Uses of Guilt in the Treatment of Dehumanization

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Abstract
Likely under the impact of impending Nazism, aggression theory in late Freud, as presented in *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930), leaves the entirety of guilt to self-punishment, retracting his view that love functions in the superego as remorse and restitution. This change essentially withdraws provision for treating victims of abuse, violence and terror. Our paper proposes a paradigm shift that reframes Freud’s late instinct theory into a theory of dehumanization by recovering reparative and relational components of guilt. This reframe has major implications for the position taken here with regard to the role of witnessing and the moral imperative in the recovery from dehumanizing experience which orthodox psychoanalytic theory essentially bypassed. Victim treatment, as case examples illustrate, reformulates guilt as drawing on the life instincts to revivify victims’ humanity through analytic witness and acknowledgment. Indeed, unless breaches of humanity are confronted by witness, the life instincts stay merely rhetorical, if not contradictory, by leaving the death instincts to grow unseen and, thus, unopposed. A two-fold formulation of guilt may better address and redress disorders of dehumanization, whereby ‘death guilt’ (under the sway of aggression) signifies the orthodox, irrevocable guilt of self-reproach for the bad we may have done, and ‘life guilt’ (under the sway of a moral imperative) the redeemable guilt for the good we have still to do.

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We begin with a starter—three brief quotes of Freud that stake out the roads taken, not taken and worth taking regarding the recognition and treatment of dehumanization in psychoanalysis. Worth taking includes the author’s analytically informed road that forks into life and death guilt, leading to confrontation between the life and death instincts:

“To the superego…living means the same as being loved—being loved by the superego…” (Freud, 1923, p. 58).

“I am convinced that many processes will admit of a simpler and clearer exposition if the findings of psycho-analysis with regard to the derivation of the sense of guilt are restricted to the aggressive instincts” (Freud, 1930, p. 138).

The third quote, published posthumously, was among Freud’s disconnected notes on two sides of a single sheet of paper. It reads:

“A sense of guilt also originates from unsatisfied love” (Freud, 1941, p. 300).

Now, our text:

In these times it seems a tossup whether man or wolf is the more endangered species. In his time, Freud’s understanding was a shade different: man is as dangerous as he is endangered, pronounced in the proverbial ‘man is a wolf to man’. For Freud, man’s drive for self-annihilation loomed as ever, only more so. Mutually assured destruction, put off by the internalization of aggression, looked less put off in the darkening days of Vienna in the early 1930s when he wrote, “men have gained control over the forces of nature to such an extent that with their help they would have no difficulty in
exterminating one another to the last man” (p. 145).* Freud did not venture to say whether or for how long the forces could be held back, but his premonition about the rise of Nazi power on the back of Jews attested to one merciless force that would come to consume his own family in the Holocaust. What he said was never said again by him in print: “The dream of a Germanic world-dominion called for antisemitism as its complement” (p. 115). Freud’s premonition nevertheless may well have been the tipping point from aggression to destruction in late psychoanalytic theory, undoing the erstwhile fusion of aggression with sexuality that animates life. Aggression, once in the service of Eros in the founding of civilization, became the undependable instinct that drives civilization to founder.

Freud’s move from aggression to destruction in the face of Nazism created an exception in a drive theory that underplayed the immediacy of the social world in the psychodynamics of the inner world. True to form even in the midst of war, Freud (1916) had held that the pleasure principle would reign supreme after the hostilities of the Great War—World War I. Pleasure could well be stretched to ignore real aggression by treating real victimization as transient. But with Freud’s new prescience toward the surge of National Socialism in 1930, matters were different, even if the public’s blinkered view kept the destructive drive hidden in plain sight. “I remember my own defensive attitude when the idea of an instinct of destruction first emerged in psychoanalytic literature, and how long it took before I became receptive to it” (p. 120). This denial of real peril comes at its own peril: “belief in the ‘goodness’ of human nature”, Freud wrote, was “one of those evil illusions [that]…only cause damage” (1932, p. 104). In the swelling crisis of

* page citations alone refer to Civilization and its Discontents (1930).
the Thirties—as this paper seeks to elaborate—a revamped superego, armored against the tidal force of actual and instinctual destruction, did indeed threaten the goodness of human nature that Freud himself had once found compatible with, even essential to, his earlier view of non-destructive aggression. From such aggression had once come the “creative sense of guilt” (Freud, 1913, p. 159) that supported a non-retributive human morality and justice.

Victimization in the shadows of psychoanalysis

Still, the reorganization of instinct theory in *Civilization and its Discontents* with the defusion of an aggressive instinct did little to alter clinical practice, notably in the absence of new didactic cases and dreams or in reinterpretation of established cases or prior dreams. Little surprise, since the new theory lacked proposals for treating disabled victims of aggression, quite unlike the classical psychoanalytic theory where treatment played an essential part. So barely noticed were the predator’s victims that no diagnosis or theory of dehumanization, no less a theory of recovery, recognized the condition of the defenseless as if, once victimized, psychic damage was intransient and un-analyzable—shattered lives beyond help or desire.

In Freud’s essential silence toward the recovery of survivors, one finds no therapeutic counterpart to the centerpiece of sexual disorders—“where id was, there shall ego be” (Freud, 1932, p. 80). His doubt that ego strength develops in the face of destructiveness may help account for this singular lack of a clinical theory. Indeed, Freud (1937) carried the pall of the death/destructive instincts and the severity of guilt they created into an overall pessimism toward the therapeutic efficacy of psychoanalysis itself.
One might be forgiven for thinking that the clandestine working of man’s aggression, bent on silencing the ego of the oppressed, was immanent in Freud’s own silence about the wounded ego’s capacity for recovery and renewal—indeed, in his recoiling from recognizing an internal life in the devastated victim at all. “No matter how much we may shrink with horror from certain situations—of a galley-slave in antiquity, of a peasant during the Thirty Years’ War, of a victim of the Holy Inquisition, of a Jew awaiting a pogrom—it is nevertheless impossible for us to feel our way into such people” (p. 89). This surely was an astonishing leap away from his early confidence that war neuroses would spontaneously vanish and Eros restored with the end of the Great War. Yet while Freud may have freed himself of illusions about the goodness of human nature, a denial remains nonetheless—this time denying the shackled or lost victim a will to be known, as if to know would bring on the alarm of the unstoppable might of destruction for speaker and listener alike. Perhaps only with the help of outspoken Holocaust survivors like Primo Levi are we able to think today that Freud’s perception was not self-evident but self-fulfilling—that shrinking from horror itself drives the impossibility to feel one’s way into such people. Freud’s failure to recognize the victim’s need for therapeutic witness seems to fit Primo Levi’s indictment that the “civilian” mentality of psychoanalysis cannot bear such fear. The peacetime mindset of psychoanalysis, Levi said, does not conceive of the survivor’s “strong and durable instinct” and “moral obligation toward those who were silenced…to speak in their stead, by proxy” (Levi, 1986, p. 84-85). In this, Levi animates guilt with moral resolve, recasting the self-punitive silence of ‘survivor guilt’ into an imperative to confront aggression with witness and credibility.
We have extrapolated from this (Peskin, 2012a) that Freud’s avoidance of the survivor’s need for witness and credibility constituted a missed next step, after his acknowledgment of destructiveness, in bringing psychoanalysis to a theory and treatment of dehumanization. For the universal abhorrence of human destruction can become an affliction of its own when it can mostly identify evil but not the fear of it, predators but not their prey. Such affliction suggests a ‘pre-traumatic disorder’ that organizes the vulnerable self against impending cataclysmic disorder by a preoccupation with aggression and power, whether toward self or other, that prevents recourse to the cohesive force of love and remorse. It is an organization of the self seemingly inured to fear yet infiltrated and fragmented by it in grinding cumulative trauma, day by day. To Peter Gay, Freud’s laconic tone in his November 1929 diary entry of “anti-Semitic riots” in Vienna seemed “almost by the way” (Gay, 1988, p. 552). One need only read memoirs of the Twenties and Thirties (e.g., Haffner, 2000; Reck, 1966) or of the terrified prewar night dreams of German citizens (Berardt, 1968) to feel the hidden hyper-vigilance and mini-aggressions in private and public life that Freud surely gazed upon—in short, the incipience of Nazi dehumanization long before its denouement. It is surely oversimplified to impose summarily the label of denial on this excruciating process. If his critique of the peacetime mentality of psychoanalysis was meant for Freud, Primo Levi may well have overestimated Freud’s detachment and underestimated his mounting apprehension. In parallel with this restructuring of the self under threat and, finally, under siege, Freud kept victimization at a certain arm’s length, forewarning of disaster behind “our dishonest mood of denial” of evil (as W. H. Auden put it in his “Memory of Sigmund Freud”) yet
shunning any identification with hopeless defeat that found no niche for its acknowledgment in psychoanalytic theory itself.

In his letter to Einstein, Freud (1933) himself warned that sexual or idealistic motives provided cover of deniability to stalking aggression. But without case material, Freud steered clear of formulating a plausible psychodynamics of victimization that might have exposed ‘man as a wolf to man’ in sheep’s clothing. We are helped to imagine the grimness of such dynamics by the Italian-American psychoanalyst, Silvano Arieti, whose preternatural ability to imagine the vistas opened by Freud upon the introduction of the aggressive instinct presented a road to the treatment of dehumanization that Freud himself balked at taking. Arieti’s novelistic “scene from the Holocaust”, entitled The Parnas, offers a breath-stopping narrative of the breakthrough into consciousness of human evil when the protagonist, the beloved president of Pisa’s Jewish community, faces his Nazi murderers. Confronting the Nazis cures his life-long dread of dogs—a classical symptom of psychosexual neurosis—that had covered over both his fear of human evil and his Jewish community’s complicity in its obedient denial. (J. Arieti, 1999; S. Arieti, 1979). His fear of losing the community’s love, enough to mold a self-punishing and paralyzing conscience, reprises Freud’s grim analytic view (to be discussed shortly) but with the difference that evil can be faced and faced down.

Otherwise, Freud’s warning of inhumanity was illustrated not in his clinical cases but in his few but well-aimed quasi-political opinions, like his sardonic observation in Moses and Monotheism (Freud, 1939) that liberated sexuality lived side by side with brutality in Stalinist Russia to make the brutality bearable. Conversely, one could well suppose that the stonewalling of aggression fueled the restoration of classical libido
theory in German psychoanalysis after World War II to distance or dissociate itself from Nazi destructiveness. Such subterfuge also includes belief systems such as Soviet communism or religions purporting universalistic principles that exclude demonized non-believers from the human count. But if Soviet communism staged its own unity of mankind by eliminating its detractors and religion by converting or excommunicating them, one might say that psychoanalysis, too, shorted the human count by counting out those dehumanized by mass violence. Being uncounted is to be discounted, perpetuating a ‘disorder of acknowledgment’ that may prevail in all disorders of dehumanization (Auerhahn & Peskin, 2003). That the life instincts can be so hobbled by man-made elision undermines the very notion of an instinctual force, already suspect for lacking any irrepressible thrust of their own. Nonetheless, the unity of mankind, to which the life instincts reaches, reflects an ethical force that presumes accountability for failing to count—to cite Agamben’s post-Holocaust meditation—“a part of humanity, no matter how unpleasant or difficult that humanity is to see” (1999, p. 63).

In the penultimate sentence of Civilization and its Discontents, Freud unexpectedly proposed that the life instincts could fight at all: “…eternal Eros will make an effort to assert himself in the struggle with his equally immortal adversary” (p. 145). Freud’s distress call to the life instincts may be as close to an acknowledgment that the death instincts have not the final say in the measure of aggression against the self. Still, a new last sentence added to Civilization and its Discontents indicated that the power of the life instincts is, anyway, dubious for “who can foresee with what success and with what result?” (p. 145). The sentence was added in 1931 after the Nazi party leapt from a handful of seats to second place in the newly elected Reichstag. More than an
afterthought, the chill of the question encodes the final message of *Civilization and its Discontents*: to arouse not only the Jewish world but the social and psychoanalytic world to the “current unrest” (p. 145) of the unnamed NationalSocialism. For psychoanalysis, this arousal called for lifting the veil of sexuality to expose the aggressive drive growing ever more destructive, with a superego rushing to absorb it in order to contain it. Impotence this time will be other than a sexual failing. But as we will propose, an overly fortified superego that jettisons Eros is an unreliable container of aggression.

Freud rendered no such verdict as ours. Rather, the vision he expressed to Einstein that the progressive internalization of aggression would put an end to war rings hollow against his baleful comment to Marie Bonaparte that “the world is turning into an enormous prison. Germany is the worst cell. What will happen to the Austrian cell is quite uncertain” (Jones, 1957, p. 182-183). Freud’s comment here may be the nearest we have to reveal the terror beneath his dispassionate writing.

Except for its last abrupt sentences, *Civilization and its Discontents* makes no mention of the life instincts standing against destruction when psychic existence and life itself hang in the balance. In his unfinished treatment of the life instincts, Freud hardly deals with this responsibility to oppose dehumanization with rectitude and credibility—finished, one might say, in Keat’s equally unconditional rejoinder to ‘man is a wolf to man’: ‘beauty is truth, truth beauty’. We have named this responsibility a humanizing or life guilt that empowers the life instincts to push back against the aggressive instincts which Freud had linked to what is called here a civilizing or death guilt that speaks accommodation to power for the survival and good order of civilized societies. These opposing guilts join battle on the plain of acknowledgment and witness of
victimization—life guilt to reveal and death guilt to silence (Peskin, 2012a, 2012b; Boulanger, 2012).

**Guilt as originating from aggression**

*Civilization and its Discontents* instead took on the tall order of persuading the psychoanalytic world that non-erotic aggression not only matched the power of Eros—already anticipated in the death instinct of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920)—but removed unsatisfied love itself from superego guilt to make it so. Disposing of unsatisfied love also meant the end of psychoanalytic interest in the abusive exploitation of love that the discarded seduction theory had recognized in victims of trauma. Without acknowledging a retraction or revision, Freud flatly declared that an unfulfilled erotic demand could not account for an increase in the sense of guilt, but—as we have featured in the second starter quote of this paper—only aggressive instincts could. (Wilhelm Reich [1970] was soon to magnify sexual guilt to account for Nazi brutality, a formulation that Freud derided).

As in a pre-traumatic state of mind combing for danger, Freud intermittently bundled all aggressions together. But once guilt was linked exclusively to non-erotic aggression, the superego became a “garrison in a conquered city” (p. 124) with self-reproach constituting an appeasement of real or imagined threat of punishment. Such other meanings of guilt as the mercies of remorse, atonement and reparation were withdrawn. Freud seemed to have retained little of such loved and beloved aspects of the guilt that Roy Schafer (1960) explicated in earlier Freud, as represented in our first starter quote where the superego is presented as the ego’s devoted protector. Although the
superego was never proposed as a blooming garden, it was not until *Civilization and its Discontents* that it moved from guardian to garrison. Remorse—the ambivalent blend of penalty and restitution—well illustrates Freud’s discard of complex affects in his preemptive linking of destructive aggression and self-punitive guilt. Erotic aggression, once the cornerstone of the remorseful superego in the pre-history of the primal horde (Freud, 1913), no longer served the new conceptual mission of *Civilization and its Discontents* to establish the exclusive connection of remorseless aggression and guilt.

Freud is mostly single-minded in pronouncing that the shadow of punishment falls upon the beloved and loving object. It is not even the carrot of care but the stick of its removal that builds the superego. Not until *Civilization and its Discontents* is the irreducible character of love—one of life’s “culminating peaks” (Freud, 1915, p. 169)—reduced to a deterrent against aggression: “This is, of course, what fear of loss of love amounts to, for love is a protection against this punitive aggression” (p. 128). This reduction of love is presented by Freud parenthetically, as if its validity is self-evident and never before gainsaid by Freud himself. Yet in plain enough sight, it minimizes a seismic shift in psychoanalysis from desire to fear as the world moved toward cataclysm. Self-punishment is introduced to placate whatever a superior authority on whom one depends deems bad enough to withhold love: “…what is bad is whatever causes one to be threatened with loss of love” (p. 124). Obviously, the authority’s privilege to lay down conditions riddles such love with a joyless apprehension. (With poetic bluntness, Shakespeare had this to say about conditional love: “Love is not love/ which alters when it alteration finds/ or bends with the remover to remove/ O, no; it is an ever-fixed mark/ that looks on tempests and is never shaken”). Yet neither is authentic love any more
effective to prevent self-punishing guilt because “the experience of being loved…turns the [child’s] aggressiveness inwards and hands it over to the superego” (p. 130). The following passage, perhaps as anti-relational as any in the Freudian canon, traces the inescapable parental forerunners of the superego’s severity:

“The superego seems to have made a one-sided choice and to have picked out only the parents’ strictness and severity, their prohibiting and punitive function, whereas their loving care seems not to have been taken over and maintained. If the parents have really enforced their authority with severity we can easily understand the child’s in turn developing a severe superego. But, contrary to our expectations, experience shows that the super-ego can acquire the same characteristic of relentless severity even if the upbringing had been mild and kindly and had so far as possible avoided threats and punishments” (Freud, 1932, p. 62).

Albeit with different thresholds of tolerance for child aggression, both kind and severe parents bargain on the child’s fear of the withdrawal of love, following Freud’s dictum that parental love is not ‘ever-fixed’ but balanced against the child’s exercise of aggression. No room is conceived for real love to safeguard and distinguish the expression of non-destructive, erotic aggression from punitive aggression. For it is the self-regard of being truly loved which protects against the supplication of self-blame and suppression of resentment that superior authority exacts, even if unjustly, before granting clemency. If quality parental care, then, makes no difference in the first place, the superego’s demand for self-punishment grows apace, becoming locked intrapsychically for all, as befits Freud’s image of a military conquest from within. Parents’ authority is given a stunning empowerment to ratchet up guilt by keeping love at the mercy of
obedience and therefore a pawn, proxy and enabler of aggression against the self. Loving itself comes to require subordination of the child’s drives; what was owed the child becomes the child’s insubordination. Such might also be the source of the hidden intergenerational resentment that Nazi seduction of youth harnessed to its own purposes (Erikson, 1963).

Freud (1923, 1930, 1932, 1937) repeated that it is the unconscious sense of guilt that makes the particular suffering of self-punishment resistant to change. While he approves no new therapeutic paths to reach this suffering, Freud discredits easy panaceas that call for the analyst standing in for the patient’s ego ideal as “prophet, saviour and redeemer” (Freud, 1923, p. 50), likely referring to his opposition to the briefer, ‘alloyed’ treatments of Rank, Ferenczi or Alexander that called for the analyst’s instigation—and domination—by one means or another of so-called correctional emotional experiences. In short, if uncovering repressed sexuality is the strong suit of psychoanalytic technique, uncovering unconscious guilt over aggression, by Freud’s own estimation, is likely its weak suit: “There is often no counteracting force of a similar order of strength [as the Ucs. sense of guilt] which the treatment can oppose to it” (Freud, 1923, p. 50).

Freud’s recognition that a child’s badness is a social construction raises the crucial question of which established authority ‘owns’ the superego. Joachim Fest’s memoir, Not I (2012), reports on a dedicated Nazi who remained guilt-ridden even after the war for violating the oath he had taken to Hitler by an act of kindness to an endangered anti-Nazi suspect. But whichever authority, the notion of ownership signifies that the superego is sectarian in its origins, often in a conflict of interests with the common bond of humanity. Freud’s’ virtual projection of a German superego bent on
world domination shines through his thinly veiled posture of denying psychoanalytic interest in a “diagnosis of communal neurosis” or a “pathology of cultural communities” (p. 144). Under Nazi socialization, the superego showed its propensity for being hijacked to manipulate guilt if despised others, like Jews, were not hated enough. Or, conversely, the superego’s moral surveillance could be suspended by the fiat that countrymen be rebranded as Other—e.g., German Jews are no longer Germans but Jews or Japanese and Muslim Americans are no longer Americans but Japanese and Muslims—so that they may be guiltlessly and gratuitously hated. Guile and guilt then are no longer at moral odds but joined when, as Freud himself recognized, a people feel more assuredly bound “in love so long as there are other people left over to receive the manifestations of their aggressiveness” (p. 114). Here it might indeed be valid to call such hate-based love a protection against aggression, even as it tramples on the exclusivity of erotic attachments.

(Nazism planted itself in the marriage bed by bestowing a copy of “Mein Kampf” on German newlyweds [Smale, 2015]). Indeed, such turning attachment from love-based to hate-based exercises a regime’s prerogative to lay bare its citizens’ privacy and manage their sexuality to culminate in Aryan eugenics.

More hate-based than before, the superego’s apparent vigilance against evil sometimes looks barely the lesser of two evils, hardly the just protector and assured binder of civilized human attachment and too often an expedient power broker converting fear of aggression into fear of authority—of any authority with the power to punish with impunity. This might be imagined too as the legacy of the primal father’s privilege to feel always wronged and never wrong. On such hate-based love, the superego changes from being a moral witness and compass to a vigilante serving a group’s survivalist sense of
existing in a persecutory world. Here, the superego is like a backfire betrayed by shifting winds to fuel the very conflagration it was meant to put out. Once no longer “moderated and tamed” (p. 121) by Eros, the superego under the cover of righteousness imperceptibly includes a repressive brutality in its watchdog function, drawing on the same dehumanization as destructive aggression itself. In sending sexuality and aggression their separate ways—sexuality to repression and aggression to guilt—the idea of an erotic-sourced guilt to protect and recover love lost its psychoanalytic provenance, leaving no conceptual provision for such reparative and redeeming agency in Freudian theory. Interestingly, Kleinian theory in the mid Thirties made new provision for reparation in the depressive guilt of the depressive position (Greenberg & Mitchell, 1983).

Our presentation is meant to bring the moral imperative to make restitution back to the psychoanalytic grid as a constituent of an alternative model of guilt that confronts and challenges the need for punishment. An exclusive need for punishment is yet another encroachment by the aggressive drive disguised as deterrent. Freud’s construction of the superego as both controlling and controlled by aggression disallowed parental love to stand against the threat of its being withheld. A life-guilt model contrasts love- and loveless-based guilt; the former involves the steadfast capacity not only for remorse and reparation for what has gone before but for allowing joy for what is yet to come that stems from the synergy of love between child and parent, while the latter involves the asymmetry of power between parent and child that conflates love with the threat of its withdrawal.
Guilt as also originating from unsatisfied love

What else but self-punishment might motivate the severity of the superego that Freud observed in loved children? Although Freud recognized a child’s badness as a social construction, he does not pose the limiting case—as we do routinely in today’s rejection of *paterfamilias* privilege—where the very idea of badness might be alien to parents’ ethos. It follows then that a non-punitive guilt can be posed that urges the protection of human equality rather than the appeasement of unjust power. Essentially unimagined was the possibility that a non self-punitive guilt, no less anguished than a punitive one, might emanate from human care and be tasked with its furtherance. An iconic example is Vaclav Havel, the first democratically elected president of Czechoslovakia, a leader of its “velvet revolution” and a survivor himself of Soviet totalitarianism, who describes a feeling of “deep guilt”: “Sometimes, the need to confirm my problematic identity, by raising my voice and standing firmly for my rights, explodes within me…I would even go so far as to say that whenever I have achieved something good, my actions were probably the result of the need to overcome the metaphysical feeling of guilt. It appears as if I create, organize and fight, only to defend my dubious right to exist” (Havel, 1990).

While Schafer (1960) does not address Freud’s shift away from the loved and beloved aspects of guilt, Hans Loewald astutely notices Freud’s later turn to preemptive self-punishment. He called Freud’s change “too superficial a view on the matter and appears to ignore his own deeper insight” (Loewald, 1980, p. 390) that guilt, if borne for a time, can facilitate the reflection and delayed action that underlay the integration of conflicting needs. For Loewald, the need for punishment is just one of a variety of
internal and external actions relating to moral accountability, further advancing the idea—compatible with our own distinction between life and death guilt—that guilt may not be univocal but manifold. Indeed, Loewald indicates that self-punishment is not elemental but may be in the service of repressing other affective experiences of guilt. Here we suggest that psychoanalytic inquiry might reveal such other repressed sources of guilt nearer to one’s own forbidden rectitude than to the obedience that superior authority demands. Loewald offered no reasons for Freud’s retreat from his deeper insight, as we have ventured in proposing Freud’s pre-traumatic mindset in the impending Hitler years—the ‘circling the wagons’ of siege mentality that supplants inner reflection. It is perhaps indicative of Freud’s concentration on ferreting out the surreptitious operation of aggression that he could not debate the alternative that the guilt suffered by loved children is not just another torment of self-punitive aggression but an anxiety to signal the call for human care.

Analytic authority between patient and analyst covers a vast territory from reciprocity to asymmetry, even within the same dyad. In the early case of Dora, one sees the shifting balance from love to power, notably in Dora (Freud, 1905) jeopardizing Freud’s love for her by repeatedly disputing his authority, culminating in his disregard for the vindicating evidence she brought him of her abuse. But still today we may fail to notice a slippage into such one-sidedness in ourselves that suggests our own sectarianism, as in when hewing to the therapeutic frame crosses over into excessive allegiance to institutional authority whose entrenched European origins may go unrecognized in the failure to acknowledge abuse and its concealment. For such acknowledgment requires terms of engagement different from classical neutrality and anonymity. As therapeutic
neutrality is to the recovery of psychic reality, therapeutic witness is to the recovery of social reality and one’s right to live in it. Witness authenticates the survivor’s lived suffering; non-witness becomes a factor of self and social disbelief. The conditions of witness provide the substrate for what we have called disorders of acknowledgment and dehumanization (Auerhahn & Peskin, 2003; Peskin, 2012a) that are perhaps components of all psychopathologies and merit psychoanalytic interest in treatment and theory.

Although we may feel embarrassment by institutional bullying within our own ranks (as in the case of Jones’ censorship of Ferenczi’s [1949] ‘confusion of tongues’ paper), psychoanalysis as an institution may be no different from other belief systems—family, religion or military—whose reality is anchored as much in credulity and mass compliance as in credibility that requires the institution to be more important than plausible dissent among its members (Kirsner, 2009). Of course, hiding dissent here may be more customary than open dispute, as between foreign adversaries who worry little about losing each other’s love. Yet the power of life guilt is stirred when candid acknowledgement confronts the immediate power of death guilt to intimidate and overwhelm truth. As death guilt is the ‘discontent’ of self-punishment that dare not tell the truth of destructiveness, life guilt is the ‘discontent’ that obliges the truth to be told. Here is a start on the array of differences in the subjectivities of death guilt and life guilt: death guilt when, as Freud said, we have done or as much as thought something we know to be bad; life guilt when we have yet to do something we know to be good. Death guilt lives on the repetition compulsion that duplicates the past in the future; life guilt on the commitment to a course of action “that life can transcend itself, that we are not bound to repeat a limited pattern” (West, 1940, p. 1131). Although both guilts are bound by the
urgency of obligation and the discomfort of soul-searching, the imperative of death guilt is to bear self-reproach for happenings perceived to be unalterable—too late—while the imperative of life guilt is to influence the course of events in the face of threat or against the uncertainty of ripening—late or even unalterably late, but not too late to head off their recurrence either now or in the legacy we will to our children. What is essential here is the turn from “the elegiac ‘what have we done’ to the practical ‘what can we do’” (Smith, 2014, p. 6).

But is not guilt over ‘too-late’ events, notably the Holocaust, irredeemably elegiac? Clinically, ‘survivor guilt’ has been understood as *sine quo non* of death guilt in a patient’s self-reproach for the violence he, but not others, has escaped. In this, survivor guilt spells the tyranny of a superego fed by unceasing aggression. Yet beneath the relentlessness of trauma, such guilt can also foreshadow a life guilt. For life guilt to claim a foothold requires envisioning guilt itself, as Primo Levi (1986) conceived after liberation, as declaring the recovery of affective life that would have endangered survival in the camps, even as its absence made such survival subhuman. In Levi’s stunning perception, survivor guilt keeps even those now dead in the zone of the human. Doing so calls for listeners from the post-Holocaust world who, facing their own propensity to look away from the shame of man’s inhumanity by shunning its victims, are ready to become virtual witnesses by receiving the survivor’s witness of what has been suffered. The transmission of such shame is itself a humanizing action because its lasting aim is to arouse and engage detached bystanders—individuals and nations—into moral responsibility for valuing all lives equally. In turn, being beheld by such virtual witnesses, survivors behold their own right—and obligation—to live even from those
who are lost to them. “What gaze, emphatic or scornful,” asks Davoine & Gaudilliere (2004, p. 210) “can compare to the gaze of those who have helped you survive, those whom you have left behind like doubles, alter egos, who believe in your survival even if they are no longer in this world, who are anxious for you to live even beyond your own wish to live?”

Turning to the self, a sense of responsibility runs through both guilts to matters of personal identity: in death guilt to relinquish, and in life guilt to recover, lost or exiled parts of the self whose disappearance has been the price of social inclusion. For the survivor, concealing the self for the benefits of social inclusion seems the better part of valor when the trauma of exclusion or annihilation still reverberate, especially where dismissive or politically unstable societies threaten withdrawal of love and renewed stigmatization. Self-punishing as it may be, yielding a piece of personal identity seems small price to pay for securing survival even if one’s humanness is thereby diminished, yet more so when sentient awareness of one’s own diminishment has disappeared. Indeed, the Freudian concept of unconscious guilt gains plausibility when the benefits of social adjustment require that self-punishment go unbeknownst to oneself. This may be more so if memory is no longer confirmed by lost witnesses from youth and childhood.

Victims run the gamut, at one end, of reaching for witness to recognize their ordeal and the strictures it has imposed on their lives and, at the other, of entering into an identification with hiddenness or concealment itself, wary of acknowledging their own credibility. This is the oblivious end of lost personal history and identity variously named psychic retreat, double reality (Bergmann & Jacovy, 1982) or encapsulation (Rosenfeld, 2006). Yet even as it risks total collapse of memory, these dissociative states can also be
viewed as relative terms by also containing a “defense…for not disappearing” (Rosenfeld, 2006, p. 30) provided that remnants of personal history and identity find a listener able to accompany the patient through silent, whispered or even antagonistic loneliness to an unasked-for but deeply longed-for acknowledgment. The therapist’s capacity to be such a virtual witness—to oppose being swept into repeating the pathogenic beliefs that have buttressed the patient’s fabricated self—is a constituent of life guilt and a consequence of the mutuality of love that is tested continuously in the transference-countertransference. This means that analytic therapists must be stirred by their own life guilt to enter the encapsulation, requiring them to be aware that the comfort zones of the patient or the therapist may create resistances against entry. But entry provides patients a witness to their capacity to sustain active conflict that had been foreclosed by the deep insecurity of trauma in communities of disbelief or resignation where it was safer to leave false identities undisturbed.

A case in point is reported by Rosenfeld (2006) in which Mario, an Holocaust child survivor in Argentina, lived in the pseudo-identity of a non-Jew who was mostly amnesic about his Jewish childhood. He fled Bulgaria at age 8 to Argentina at age 14. His Catholic analyst invites him to skip an upcoming analytic hour that will fall on Yom Kipper, the holy day of atonement. Three sessions later came an outpouring of fresh material that revealed an intact Jewish identity, featuring that as a boy he was called Moses or Moshe.

A second case, Mr. P, involves an adult child of Auschwitz survivors who, wishing her aging mother no further human betrayal, announced one day that she was ready to put off marriage to her non-Jewish partner until after mother’s death (Auerhahn
& Peskin, 2003). The therapist, containing his sense of alarm as best he could, retorted: “Are you aware that if you hold off marriage until your mother dies, you’ll find yourself wishing for her death?” You are right if you guessed that the wedding took place (with two grandchildren to follow) with a fully alive and happy mother and father giving their daughter away. Such was the beautified grip of death guilt that the patient’s plan to forego marriage missed recognizing the invisible hand of aggression masquerading as a higher love for the other which, furthermore, would disarm dissenting witness. In his interpretive action, the therapist refused to join the complicity of acquiescence that doubtless expressed how much the normalization of Nazi trauma had colonized the patient’s life. In their mutual transformation, mother did not settle for the self-punishment of joyless survival nor daughter for joyless loyalty. Their obligation was rather to reclaim their birthright: for mother, to have grandchildren to love; for daughter, to have a partner to love and her children to be loved.

With all due respect to the force of instinct, life guilt emanating from the life instincts is rarely called forth without a real Other, even as Kafkaesque narratives valorize solitary effort. To paraphrase Martin Luther King, life instincts will not roll in on the wheels of inevitability. The therapists in both clinical vignettes brought unconscious death guilt into witnessed light by proposing to the patient an alternative vision (a lost reality to Mario and a virtual reality to Mr. P) meant to awaken a sense of choice between death and life trajectories where death had been the only road, imposed or otherwise choiceless. Still, one might ask whether the patients, with no recognition of the guilt they carried, had merely ceded control to the therapists’ authority delivered in their startling interventions. By Freud’s own warning, such use of authority might be likened to the
“prophet, savior and redeemer” who sway the patient to relinquish “freedom to decide one way or the other” (Freud, 1923, p. 50) for the security of superego compliance that feeds on keeping guilt operative but out of awareness (as played out in intransigent superego pathologies in general). Ironically, while Freud in 1923 had not yet arrived at the totalism of the garrisoned superego, he may have already set the stage for seeing that such therapeutic uses of astonishment in our clinical vignettes partake of aggression’s opportunistic, non-relational and ‘corrective’ disciplinary character. By the time of Civilization and its Discontents, the analyst could find no help to help the patient reimagine and undertake action that would actually dispute the ego’s subservience to the self-punishment terms of death guilt.

**Life guilt and death guilt as ‘close by the train is waiting’**

We have conjectured that excluding Eros from the makeup of guilt was not so much theory-driven as compelled by the emergency of survival in the real face of impending Nazi control and conquest. From this, we have also contended that human endangerment comes not only from the rising level of destructiveness in the world but from the very superego force rising to contain it, so that dehumanization may come separately or together from these opposite poles. Victory in the purported name of Eros or peace privileges the victor not to acknowledge that, in war, love of the object turns into love of aggression and the fascination of power, thinning still more the borderline between aggression and its containment.

Our formulation of life guilt, on the other hand, acknowledges the inevitability of aggressive drive discharge but considers a next question that Freud ignored: how are we
to face the victims of aggression? Mostly sparing political rhetoric, we have nevertheless implicitly treated life and death guilt as adversaries, even combatants, much as Freud finally so treated life and death instincts in the last words of *Civilization and its Discontents*. Our psychoanalytic activism, so to speak, did not accept Freud’s removal of Eros from guilt because the ensuing preoccupation with appeasing aggression would neglect, if not recoil from, those already deemed oblivious or disabled by abuse and persecution from recovering their humanity; hence, our newly relabeled death and life guilt. Life guilt was conceptualized as the enforcer, rouser or summoner, if you will, of the life instincts. Yet in practice, the life instincts mostly seem to exist only nominally without affecting therapeutic change. Our paper makes life guilt the mover of such responsibility by analytic therapists able to be therapeutic witnesses to the dehumanization that man, swearing innocence, is capable of promoting. To draw on Hannah Arendt, such therapists or significant others will not serve very well either as functionaries of vengeance or of denial. Only upon those “who are filled with a genuine fear of the inescapable guilt of the human race, can there be any reliance when it comes to fighting fearlessly, uncompromisingly, everywhere against the incalculable evil that men are capable of bringing about” (Arendt, 1945, p. 155).

Thus formulated, witnessing is elevated to equal standing with the function of interpreting, while dehumanization is accorded equal standing with classical theories of conflict and deficit that do not prefigure primary assault on one’s humanity. Freud was quick to suspect that such passion as Arendt’s in a psychoanalysis amounted to subverting the patient’s freedom to think and choose. But simply dismissing the matter, if you will, as a countertransferential cure leaves a blind spot for recognizing the important
role of witnessing in the relational processes of psychoanalysis and psychotherapy. The therapist’s witnessing may often go underreported, since it often feels adversarial to analytic interpretation, just as witnessing by others is given short shrift as merely anecdotal. A case in point is Hannah Segal’s (1958) successful analysis of a survivor, age 73, given to secret drinking and business dishonesty, whose unconscious but active death guilt for abandoning his family in the Ukraine before World War II for a new life in Rhodesia ignited a psychotic storm upon the return of a brother long given up for dead who revealed the Holocaust murder of the family. The brother’s return triggered persecutory projections and death fears when denial of the family’s annihilation could no longer be sustained. One conjectures from Segal’s brief report that the analysis peeled away such Holocaust-demonized attributions to recover and re-humanize the brothers’ early relationship, as in the patient’s remorse that his jealousy had deprived the brother of mother’s love. Restoring the brother’s probity gave the patient an irreplaceable witness to his long-forfeited self-esteem that could now let in family grief and renewal, even late in a life that extended robustly much past the patient’s own sense of being a wasted old man. In a brief follow-up (Segal, 1981), a remarkably enlivened character change is described that held firm for the remaining eleven years of his life. His once alienated existence became steadfastly devoted to family unification and the whereabouts of all family members. (Curiously, Segal footnoted in 1958 that a fuller case history was awaiting publication, but her London office could only ascertain the 1981 follow-up.) However, except for triggering the patient’s psychosis, the brother’s importance receives no special mention in either the 1958 or 1981 report, as if the purity of a Kleinian analysis would somehow be diluted by such recognition of a real Other. But certainly in
Klein’s writings, especially on mourning (1940), analytic treatment well deserves credit for enabling real objects, deadened or demonized by destructive imprints, to come to life again to witness the patient’s lost internal good object and, through such witness, to reestablish fraternal and maternal good will. Segal’s case describes a stunning arc of analytic change from the angel of death to the harbinger of life.

Aggression turned destructive is no longer satisfied to be the equal of Eros, but stretches otherness to the vanishing point of ‘objectlessness’ — from outcast to superfluous, from dispensable to disappeared — that seeks to leave no witness of the object’s being or having been, banishing pain for the “creation of a new faceless reality, pointing the population exclusively toward the future and enjoining on it silence about the past” — this from W. G. Sebald (2003, p. 7) on the unmarked 600,000 deaths in the firebombing of German cities. Sebald’s meditation raises the thought that the disposition of the pleasure principle to avoid ‘unpleasure’ is the final triumph of the destructive instinct to dissolve from memory what it has destroyed. Without a theory of victimization and recovery, psychoanalysis rather obliged the destructive instinct by acquiescing in the disappearance of the oppressed and sabotaging the inclusive ethic of the unity of mankind enshrined in Freud’s life instincts before the Holocaust. ‘Beyond the pleasure principle’, as Loewald (1980) cogently perceived, unveiled not only the aggressive instinct but the possibility of a revamped pleasure principle that requires attention be paid to the grief of human suffering. Up to a point, alerting psychoanalysis to furtive destructiveness, as *Civilization and its Discontents* strived to do, challenges the life instincts not to sweeten a faceless reality. Still, there is little in the pre-traumatic structure of *Civilization and its Discontents* that mobilizes this newly defined pleasure principle to bear the pain of
victims for the restoration of their lost being. Indeed, it may be symptomatic of the pre-traumatic mindset that Freud himself lost his own sense of loss in failing to acknowledge that he had jettisoned love by putting Eros under the virtual control of internalized aggression.

The relational turn of contemporary psychoanalysis has been a turn away from Freud’s retrenchment, initiated in the shift from hate to love over the course of Kleinian theory and in relational psychoanalysis thereafter. Still, the early object-relations theorists, working in the insularity of peacetime England and America, anticipated or recognized little of how the fear of aggression shackles the mind in the pursuit of survival. If the pre-traumatic conditions of Vienna in the 1930s left their mark on the garrisoned Freudian conscience, might not relational psychoanalysis—with Erich Fromm (1973) a notable exception—be charged with a ‘civilian’ mindset of its own?

Yet even while Civilization and its Discontents discouraged a further reach beyond the pleasure principle, Moses and Monotheism (1939), written yet nearer to the Holocaust, unsealed a seemingly forgotten but encapsulated ancestry to confront retribution with love. Under the public cover of his atheism, Freud’s own spirituality belatedly beckoned the Mosaic principles of justice and love which seemed to have vanished in the ineffectiveness of the life instincts against the superego’s tyranny in Civilization and its Discontents.

His second story of Moses (the first being The Moses of Michelangelo in 1914) can confidently be taken, as psychoanalyst Harold Blum has done, to allegorize Jewish defiance and survival in the face of Nazism. But whereas Blum (1991, p. 529) renders Moses as representing the “austere, imperative and imperious superego” derived from a
fierce Yahweh (Jehovah), Freud’s Moses, by our reading, led the Jewish people away from a jealous, vengeful and “narrow-minded” Jehovah (Freud, 1939, p. 50). Twice over and 25 years apart—between The Moses of Michelangelo and Moses and Monotheism—the instinctual renunciation of the Jews was not a surrender to a primal father’s authoritarian whim. Rather, trust and love toward God were greater than the fear of His wrath. Instinctual renunciation was stimulated by a “more highly spiritualized notion of god, the idea of a single deity embracing the whole world, who was not less all-loving than all-powerful, who…set before men as their highest aim a life in truth and justice” (Freud, 1939, p. 50). Love and power, split in pre-traumatic states of mind, were rejoined in this, Freud’s last reach to restore the loved and beloved provenance of truth and justice. As Michelangelo once sculptured Moses overcoming his “hasty temper and…divine wrath” (Freud, 1914, p. 233) to punish his people’s faithlessness, Freud evoked Moses again, this time at the threshold of World War II, to stay Jehovah’s hand from withholding love—another chance for psychoanalysis to restore to guilt the love that Freud himself had withdrawn in Civilization and its Discontents, even as “close by the train is waiting” (Levi, 1986, p. 69).

For this chance, the third quote in this paper’s starter says more than its spare words: “A sense of guilt also originates from unsatisfied love.” Having his life’s ending paired with King Lear’s would have bemused, amused or annoyed him, but a Shakespearian reading of Freud is compelling when we read Rebecca West’s magnificent portrayal of Lear’s final surge of the moral imperative of life guilt: “At the end, [Lear] cries out that love is the only true jewel in the universe, that if we have not found it yet we must go on mining for it till we find it” (West, 1940, p. 1125).
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