

MOURNING BEYOND MELANCHOLIA: FREUD'S PSYCHOANALYSIS OF LOSS

Freud's mourning theory has been criticized for assuming a model of subjectivity based on a strongly bounded form of individuation. This model informs "Mourning and Melancholia" (1917), in which Freud argued that mourning comes to a decisive end when the subject severs its emotional attachment to the lost one and reinvests the free libido in a new object. Yet Freud revised his mourning theory in writings concerned with the Great War and in *The Ego and the Id* (1923), where he redefined the identification process previously associated with melancholia as an integral component of mourning. By viewing the character of the ego as an elegiac formation, that is, as "a precipitate of abandoned object-cathexes," Freud's later work registers the endlessness of normal grieving; however, it also imports into mourning the violent characteristics of melancholia, the internal acts of moralized aggression waged in an effort to dissolve the internal trace of the other and establish an autonomous identity. Because it is not immediately clear how Freud's text offers a theory of mourning beyond melancholy violence, his account of the elegiac ego is shown here to ultimately undermine the wish for an identity unencumbered by the claims of the lost other and the past, and to suggest the affirmative and ethical aspects of mourning.

In laying out his early theory of mourning in "Mourning and Melancholia" (1917), Freud begins by defining similarities between the two responses to loss he otherwise seeks to distinguish. Mourning and melancholia entail similar symptoms: "profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, [and] inhibition of all activity" (p. 244). Moreover, both "normal" mourning and "pathological" melancholia may arise in "reaction to

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the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one's country, liberty, and ideal, and so on" (p. 243). Whether in response to literal death or symbolic loss, mourning names an experience of grief and a process of working through during which the mourner relinquishes emotional ties to the lost object. While drawing on prevailing assumptions about the mourning process,¹ Freud suggested this detachment of libido takes place through a "testing of reality." Although he admitted a lack of complete knowledge about reality testing, Freud maintained that the mourner severs attachments primarily through a labor of memory: "Each single one of the memories and expectations in which the libido is bound to the object is brought up and hypercatheted, and the detachment of the libido is accomplished in respect of it. . . . When the work of mourning is completed the ego becomes free and uninhibited again" (p. 245).

The work of mourning, as Freud describes it here, entails a kind of hyperremembering, a process of obsessive recollection during which the survivor resuscitates the existence of the lost other in the space of the psyche, replacing an actual absence with an imaginary presence. This magical restoration of the lost object enables the mourner to assess the value of the relationship and comprehend what he or she has lost in losing the other. But prolonging the existence of the lost object at the center of grief work (*Trauerarbeit*) does not persist indefinitely, for Freud claimed that the mourner, by comparing the memories of the other with actual reality, comes to an objective determination that the lost object no longer exists. With a very specific task to perform, the Freudian grief work seeks, then, to convert loving remembrances into a futureless memory. Mourning comes to a decisive and "spontaneous end," according to Freud, when the survivor has detached his or her emotional tie to the lost object and reattached the free libido to a new object, thus accepting consolation in the form of a substitute for what has been lost.

Freud's "Mourning and Melancholia" succeeds in countering the denial of death and demonization of bereavement typical of early-twentieth-century Western culture.² However, there is still something

¹For discussions that relate Freud's account of mourning and melancholia to ancient, medieval, and Renaissance traditions, see Jackson (1986, pp. 311–324) and Agamben (1993, pp. 3–26).

²The medicalization of illness and dying in the closing decades of the nineteenth century not only rendered death an increasingly taboo subject; it also contributed to the disappearance of Victorian mourning customs and to what a cultural anthropologist (Gorer 1977, p. 128) defined as the demonizing of all social displays of bereave-

self-serving about his description of mourning as a process of detachment and consoling substitution. Any effort to explain this selfishness would do well to recall that “Mourning and Melancholia” assumes a view of subjectivity and object-love that Freud articulated a year earlier in “On Narcissism: An Introduction” (1914). (The former work, though published in 1917, was written in 1915.) Although he begins with a discussion of narcissistic disturbances in which a person “treats his own body in the same way in which the body of a sexual object is ordinarily treated” (p. 73), Freud was less interested in clarifying mental disorders related to narcissism than in introducing the concept of primary narcissism as a normal stage in ego development. Primary narcissism names an initial investment of libido in the ego, an investment Freud termed “ego-libido” and linked to “the instinct of self-preservation” found in “every living creature” (p. 74). This investment of libido in the ego emerges in response to the loss of “original” narcissism, a state of unmediated selfhood prior to individuation, which prompts the child to construct an “ego ideal” by internalizing external attachments to parents. “This ideal ego,” Freud clarifies, “is now the target of the self-love which was enjoyed in childhood by the actual ego,” and functions as a “substitute for the lost narcissism” of childhood (p. 94). As a component of ego development, primary narcissism governs the formation of later attachments to others, transforming ego-libido into what Freud called “object-libido” (p. 76). In achieving a more developed type of narcissism, the subject forms attachments outside the self and constructs a self-image conditioned by an outside world of others and objects. The narcissistic constitution of subjectivity thus explains how human beings develop a sophisticated and realistic sense of self, realistic because self-love yields to object-love and gives rise to an image of the self mediated by the external world.

“On Narcissism” marks the beginning of Freud’s radical reconceptualization of the subject, raising issues that would lead to his articulation in *The Ego and the Id* of the second topography of the psyche. However, at this stage Freud still theorized the subject primarily in terms of a self-centered and closed system of meaning, in terms of what Benjamin (1988) has addressed as the focus in early psychoanalysis on “the self’s attitude to itself” rather than on “intersubjective” relations

ment. Freud resisted this cultural repression of loss by defining mourning as a necessary labor, theorizing the psyche as an internal space for grief work, and bringing a discussion of bereavement into the public domain.

(pp. 19–20). Jacobson (1964) critiqued Freud’s account of narcissism on similar grounds, pointing out that while Freud defines narcissism as “a complex process closely linked up with the structural differentiation and the constitution of the system ego,” he still suggests “that the ego is built up and gains strength by being vested only with narcissistic libido,” rather than achieving “enduring object-libidinal cathexes” (p. 18).

The self-centeredness in Freud’s thesis on narcissism comes into even sharper focus when we examine his account of object-love. Despite his insistence on contrasting “normal” object-love and “disordered” narcissistic love, Freud actually reduces object-love to narcissistic love. As he puts the issue, complete object-love “displays the marked sexual overvaluation which is doubtless derived from the child’s original narcissism and thus corresponds to a transference of that narcissism to the sexual object” (p. 88). In other words, Freud defines normal object-love as a transference onto another of a fundamental and prior overvaluation of oneself. Borch-Jacobsen (1991) has critiqued Freud’s account of narcissism by exposing how the subject emotionally invests in another. This Freudian emphasis on the narcissism involved in subject formation prompts Borch-Jacobsen to the following conclusion: “That the ego can imagine itself outside itself, imagine itself before itself in the mirror the other holds up to it, in no way, in fact, contravenes its auto-position” (p. 68). Consequently, Freud’s account of primary narcissism, like his theory of object-love, implies that we love others less for their uniqueness and separateness, and more for their ability to contract our own abundance, that is, to embody and reflect back that part of ourselves we have invested in them. Freud’s text suggests, therefore, that the people we love are imminently replaceable and that we necessary fail to appreciate exactly how other they are.

It is this model of the narcissistic subject that informs Freud’s early mourning theory, where the loss of a love object is understood as a temporary disruption of the mourner’s narcissism. As “Mourning and Melancholia” lays out, the other’s departure propels the mourner into a battle between life and death, between a desire to live that entails abandoning the other, and a desire to die that entails clinging to and following the other into death. What ensures that mourning will culminate in the triumph of life over death is the subject’s narcissism, for Freud claimed that the mourner “is persuaded by the sum of the narcissistic

satisfactions it derives from being alive to sever its attachment to the object that has been abolished” (p. 255). In other words, as Freud contended, mourning induces the survivor to give up the lost object by “offering the ego the inducement of continuing to live” (p. 257). Believing that love for the other fundamentally derives from one’s self-love, Freud argued that the mourner reclaims the libido invested in the lost object and returns this emotional investment to the ego as a necessary prelude to forming a new attachment. In short, Freud claimed that we must sever one attachment to make another possible.

We are now in a position to understand how Freudian mourning involves less a lament for the passing of a unique other, and more a process geared toward restoring a certain economy of the subject.³ During the memory work of mourning, as Freud assumed at this early stage in his theorization of grief, the survivor seeks a magical recovery of the lost object for self-serving reasons. More specifically, by resuscitating the other in memory, the mourner attempts to reclaim a part of the self that has been projected onto the other, a part of the self necessary to the construction of the subject’s self-image as a complete and autonomous being. Losing a loved one therefore threatens to shatter the mourner’s imaginary psychic integrity, imaginary since this self-image depends on a relation external to the self. This threat explains why the mourner clings to the lost object, since acknowledging the loss would force the grieving subject to recognize the full extent of what has been lost, namely, an irrecoverable attribute of the self necessary to the mourner’s sense of coherent identity.

By the time he wrote *The Ego and the Id* Freud understood that explaining the dynamics of mourning demanded a more nuanced view of ego formation, one that no longer reduced object-love to a species of self-love. But in “Mourning and Melancholia” Freud assumes that the subject’s primary concern is to its own desire and not the objects of this desire, and grounds his account of mourning upon a model of the traditionally unified subject. Restoring the subject to itself thus depended on a rather straightforward process of abandoning emotional ties,

³Woodward (1990) offers an excellent critique of Freud’s early mourning theory, arguing that “there is something *in between* mourning and melancholia,” a performance of grief “that is lived in such a way that one is still *in* mourning but no longer *exclusively* devoted to mourning” (p. 96). I would argue, however, that the problem with Woodward’s otherwise insightful essay is that she treats “Mourning and Melancholia” as Freud’s last word on the grieving process and neglects the substantially revised theory Freud proposes in *The Ego and the Id*.

repudiating the lost other, and assimilating the loss to a consoling substitute. The self is restored and the work of mourning brought to a decisive close, Freud believed, when the free libido has been reinvested in a new object. As a process of detachment and disavowal, Freud's early mourning theory may be placed, then, within a longstanding epistemological and cultural tradition in which the subject acquires legitimacy at the expense of the other's separateness and well-being, a tradition in which the subject neutralizes the enduring pain of loss by accepting consolation in the form of a substitute for what has been lost.

THE PERSISTENCE OF FREUD'S MOURNING THEORY

48 Although I have raised objections to Freud's early mourning theory, literary critics working in a range of historical periods and genres have persisted in using the Freudian model, though in refined form, to evaluate narrative representations of death, loss, and bereavement. Among the most well-known, Sacks (1985) has argued that the elegy from Spenser to Yeats basically reflects a Freudian economy, where consoling substitution becomes the central aim. Sacks draws an analogy between the aim of mourning and the aim of the elegy: "One of the major tasks of the work of mourning and of the elegy is to repair the mourner's damaged narcissism" (p. 10). In response to this bereaved self-shattering, the traditional elegist, like the mourner in Freud's early theory, overcomes grief by deriving solace from a substitute for the lost object. Although Freud focuses primarily on finding human replacements, Sacks shows how cultural fictions serve the same substitutive function. In Milton's "Lycidas," for instance, a shepherd successfully mourns by displacing affection from the dead friend to a fiction in which the lost other "lives and spreads aloft" in heaven (p. 96). Even in the Victorian era, when growing religious and philosophical skepticism rendered fictions of transcendence more difficult to endorse, poets continued to find consoling substitutes to heal the wounds of loss. By way of example, Sacks cites *In Memoriam*, Tennyson's elegy for Arthur Henry Hallam, which manages to "resist the tremendous counter-pressure of melancholy" (p. 202) by figuring the beloved friend's death as a "divine event" (p. 201).

Sacks's study does more than simply show how poets and their contemporaries found comfort in fictions that transcend and outlast death; it also demonstrates how the elegy itself emerges as a consoling

substitute for the lost one. In laying the groundwork for this argument, Sacks argues that the very act of writing moves the poet from bereaved despair to resolution. This resolution converges with the elegist's assessment and affirmation of his surviving powers, one of the most important of which is his continued use of language.⁴ By representing the loss of the other, the poet establishes a distance between the original object and the arbitrary verbal signs that convey its loss. This distance is essential to the work of mourning, according to Sacks, because it helps the grieving poet understand the difference between the dead and the living, a profoundly simple difference between those who no longer speak or write and those who do. Although the mourner wants to cling to the lost object and deny this difference, the act of "figuring" the loss brings about the "elegist's reluctant submission to language itself" (p. 2). This submission, Sacks claims, marks the successful completion of mourning at the same time it signals that the lost one has transcended death by achieving aesthetic immortality in a timeless literary artifact.

Sacks defines the genre's substitutive function and consolatory power most clearly in his analysis of Ben Jonson's "On My First Son" (pp. 120–26). Consider the last four lines of Jonson's elegy for his son, also named Benjamin:

Rest in soft peace, and asked, say here doth lie
Ben Jonson his best piece of poetry,
For whose sake, henceforth, all his vows be such
As what he loves may never like too much.

In a dialogue with the dead, Jonson has Benjamin speak from beyond the grave. When "asked," Benjamin declares that he has converged with his father's "best piece of poetry," thereby legitimating the father/poet's creation of his own literary tomb. The last two lines seem to undercut the value of the poem's consoling effect, since the "vow" entails Jonson's own declaration that he will never love anything again, including his own literary output, as much as his departed son. But Sacks argues that "one cannot underestimate the consolatory aspect of

⁴I deliberately use the masculine pronoun since Sacks focuses exclusively on male elegists and since feminist critics have argued that traditional elegies written by women typically resist the consolatory paradigms of the male canon. For a discussion of the female elegiac tradition, see Schenck (1986) and Stone (1991).

the specific figure” of poetic creation in Jonson’s elegy (p. 124). As evidence for this claim, Sacks suggests that when we associate “vow” with *veu* (wish) and with *vox* (voice, vowel, utterance), the closing lines declare Jonson’s devotion to the future and his “interest in continuing to perform certain acts of language” (p. 125). The elegy consoles, then, because the poet has accepted his surviving and masterful use of language as an adequate compensation for the loss. Further, by accepting an arbitrary linguistic totality—the poem itself—as a consoling substitute for the lost son, the elegist redirects emotional ties from the other to a literary object that in some sense replaces and transcends the one it mourns. Through this completion of mourning, the lost other, in Sacks’s words, “is thus eventually transformed into something very much like a consolation prize—a prize that becomes the prize and sign of poethood” (p. 5).

That the traditional elegy transforms the lost other into the writer’s own aesthetic gain raises certain political and ethical suspicions, at least from a contemporary perspective, about the redemptive function of art and the effacement of the other’s absolute uniqueness it assumes. One way to clarify this denial of alterity is to consider the fundamental similarity between Sacks’s account of successful mourning and recent psychoanalytic theories of bereavement offered by Abraham and Torok (1980) and Kristeva (1989). For Abraham and Torok “successful” mourning depends on trading the other for symbolic compensation, that is, on reducing the other’s uniqueness to the subject’s means of representation. Abraham and Torok define internalization, the process of taking the lost object into the structure of one’s own identity, as the primary support system of mourning. Further, they distinguish two forms of internalization: “introjection,” a metaphorical process regulating normal mourning, and “incorporation,” a literalized fantasy governing melancholia in which the loss is denied and the other encrypted in the body. Incorporation arises, they point out, when a traumatic memory associated with the other renders introjection impossible.

In defining the structure of mourning in relation to the first loss we experience, that of the mother, Abraham and Torok argue that the introjection of this primary loss establishes “an empty space” from which speech and the meaningfulness of language emerge. When confronted with the loss of the maternal breast, itself a consolation for the loss of an intrauterine mother-child union, the infant mourns by learning “to fill the void of the mouth with words” (p. 6). That is, the successful dis-

placement of libido from the lost mother takes place through a process of “vocal self-fulfillment.” In a manner similar to the elegists in Sacks’s account, the child verbalizes the loss, replaces the satisfactions received at the breast “with the satisfactions of mouth devoid of that object but filled with words addressed to the subject” (p. 5), and thereby comes to terms with the painful separation. At once a theory of individuation, primary language acquisition, and signification, Abraham and Torok’s account of mourning describes a process whereby the child negates the loss of the mother and accepts its own linguistic mastery as adequate compensation.⁵ Consequently, their theory excludes the mother from the realm of the social by subordinating the thought of her absolute difference to the workings of the sociolinguistic order. Indeed, the very idea of the mother’s difference from both the child and the symbolic order—the notion of maternal alterity that Sprengnether (1990) has raised to challenge the patriarchal bias within psychoanalytic theory—does not arise within the terms of Abraham and Torok’s analysis.

Kristeva’s analysis of melancholic depression leads to a further clarification of the violence done to the lost other, especially the maternal other, in the work of so-called normal mourning. Kristeva (1989) ventures the highly criticized claim that “matricide is our vital necessity,” by which she means that healthy subjectivity depends on killing off—or more precisely, separating from—the mother (p. 27).⁶ Moreover, stable forms of selfhood depend on accepting the linguistic resources regulated by the symbolic order as a means of mourning and neutralizing the guilt that follows the murderous deed. Kristeva contends that “what makes such a triumph over sadness possible is the ability of the self to identify no longer with the lost object but with a third party—father, form, schema” (p. 23). As this description of recovery suggests, her account of mourning defines a repudiation of attachments as a condition of normal subjectivity and signification. Conversely, the failure to mourn the mother results in an inadequate integration into

⁵My reading of Abraham and Torok has been influenced by Butler (1990). Although she does not explicitly critique the notion of introjection as the governing process of normal mourning, Butler contends that gender identity necessarily takes the form of a melancholic structure so that “it makes sense to choose ‘incorporation’ as the manner by which that identification is accomplished” (p. 68).

⁶Ziarek (1993) articulates an ethical model of mourning that recognizes maternal alterity by comparing the work of Kristeva and Emmanuel Levinas. She argues that “in Kristeva’s case, the encounter with the unmediated other bespeaks the necessity of matricide; in Levinas’s case, it initiates ethical responsibility for the other and a prohibition of murder” (p. 66).

society that may lead to clinical depression, a condition Kristeva sees as arising when the subject has “been unable to find a valid compensation for the loss” (p. 5).

Although Kristeva recognizes that men may experience an unsuccessful reckoning with the primary loss of the mother, she clearly associates women with failed mourning. Beyond Kristeva’s study, this gender bias also complicates the work of Sacks and of Abraham and Torok, at least insofar as the mourning theories they offer assume a traditionally masculine model of subjectivity in which rigid forms of individuality have been the norm. In Kristeva’s argument, women are not simply culturally prone but in fact constitutionally predisposed to become failed mourners, succumbing to depression and “sinking into the blackness of *asymbolia*” (p. 33). Unlike men, women possess what she calls a regrettably weak “*matricidal drive*,” since their separation from the mother is complicated by the fact that they must also assume the mother’s gender identity. For Kristeva, bereaved depression thus emerges as a kind of a psychoanalytic standard for women.⁷ The only hope for curing this depressive economy rests on accepting a “counter-depressant”—psychoanalysis as Kristeva practices it—that prescribes that women liberate themselves from the emotional demands of mourning, liberate themselves from enduring attachments to lost loves. Toward this end, Kristeva counsels women to follow the artistic example of the male melancholics in her study. Motivated by a desire to master loss, overcome contingency, and assert the primacy of identity, writers including Gérard de Nerval and Fyodor Dostoevsky, at least as Kristeva reads them, overcome grief by translating the lost other in a work of art that may succeed in expanding the limits of representation, but that still effaces the radical otherness of what it translates.

In bringing these recent theories of mourning to bear on Sacks’s study, I have sought to demonstrate how his model of compensatory mourning depends on a denial of otherness, a denial that occurs exactly at the moment the other is represented and memorialized. But any effort to evaluate Sacks’s work must begin by recognizing the descriptive nature of his study. More specifically, Sacks analyzes an historical practice from the Renaissance to the late romantic period in which elegists worked through loss by adopting or creating such consolatory fictions as the rebirth of the dead in God, nature, and the poem itself.

⁷For a critique of Kristeva’s account of female subjectivity, see Schiesari (1992, pp. 77–93) and Sprengnether (1990, pp. 216–219).

On this level, I would argue, Sacks's study establishes an historically limited period in which Freud's early account of mourning makes complete sense, clarifying how elegists completed grief work through an artistic process of negation, substitution, and consolation. But as his "Epilogue" makes clear, Sacks moves from description to prescription, arguing that successful mourning and successful elegies in our time depend on accepting "renewed figures of consolation that readers at large can share" (p. 307). Such consoling figuration, it is important to recognize, has been wholly abandoned by some of the most successful cultural sites of contemporary mourning, including Maya Lin's Vietnam Veterans War Memorial, Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*, and Toni Morrison's fiction, to name but a few. Sack's endorsement of consolatory mourning, it strikes me with some force, presents a troubling and inadequate model for mourning and memorializing practices that aim primarily to sustain bereaved pain as a means to acknowledge the social politics and personal ethics entailed in loss.

The argument against consolation has been forcefully made by Ramazani (1994), who critiques Sacks's account and analyzes the pervasive challenge to elegiac and mourning conventions in the work of modern poets as diverse as Wilfred Owen, Langston Hughes, and Anne Sexton (p. 3). Over and against depictions of mourning as substitutive and compensatory, Ramazani locates a recurring event in the modern elegy: an experience of grief that resists neutralization in redemptive fictions. Defining the difference between the traditional and modern elegy, Ramazani writes: "If the traditional elegy was an art of saving, the modern elegy is what Elizabeth Bishop calls an 'art of losing.' Instead of resurrecting the dead in some substitute, instead of curing themselves through displacement, modern elegists 'practice losing farther, losing faster,' so that the 'One Art' of the modern elegy is not transcendence or redemption of loss but immersion in it" (p. 4). To evaluate this "immersion" in terms of consolatory mourning would necessarily lead to a view that many twentieth-century elegies fail to properly grieve, that such works dramatize the pathology of melancholia. But Ramazani convincingly argues that the modern elegy participates in the creation of a new practice of mourning, one that steadfastly resists consolation, scorns recovery and transcendence, and gives voice to criticism of the dead as well as to self-criticism (p. 8).

Rather than seeking consolations for loss, consolations that have increasingly appeared as dubious forms of comfort for the living, modern

poets perform a type of anticonsolatory grieving that Ramazani calls “melancholic mourning” (p. 4). As he explains, the melancholic emphasis of modern mourning names a work of grieving less idealistic and more ambivalent, enraged, and aggressive. Explaining how aggression actually serves the purposes of mourning, Ramazani points out that part of what intensifies and perpetuates bereavement has been the social prohibition against expressing anger and aggression toward the lost other. Mourners may feel this aggression toward the lost other for a variety of reasons, including common feelings of abandonment and more specific complaints about the other’s conduct. A mourning practice that prohibits the expression of bereaved anger tends to drive hostility inward, where berating the self takes the place of criticizing the deceased. Because redeeming the dead in transcendent or consoling fictions necessarily sustains the terms of the attachment, modern poets attack those they mourn in order to weaken ties and create new discursive spaces unencumbered by the demands of the other and the past. By warring on lost others, these writers often seek redress for an array of personal grievances. Through their bereaved assaults, they simultaneously criticize tradition and rebel against cultural inheritances that would otherwise perpetuate familial and social power structures, along with the gender, racial, and sexual biases such structures have historically implied. Far from sugarcoating grief expression, these writers, as Ramazani puts it, “have forged a credible vocabulary for grief in our time,” a language that resounds with all “the violence and irresolution, all the guilt and ambivalence of modern mourning” (p. ix).

In its resistance to outworn forms of solace and transcendence, the modern elegy reflects a significant advance beyond conventional models of consolatory mourning; however, I also want to consider how bereaved aggression reveals a problematic desire for radical independence from both the lost other and from social determinants. Freud himself, it is worth noting, observed this connection between mournful rage and personal autonomy in those suffering narcissistic disorders, when he defined the internal “revolt” against the “censoring agency” as arising “out of the subject’s desire . . . to liberate himself from all these influences, beginning with the parental one . . .” (1914, p. 96). More recently, Ramazani has addressed this troubling wish for autonomy in his analysis of Sylvia Plath’s “Daddy,” a well-known elegiac poem that stands as an extreme but paradigmatic example of melancholic mourning. As the elegy begins, Plath’s speaker blames herself for her father’s death, imagining that her

love has entailed an ecstatic and even incestuous sense of oneness resulting in her father's annihilation. It follows that killing herself, as the poem's speaker proposes, would be just punishment for having caused her father's death. But the elegy's expression of intense love also converges with declarations of hatred and hostility, an ambivalence echoed by Plath's characterization of her own father as an "autocrat" whom she both "adored and despised" (p. 264). Significantly, what begins as self-reproach now yields an attack against the loved and hated patriarch. Directing sadistic vengeance upon the lost other to liberate herself from persisting emotional ties, Plath's speaker concludes, "Daddy, I have had to kill you" (p. 277). But, as Ramazani understands, the wish to be "finally through" with the lost other reflects a fantasy attainable only at the cost of suicidal self-destruction (p. 280). In other words, Plath's speaker turns an aggressive patriarchal discourse back upon the patriarch in order to free herself from constraining emotional bonds. And yet, this reflexive strategy falls short of the intended aim, suggesting the extent to which the speaker's relationship to the lost father continues to establish the conditions for her own self-realization. More important, Plath's desire for radical independence, her wish to permanently lose the other, actually intensifies the patriarchal aggression her speaker wields in order to dissolve emotional bonds. Thus, to be finally through with the other can occur only by being finally through with the self, an insight the elegist unwittingly expresses in recurring images of the speaker's own suicidal destruction.

Ramazani's account of melancholic mourning not only succeeds in showing how twentieth-century bereavement becomes aggressive toward the lost one in attempting to sever attachments; it also demonstrates how a residue of unresolved grief signals that emotional bonds have not been broken. Consequently, his analysis compels us to reject the notion of a complete working through of loss and adopt a notion of mourning as an endless process. But by emphasizing the primacy of aggression, Ramazani's focus on melancholic mourning leaves us without an understanding of mourning beyond melancholy, a modern practice of mourning that is not only enraged but also loving, not just reactive but affirmative.⁸ Poised between the hidden violence of reducing the lost other to the order

⁸Ramazani sets historical limits to melancholic mourning, arguing that the more recent work of Amy Clampitt and Seamus Heaney reflects a less contentious relationship toward the dead and toward elegiac conventions than that of American poets of the sixties (pp. 333–353).

of consciousness (Sacks's normal mourning), and the explicit violence of positioning the other as a target of elegiac blaming (Ramazani's melancholic mourning), are we left with no alternatives? How might we reconceive the unresolved grief in melancholic mourning as a foundation for an affirmative theory of endless mourning? How might recognizing the trace of the lost other that resides within the ego lead away from the aggression of melancholy and toward an affirmation of enduring attachments that no work of mourning can sever?

In an attempt to answer these questions and to address a work of mourning beyond melancholy violence, I turn to Freud's *The Ego and the Id* (1923), the culmination of his thinking about grief. Freud's essay provides an important framework for thinking about the trace of the lost other that creates the character of the ego. More specifically, in revising his earlier account of melancholia, Freud reconceptualizes "the character of the ego" as "a precipitate of abandoned object-cathexes," that is, an embodied history of lost attachments (p. 29). The subject may rage against these intractable bonds in an attempt to assimilate otherness in the self and establish or reconsolidate a strongly bounded identity fortified against incursions of difference. But as Freud's late theory also suggests, the subject may move from rage to recognition, accepting its own contingency and welcoming a process of mourning that can never be complete.

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FROM RAGE TO RECOGNITION: FREUD'S LATE THEORY OF ENDLESS MOURNING

Before revising his mourning theory in *The Ego and the Id*, a revision that largely emerges through his reconceptualization of melancholia, Freud returned to the subject of mourning in several texts formulated in response to World War I: "On Transience" (1916) and two papers published together in "Thoughts for the Times on War and Death" (1915). I want to consider these writings because they mark an important juncture in the development of Freud's late mourning theory, reflecting his reexamination of the issue of consolation and his concern with the problem of bereaved aggression. Moreover, Freud's changing ideas about mourning in the context of the Great War stand in stark contrast to wartime mourning practices recently evaluated by Winter (1995). According to Winter, millions of Europeans represented their shared grief and found collective solace during and immediately after the war

through memorializing acts informed by classical, religious, and romantic traditions (p. 4). Winter not only challenges the assumption that the war ushered in a pervasive sense of modernist irony and critical anger in Western cultural expression; he also suggests that war memorials characterized by traditional architectural forms and commemorative arts based on conventional mourning models constituted the norm during the war period because they “provided a way of remembering which enabled the bereaved to live with their losses, and perhaps to leave them behind” (p. 5). In contrast, Freud’s war writings reflect a shift away from the resources of tradition and the sacred, anticipating the kinds of anticonsolatory and anti-idealist mourning practices that have gained widespread currency in the post–World War II era.

In “On Transience” (1916), written fifteen months into the war and several months after “Mourning and Melancholia,” Freud both repeats and begins to challenge his early account of mourning. The essay records a conversation he had just before the war, during a summer walk with two friends. Freud’s companions could not enjoy the “smiling countryside” because they feared that time would inevitably destroy it. Freud responded to his friends’ pessimism by claiming that the impermanence of nature’s splendor and culture’s material creations need not lessen our appreciation of them. In fact, he went so far as to contend that the very transience of cherished objects elicits our esteem and admiration. Freud diagnosed his friends’ inability to affirm the temporality of natural and social creations as a “revolt in their minds against mourning” (p. 306). Consequently, he prescribed mourning as a mode of personal and social recovery, a process of reality testing by which to soberly acknowledge that lost objects no longer exist. In offering this prescription for recovery, Freud begins by repeating his early mourning theory: “When it [mourning] has renounced everything that has been lost, then it has consumed itself, and our libido is once more free (in so far as we are still young and active) to replace the lost objects by fresh ones equally or still more precious” (p. 307). The process of mourning that Freud describes, a process of detachment and consoling substitution, precisely replicates the formulation he articulated in “Mourning and Melancholia.”

The conversation recorded in the essay took place prior to the outbreak of the war; however, Freud extended his commentary on mourning to the war years, offering grief work as a means to “build up again all that the war has destroyed, and perhaps on firmer ground and more

lastingly than before” (p. 307). In the context of war-torn Europe, the essay clearly displays unbridled optimism for the future, holding out the promise that mourning would enable countless Europeans to consign their losses to the past and start life anew. In this sense Freudian mourning echoes what Jay (1993) has addressed as one of the utopian goals of the modernist era: the injunction to “make it new” and leave the past completely behind (p. 94). And yet, Freud was beginning to distance himself from the therapeutic ideal of conventional mourning, for in the course of repeating his earlier formulation, he offered a new observation that threatens to collapse the very theory of mourning he simultaneously advanced: “But why it is that this detachment of libido from its objects should be such a painful process is a mystery to us and we have not hitherto been able to frame any hypothesis to account for it. We only see that libido clings to its objects and will not renounce those that are lost even when a substitute lies ready at hand. Such then is mourning” (p. 306). For the first time in his writing about grief, Freud explicitly acknowledged that mourning might not be as straightforward a business of severance and redemptive replacement as he had earlier surmised. While expressing his perplexity over the protracted painfulness of mourning, Freud also admitted his lack of any adequate theory to explain why mourners cling to lost objects and in what sense they remain tied to them.

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If “On Transience” tempers its optimism for postwar recovery by admitting confusion over the mourning process, Freud goes further in “Thoughts for the Times” (1915) by emphasizing cultural ideals lost as a result of the war should not be mourned at all, but fundamentally reevaluated in light of a new awareness of human aggression. In a text that Gay (1988) has aptly called “an elegy for a civilization destroying itself” (p. 355), Freud addressed the loss of “so much that is precious in the common possessions of humanity” (p. 275), including many of society’s most cherished ideals: the steady march of progress for the state; the moral disposition of human beings beyond racial and national boundaries; and the power of human reason to curb violent desire. Forced to confront the loss of these grounding values, Freud does not invoke mourning, as he did in “On Transience,” to replace them with new ones of equal or greater worth. He takes an entirely different tack. Specifically, Freud exposed lost values as nothing more than illusions, as the insubstantial chimeras of a naive humanism. In seeking to dissolve the “mortification” and “painful disillusionment” (p. 285) with

which Westerners regarded wartime violence and brutality, Freud argued that pre-war ideals, particularly the notion of the civilized, peaceful, and rational individual, “were based on an illusion to which we had given way. In reality our fellow-citizens have not sunk so low as we feared, because they had never risen so high as we believed” (p. 285). In response to this realistic reappraisal, Freud concluded that the violence sweeping through Europe was not an anomaly of the war, but an undeniable fact of human existence, a fact that civilization tries but largely fails to restrain. Consequently, the Great War, despite the deprivation and alarming death tolls it produced, fostered an especially productive period for Freud as he worked to revise psychoanalytic theory, including his mourning theory, to reflect a concept of aggression as a lamentable but inescapable component of human subjectivity.⁹

Any attempt to understand the relationship between aggression and mourning that Freud addresses in *The Ego and the Id* must begin with his earlier account of melancholia. Indeed, in “Mourning and Melancholia” (1917), Freud perceived the power of human aggression and defined this aggression as a symptom of melancholia in which hostility originally felt for another is internalized and directed at oneself. If melancholia mimics mourning in ways I have mentioned, it also differs from normal grieving in that sufferers relentlessly attack themselves, display low self-esteem, and expect to receive some sort of punishment. Freud attributed the onslaught of melancholia to an object relation marred by ambivalence. In contrast to the predominant feelings of love that he believed made the completion of mourning possible, the melancholic has ambivalent feelings of love and hate for the other. This ambivalence stems from “a real slight or disappointment coming from this loved person” and renders it impossible for the melancholic to give up the attachment, at least until the grievance has been brought into consciousness and settled (p. 249).

Melancholics are in mourning, then, but in a particular way. Like the mourner, the melancholic detaches his or her libidinal investment in the lost object; however, instead of reattaching the free libido to a new object, the melancholic refuses to break the attachment to the lost object when in reality it is gone. Instead, the melancholic consolidates the connection with the lost other through “an identification of the ego

⁹For discussions on the impact of World War I on Freud’s thinking, see Fromm (1973, pp. 439–469), Gay (1988, pp. 342–357), Homans (1989, pp. 222–231), and Jones (1955, pp. 168–206).

with the abandoned object” (p. 249). Through this identification, the melancholic creates a figure for the lost other and withdraws this figure into the ego, a means by which a trace of the lost one becomes internalized as a living part of the self. Moreover, this withdrawal of the lost other institutes structural divisions within the psyche, and these divisions take on opposing positions in relation to the conflicting feelings of love and hate originally felt for the other. On the one hand, the identification with the other works to sustain the love relation, setting up the ego as an internal surrogate for the other and enabling the id to love the ego as if it were the original object. On the other, the identification process establishes a “critical agency” (or what Freud would later call the superego) said to “split off” from the ego. With relentless violence, the critical agency attacks the ego for failing to live up to the original object, leading to the internalization of aggression characteristic of melancholia. According to Freud, these violent assaults express the melancholic’s grievance against the lost object, the complaints the melancholic would have liked to address to the other for its alleged misconduct or shortcomings. As a kind of internal rebellion, the melancholic punishes him- or herself as a means of taking revenge on the lost other. Sufferers from this pathological failure to mourn may resort to suicide, the most extreme form of melancholic self-punishment, when the ego cannot withstand the mercilessly violent attacks coming from the critical agency.

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Conversely, to break the melancholy bind, Freud believed that the sufferer must become a mourner, defaming the dead and repudiating the attachment. In describing the move out of melancholia, Freud writes: “Just as mourning impels the ego to give up the object by declaring the object to be dead and offering the ego the inducement to love, so does each single struggle of ambivalence loosen the fixation of the libido to the object by disparaging it, denigrating it and even as it were killing it off” (p. 254). That Freud advocated killing off the trace of the other in the self as a means to reestablish psychic health clearly demonstrates that his early account of melancholia assumes a subject who might exist without its losses, a subject capable of repudiating attachments to lost others.

All this changes six years later, when Freud redefines the process of identification associated with melancholia as a fundamental part of both subject formation and mourning. In *The Ego and the Id* (1923), the decisive statement of his second topography, or structural theory of sub-

jectivity, Freud reevaluates the account of melancholia articulated in “Mourning and Melancholia.” He recalls defining melancholia “by supposing that [in those suffering from it] an object which was lost has been set up again inside the ego—that is, that an object-cathexis has been replaced by an identification” (p. 28). In focusing on the dynamics of identification, Freud admits that he “did not appreciate the full significance of this process and did not know how common and how typical it is” (p. 28). What he now understands is that the identification process previously linked to a pathological failure to mourn provides “the sole condition under which the id can give up its objects” (p. 29). During the early stage of human development, the infant negotiates the loss of or separation from a primary love object by identifying with the lost other. Identification thus becomes the condition for constituting the self, giving rise to a psyche internally divided as ego, id, and superego. It is only by internalizing the lost other through the work of bereaved identification, Freud now claims, that one becomes a subject in the first place.

In grounding the formation and later development of the ego in the loss of significant others, Freud collapses the strict opposition between mourning and melancholia, making melancholy identification integral to the work of mourning. As a result, his work substantially revises our understanding of what it means to work through a loss. Working through no longer entails abandoning the object and reinvesting the free libido in a new one; it no longer entails accepting consolation in the form of an external substitute for the loss, as Freud had postulated in “Mourning and Melancholia.” Rather, working through depends on taking the lost other into the structure of one’s own identity, a form of preserving the lost object in and as the self. In “Mourning and Melancholia” Freud thought that mourning came to a decisive end; however, in *The Ego and the Id* he suggests that the grief work may well be an interminable labor. Pollock (1989) has highlighted this endurance of the object tie to the mourned other in Freudian theory when he remarks, “In the instance of the loss of a very significant object, the total mourning process may never be completed” (p. 31). Indeed, in a 1929 letter to Binswanger (E. Freud 1960), Freud confirms the persistence of mourning when he generalizes from the experience of his daughter’s death nine years earlier: “Although we know that after such a loss the acute state of mourning will subside, we also know we shall remain inconsolable and will never find a substitute. No matter

what may fill the gap, even if it be filled completely, it nevertheless remains something else. And actually, this is how it should be. It is the only way of perpetuating that love which we do not want to relinquish” (p. 386). Freud eloquently describes the enduring bonds of love that remain long after the other has departed. It is a description of ongoing grief already theorized in *The Ego and the Id*, a text Butler (1997) has read as demonstrating that no final severance of attachments “could take place without dissolving the ego” (p. 196).

As Freud concludes section 3 of *The Ego and the Id*, however, he largely undermines the insights of his own findings. Indeed, when he lays out the resolution of the oedipal complex Freud argues that identification with the rival object (rather than the lost love object) governs “normal” subject formation. Consider, for example, his discussion of the “simple positive Oedipus complex in a boy,” which is characterized by an “ambivalent attitude to his father and an object-relation of a solely affectionate kind to his mother . . .” (p. 32). Freud claims that in negotiating the loss of the mother, the boy replaces this maternal object-cathexis “by one of two things: either an identification with his mother or an intensification of his identification with his father” (p. 32). Freud does acknowledge the possibility of the former mode of identification by suggesting the boy may identify with the lost maternal other; however, he renders this option an exception to the general rule in claiming that we “are accustomed to regard the latter outcome as the more normal” (p. 32). This conclusion prompts a degree of surprise about his own theorizing, registering the conceptual distance the account of identification has traveled in the short space of several pages: “These identifications,” Freud suggests in reference to the “more normal” identifications emerging in the oedipus complex, “are not what we should have expected, since they do not introduce the abandoned object into the ego . . .” (p. 32). Even when the discussion moves on to “the more complete Oedipus complex, which is twofold, positive and negative” (p. 33) and thus includes the boy’s object-cathexis to his father, Freud continues to imply that identification with the rival, in this case the mother, constitutes the norm.

The notion of rivalrous identification now central to his account of subject formation has significant implications for our understanding of Freud’s mourning theory, for this revision imports into mourning the violent and hostile characteristics previously associated with melancholia. In staying with the example of the male child, Freud remarks

that identification with the rival father not only “permits the affectionate relation to the mother to be in a measure retained” (p. 32); this identification also creates a conflict within the ego, giving rise to internal acts of moralized aggression thought to transform oedipal desire into desexualized conscience. Identification preserves the loved and hated rival within the ego, but an ego subject to the violently critical and disparagingly nay-saying superego. If Freud speaks of both love and hate as equally fundamental effects of bereaved subject formation, how does his work suggest an account of identification that need not take the form of a violent conscience? How does *The Ego and the Id* offer a theory of mourning beyond the necessity of melancholy violence?

An answer to these questions is made possible by further examining Freud’s elaboration of the identification process. It is important to clarify, however, that Freud does not explicitly define identification as a positive incorporation of the lost other. He does not, in other words, fully articulate what Laplanche (1999), in his critique of Freudian mourning theory, has addressed as an affirmation of otherness in the self, of an enduring “voice” belonging to the other understood as “related to the superego, but which is not entirely merged with it” (p. 254).¹⁰ What Freud does succeed in doing is to undermine his own account of violent superego formation by proceeding in a manner that Reisner (1999) sees as the autodeconstructive aspect of his psychoanalytic theory. In describing the self-canceling movement of Freud’s writing, Reisner writes that Freud “typically laid out premises, in the form of inviolable axioms or ‘basal concepts.’ He would then proceed to elaborate upon these, and, finding challenges to them within his own elaborations, ultimately end up undermining the premises upon which he had begun” (p. 1046). Reisner’s account of Freud’s deconstructive textuality as “progressively expanding our understanding of how we think and the terrain of what can be thought” (p. 1047) is particularly pertinent to the issue of identification. We have already seen how Freud begins by defining identification with the lost other as the primary mechanism of mourning and then moves on to undermine this account by emphasizing identification with the rival in the so-called normal

¹⁰Derrida (1996) also argues for an understanding for mourning as an affirmative incorporation of the lost other, emphasizing that we internalize lost loves at the same time the lost other cannot be fully assimilated in the mourner’s psyche. While recognizing that otherness in the self may give rise to forms of melancholy depression, Derrida also argues that the mourning subject “welcomes” its own bereaved decentering as the very condition of “hospitality, love or friendship” (p. 188).

resolution of the oedipal complex. In yet another deconstructive turn, however, Freud challenges even this latest version of the identification process. He acknowledges that infantile bisexuality, which enabled him to perceive both a positive and a negative oedipus complex in children, also makes it “difficult to obtain a clear view of the facts in connection with the earliest object-choices and identifications . . .” (p. 33). In a major challenge to the notion of rivalrous identification at the foundation of his account of the oedipus complex, Freud writes: “It may even be that the ambivalence displayed in the relations to the parents should be attributed entirely to bisexuality and that it is not, as I have represented above, developed out of identification in consequence of rivalry” (p. 33).

In a close reading of the passage under discussion, Bersani (1986) has insightfully argued that Freud “nearly overthrows the entire psychoanalytic account of the Oedipus complex” (p. 98) and thus puts “very seriously into question the *necessity* for the amount and type of aggressiveness unleashed by the Freudian superego” (p. 100). Bersani interprets what he calls the “speculative risk” that Freud occasionally takes in the text as countering its otherwise compulsory heterosexuality and normalization of desire. What I want to emphasize is that Freud’s view of primary bisexuality and especially his rejection of rival identification invite us to return to the notion of identification with a lost loved object to explain the dual dynamic of ego formation and mourning. When we follow this line of Freud’s thought, identification does not necessarily have anything to do with an object relation characterized by rivalry. There is no reason to assume, therefore, that internalization creates the kind of aggression ascribed to the post-oedipal superego.¹¹ Consequently, Freud’s text raises the possibility for thinking about mourning as an affirmative and loving internalization of the lost other.

This description of the ego as an elegiac formation already gestures toward a less contentious and less aggressive stance toward the trace of

¹¹Schafer (1976) has provided an alternative perspective from which to challenge conventional ways of thinking about Freudian aggression. Schafer points out that classical psychoanalysis has anthropomorphized aggression, along with other mental attributes. Rather than conceiving of aggression as a “creature, spirit, substance, or quantity encountered in everyday speech” (p. 282) and subsequently setting up the “superego as a personified entity” (p. 284), Freudian analysts should treat aggression in terms of linguistic constructions that clarify activity and modes of activity. This use of “action language” to understand and describe aggression removes psychoanalytic theory and practice from the vestiges of physicochemical and biological models, and enables our conceptions of the psyche and its functioning to be “improved by our dispensing with notions of the inside and the outside in our theorizing” (p. 178).

the lost other in the self. But perhaps the best way to understand how Freud's text supports a theory of mourning beyond melancholy aggression is in relation to the issue of ambivalence. In the oedipal scenario, Freud assumes that ambivalence about the other precedes the loss, that the boy sees his father as a rival for the mother. When forced to negotiate maternal loss, the boy typically identifies with the father and thus internalizes a figure of the loved and hated paternal other. But when Freud goes on to speculate that ambivalent feelings for the father, as for the mother in the negative oedipus complex, may have nothing to do with rivalry, his work suggests that we can no longer interpret ambivalence as deriving from the outside, as blamed on the contesting other. Rather, ambivalence may be understood as an effect of the very separation between self and other, as the product of bereaved internalization.

Identification with the lost other, as I have noted earlier, establishes the condition for founding the self and, hence, constituting internal divisions within the psyche. In this sense identification simultaneously creates and frustrates a desire for fusion or unity of selfhood. Like the kind of alienation at the heart of subjectivity described by Lacan in the mirror stage, ambivalence in Freud's work thus names a uniquely human predicament: the predicament of being inhabited by otherness as a condition of one's own subjectivity. As we saw in Plath's poem, ambivalence toward the lost one may produce violence, the violence that arises in the attempt to sever bonds and absorb the internal trace of the other. But in recognizing there can be no final severance of attachments without dissolving the ego, Freud's late theory suggests a different alternative: the mourning subject may affirm the endurance of ambivalent bonds to those loved and lost others as a condition of its own existence. Freud's work counsels us, then, to relinquish the wish for a strict identity unencumbered by the claims of the lost other or the past. In so doing, we realize the possibility of mourning beyond melancholia, a response to loss that refuses the self-punishment entailed in blaming the lost one for our own contingency and that enables us to live in light of our losses. Freud's work on mourning helps us, finally, to establish an intimate, indeed ethical, relation between past and future as we embark on the present work of endless mourning.

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