

TRAUMATIC RELIVING IN HISTORY, LITERATURE, AND FILM

Rudolph Binion



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For Eléna

*Beyond the compass of a wife
She verges on an edge of life
Where species mingle, beasts don't bite,
And donkeys dine by candlelight.*



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“All miserable events do naturally beget their like.”

—Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*

“I had the feeling as in a nightmare of its all being something repeated, something I had been through and that now I must go through again.”

—Ernest Hemingway, *The Sun Also Rises*



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FOREWORD

This book is about a rare but highly significant psychological mechanism that has yet to be seen for what it is. By a “psychological mechanism” I mean a set course of human behaviour such that, once it kicks in, there is no stopping it. The one to be discussed has often been observed at work in everyday life, although without being recognized as the distinct mechanism that it is. Psychologists in particular have overlooked its patterned workings, which they lump together with others or else parcel out under various distinct rubrics. I propose to track and trace those workings through history, literature, and film with the aim of defining their specificity. Creative writers since antiquity and especially film-makers in our own times have drawn on this mechanism to dramatic and even comic effect with at least an intuitive grasp of its independent reality and uncanny force. But history is the prime showcase for its incidence on individual and mass behaviour alike. It intrudes on history only exceptionally, but when it does it sweeps all before it.

What is this mechanism? All too simply put, it is the occasional felt need to repeat, to re-enact, to relive an unbearable experience. But this formulation is obviously deficient: who would want to re-experience something unbearable? What needs adding is that

the repetition is unconscious. The unbearable experience is re-run without being recognized. It looks different, but it feels the same deep down. And it feels the same because it is the same in disguise. Not every unbearable experience is repeated, however, even in disguise—far from it. Who, then, repeats which unbearable experiences, and why? This is the complex question behind all the words ahead.

Such repetition can be divined behind one news item after another. A woman committed for crying “Fire!” in the basement of a department store turns out to have survived, and almost forgotten, a devastating nightclub fire long years before. A seemingly readjusted Vietnam veteran is arrested in a cemetery shouting orders to a non-existent platoon to attack a nearby police station. A child molester, when interrogated, claims to have suffered in the act, then remembers that he himself had been painfully raped as a child: a classic role reversal. A stretch of coast line that is periodically wiped out by floods is each time resettled by the survivors once they find false closure. The pattern is discernible at a glance. I propose to try to define it exactly and then to look behind it.

The short word for such an unbearable experience that may get recycled is “trauma”. As a rule, people who suffer a traumatic experience do not find closure easily—which is just as well, for the price of their putting the experience behind them, as the expression goes, is that they may then contrive to repeat it unknowingly at a later point. We do not puzzle over the compulsive, vivid remembering of a trauma, however painful and pointless, because that is the familiar, normal reaction. For the opposite reason we do not puzzle over repeating a trauma unawares: because the process has not been properly discerned even though it is instinctively known to us all and often evident at a glance. Again, the aim of this book is to make that evidence precise and that knowledge explicit.

My concern is, then, with the human peculiarity of occasionally contriving to repeat a traumatic experience in a disguise thick enough to fool the traumatized subject but thin enough for an outside observer to see through, especially since Freud alerted the world to the common forms that unconscious disguises take. Simple opposites, such as carnal for chaste or tutor for tutee, are about as thick as such disguises ever get. I draw these two tiny, tidy examples from the first case of traumatic reliving that I encountered in my

historic researches, Lou Andreas-Salomé's routinized rehash in life and letters of her traumatic break-up with Friedrich Nietzsche. Ever since this first encounter with traumatic reliving in history I have been prone to hit up against it repeatedly whether on the individual or the group level—or even both at once, as with Hitler and his following reliving separate traumas in sync. My own repetitive pattern was not, then, itself trauma-induced—or did Lou's trauma set it going? Once I thought to escape it by way of a book on literary classics, only to come upon it again and again in fiction since antiquity. And most recently, after I complained to my wife about my recurrent encounters with recurrent trauma, she found herself spotting it in one movie after another. So I finally resolved to consolidate my findings on traumatic reliving in fact and fancy—for the prospective benefit of learning, to be sure, but also in hopes of finally kicking the curse.

My wife, Eléna Lagrange, encouraged and assisted me in this endeavour well beyond the film research, at which she beat me cold. Alice Binion and Deborah Hayden each gave me invaluable feedback along my way. Philippe d'Hugues provided me with several precious leads on film. Stephen Kern annotated the whole manuscript incisively, and Barry Shapiro gave a near-final draft a sharp critical overview. To all, my apologies for rewarding their generous support so poorly in that my findings raise more problems than they even begin to solve. At least those problems are now raised.



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born on 18 January 1927 in New York, Rudolph Binion was educated at Columbia University and the University of Paris. He served two years in the United States Army and worked three years in demographic statistics at UNESCO (Paris) before taking a doctorate in History at Columbia in 1958. By then he had begun teaching—one year in intellectual history at Rutgers University, three years in the humanities at MIT, and eight years in intellectual history at Columbia. In 1967 he moved to Brandeis University, where he has remained ever since except for a visiting professorship at the Collège de France (Paris) in 1980. He has published ten books and some fifty scholarly articles in European and American political, social, and demographic history, biography, art, and literature. But ever since his monumental psychobiography of the prodigious Russo-German woman of letters Lou Andreas-Salomé, *Frau Lou* (1968), his constant preoccupation in all of his research has been with developing psychohistorical method, and this increasingly with a focus on “group process”, or human groups acting in concert without their members’ awareness. In his numerous individual and, more recently, group studies he has repeatedly found himself dealing with the unconscious repetition

of traumatic experiences. In his present book he draws on his life's work with "traumatic reliving" in history, and adds comparative studies of the same phenomenon in literature and film, in an attempt to define the process of traumatic reliving by individuals and groups and to understand who relives which traumas why.