructuralist authors, since most proponents of this tradition are deeply indebted if not to clinical (psychodynamic) psychology, then to psychoanalysis as defined by authors like Lacan, Derrida, Laplanche, and also Freud to a certain extent. On the other hand, Weinberg's insistence on placing the humanities in binary opposition to "psychoanalysis" leads us to wonder whether poststructuralism affiliates itself to a psychoanalysis of a strictly philosophical and ontological sort. And furthermore, whether the personal and institutional interests of a *non-psychological psychoanalysis* resolve to keep traumatic experience from becoming "accessible" and "curable", and to do so with quite some strength of will.

The representatives and sympathizers of this tradition of thought would certainly reply: "Well, this is not what we really meant. It is much rather the case that we mean to point out some fundamental and constitutive factors of language and representation that need to be explored in more depth in order for cultural and historiographic practices to be safeguarded from being weakened and abused by inhumane ambitions." I, too, do not think that the conclusions I have drawn reflect these authors' conscious intentions. As I have said, these authors mean well, especially with respect to the Shoah, which gave rise to the abundance of cultural trauma concepts in the first place. But meaning well does not, of course, ensure that one also has an impact to this effect; "the road to hell is paved with good intentions", as the saying goes. The empirical consequences of one's own discursive practices will always be beyond one's self-reflexive insight to a certain extent, especially if the discourse is conceptually vague, at times outright enigmatic, and carries a high affective charge. These consequences will remain all the more concealed if no mode is developed with which to engage in self-reflexive thought — let alone methodical procedures of qualitative self-evaluation, according to criteria of research ethics, which are customary in the social sciences but alien to the humanities.

Therefore, we must pursue our line of questioning and explore whether, and in what sense, an interest in rendering traumatic experience "inaccessible" and insisting on "unfathomable" ontological "truth" as well as "true" and "absolute [...] pleasure" coincides with supporting the effacement/obfuscation of trauma — which in a sense would seem to equal the "abolition of trauma" that Weinberg so ominously evoked when referring to psychoanalysis' healing function. Here, a first answer can be given relatively easily. This interest seems to be related to the appreciation of art and literature and implicitly to an intense love of reading. Moreover, the quoted authors love literature in a way that implies that it both carries "unfathomable" "truth" and makes them feel a "pure" and "absolute" "pleasure". When Weinberg sternly stated that "philosophy and history must make one forget about the traumatic flipside of all memory", he did so in order to render all the more powerful his follow-up statement: that only literature and the arts can "engage in the interplay of trauma and memory" (206). With Bronfen and Braese, too, it is beyond doubt that the appreciation of literature is at the heart of their arguments.

Thus, poststructuralist interest is essentially directed towards issues of taste and aesthetics rather than scientific analysis. Trauma has to remain inaccessible to narrative expression (and history must make one forget about trauma) in order to secure a certain aesthetic order, or more accurately: a certain kind of love of reading literature (about trauma). How, then, can one

account for this peculiar kind of love of reading? Evidently, literature, the arts, and philosophy are appreciated and loved in an idealistic and romantic manner that dates back over two centuries. It is believed that literature contains certain inalienable values and even "the truth", despite — or rather because — that truth is "unfathomable", "inaccessible", and demands not to be "betrayed". But loving literature idealistically/romantically also means believing in or at least unconsciously performing an interactional and psychodynamic pattern of exclusion, which, while reading the "truth" and feeling absolute "pleasure", dissociates and often also devalues something else. This "something else" might be perceived as un-truth or lesser truth, or else as un-pleasure or as inappropriate representation; it also might be viewed as the other of literature altogether — for instance the empirical realm and the study of it.

For Weinberg, this "other" of art and literature seems to be "philosophy and history", which, of course, is not explicitly considered an "inappropriate" form of representation, but which is put onto a level that is not allowed to engage in the "interplay of trauma and memory" (206). This exclusionary move in the end renders quite inconceivable how "history" may, as Alfred Krovoza says, become "a cultural practice of de-traumatization" (933). Wulf Kansteiner rightly warns that the "problematic aesthetization" of trauma, which is congruent with what I called the "love of reading romantically", might result in the denigration of any non-aesthetic form of "detached curiosity" vis-à-vis the trauma issue. Yet it is precisely detachment and curiosity that might constitute an especially helpful element in the societal working-through of trauma.

Moreover, exclusionary gestures, while they run counter to the very core of what poststructuralism struggles to achieve, are subliminally at work in practically all of the texts referred to above. Braese, Baer, Sebald, and Caruth rule out any representation that "breaches loyalty towards the dead" and "the integrity of the trauma" — whatever this might mean in terms of the concrete criteria of evaluation. Hock, at least in some of the more melancholy passages of his article, excludes analysis itself, at least the "dissolving and decomposing impact of analysis", which is conceived of as being the other of the "unbending steadfastness of the object". With Bronfen, it is "happy genital sexuality in Freud's understanding" which seems to be of a lesser value than "true pleasure", since it prevents the "enjoyment" of "traumatic knowledge"; and Juranville, when referring to "true" and "absolute" forms of pleasure in connection with medieval mystic Thérèse de Lisieux, adds that "some men are cognisant about it, too" (145) — which implies, of course, that by and large they are not. Thus, this "love of reading" is a process of mental splitting that aims at forcing a cleft between something valuable and something valueless. This manoeuvre was observed with Caruth's and Braese's dichotomy of "memory" and "recollection", a process of mental *divide et impera*, in other words of psychic splitting and dissociation (Weilnböck 2005c).

However, when the principle of erecting idealistic dissociations is applied to issues of psycho-trauma, this principle's basic psychological target becomes more evident. For once trauma, just like art, is considered valuable to the point of being "truthful", "unfathomable", and "inaccessible", and once trauma is made liable to differential criteria of beauty, taste, and appropriateness, it consequently becomes subject to processes of selection and exclusion: psychologically speaking, of mental splitting or dissociation of aspects of experience. In the case of trauma, it is obvious what mental splitting really does. It tends to fend off those aspects of one's experience that are of a traumatic and/or conflict-stricken nature. These are subject to dissociation.

What remains conscious after the splitting is idealizations and aesthetizations, for instance notions of "true" and "absolute" pleasure, and of "some" persons who are "cognisant about" them as opposed to others who are not.

Thus, the conclusion about the core poststructural interest in trauma, art, and literature can safely be drawn: that it is a defence against traumatic experience becoming conscious and being expressed in cultural narrative. Hence, analysis sometimes means to take at face value the statement: "Trauma has to remain inaccessible to the memory" The logic is simple enough: traumatic experience is to be split off and dissociated. And since this core interest, despite being paradoxical and non-conducive to empirical inquiry, is immensely important to poststructuralism for institutional, ideological, and psychological reasons, it is integrated into research articles sometimes quite abruptly and forcefully, even where to do so is not necessary for the argument.

In the context of such a discursive constellation, clinical trauma studies are used only in order to support these interests. In this case, clinical concepts of mechanisms of defence and trauma-compensation (misrepresentation, screen memory, flash-backs, repetition compulsion, counter-productive acting-out) are ontologized as the essence of art, literature, the human condition as such, and, of course, "the Trauma". Mechanisms of defence and trauma-compensation become the modules of a poststructuralist trauma theory, which is why the demand of "inaccessibility" is the most (psycho-)logical consequence. By the same token, this trauma theory, while meaning well, runs the risk of becoming a vehicle that unwittingly supports the societal perpetuation of traumatic or compensatory patterns of interaction.

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¹ See LaCapra and Weilnböck 2003a.