
Essays

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Memory – a Pharmakon

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What is better for life: to remember or not to remember? Or is it as Jan Sowa has claimed in his speech,¹ that all memory is conservative, and therefore focused solely on the past, and as such is a hindrance to thinking about the future? Or is it the other way round, and only a properly remembered past paves the way for responsible futuristic projects? Who is therefore right: Friedrich Nietzsche, stigmatizing the detrimental influence of history on life; Mao Zedong, who commanded the destruction of historical relics in the name of a brighter future; Jan Sowa, who views the current Polish memory of communism as a muzzle placed over adventuresome utopian thinking – or rather those for whom a properly constructed memory constitutes the necessary precondition of a responsible vision of the future? These are the questions that will guide my thinking throughout this essay.

¹ Jan Sowa, "Nieznane znane. Polska kultura nie-pamięci" [Unknown known. Polish culture of non-memory] (lecture, Jagiellonian University, Kraków, September 30, 2016).

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The Eternal Contemporaneity of Trauma, or, On the Pathologies of Polish Memory

Let us start with the wrong kind of remembering that considerably impedes any openness to the future. This is the subject of Friedrich Nietzsche's notable treatise "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life," which can be read in two ways: either as a direct attack on the "parasite of memory," which lodges itself in the human mind and sucks the vital energy out of it, or – in a more dialectical manner – as a subtle guide that illuminates the difference between pathological and nurturing memory.² I will follow the second reading – even if it goes against Nietzsche's intentions – as alongside the "antiquarian" memory, which overburdens the psyche with commitments to past things whose traces memory tries to preserve, there is also a kind of active remembering that is governed by a sense of responsibility for the future. When Nietzsche defines humans as beings that are capable of making promises, he does it on the grounds of their ability to properly remember those commitments – all the more so as a substantial number of those are of the negative kind: "Never again!" Therefore, only well-structured memory permits us to escape the circle of fruitless repetition and to break the bonds of harmful projects. Contrary to what Karl Marx has claimed, not every tragedy reappears as farce; it most often returns simply as another tragedy.

The idea that good memory can bring deliverance from the vicious circle of compulsive repetition shows up in Sigmund Freud's essay "Beyond the Pleasure Principle."³ In both these works – of Nietzsche and Freud – a certain paradox comes to the fore, as good, appropriate remembering turns out to be, in part, forgetting. Here the Nietzschean *aktive Vergessenheit* is above all the ability to gain some distance to the things that were, by framing them as proper past, that is, as something that no longer exists. Proper memory would therefore draw upon the dialectical power of forgetting, which distances past things from the field of the living present, preventing the specters of past events from casting a shadow on the time experienced here and now. While Nietzsche calls the ever-present past a "destructive force," Freud talks in this context of the repetition compulsion, which he also places on the side of the death instinct. The past that cannot become the future and reappears incessantly

2 Cf. Friedrich Nietzsche, "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life," in *Untimely Meditations*, ed. Daniel Breazeale, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

3 Sigmund Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," trans. James Strachey, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey, vol. 18: (1920–1922): *Beyond the Pleasure Principle, Group Psychology and Other Works* (London: Hogarth, 1955).

in its spectral actuality becomes the principal mechanism by which Thanatos methodically eradicates the life psyche, depriving it of its fundamental vital ability of being-in-time, of participating in its constant transformation.

The pathology of memory would therefore manifest in sustaining the past as ever present – and, it seems, herein lies the most malignant aspect of Polish historical memory. Several Polish scholars have already turned to psychoanalysis in their interpretations of the Polish social context (Paweł Dybel, Piotr Augustyniak, Szymon Wróbel, Jan Sowa) and my understanding of Polish pathological memory as a repetition compulsion fits in well with this trend. Indeed, it seems that Polish right-wing historical policy relies on the pathological mechanism of *Wiederholungszwang*, which actively opposes resolving the past as if it was the past. The thanatic system of repetition, which it proposes, directly aims to block the work of memory, as at its core lies the eternal presence of trauma. Therefore, we are dealing here not only with a memorological pathology, but also with pathology elevated to the level of methodical national propaganda, whose purpose it is to hinder the critical process of *Durcharbeiten*; this is hyper-pathology which consciously styles itself into a singular standard of well-being. There is, unfortunately, method in the madness.

Magdalena Saryusz-Wolska performed an unparalleled analysis of this deranged method in her presentation,⁴ I will therefore limit myself to its psychoanalytic summary. First, as Saryusz-Wolska aptly pointed out, this memory bets heavily on i m a g e s: the covers of patriotic right-wing periodicals showcased by the scholar – such as *Do Rzeczy* or *W Sieci* – deliberately disturb the perception of the linearity of time. Jarosław Kaczyński⁵ dressed in Marshall Józef Piłsudski's⁶ uniform or Muslim "terrorists" substituted for German troops in a notorious wartime photograph depicting the storming of the Polish border – these are all devices employed in service of repetition, of the eternal return of the same, a reality where Poland always needs to defend itself against an external threat. The trauma of threat and the knee-jerk defensive reflex align with the model of Ptolemaic immutability, wherein Polish history is solidified, and therefore the passage of time is completely negated.

4 Magdalena Saryusz-Wolska, "Historia w ikonografii prasy prawicowej" [History in the iconography of the right-wing press] (lecture, Jagiellonian University, Kraków, September 30, 2016).

5 Leader of the party Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość), which was the ruling party in Poland from 2005 to 2007 and then since the 2015 election. – Trans.

6 Józef Piłsudski (1867–1935) – Polish statesman, one of the preeminent figures in the Polish struggle for independence at the time of the First World War, organizer of the future Polish Army during the last years of Partitions. He is considered the father of the Second Polish Republic and is especially revered in Polish right-wing circles. – Trans.

While narrated history contains tensions, incidents, and plot turns – as any intricate story does – a history frozen in images is merely the catalyst for a simple string of associations that activates automatically. If the narrative falls into the domain of the self-conscious “I,” one that can be-in-time, then the series of images offered by right-wing historical policy wholly belongs to the realm of the subconscious, whose basic element is timelessness, *nunc stans*, the everlasting present.

I will adhere to the psychoanalytical method for the most part in this essay, but here I need to make a short departure from it. Though Freud gives a masterful description of temporality’s negation, the communal effects of it are even better diagnosed by the phenomenology of religion – a discipline instituted by Mircea Eliade. The Romanian thinker straightforwardly defines *sacrum* as the sphere in which temporality is suspended and which is marked by *illud tempus*: “that time,” a moment of a privileged event that will ritually repeat itself, thus negating the temporality of all other profane occurrences.⁷ The Polish national liturgical year is built strictly according to Eliade’s cyclical model, whose goal it is to deprive history of its linearity: on August 1 the Uprising begins, on September 1 the war always starts, and on April 10 the Presidential Flight⁸ crashes once again (this is a new day of remembrance, one that is being constantly adjoined to earlier traditions, but it will soon achieve the same sacred status of timelessness). Besides, the juxtaposition of Freud and Eliade is more than a mere digression. In fact, their notions of eternal presentness are perfectly symmetrical. What fills Freud with dread – the engulfment of linear time by the repetitive event that acts through a traumatic force – for Eliade becomes a positive criterion of sacrality, which is exactly this negation of time. What Freud tries to change by subjecting the repetition compulsion to a talking cure – that is by attempting to rewrite static images as linear narratives, traumatically experienced time as time restoratively recounted – Eliade, in turn, tries to preserve in the primordial form of traumatic influence, from which the Event is supposed to draw its sacrosanct power. Polish national holidays align perfectly with this (in Eliade’s own terms) “affirmatively pagan”

7 Cf. esp. Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return: Cosmos and History*, trans. Willard R. Trask, introd. Jonathan Z. Smith (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); and his *Sacrum, mit, historia*, trans. Anna Tatariewicz (Warszawa: PIW, 1970).

8 On April 10, 2010, the Polish Air Force Flight 101, carrying Polish delegates travelling for the 70th anniversary commemoration of Second World War mass murder of over twenty thousand Polish officers and intellectuals, crashed near the Russian city of Smolensk, killing all of the ninety-six passengers on board. Among them were the Polish president and first lady. – Trans.

understanding of *sacrum*, which feasts on extreme and catastrophic events that shatter the “profane” order of everyday.

The extraordinary sculpture by Stanisław Szukalski – an artist associated before the war with the paganist Zadruga, who afterwards emigrated to California (his inheritor is no other than Leonardo DiCaprio himself, the son of Szukalski’s guardians) – comes to mind in this context. The sculpture depicts general Tadeusz Bór-Komorowski⁹ as the Aztec god of war. This seemingly eccentric creation, where the demonic Bór hovers above the hecatomb of the Uprising’s casualties, reveals the very essence of Polish memory, which celebrates the Warsaw Uprising as a great massacre. Only Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz dared to directly speak this truth – which was universally concealed, as is anything profoundly sacred – in his fictionalized journal titled *Kinderszenen*. By drawing upon Martin Heidegger, Eliade, and Louis-Ferdinand Céline, he has basically confirmed Szukalski’s intuition that great historical events can be sacralised only through bloodshed in the deeply pagan Polish memory. As in the Aztec ritual sacrifices – the more blood is spilled, the more worthy of commemoration they become.

Let us return to psychoanalysis which has this great advantage over Eliade’s understanding, that it identifies the principle of sacrificial bloodshed as a traumatizing pathology. Most aforementioned scholars, especially Dybel and Sowa,¹⁰ strongly favor the ideas of Jacques Lacan in their analyses, but in my opinion the best psychoanalytical theory capable of elucidating the hyper-pathological mechanism of Polish historical memory can be found in the work of Melanie Klein. While Lacan is quite vague in this respect and his theory is just as well (or even better) suited for an apology of Polish death worship, Klein does not leave room for uncertainty. According to her, remaining in the paranoid-schizoid position, which is characterized by the repetition compulsion, is a fundamental psychological aberration and the primary “source of suffering.”¹¹ This position characterizes early infancy, when the just emerging psyche is completely dependent upon the mother. This reliance breeds constant frustration, as no actual mother can fully satisfy all of the infant’s

9 Tadeusz Bór-Komorowski (1895–1966). Polish military leader who presided over the planning and execution of the ultimately failed Uprising of August 1, 1944, which has led to an estimated 200,000 military and civilian Polish casualties and resulted in the almost complete destruction of Warsaw followed by mass exodus from the capital city. – Trans.

10 Cf. Jan Sowa, *Fantomowe ciało króla. Peryferyjne zmagania z nowoczesną formą* [The king’s phantom body. Peripheral struggles with modern form] (Kraków: Universitas, 2011); Paweł Dybel, *Urwane ścieżki. Przybyszewski – Freud – Lacan* [Broken paths. Przybyszewski – Freud – Lacan] (Kraków: Universitas, 2000).

11 Cf. Melanie Klein, “Envy and Gratitude,” in *Envy and Gratitude* (New York: Free Press, 2002).

demands: she is commonly, in the words of Klein's British protégé, D. W. Winnicott, "a good-enough mother." This frustration leads, in turn, to bouts of anger and aggression, whose object is the "bad breast," that is the life-giving source of milk. Because it is not readily available at all times, and it is not always full, the infant, still possessing the trace memory of "prenatal bliss," when feeding and nurturing was interrupted, rebels against its absence. Aggression in the paranoid-schizoid phase is therefore in essence a negation of coming into the world; it is an attempt to undo the "trauma of birth" (Otto Rank's term), in the course of which the psyche abandons the *pleroma* of delightful being-in-the-womb and is exposed to the foreign influence of an external world: of others, the difference, the reality principle and – last but not least – of time. In the rebellion against the "bad breast" the whole metaphysics of the Fall is being expressed: in its desire to return to the timelessness of the womb and to its eternal pleasure principle, the psyche refuses to "fall" into both world and time. It does not wish to be confronted with difference, because – at least initially – this can cause only suffering.

The greatest discovery of Klein and her "object relations" psychoanalysis is the diagnosis of the immature psyche as frozen in the paranoid-schizoid phase. The inability to progress to the depressive stage – where the world ceases to be perceived as a black and white space consisting of either absolutely good or absolutely bad objects – precludes the possibility of maturation: the psyche becomes frozen in the infantile stage, which is characterized by the alternating repetition of pleasure, when the "good breast" reminds of the bliss of the womb, and of persecutory delusion, where the "bad breast" reminds of the fall into the world and time – one is a state of blissful, uninterrupted narcissistic phantasy, the other is a state where each coming into contact with the reality principle is experienced as outright persecution. In the Polish context this would mean that Polish historical memory, which exhibits all the symptoms of being stranded in the mental stage of infancy, is capable of producing only two kinds of experience: either ecstasy induced by "an encounter with a good object" – a leader who is trusted without reservations, an environment that offers the comfort akin to that experienced in the womb, or a historical event presented as "a virtuous chapter" of Polish history – or paranoid fear caused by "an encounter with a bad object," that is with an actively persecutory "enemy of Polishness," who poses a direct existential threat.

It is noteworthy that in the Polish sacro-political imaginarium – which could also be characterized as universalized *mariavitism*,¹² where Catholicism

12 *Mariavitism* is the theological doctrine of the Mariavite Church, which was inspired by the Polish mystic Feliksa Magdalena Kozłowska (1862–1921). It sought the renewal of the Roman Catholic Church in the spirit of simplicity guided by the life of Mary, mother of Jesus,

becomes a pagan tribal religion accompanying “the Polish Christ” on his blood-soaked journey through the ages – holidays have always carried the mark of a “return to the womb,” by offering pleasure steeped in the selfness of nationalistic narcissism. Nation, Church (these nouns are superficially masculine in the Polish language, but derive from the Latin feminine *natia* and *ecclesia*) become in the Polish pomp a space of prenatal bliss, through which the miracle of suspension of the world and of all difference shines through. This is when Polishness collapses into the abyss of its monocultural inwardness, as if into its own phantasy-nightmare, producing only a private language that for others is mere gibberish. Witold Gombrowicz fittingly identified this as Polish “formlessness,” having on his mind the amorphousness of direct experiences and short-lived collective innervations that are produced by the multi-headed Polish body – “Pole on Pole,” kneaded into a uniform national dough that fails to rise – here no difference, no distance, and no perspective can come to life. The Polish model of community, based in infantile prenatal reminiscences is therefore a genuine proxemic nightmare: Gombrowicz’s tangle of bodies that are bound so closely together that no gaze can pierce the darkness of this national orgy. Blind identity, uninterested in seeking any external representation or reflection. The deepest pathology of inwardness, where memory is tasked with a single function: to once again summon the trauma which justifies the rejection of the world and the return to the womb.

These holidays also inevitably contain apocalyptic elements, as the return to the womb requires that the world first be destroyed. Whether this is achieved through the “great war of nations” prophesized by Adam Mickiewicz, where the harmful reality will bring on its own demise, or through some other sacrificial death of Poles – brave infants offered to the Moloch of this world to be devoured – is of no consequence. What matters, though, is the apocalypse itself, that is the great Manichean “NO!” which annihilates the reality principle, being-in-the-world, in time, in *saeculum*, which is full of ambivalence and where nothing is simply good or bad. This is fairly reminiscent of the “election program” put forward by Krzysztof Kononowicz, the self-proclaimed candidate for the Polish presidency. A chaotic enumeration of various “NOES” filled the campaign video posted by him on the internet – “so as there were no hooligans, that there was no noise, that there were no gymnasiums...” – which ended with the only logical conclusion: “so that there is nothing.” Sometimes you need a maniac to express the truths animating a frenzied society. Just as Stanisław Szukalski was right on the mark in his presentation of Bór-Komorowki as the thanatological demon of

which has led to the papal excommunication of the movement in the early twentieth century. – Trans.

carnage, so was also Kononowicz in his *credo* of Polish infantile apocalypticism: let us return to the womb, and this strange thing, this horrid world, let it finally come to an end...

Klein also claims that the greater the trauma that was experienced in infancy – that is, the more difficult the process of confronting the child with “the external world” – the stronger is the tendency to stultify maturation and entrenching of the psyche in the paranoid-schizoid position. Polish historical memory, which is focused almost exclusively on historical trauma, where Polishness fell prey to the “hostile world” – one example of this can be found in the representation of foreign powers in Adam Mickiewicz’s *The Books and the Pilgrimage of the Polish Nation* – is based on exactly the same principle. By underscoring the traumatic nature of confrontation with any kind of difference, it closes itself off in the phantasm of self-identity, which it sources from the image of primal narcissism, when the infant’s psyche, experiencing prenatal bliss, did not yet distinguish anything that was other from itself. The syndrome associated with the paranoid-schizoid position is therefore defined by traits such as the bare repetition of the traumatic event, the inability to experience ambivalence, and intolerance of any, even the slightest, differentiation.

Moving Into Time: On Polish Critical Memory

Poland is a country where maturation is associated with a considerable effort, which goes against the spontaneous tendencies characterizing, in the words of Stanisław Brzozowski, “infantilized Poland.” The willingness to work through traumas, where the simple opposition “enemy–friend” disappears, and the readiness to accept ambivalence and difference emerge, are characteristic of the syndrome that was described as the depressive position by Melanie Klein – in contemporary Poland it is adopted only by the critically inclined intelligentsia, for whom Brzozowski still remains a pertinent role model.

According to Klein, the depressive position amounts to the abandoning of infantile narcissism and gaining a subjective perspective, whose first stage is the acceptance of the indelible ambiguity of the surrounding world, understood as a separate and external reality that is governed by its own rules and that requires the psyche to abandon a fair amount of its demands. In the phase of decompression the child realizes that the mother, who is the embodiment of externality – for the first time appearing as a singularized object – is not, all things considered, as bad as it seemed, and the child’s very survival depends solely on her: here the aggression stemming from dependency of the powerless child gives way to feelings of guilt and gratitude for the love and care that it has been shown. More than this, the depressive position gives rise to the

sense of responsibility and agency. The child starts to perceive that its own actions also have a bearing on reality, that it can wound and hurt the environment that gave it life – henceforth, the child no longer identifies solely as a victim, it stops unleashing unmitigated fury upon the world, starts to comprehend the brittle nature of things that are external to it, and finally starts to empathize and therefore to participate. It becomes a part of the world.

“To be a part of the world”: this is the essence of the dream of Brzozowski, who was obsessive in his aspirations for “historical maturation.” Permanently unable to come to terms with the Polish paranoid-schizoid model, Brzozowski longed for it to mature into the position of historical agency and responsibility. He wanted for the Poles to become a part of the Western civilizational process and for them to join the group of nations that cultivate it purposefully. Adam Lipszyc used very similar critical instruments, including the psychoanalytic apparatus of Melanie Klein, to talk about overcoming of the infantile position towards the European Union, which corresponds perfectly with Brzozowski’s wish for Poland to finally see itself as a responsible part of the Western world, and not merely as a dependent permanent victim. Because just as infantile aggression is the flip side of powerlessness, so are current Polish attacks on the Union an expression of the certainty that no attack on the Union’s “maternal body” can truly harm it. Just as the biting and kicking infant feels utterly helpless in confrontation with the mother, so will Jarosław Kaczyński hurl the worst insults at the European Union, all the while expecting that it will “keep on giving.” The infant is permitted everything because, in fact, it can do nothing. Furious or not, it is at the mercy of the breast that it bites.

Maturation would therefore equal moving beyond the pathology of dependence, but this – somewhat paradoxically – would only be possible through acknowledging the state of dependence. This depressive recognition of the fact that one is not the center of the world, but merely a part of a greater whole, also has consequences for the competing model of remembering, where the narcissistic claims of Poles to represent themselves as the cosmic sacrifice or as the “Savior of nations” – that are a simple reversal and, at the same time, a continuation of the infantile feelings of omnipotence and all-importance – become fundamentally worked through and give way to a more somber feeling of *peripherality*. As far as the Polish paranoid-schizoid position inevitably places Poland at the center of the universe, the depressive position produces the image of Poland as a *peripheral culture*, which depends on patterns created by more central civilizations, or as Klein would describe it – it is destined to “learn from others.” Brzozowski had no qualms about the fact that Poland must once and for all stop being all that sweet about itself for the sake of “raising the spirits,” and enter into a period of study, which he

in no sense equivocated with the principle of “blind imitation” that is so effortlessly ascribed by the representatives of the political right to, as they call them, Polish “lemmings.”¹³ Just as a subject in a depressive position knows that learning is not a disgrace – that the child came to this world after its parents who “were here first” and have a better understanding of how to deal with its intricacies – so was Brzozowski free of the peripheral shame arising in contact with the cultures of primary modernity, especially the British. He wanted to drink from the fount of cultural self-knowledge of David Hume, William Blake, George Gordon Byron, and George Meredith – and a lot of what he creatively absorbed could aid the maturation of the Polish Romantic paradigm, for one. While absorbing a novel pattern of remembering from the British – one that is based on an intensely instrumental participation in world and time – Brzozowski also hoped to benefit the growth of the Polish soul, by habituating it to a more reflective way of thinking about its own history, wherein previously the passive dependency upon the West oftentimes found compensation in brutal colonizing aloofness exercised on nations considered even more culturally lagging.

Contrary to what the “stand tall” pundits claim these days, the depressive-peripheral position that Brzozowski recommended for the Poles has nothing to do with humiliation. Firstly, this is a “matter of fact” realization: Polish civilizations is for reasons not entirely under its control derivative in its relationship with Western modernization; and if it wants to take part in it at all, it must acknowledge this delay (unless it actually does not want to this, which would in essence lead to a secession from the Union). Secondly, it is an equally normal break with childish narcissism, when individual history stops appearing as a chain of special and extraordinary events – even miraculous ones as in the case of the “Miracle on the Vistula,” or the “Miracle of Solidarity” that was prayed for by the Polish pope – and reveals itself instead as a typical history of weak nations that fall victim to all kinds of invaders. Thirdly, it is also a chance to extract that which is of true importance in Polish memory: not subsequent failed uprisings, massacres, and senseless hecatombs, but idiosyncratic experiences, unknown to the more fortunate cultures of the primary West. The most obvious example of these would be the memory of communism.

And here it is where my argument comes full circle. If I were to imagine a model of Polish mature memory, then it would be a laborious attempt

13 The term “lemming,” which was first noted in the late aughts, is used in Polish public discourse as a derogatory term for (mostly) young professionals from large cities who are not interested in politics venturing beyond the short-term economic interest of their in-group. The term alludes to the supposed herd behaviors of the eponymous mammal. – Trans.

to work through the experience of communism that is not past-oriented but rather future-facing – not an attempt to redress the hurts (because justice for millions of victims just cannot be delivered), but rather a turn to our future responsible involvement in the project of Western modernization; one that would cast a critical gaze on all kinds of social radicalism. If there is one dimension where our memory can prove universally important and useful, it is in its strong-voiced *memento* against preserving the “idea of communism” as immortal and unsoiled by the dirty matter of real socialism. Because if anything is worthy of remembrance and working-through in Polish history, it is so for the sake of forewarning others – with the power of lived experience – about the consequences of travelling the path towards the very end of even the most noble utopia.

I am of the opinion that the memory of communism should become the mission of our critical intelligentsia that draws on Brzozowski’s legacy – it should attest to our mature depressive position not only in the face of right-wing claims of Polish tradition, but also in confrontation with globally-inclined left-wing utopianism. Though, first and foremost, we should work hard to safeguard the trauma of communism from being completely appropriated by the pictorial pseudo-memory of right-wing rituals. If this would happen, then we would lose the probably singular chance of gaining a truly reflective self-identity. Ultimately, a measure of individual maturity is a well-structured memory that empowers the subject to narrate its own history in such a manner that allows others to draw some lessons from the story they hear.

Translated by Rafał Pawluk

Abstract

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Memory – A Pharmakon

This essay examines the pathologies of Polish memory through Melanie Klein's psychoanalytical theory. Bielik-Robson suggests that the majority of what is seen as historical memory in contemporary Poland is no memory at all but a compulsion to repeat, reminiscent of the dark ritual of an ever-returning trauma. It is of course risky to extrapolate from psychoanalytical methods to collective subjects, but this essay attempts to describe the assumptive subject of the Polish collective as a Kleinian "angry infant" in the paranoid-schizoid position. This arrested development results in a falsely passive experience of dependency as well as a complete inability to work through trauma. To develop this ability, however, turns out to be a necessary condition for the formation of memory in the strict sense.

Keywords

individual and collective memory, repetition compulsion, trauma, Melanie Klein, psychoanalysis, angry infant