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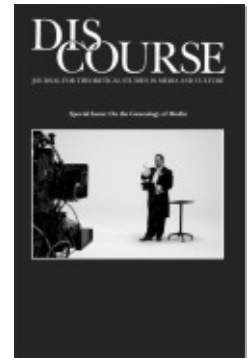
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Sublimation as Media: *inter urinas et faeces nascimur*

Craig Saper

The lack of a clear and coherent theory of sublimation remains one of the lacunae in psychoanalytic thought.

—Laplanche and Pontalis,
*The Language of Psychoanalysis*¹

*sublimatē*²

1. To change from a solid to a gas or from a gas to a solid without becoming a liquid.
2. To express potentially violent or socially unacceptable impulses in a modified socially acceptable manner.

Cloud Machine

In his exploration of the “influencing machine” experienced by schizophrenics, Victor Tausk describes something that very closely resembles the cinematic apparatus and also suggests virtual reality. His article “On the Origin of the ‘Influencing Machine’ in Schizophrenia,” published in 1919,³ represents one of the most important contributions to the psychoanalytic reception of the media. This machine, as described by schizophrenics, “consists of boxes, cranks, levers, wheels, buttons, wires, batteries, and the like.”⁴ This detailed technological explanation of the strange influence

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the schizophrenics report demonstrates how they use science to explain the sense of persecution that, at first, appears beyond scientific explanation. In describing how the mechanism works, patients describe how the machine produces pictures similar to those projected by a “magic lantern” or “cinematograph.” These pictures are not hallucinations, but rather two-dimensional single-plane images projected on to walls. This description is remarkable not just for being an apparent invention of a paranoiac, but also, and more importantly, for its suggestion of the cinema as an influencing machine. Although the “influencing machine” described does not appear in a socially acceptable way (i.e., the general community does not see these movies), it so closely resembles the cinema that one cannot help but wonder whether Tausk’s analysis can apply also to film and, more aptly, electronic media’s latest developments. The machine produces and removes thoughts and feelings by means of “waves or rays,” and patients sometimes describe the machine as a “suggestion machine” if they have less familiarity with technology. Those familiar with contemporary and future trends in technology will recognize that the electronic machines will *influence* rather than *suggest* as in hypnosis. We do not follow in a trance the images on the screen; we interact with them, allowing them to influence our movements, thoughts, and feelings.

Cloud of Scandal

William James “produced the first thoroughgoing Darwinian epistemology. He proposed that creative ideas were the results of selection of fit thought variations from among the multitude spontaneously generated.”⁵ James Mark Baldwin criticized James for ignoring the social aspect of knowledge and for not having any constraints on the production of mental variations. Baldwin proposed the notion of social heredity.⁶ His definition of truth included “social confirmability,” which required other people to agree and similarly understand variations. “Social confirmability” was about choosing “fit ideas” according to the “fitness for imitative reproduction and application.”⁷ This theory allowed Baldwin to explain how society continues to evolve even though physical selection might no longer play the crucial role in human evolution.

Unfortunately, Baldwin’s own fate seemed to confirm his theory that social context plays a crucial role in determining the truth value of ideas. If “fitness” depended on imitation and application, then an unpopular theorist may doom creative variations. The scandal that sent Baldwin from the ranks of the “most important

psychologists” in America, and from his position at the Johns Hopkins university, also appears to have buried his theories in an eighty-year hibernation. Behavioral and, then humanistic, theories would not merely dominate explanations of creativity during those years, but they would also efface any social evolving system theories. Those theories that did mention social contexts never made use of the evolutionary or social selection schema. Baldwin’s unfortunate personal history appears to have played a role in determining the course of the selection of ideas. Indeed, most psychologists know little about this previous leader of American psychology.⁸

Anyone who might guess that extracurricular activities do not play a role in the evolution of thought may find this story instructive. For, after the scandal that sent Baldwin to Europe, his name was literally erased from psychological theory. Many of the major academics in the field quietly denounced him and made sure his theories would fade away. The sin that Baldwin committed against society consisted of an alleged visit to a “House of Negro women” in 1908. His behavior unacceptably added interracial encounter to adultery and prostitution.

Cloud People

In ritual dances, the Hopi kachina functions as a “person” who travels and mediates between realms: *hopi/kahopi* (Hopi/un-Hopi), living and dead, liquid (e.g., rain) and flesh (i.e., life). The kachinas function as “cloud people” wandering through the sky and raining upon the earth. The literal translation of kachina as “a sitter” suggests how these masked figures mediate among gods and people. The kachina “comes to sit and listen to the petitions of the people.”⁹ Usually the Hopi pray to these cloud people for rain, but these messengers can bring any needed resource (e.g., money). The kachinas do not appear directly from the gods, but appear in the masked dancers who channel the kachinas. During the dance, the masked participant loses any personal identity.

Seven Clouds

Alfred Rosenberg, the Nazis’ chief philosopher, describes the Jewish version of paradise. He writes, “The Tree of Life will grow, radiating 500,000 kinds of taste of scent. Seven Clouds will lie over the tree and the Jews will knock its branches so that its magnificent perfume is wafted from one end of the world to the other. This

land of milk and honey grew with religious sanction and then celebrated its rebirth in Jewish Marxism and its ‘splendid’ future state. The greed of the Jews exists because of their bankrupt theology, whether of the past or the present. At the same time they almost completely lack a truly and artistic creativity.”¹⁰

Smoke

Already these fragments suggest a “fantastic sounding” speculation about the control of fire by renouncing the urge of “putting it out with a stream of urine.” It is a speculation Freud describes in terms of a renunciation of a desire. In the context of this essay, the result of the activity described is crucial. Freud writes that “the first person to renounce this desire and spare the fire was able to carry it off with him and subdue it to his own use. By damping down the fire of his own sexual excitation, he had tamed the natural force of fire.” These activities also suggest “the connection between ambition, fire, and urethral eroticism.” Many commentators have pointed to this discussion in a footnote to *Civilization and Its Discontents*.¹¹ What this activity of starting to urinate and then renouncing the urge produces—that is, what sublimation literally creates—is smoke.

Projection of Smoke

Protocinematic exhibitions in the nineteenth century depended on the widespread acceptance, or at least fascination with, spiritualism. The audience would enter a dark room decorated appropriately with flying skulls and other signs of spirits. Large urns would produce clouds of smoke, and a projector would illuminate floating images of ghosts. The excitement over these seances, with men drawing their swords and women fainting in fear, provoked entrepreneurs to find other ways to continue to make the mere play of light and shadows on smoke into images of spirits and guides from beyond everyday life. In short, cinema began with smoke and mirrors.

Fumblemation

In a discussion of Lewis Carroll’s inventive practices, Gilles Deleuze¹² points to an exemplary case of the portmanteau construction. He finds the word in the following passage from *The Hunting of the Snark*:

If your thoughts incline ever so little towards “fuming,” you will say “fuming-furious”; if they turn, even by a hair’s breadth, towards “furious,” you will say “furious-fuming;” but if you have that rarest of gifts, a perfectly balanced mind, you will say “frumious.”

Deleuze concludes from this that the “function of the portmanteau word always consists in the ramification of the series into which it is inserted. This is the reason why it never exists alone.”¹³ Discussions of Freud’s theory—or lack of coherent theory—of sublimation often attempt to abstract a mechanistic or hydraulic model that can explain events outside of the series of events within which sublimation occurs. Further, abstract models of sublimation necessarily discount the disjunction of activities condensed in events Freud attempts to describe. One might argue that the process involved a certain fumbling around in the dark; and this fumbling can suggest the fumbling-bumbling of putting out the fire. One might focus on the fumes produced or the fuming of the participants. The disjunction within sublimation between noun and verb, memory and potential future, and renunciation or mourning and celebration makes the term sound more and more like an (im) possible portmanteau word. Of course, James Joyce also uses this disjunctive strategy not only in Molly Bloom’s literalized stream-of-consciousness-and-urination, but also in *Finnegan’s Wake* (1939), where Joyce writes about “potting the po to shambe.”¹⁴

Sublimation Box: Smoke and Mirrors?

In the United States by the middle of the twentieth century, behaviorist models of creativity partially eclipsed, just by the sheer volume of psychological studies, psychoanalytic theories of sublimation. In the enthusiasm surrounding breakthroughs in learning theory later closely associated with B. F. Skinner’s learning boxes, psychologists set out to mass produce the traits of creative activity; that is, they investigated the possibility of teaching everyone to be “more creative,” if not exactly better at sublimation. Many commentators use J. P. Guilford’s presidential address to the American Psychological Association members in 1950¹⁵ as the watershed event that sparked widespread interest in creativity in the United States. The staggering increase in the number of citations in *Psychological Abstracts* during the 1950s indicates the growth of interest in studying creativity. Guilford’s own research cataloged the characteristics of creative geniuses. The traits he discovered included a generalized sensitivity to problems or an ability to notice inadequacies in situations,

an ability to offer solutions (what Guilford called “fluency of thinking”), and the flexibility to see old problems in new ways. In solving problems, they offered original and uncommon responses, redefined or reorganized their knowledge, and usually combined two or more of these abilities in constructing often complex solutions. The apparent obviousness of these traits does not arise from their poignancy but from their generality. Guilford sought to map the parameters of creativity, but he offered a tautological definition: if creativity requires an original response, then original responses are traits of creative individuals. Merely to state the obvious in the most general terms does not help guide applications for the encouragement of creativity. In spite of these problems, psychologists at the time attempted to find individuals with these traits in the general population. No mention was made of the fires of desire nor the smoke, steam, and fog of sublimation.

While Guilford extrapolated traits from accounts of creative geniuses, E. P. Torrance¹⁶ developed a creativity test and attempted to work toward a program to teach creativity. The test, initially devised in the mid-1960s, asks participants to manipulate objects in unusual ways, draw pictures from abstract shapes, or solve a riddle. Unusual answers are encouraged. For example, one question asks the participant to list possible uses of a brick. The evaluator grades the test according to four factors that closely resemble Guilford’s traits: fluency, flexibility, elaboration, and originality. In grading the test, one counts the total number of solutions to determine fluency, and counts different types or kinds of solutions to determine flexibility. For example, if you wrote down two uses for a brick, then you would have a fairly low score on fluency. If you suggested different types of uses, then you would have a high flexibility score; using a brick as a sheltering device in a brick house is a different type of use than using it as a water-displacement device in the tank of a toilet. Elaboration depends on how much extra information a participant supplies for each solution. For example, the answer “to build things with” is less elaborate than the answer “to use in the tank of my toilet to save water every time I flush the toilet.” An unusual but appropriate or possible answer determines the score for originality. An inappropriate use would be an impossible use. According to Torrance, any creative individual will have a high cumulative score on this test. Another question required participants to solve a riddle. Left in a room without any tools whatsoever, the participant must devise a way to get a ping-pong ball out of a small hole too deep and narrow for fingers. The solution is, of course, to urinate in the hole, allowing the ball to rise to the surface.

Criticisms of narrow notions of creativity have invariably alluded to Torrance's test. Critics complain that knowing ways to use bricks has little to do with innovations or creativity in a large-scale social context. By defining creativity outside of cultural contexts, Torrance does not explain how a high score leads to innovation. And, by focusing on individual traits, he does not explore which social contexts might encourage these traits.

The use of practical building objects (e.g., bricks or nails) in tests of creativity may suggest a link between conceptions of language and architecture. For example, Wittgenstein described language games by alluding to the discussion between a carpenter and a helper. His conception of the building trade as somehow linked to the very foundations of language resembles Torrance's implied suggestion that creativity has something to do with understanding how to use a brick. It is as if Torrance answered Wittgenstein by claiming that participants can build alternative language games from the raw materials of their current language games.

Many years later, Torrance added two more traits. He wrote, in the 1980s, that "falling in love" with the endeavor and the perseverance to overcome hostility toward that love are the major factors for predicting creative achievements later in life. In making this argument, he describes a boy who "was in love with nature, especially birds. He was a social outcast in his youth because of this [love of birds]. . . . This has been a common experience of many of our most eminent inventors, scientists, artists, musicians, writers, and so on."¹⁷ On the one hand, Torrance appears to describe a commonplace many take for granted: creative people love their endeavors even if that love alienates them from their own community. He seems guilty of nothing more than the common social scientific trait of stating the obvious. And he seems to find company in his argument with critics who defend writers against censorship.¹⁸

Herbert Blau, for example, describes how he defended Ginsberg's *Howl* (1956) at a censorship trial. He spoke of the "'furious negation' of its hysterical cadence as part of a 'literature of disorder, psychosis, and fear and trembling,' perhaps the most honored tradition of the modern, 'a sustained elegy to the loss of power in a time of power' which made an affirmation of perversions 'out of motives so intensely serious that the placidly conformist mind cannot even feel them,' no less question 'the legitimacy of the intent, or its right to an open hearing,'"¹⁹

On the other hand, analyzing the ideological assumptions of this supposedly innocent love and the corresponding alienation uncovers a more malignant problem in this particular combination

of love and creativity. Although Torrance argues that the love of creative individuals makes them easy targets of a narrow-minded conservative community, Paul Feyerabend explains how a loving faith in an endeavor creates many dangers for an uninvolved community. Both of these scholars argue that whether the community finally forces the individual into alienation or not, the individual's love and faithfulness initiate that alienation. Torrance never examines if, and how, the community benefits from those individuals' love of the endeavor. More importantly, he fails to examine how creativity functions in the context of a sociopolitical structure. That social structure includes what science considers objective, reasonable, and creative. The relationships among these terms help Feyerabend explain the dangers of an unfettered love for the endeavor.

Freud's discussion of sublimation already suggests this uneasy and, often, disjunctive relationship among desire, love, and socially sanctioned, and accepted, innovations. His *Civilization and Its Discontents* copiously analyzes the connections among sublimation, libidinal development, and the process of civilization. In fact, he argues that love of a sexual partner opens the door to many dangerous dependencies. A few people can "make themselves independent of their object's acquiescence by displacing what they mainly value from being loved onto loving; they protect themselves against the loss of the object by directing their love, not to single objects but to all men alike; and they avoid the uncertainties and disappointments of genital love by turning away from its sexual aims and transforming the instinct into an impulse with an inhibited aim" (*C&ID*, 102). And yet, even at this point in his argument, Freud adds that "a love that does not discriminate seems to forfeit a part of its own value, by doing an injustice to its object" (*C&ID*, 102). He goes on to explain that love has an ambiguous relationship with civilization: it resists the interests of civilization, and civilization attempts to restrict its bounds. More importantly, "it is always possible to bind together a considerable number of people in love, so long as there are other people left over to receive the manifestations of their aggressiveness" (*C&ID*, 114). Love jams the utopian project of the sublimation box even as it sets it going.

Black Cloud

A number of late nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century commentators associated prostitution with "primitive" societies. Further, as Sander Gilman²⁰ notes, the supposed connection

between the sexuality of “primitive” people and prostitutes also included the connection with black sexuality. The association of hypersexuality and primitive society made sense to scholars who saw civilization as an outgrowth of sublimation and control over the world. Significantly, efforts to gain control over diseases led to control of slaves as sexual objects. Gilman explains that “the connection made in the late nineteenth century between this earlier model of control and the later model of sexual control advocated by the public health authorities came about through the association of two bits of medical mythology. First, the primary marker of the black is taken to be skin color; second, there is a long history of perceiving this skin color as the result of some pathology. The favorite theory . . . is that the skin color and physiognomy of the black are the result of congenital leprosy. It is not very surprising therefore to read in the late nineteenth century . . . that syphilis was not introduced into Europe by Columbus’ sailors but rather was a form of leprosy that had long been present in Africa and spread into Europe in the Middle Ages. The association of the black and syphilophobia is thus manifest. Black females do not merely represent the sexualized female, they also represent the female as the source of corruption and disease.”²¹ Later in his argument, Gilman goes on to mention again that blackness becomes “an image of the power of sexuality [not] in general [but] a damaged, corrupted, and corrupting sexuality.”²²

From the Clouds

In “The Moses of Michelangelo,” Freud concludes by arguing that “what we see before us is not the inception of a violent action but the remains of a movement that has already taken place. In his first transport of fury, Moses desired to act, to spring up and take vengeance and forget the Tablets; but he has overcome the temptation, and he will now remain seated and still, in his frozen wrath and in his pain mingled with contempt. Nor will he throw away the Tablets so that they will break on the stones, for it is on their especial account that he has controlled his anger; it was to preserve them that he kept his passion in check. . . . He remembered his mission and for its sake renounced an indulgence of his feelings.”²³ Freud uses this passage to describe Moses’s feelings and actions; later he connects his reading to a general theory of sublimation. The statue is a “concrete expression of the highest mental achievement that is possible in a man, that of struggling successfully against an inward

passion for the sake of a cause to which he has devoted himself.”²⁴ In this description, Freud suggests that the artist sublimates passions in order to protect something that benefits the entire community, whether they like it or not. This benefit seems to arrive from a greater source even more powerful than either the inward passions or the ability to constrain the furious fuming. That source is, on the one hand, god, and on the other, artistic expression or, perhaps, the Pope’s power and money.

Sublimation requires a series of factors rather than a singular hydraulic action. Few commentators mention the importance of the “gift” of the law or commandments in Freud’s model of sublimation. But whatever happens up there in the clouds also motivates the effort to constrain the passions. Certainly, Freud does not want to adopt a theological model of creativity, nor does he want to depend on a completely cynical model in which God’s or the Pope’s power constrains the artist’s passion. He does argue in *Civilization and Its Discontents* that “first comes renunciation of instinct owing to fear of aggression by the external authority” (*C&ID*, 128). The artist sublimates this anxiety and anger by expressing a love, which necessarily involves the disjunctive hate, in the form of a gift. The gift, as an expression of renounced passions and sublimated anger, only finds itself exposed in the paranoid and punishing civilization that fails to acknowledge it as a creative achievement. In any other case, the expression remains unconscious to all involved; no one, not even the artists, has a transcendent awareness of the clouded overdetermined origins. More importantly, once the clouds part, once there is an unveiling, then the aesthetic achievement disappears as though in a magicians’ puff of smoke. The veiling itself, the confusion between sublimation as noun or verb, produces the effect described by Freud.

In his analysis of the “herd instinct,” Freud describes the mechanisms of social justice through which “we deny ourselves many things so that others may have to do without them as well, or, what is the same thing, may not be able to ask for them. This demand for equality is the root of social conscience and the sense of duty.”²⁵ The demand for renunciation out of a sense of duty reinforces Freud’s claims about Michelangelo’s and Moses’s restraint and achievement. It is unclear from these remarks how precisely sublimation relates to a sense of social justice. Although they are not exactly synonymous, they have some striking similarities. Freud continues his discussion of social justice by making reference to a particularly apt example and then goes on to summarize his argument in terms similar to his conception of sublimation. He writes

that social justice “reveals itself unexpectedly in the syphilitic’s dread of infecting other people, which psychoanalysis has taught us to understand.”

The dread exhibited by these poor wretches corresponds to their violent struggles against the unconscious wish to spread their infection on to other people; for why should they alone be infected and cut off from so much? Why not other people as well? And the same germ is to be found in the apt story of the judgment of Solomon. If one woman’s child is dead, the other shall not have a live one either. The bereaved woman is recognized by this wish.

Thus social feeling is based upon the reversal of what was first a hostile feeling into a positively-toned tie in the nature of an identification.²⁶

Freud’s use of the syphilitic condition as part of his explanation would seem strange outside the context of the late nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century medical interest in stopping the spread of sexual disease especially through social and psychological control. Further, the quote takes on an almost allegorical cast when placed beside other fragments in this essay on the relationships among the spread of disease, stereotypes, prostitution, social (in)justice, and sublimation. It is as if the sense of sublimation takes place with these motifs recurring. It is a scene we only overhear as though in the next room, and which we almost certainly misunderstand (at least until much later).

Instead of conceptualizing creativity as a pragmatic strategy or as a fount of innovation, Freud’s great achievement is to conceive the threatening aspects of creative achievement as something that pulls desires and passions into a form that, then, more powerfully pulls others into its sexual/renunciative collapse of space: as more people give into sublimation, more people will fill the limited space of civilization with increasing numbers of veiled hostile and discontented expressions. Paradoxically, this intense collapse of love, hate, and anxiety continues to seduce civilization into giving up pieces of order and control. In short, Freud’s model of sublimation more closely resembles a cultural black hole than an individual’s personal enlightenment. With most commentators seeking to find a common hermeneutic ground for understanding creativity in terms of sublimation, few have appreciated Freud’s political maneuvering against a humanism that sees individuals and civilization working smoothly together for the common good. Instead, he conceives of sublimation in much the same way as something like a primal scene taken in as details, fragments, digressions. Although this is not the sexual primal scene, we invariably (mis)

understand it in a similar way (as hostile and fear-provoking) without further interpretation.

Hollywood Sublimation

Laurence Rickels in *The Case of California*,²⁷ a text with a scope large enough to investigate the connections between Germany before World War II and its literal extension/critique in the emigrant culture of California after World War II and into the contemporary scene, stresses how psychoanalytic and psychological researchers have argued for a strong link between media-technical apparatuses and the psyche. Psychoanalysis appears to have a particular fascination with media screens and outlets. Media researchers in turn often use cinema as an analogy for the machinations of the psyche. Examining the cinema and psyche connection, Rickels traces the history of investigations conducted by researchers as different as Münsterberg and Staudenmeier linking particular mental processes and the cinema. Herbert Marcuse,²⁸ a German Frankfurt school emigrant to California, uses the cinema as a crucial example for his argument and also suggests that the cinema creates the massification of privacy. When the projector turns on, everyone has the same media, the same Other, the same Unconscious. What is lost in this massification is the ability to create movies in your own head; it becomes difficult to turn off the theater's projector and begin projecting your own desires and utopian fantasies.

Using this negative criticism of the cinema and of the feel-good culture it reinforces, the American sentiments for creativity (shared by the Nazis, as well) look like the "California" version of Freud's Germanic sublimation. Creativity, especially during the 1950s, epitomized the continuing collective effort to "feel good about one's self"; its big-screen familial version of the European mix of *Übermensch* and sublimation made heroes out of happy-go-lucky technicians who followed the rules for the ultimate in individuality: homespun safe creativity. Freud's sublimation contained all of the angst involved in the family drama. To borrow Marcuse's criticism of the cinema, sublimation allowed for the "emptiness," self-hatred, and personal dreams exiled from, and recuperated into, the Hollywood-psychological soft version of creativity. Rickels notices the threat to this model of creativity lurking in the diabolical seductiveness of imitation. He concludes, and partially summarizes, his extended serialized essay on the case of California with a discussion of creativity and invention in terms of its tenuous situation:

The dialectic of the enlightenment turned on two types of invention: the invention of stories and that of machines. But since invention is always invention of oneself, as soon as the creator of either type of invention has to be identified (and identified with), the invention belongs to the other. At first invention implies illegality, and the breaking of a contract. . . . Invention, which was always invention of the subject, produces via its backfire (via depersonalization) the impostor, gadget love, the leader and the pack. But invention (like citation) still belongs to the other who's not new but who's the future, the time to come.²⁹

This passage is dedicated to Derrida's work on the invention of the Other and the pregnant desire associated with creativity's double, sublimation: a time to come. But Rickels uses the term *backfire* to describe the paradoxical outcome of "invention," and, in doing so, alludes to a usually effaced second fire involved in sublimation. It is no longer merely a matter of a fire burning or a fire extinguished; now, every fire (sublimation) has its backfire (as in the explosion of "unburnt exhaust" that produces smoke and no fire power). It is this smoke, this acting-out sublimation, that is more than a form of the colloquial expression "don't piss your life away," which hints a potential disjunction between sublimation and creativity.

Sublimation Principle

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud introduces the term "ethical sublimation."³⁰ Considering the harsh treatment he gives this concept, the reader might suspect that he wants to distinguish it from sublimation. Later in the same passage, he refers directly to the term *sublimation* as a synonym for ethical sublimation. First, he discounts the possibility that people have a sublimation instinct that will propel them toward perfection and development into *Übermenschen*. Second, he argues that sublimation will not relieve repression's effects. He equates the drive toward perfection with a self-persecuting repressed hostility and an overblown superego. The generous and compassionate parental figure produces the chip off the old block, who, in turn, represses hostility against the authority and strives, instead, to improve his or her own self even if it means directing the hostility inward. Of course, this discussion about sublimation occurs in the wider context of an analysis of the possibility of a death instinct. The desire to return to the inanimate state might correspond to a death instinct according to Freud. He writes of a "sublime necessity" of death as a manifestation of adaptation. While he connects libidinal drives to the Eros

of poets and philosophers, he connects this sublime necessity to a desire to return to the womb. In this context, sublimation, distinguished from the sublime, involves the compulsion to continue to leave the womb with all of the trauma involved in that evacuation. Just as Freud extends his analysis of the pleasure and reality principles to include the possibility of a death instinct, opening the way for Jacques Lacan's work on lack, Freud also hints at something beyond the "feel-good" pleasure usually associated with sublimation and creative achievement. Just as death occurs before birth, not merely after birth, the process of sublimation requires both the sublime necessity of a return to the womb and a continual libidinal and traumatic rebirth. Of course, the maternal figure in this scenario finds herself in a particularly troubling situation.

Lacan's conceptualization of desire as a ratio between emptiness or lack and Symbolic structures explains sublimation by alluding to Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, as well as to Heidegger's writings. In *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan uses the making of a pot to illustrate how lack and sublimation might function together.³¹ In this way, he connects his reading to a linguistic approach. When the potter makes the pot, the user can then look inside and, for the first time, see that it has "nothing" in it. Just as the potter organizes a structure around a void, the Symbolic forms in relation to a void. Discussions of creativity usually reduce the pot to its literal form and function. Creativity describes a relation only with presence. For Lacan, the sublimation occurs not according to a sexualized hydraulic model, but as an effort to symbolize a lack or impasse; paradoxically this lack exists (in the present and as presence) only after symbolization. Mary Ann Doane connects Lacan's theory of lack and sublimation to courtly love "which is dependent upon the very inaccessibility of its object."³²

Trouble

In the context of French psychoanalysis, Laplanche's work on sublimation does not seem to suggest a great departure from other optimistic appraisals; on this side of the Atlantic, on the other hand, his work puts *trouble* into the equation of creative achievement. By separating sublimation from the principle of repetition, which is associated with repression, Laplanche seeks to define sublimation in terms of innovation rather than pathology. Further, he attempts to find in sublimation a mobile concept that can function both in opposition to sexuality and in conjunction with it. Doane notices

Freud associated sublimation with *epistemophilia*, the drive to know; and this drive to know commonly gets mixed up with *scophophilia* especially around childhood fascination with sexual difference and secrets. Doane argues that Laplanche's use of "investigation" to explain sublimation opens the door to sexuality. For Doane, "Laplanche's researches keep tripping against the difficult relation of the sexual and the non-sexual. And it would seem that in each of Freud's readers, the concept of sublimation is brought back to sexuality" (255). Doane also finds this trouble in Freud's work itself and in Lacan's, as well:

It is quite striking that Lacan locates sublimation, which Freud associated with the sphere of the non-sexual, in a desexualized sexual relation between man and woman. Shot through with sexuality insofar as sexuality for Lacan is always infused with absence, courtly love would also represent the opposite of sexuality in what Lacan calls the "crude" sense. In any event, the difficulty of desexualizing sublimation is manifest in Lacan's discourse as well as in Freud's. (257)

Discussions of sublimation easily fall into a clouded effort to distinguish and join sexuality and nonsexuality. Perhaps sublimation itself clouds the issues and confuses desires.

Desire, in Laplanche's model of sublimation, functions as the term that grows out of a destabilization of a preexisting state of equilibrium. It falls on the side of the life instinct. Sublimation works to transform desire. One commentator notes that, contrary to Laplanche's approach,

Freud would insist, in opposition to this optimistic view of sublimation, that the eruption of instinctual energy into the life of the self is a traumatic occurrence: the self is wounded by desire. Desire is experienced as a threatening intrusion, an influx of energy throwing the organism into a state of panic. The traumatic eruption of desire introduces dissonance into a harmonious whole. It threatens to overturn the self's existing system of meanings. As Melanie Klein remarks, the "depressive anxiety of disintegration," a terrifying experience of ontological insecurity, is a crucial motive for the sublimation of desire."³³

Later this same commentator, Eric White, argues that Laplanche does in fact suggest that sublimation requires "traumatophilia." By separating out sublimation from repetition, Laplanche also refuses to suffer the traumas of the new part of an effort to repeat the past as the present; that is, someone unable to sublimate merely lives each day as if it were the same. In making this argument, Laplanche alludes to Freud's account about the myths concerning the early control of fire as the inaugural act of sublimation.³⁴ Freud

describes both the practice of renouncing the urge to urinate on the fire and the myth of Prometheus stealing the fire from the gods. Both stories illustrate the benefits gained by directing desire away from immediate physical and instinctual satisfaction toward a contemplation of future rewards. Desire appears in deferred fantasies of satisfaction. Although Freud suggests that when he invents civilization, Prometheus inevitably condemns humanity to unfulfilled desires and frustrations, Laplanche argues that Prometheus steals fire, sexual excitement, from the gods and offers the world “bliss without limit.” For Laplanche, the myth involves two penises: a penis of water and a penis of fire. Eric White identifies the crucial fulcrum in Laplanche’s reading of this dynamic of fire and water. Laplanche juxtaposes the career of Prometheus with that of Hercules, who rescues Prometheus when Zeus punishes him for his theft:

Hercules, Laplanche argues, is undeniably a libidinal hero, associated with an unfettered expanse of desire, as when he floods the Aegean stables. The relationship between the two figures recapitulates the relationship between the primary and secondary processes and in effect defines the space within which an ideal sublimation of desire must situate itself. Thus, where Hercules represents an incoherent desiring frenzy seeking an ultimate discharge, Prometheus stands for a channeling of instinctual energy that renews rather than extinguishes the movement of desire. And where Prometheus stands for a repudiation of present pleasure and consequent retreat into dogmatic fantasy, Hercules would be that intrusion of instinctual energy which bursts through every structure intended to contain its flow: a traumatic eruption of desire enabling a new beginning.³⁵

In this description of sublimation, we see the interplay between water imagery and the birth metaphor as a model of traumatic innovation.

Steam Heat: Prostitution Sublimation

Doane examines the distinction between symptomatic readings, common in media and cultural studies, and potential readings of sublimation in, for example, the cinema. In her careful and copious unpacking of the concept, she notices how the terms get caught up with sexuality:

[W]hile the source or origin of sublimation is sexuality, sublimation is sublimation by virtue of a radical disjunction between the two, a gap which is unbridgeable—the displacement is irreversible. This is what marks the distinction between repression and sublimation—the symptom is interpretable, readable as the delegate of a repressed sexual conflict.

Repression is in the final analysis reducible to sexuality. Sublimation, on the other hand, designates a realm of meanings which are not interpretable as sexual; they are excessive. Sublimation, in other words, marks the limit of psychoanalytic interpretation. (255)

At the limits of interpretation, she finds the *mise-en-scène* of sublimation. She finds Freud using the figures of the prostitute. These “bad copies of a work of art,” in Luce Irigaray’s terms, upset the economy of sublimation. Doane writes that

the economy which subtends psychoanalytic theory is strongly influenced by a nineteenth-century version of thermodynamics in which the notion of the conservation of energy dictates the arrangements and displacements of a finite amount of libido. Sublimation is an exemplary consequence of this economy since it depends upon the notion that sexual energy is displaceable and modifiable and can be released, liberated for cultural work. This economy, however, is also used as a buttress against another kind of economy, one which involves prices, labor, and exchange value. What is at least partially at stake for Freud in the fragile concept of sublimation is keeping the two economies separate. (261)

Threatening the oppositions between sex and work, cultural value and perverse sexuality, the prostitute like the love gadget tempts true sublimation with a diabolical seductiveness: imitation. Doane notices that Freud associates prostitutes with primitives and regressive polymorphous perversity. The problem with the prostitutes is that they imitate rather than truly embody this. Their exploitative performance functions as one more shadow or ghost of sublimation threatening it with imitation, excess, and trickery.

Fog

“The Dachau Memorial Museum is open year round except for Christmas and national holidays. As with most of Europe, crowds are at their peak during the spring and summer. The morning hours, however, will afford the viewer the most intimacy. Visitors during the fall and winter will find the camp most depressing as the Bavarian weather will shroud the sight in a gray blanket.”³⁶

Clouded Thought

A group of researchers presented the Kpelle farmers with a set of twenty items, five each from four categories: food, clothing, tools,

and cooking utensils.³⁷ They asked the farmers to sort the objects into groups that go together. Instead of putting objects into the four taxonomic categories, the farmers would, for example, put the potato with the pot. "After all," they would explain, "one needs the pot to cook the potato." A "wise" man, they reasoned, would group these things in the same way. Startled, the experimenters asked how a "fool" would group the objects; the farmers explained that a fool would put the objects into four categories: food, clothing, tools, and cooking utensils. Although the Kpelle had the ability to do the rational taxonomic classification, they chose an alternative method.

Living with Angels

In his study *Creativity and Madness*,³⁸ Albert Rothenberg ends with a chapter on the effects of psychotherapy on creativity. He begins by recounting a number of artists and writers expressing fears that psychotherapy will interfere with their creative endeavors. Rothenberg argues that, in fact, therapy will alleviate blocks that interfere with Janusian and homospatial processes among other creative operations. In explaining how therapy works to increase creativity, he quotes at length a dream. In this dream "a man with a long sword was standing in front of you. Several unidentifiable people were also nearby. Suddenly, the man's sword turned into a sheath of fire, and he started to set three of the nearest people ablaze, all the while saying that it could not hurt them. They burned up" (177). Rothenberg explains how successful therapy sessions work through this dream. In interpreting the dream, a series of repressed and unacceptable associations were connected to the image of the swordsman and burning sword. It was both the abusive father's punishments and the therapist's enlightenments about making conscious unacceptable thoughts. In the dream, "the swordsman/therapist had reassured you that enlightenment and expression of your feelings about the people in your life who were nearest and most important to you would not hurt either them or you. Instead, however, these people ended up burned and completely destroyed. You also experienced your mother's lack of interventions with your abusive father, and feared your own feelings of unbearable rage toward her. . . . Over the months to follow, you begin to feel increasingly better. Finding yourself to be more relaxed and better able to get along with women of all types, you also seem to notice more about the physical world around you. When you sit down to work

now, or when you walk near the park, you feel a sense of increased energy and freedom” (178).

This story illustrates a successful sublimation of fear and anger without repressing or extinguishing the thoughts. Usually, commentators have difficulty distinguishing between repression and sublimation, yet this example appears to demonstrate how the two are not synonymous. Only by relieving the repression can the analysand begin to sublimate his “burning sword” of enlightened anger and fear into a “sense of increased energy and freedom.” Of course, this particular dream has overtones of the Prometheus myth, which Freud draws on to explain sublimation. The analysand discussed by Rothenberg has another dream, discussed in the same session, that suggests another element involved in myths about taming fire. In that dream “you descended to the bottom of the ocean and there found yourself in the midst of a large, unfamiliar city . . . finding yourself standing in front of a pile of layered earth, you lift up each layer, and after taking off two or three, you became concerned about having to take responsibility for what you were doing” (177). The analysis suggests that going to the bottom of the ocean is analogous to going to the bottom of your difficulties. So, the two dreams are intimately connected. The solution to how to sublimate, without repressing, the burning sword, lies at the bottom of the ocean beyond the mere extinguishing/repressing water. Likewise, the renunciation of the urge to urinate on the fire allowed people to control and use fire. Water and fire imagery, and digging around in piles of earth reappear, in many descriptions of sublimation. For the archaeologist digging deep down inside himself, the goal appears to be to dig yourself right through to the other side, giving a new birth to yourself *inter urinas et faeces*.

Notes

¹ Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: W. W. Norton, 1973), 433.

² Peter Miles Westley, *The Bibliophile's Dictionary: 2,054 Masterful Words & Phrases* (Cincinnati, OH: Writer's Digest Books, 2005), 116.

³ Victor Tausk, “On the Origin of the ‘Influencing Machine’ in Schizophrenia,” *Psychoanalytic Quarterly* 11, nos. 3–4 (1933): 519–56.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 186.

⁵ Robert Richards, *Darwin and the Emergence of Evolutionary Theories of Mind and Behavior* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 475.

⁶ James Mark Baldwin, *Social and Ethical Interpretations in Mental Development: A Study in Social Psychology* (New York: Macmillan, 1897). Book 1 of the collection, titled *The Person Public and Private*, begins with a particularly apt epigram from the Gospel of Luke: "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." "And who is my neighbor?" These sentences summarize the tensions surrounding Baldwin's public and private life and, in doing so, also comment on a social theory of sublimation.

⁷ Baldwin, as quoted in Richards, *Darwin and the Emergence*, 475.

⁸ For an indication of the reemergence of Baldwin's importance for studies of social-symbolic interactions, see Sheldon Stryker, *Symbolic Interactionism: A Social Structural Version* (Menlo Park, CA: Benjamin/Cummings, 1980), 23–24.

⁹ Alexander Stephen, *Hopi Journal* (1936; repr., Eastford, CT: Martino, 2005), 1:103. See also Louis B. Hieb, "Masks and Meaning: A Contextual Approach to the Hopi Tüvi' Kü," in *Ritual Symbolism and Ceremonialism in the Americas*, ed. N. Ross Crumrine, *Studies in Symbolic Anthropology* (Greeley: Museum of Anthropology, University of Northern Colorado, 1979), 62–79.

¹⁰ Alfred Rosenberg, *The Myth of the 20th Century: An Evaluation of the Spiritual-Intellectual Confrontations of Our Age* (1930; repr., Newport Beach, CA: Noontide, 1982), 81. No translator is listed for this translation into English of the German-language original.

¹¹ Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey, vol. 21 (London: Hogarth, 1955), 90n; hereafter cited in the text as *C&ID*.

¹² Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, trans. Mark Lester (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990).

¹³ Deleuze, *Logic of Sense*, 46–47.

¹⁴ James Joyce, *Finnegan's Wake* (1939; repr. New York: Penguin Classics, 1999), 622.

¹⁵ J. P. Guilford, "Creativity," *American Psychologist* 5, no. 9 (1950): 444–54.

¹⁶ E. Paul Torrance, "The Nature of Creativity as Manifest in its Testing," in *The Nature of Creativity: Contemporary Psychological Perspectives*, ed. Robert Sternberg (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 43–75.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 68.

¹⁸ E. Paul Torrance, *Role of Evaluation in Creative Thinking*, Report of Project 725 (Washington, DC: U.S. Office of Education, Department of Health and Human Services [HEW], 1964), 4–5.

¹⁹ Herbert Blau, *The Eye of the Prey: Subversions of the Postmodern* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).

This quote appears in the chapter "(De)Sublimating the Sixties."

²⁰ Sander Gilman, *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race, Madness* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985).

²¹ *Ibid.*, 101.

²² *Ibid.*, 123.

²³ Sigmund Freud, "The Moses of Michelangelo," in *Standard Edition* (see note 11), 13:211–38, quotation on 229–30.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 233.

²⁵ Sigmund Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, in *Standard Edition* (see note 11), vol. 18, quotation on 120–21.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 121.

²⁷ Laurence A. Rickels, *The Case of California* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991).

²⁸ Herbert Marcuse, *Five Lectures: Psychoanalysis, Politics, and Utopia*, trans. Jeremy Shapiro and Shierry Weber (Boston: Beacon, 1970).

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 337–38.

³⁰ Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, in *Standard Edition* (see note 11), vol. 18, quotation on 76.

³¹ Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1979), quotation on 165.

³² Mary Ann Doane, *Femme Fatales: Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 1991), quotation on 257; hereafter cited in the text.

³³ Eric Charles White, *Kaironomia: On the Will-to-Invent* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), quotation on 190. See also Jean Laplanche, *Problematisques III: La sublimation* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1980).

³⁴ White, *Kaironomia*; and Laplanche, *Problematisques III*.

³⁵ White, *Kaironomia*; 194; and Laplanche, *Problematisques III*.

³⁶ Ken Baron, "A Haunting Memorial in Dachau: Death Camp Visit Leaves Lasting Impressions," *St. Petersburg Times*, 4 February 1990, 11f.

³⁷ See Michael Cole, John Gay, Joseph A. Glick, and Donald W. Sharp, *The Cultural Context of Learning and Thinking: An Exploration in Experimental Anthropology* (New York: Basic, 1971).

³⁸ Albert Rothenberg, *Creativity and Madness: New Findings and Old Stereotypes* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990); hereafter cited in the text.