

MOURNING AND BREAK-UPS

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Mourning and melancholia

In 1915 Freud writes: “Mourning is regularly the reaction to the loss of a loved person [...] Reality-testing has shown that the loved object no longer exists, and it proceeds to demand that all libido shall be withdrawn from its attachments to that object. [...] Each single one of the memories and expectations in which the libido is bound to the object is brought up and hypercathected, and detachment of the libido is accomplished in respect of it.”¹ Although this process is painful, it nevertheless occurs spontaneously. Still there are factors that can complicate it, such as the ambivalence that marks the love relationship in obsessional neurosis and melancholia. On several occasions Lacan will return to this Freudian analysis. He will contrast ‘respect for reality’ with the ‘hole in reality [*réel*]’, and ‘ambivalence and the death wish’ with the ‘propitiation [*satisfaction*] owed to the departed and the pain of existing’.

Respect for reality, hole in reality [*réel*]

“The subject succumbs to the vertigo of pain, [...] mourning, which involves a veritable, intolerable loss to human beings, gives rise in them to a hole in reality [*réel*].”² This hole turns out “to provide a place onto which the missing signifier is projected.”³ In this way mourning “coincides with an essential gap, the major symbolic gap, [...]”⁴ When faced with this hole, the mourner summons up memories, signifiers and images, what he or she demonstrates is a lack in language that would respond to the hole. This lacking signifier can only be paid for “with your flesh and blood.”⁵ Lacan adds.

Ambivalence, propitiation [*satisfaction*] owed to the departed

¹ Freud, S., “Mourning and Melancholia,” (1917) *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XIV*, London: Hogarth Press, 1961, pp. 243-245.

² Lacan J., *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VI, Desire and its Interpretation*, ed. J.-A. Miller, trans. B. Fink, Cambridge: Polity, 2019, p. 336.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid* p. 340.

⁵ *Ibid* p. 336.

Rituals mediate the gaping hole left by mourning. They present themselves “first of all as a palliative for [*satisfaction donnée* à] the chaos that ensues from the inability of all signifying elements in dealing with the hole in existence that has been created by someone’s death.”⁶ Lacan calls it a “propitiation [*satisfaction*] owed to the departed”⁷, without which phenomena of singular apparitions, ghosts and images will occur. Perhaps this simply means that in the absence of rites, the dead remains too much alive, i.e. too enjoying [*jouissant*]?⁸ Indeed, the hatred, i.e. the *jouissance*, evoked by Freud is not only on the side of the bereaved, but also on the side of the dead. We see this in the case of a neurotic man suffering from sexual impotence with his new partner. In the aggressive words his wife uttered shortly before her death – “If you go with anyone else after this, I’ll be there to pull you by your feet”⁹ – she remains far too alive, far *too enjoying*. We can also see this in a psychotic woman, persecuted by the gaze of her son, who had died but remained too ‘alive’, just like her deceased father who, in her childhood nightmares, would take his hand out of the grave to draw his daughter down with him.¹⁰

Death wish, the pain of existing

Revisiting the dream commented upon by Freud of the man in mourning for his father, the father ‘who didn’t know he was dead’, Lacan will return to the ambivalence and the death wish. He goes beyond the oedipal interpretation of the dream to denounce the pain of existence, against which infantile rivalry with the father is merely a defence. “Existence here is nothing other than the fact that a subject, from the moment at which he is posited in the signifier, can no longer destroy himself; he enters into this intolerable sequence that immediately unfolds for him in the imaginary, and which is such that he can no longer conceive of himself except as for-ever re-emerging in existence.”¹¹ Through desire, the subject defends himself, distracts himself from the reality of the intolerable pain of existence. What complicates mourning is not the presence of aggressive desires towards the dead, but the loss of desire as such.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 337.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Adam, R., “*Le deuil impossible*,” in *Comment s’orienter dans la clinique?* Champ freudien, 2018, p. 178. [Untranslated in EN]

⁹ Adam, R., “What does it mean “To Mourn”?”, trans. R. Montague, *Lacunae*, Issue 13, December 2016, pp. 40-56.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Lacan, J., *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VI [...]* Op. cit., p. 89.

Love and the missed encounter

Revisiting another dream commented on by Freud, the dream of a father mourning the loss of his child – “Father, can't you see that I'm burning?” - Lacan emphasises the dimension of failure, of the missed encounter that all love is. The link to the other is made through the fantasy that leaves the other “irremediably missed”.¹² Thus, mourning confronts the subject a second time with the loss of an object already ‘eternally lost’.¹³

Love object, object *a*

The object at stake in mourning is not the loved object, the desired object. Lacan says: “We mourn for people [...] with respect to whom we don't know that we fulfilled the function of being in the place of their lack. What we give in love is essentially what we haven't got [...]”¹⁴ Thus, the object of mourning is not the person who has disappeared, but the object that I myself am as the mourner. The desired object is merely a veil, a covering for the object cause of desire that I am for the other. This is why the experience of mourning can reveal a feeling of *niederkommen*, that “is essential to any sudden moment at which the subject is brought into relation with what he is as *a*.”¹⁵ The work of mourning will then be a work to “maintain and sustain all these painstaking links with the aim of restoring the bond with the true object of relation, the masked object, the object *a* [...]”¹⁶

Impossible mourning

If mourning involves consummating the loss of the object a second time, how can we mourn an object that has never been lost? This is the impossible task faced by Célia, who massively identified with her mother who died when she was a child. “[...] I don't need to mourn her and

¹² Lacan J., *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VIII, Transference*, ed. J.-A. Miller, trans. B. Fink, Cambridge: Polity, 2015, p. 36.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Lacan J., *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book X, Anxiety*, ed. J.-A. Miller, trans. A.R. Price, Cambridge: Polity, 2014, p. 141.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.110.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.335.

I can't because I am her mourning. [...] The best way of not losing my mother: I made her mine, I always have her with me, I integrated her into me; she is part of me.”¹⁷

¹⁷ Castanet, H., *Ne devient pas fou qui veut*, Ed. Lussaud, p. 66. [Untranslated in EN]