

**Introduction of the catalogue for the exhibition *Memoire Collective*,  
Guillaume Constantin, Frédérique Decombe, Richard Ducker, Christine Finn,  
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*Overcoming the loss of objects*

I am re-reading Freud's essay of 1915, 'Mourning and Melancholia', in which he compares the symptoms of both states of being.<sup>1</sup> I am reading it again because for quite some time, I have been waking each morning with a profound sense of – I suppose it is grief. It is a particularly sad feeling, without any objective cause, other than that of aging, and colours the day that follows, often leaving me immobile or half-hearted in my acts. I hold the sadness at bay by calculating (this takes no more than a moment in that curious time suspended between night and day, repose and action) how many years I may have still to live. Sometimes I do quite well, twenty-five, even thirty years. At other times, the horizon is closer and I am subject to limits. If I am to name my feeling, then it is closer to mourning, the mourning of what will have happened. Every year I have to readjust my world to the loss of a friend or acquaintance, while finding a way to remember without ambivalence.

Freud first addresses the subject of melancholia in an extended letter to Wilhelm Fliess in 1895, then two years later revises his thoughts in a new manuscript, also sent to Fliess for his comments. Freud suggests that both sentiments may serve as reproach or punishment for hostile impulses, directed towards parents, and more usually repressed. In mourning, lies self-reproach; in melancholia, a hysterical self-punishment. He re-opens the subject when he introduces his concepts of narcissism, as 'critical agency', and the ego ideal (where libido is displaced on to an ideal in departure from primary narcissism, and satisfaction

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<sup>1</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia' (1917 [1915]), *Standard Edition*, 14, London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis 1957, pp.237-58.

lies in the fulfillment of the ideal). While his first text indicates that identification is at work in mourning, the question of the nature of identification is raised, and in 'Mourning and Melancholia', Freud writes that identification is a 'preliminary stage of object-choice'. In short, the ego chooses its objects, what it will love and what it will seek to be loved by (as love lies in recognition). Moreover, it devours its objects. Karl Abraham makes the connection between melancholia and orality in a letter he writes to Freud in March 1915.

In mourning (both the display of grief and its affect), an object is taken in, but it is an object that **is** no longer, a lost thing whose existence is prolonged by its incorporation. One swallows nothing, but it leaves a lump in the throat nonetheless. Freud describes the dejection, the loss of the capacity to love, the decline of interest in the world, shared by those who mourn and those who suffer from melancholy. Nothing is left over in the 'expression of an exclusive devotion to mourning'. Freud calls this, 'the economics of pain'.

I remember, while reading, the story of a man whose mother had died. In his father's house he was acutely aware of his dead mother's presence. Finally his father explained that since her death he had been spraying the pillows of the bed he had shared with her with her scent, 'Shalimar' by Guerlain. The detail of the scent has always stayed with me and of course, it is the attention to detail that is most important in creating an illusion, if it is to be in any way effective. Freud writes, 'the existence of the loved object is psychically prolonged'. Mourning is a compromise with the demands of reality. It is neither silent nor unnoticed; the empty space of loss leaves a place where one must fall and give voice. One gives way at last to nothing, but not at once and always part by part. That is the work of mourning. One is conscious of what is lost, as what was visible, heard or held, disappears. In melancholia, one does not know it – the form of the object may be known but not what it represents. In mourning, images, objects, words are assembled to make a presence of what is no longer present. Like all

representation, this draws notice to the fearful absence where a strange pleasure may lie.

As Freud remarks elsewhere, separation from an object is always painful.<sup>2</sup> Separation produces pain or anxiety or mourning, and these are reactions to the loss of an object, one that was imagined as fulfilling a need and so was created out of circumstances of repeated satisfactions. As one separates from the object, it ceases to exist. Emotional bonds are slowly undone, yet the memory of the lost object is not annihilated. One might say that its scent remains.

In an earlier essay of 1911, Freud writes that an artist is one who turns away from reality, for he cannot accept the renunciation of satisfaction it asks of him.<sup>3</sup> In phantasy, the inventions of the unconscious, the desires of the artist are given full play. His production allows him to become what he desires, 'without following the long roundabout path of making real alterations in the external world'. Yet this does not produce satisfaction either and is only achieved as others share the loss provoked by renunciation (there is always the promise of a future satisfaction after all). The object, the psychic construction that is fabricated to fill the void, emerges as a loss, leaving an empty place where a new object can provisionally come to be. The work of mourning ends, if it ends, in a different relation to anguish that makes life at least tolerable. I like the philosopher Alain Badiou's remark, that 'the work of art makes the unbearable scintillation of the lost object (...) vanish, whence invincibly luring the gaze or the listening of those who venture'.<sup>4</sup> It is as though the objects of art might help one to mourn more completely, more satisfyingly; as though as subject of and subject to loss, one may still return to the fragrant possibility of the world.

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<sup>2</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety (1926), *SE* 20, pp.75-175.

<sup>3</sup> Sigmund Freud, "Formulations of the Two Principles of Mental Functioning' (1911), *SE* 12, pp. 213-26.

<sup>4</sup> Alain Badiou, 'Art and Philosophy' in *lacanian ink*, 17, spring 2000, pp.48-68.

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