

## Strange Love

Megan Craig

To fill a Gap  
Insert the Thing that caused it –  
Block it up  
With Other – and 'twill yawn the more-  
You cannot solder an Abyss  
With Air.

Emily Dickinson

In what follows, I consider the strange love at the heart of Freud's essay, "Mourning and Melancholia." What kind of love was it to begin with that passes, steadily, quietly away in mourning? What kind of love was it that consumes and tears apart the melancholiac? What is this strange love that manifests itself in the work of mourning and melancholia? Is it love at all – was it ever love? You ask yourself this once it is over and done with – once you've lost your love. Did it take losing her to find out that you never knew love, that the love you thought you knew was already lost? And now that you've lost her – are you in love with your loss, in love with your own mourning – in love with your own death? What is this web of despair in which recovery – and being able to love again – begins with giving up the only bridge you have back to your first love, giving up your grief? You'll have to lose to win. And what is the prize for this "victory" over mourning? That you can love again – and so lose yourself to another.

Why think about mourning at all? Why this impulse to retrace old wounds and to find meaning in so many tears? Why not let mourning alone – let it remain meaningless, irrational, sad, infinite? There is a part of me that wants to say to Freud: leave us alone in our mourning and melancholia. There is no clinical treatment, no getting better. Grief sustains itself, and

recovery looks like another betrayal, another way of losing. If I can't have my love, I can have my grief. I want this sadness to last forever.

And yet, this is not the whole story, or is not wholly right. Philosophical thinking about mourning and melancholia might begin with this nagging feeling that there is something more to say after all. It might begin with the surprise of finding that we are here, talking, maybe even laughing, after so much grief. One day your sadness consumes the world, and one day the world consumes your sadness. A door closes. That is all. Can you outlive your grief? Despite yourself, you go on. There are things to do, people to see. Perhaps that wasn't the plan, but then, losing you wasn't part of the plan either.

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In "Mourning and Melancholia," Freud considers melancholia through "a comparison with the normal emotion of grief, and its expression in mourning" (164). This strategy mirrors his comparison of dreams with narcissistic mental disorders and his general practice of "...institut[ing] comparisons with certain states and phenomena which may be conceived of as *normal prototypes* of morbid affections."<sup>1</sup> Freud's essay begins with the thought that mourning is not meaningless but has a definitive, positive goal and result. This is the first striking thought. You will suffer, but it will not be for nothing. Mourning is normal and healthy. There is a real (and I think ideal) optimism in Freud's characterization of mourning insofar as he describes it as directed towards the return of a healthy psychic equilibrium and an ability to let go of your loss, to let "reality pass its verdict – that the object no longer exists (176)." Mourning works. The

puzzle for Freud is why, if mourning works, some people succumb to a melancholy that doesn't work. Melancholia, mourning's pathological counterpart, has no economy and no return. Accordingly, Freud asks about this depleting mood that runs counter to the reality *and* the pleasure principle. How can the mind sustain the living death of melancholia? Why, for some, is there an ability to go on? What happens when someone can't go on? And how will we (their analysts, friends, lovers, family, co-workers) tell the difference?

In a remarkable passage near the beginning of "Mourning and Melancholia," Freud claims, "It is really only because we know so well how to explain [mourning] that this attitude does not seem to us pathological" (165). Mourning and melancholia sit precariously close to one another. If this is so, what makes mourning "the *normal* (my emphasis) emotion of grief (164)?"

If another's mourning does not seem pathological, then I think it is not because we "know so well how to explain it," as Freud suggests, but because we have been there too. It is an issue of recognition, not explanation.<sup>2</sup> This is almost a detail – a slight correction in emphasis - but I think this shift in emphasis begins to unravel Freud's distinctions between mourning and melancholia. Mourning may strike us as deeply familiar, and still inexplicable and beyond comprehension. This might be why it is so difficult to explain one's own mourning in retrospect – to explain how or why or when things got better. (And if it did get better, why does it seem so suddenly bad again now, as if nothing has changed). I can acknowledge your mourning, acknowledging that this will take a long time, that nothing is henceforth the same as it was – all of this without being able to give you any explanation of my mourning or yours. "I'm sorry for your loss. I'm here for you." These are expressions of solidarity with another in their grief. They are expressions that indicate I recognize you're going through something and you're not alone. But perhaps more importantly, they indicate that I don't *know* anything about it. Your

mourning is essentially your own and you are alone in it. Your grief is unique and irreplaceable. Letting a person hear this and helping them believe that their loss will not be consumed or threatened by an impersonal comprehension might be the best way of helping them mourn. Isn't this part of a fear over death and dying – the fear that in death everyone ends up the same?

If there is not as clear a distinction between mourning and melancholia as Freud describes, then we should ask: is there a “successful” mourning? If there is a work of mourning (like a work of art?) and mourning takes work, in what sense *does mourning work*? (In what sense does a painting *work*?) Freud writes, “...when the work of mourning is completed the ego becomes free and uninhibited again” (166). Once mourning has run its course, we are meant to regain a sense of freedom and trust in the world. We go through the difficult work of mourning to come out on the other side whole and in tact. This is part of the psychic economy central to Freud's vision of the mind. Energy expended in mourning and the inner tension it creates should slowly bring about a release of tension – pain giving way to pleasure (or if not wholesale pleasure, at least relative peace, acceptance, contentment).

It is not only the normality of mourning and the distinction between mourning and melancholia that strike me as problematic in Freud's essay. Both mourning and melancholia as Freud describes them seem insufficient in their characterizations of love, loss and grief. In some sense Freud's mourning appears too easy and his melancholia appears too tortured. Neither mourning nor melancholia allows for a third way between total forgetting and radical memory – a way in which I might hold onto my loss without being consumed by it. What if there is a space of memory that is not pathological? Could this be a space of memorial within a healthy consciousness – a reservoir of memory that remains in tact even though it is at odds with reality. And what if this space and this memory are themselves integral to mental health?

## I.

In “Mourning and Melancholia,” Freud attempts to show the conditions and effects of melancholia by “comparison with the normal emotion of grief, and its expression in mourning.”<sup>3</sup> Additionally, he is concerned with the economic conditions that differentiate mourning from melancholia, and the economic conditions that differentiate melancholia from mania (as well as those that keep mourning from becoming mania). When is a person grieving in a way that is expected, necessary and healthy, and when has grief become inextricably bound into one’s life? What differentiates a process of recovery that necessitates a certain temporary retreat from the world from a process of deterioration in which retreat becomes permanent and dangerous? Is the tendency towards melancholia predetermined by the way in which we love, or *who* we love, in the first place?

### 1.

#### **The work of mourning**

Freud characterizes mourning as a normal mood, experienced after the loss of a loved person. The work of mourning consists in a struggle between the testing of reality in which the loved object no longer exists and the abandoning of the libido-position in relation to the lost object. First one must reconcile oneself to a new reality, by accepting that someone is lost. Then one must loosen one’s grip on the person who has passed away, loosening the ties that strung you together. Freud describes this process as a kind of “compromise” (166). In exchange for your abandonment of the libido position in relation to your lost love, you regain life and are able to love again. The person who does not, or cannot, perform the work of mourning risks remaining

tied to their lost love object, separated from reality and from life. This separation will become its own form of illness. Freud warns in "On Narcissism," "we must begin to love in order not to fall ill, and we are bound to fall ill if, in consequence of frustration, we are unable to love."<sup>4</sup>

Prolonged attachment to a lost love object puts one at odds with reality and ultimately frustrates one's capacity to love.

However, the claims of life and the will to live are meant to win out in the ego's struggle between life and death; "the normal outcome is that deference for reality gains the day" (166). And so the work of mourning is the work of undergoing another's death, enduring the loss, while simultaneously letting 'reality gain the day.' Although this work is slow and painful, "when the work of mourning is completed the ego becomes free and uninhibited again" (166). Mourning takes time, but Freud's astonishing claim is that the ego can return and recover. There is no way to make quick work of mourning, to have it over and done with. It is a "task carried out bit by bit" (165). Ultimately Freud claims it is the length of time required for mourning, the slow and painful walk, that differentiates mourning and melancholia from forms of mania.

Given his economic view of the mind, Freud must ask "...why [normal grief] does not set up the economic conditions for a phase of triumph after it has run its course or at least produce some slight indication of such a state?" (176). Why is a period of such intense grief not followed by a period of equally intense joy? Freud answers by suggesting that the reservoir of memory is too deep and too fluid to be completely emptied of its ties to a lost love. The loved object has "a thousand links to the ego" (177). Each of these links needs undoing, one by one.

Early in the essay Freud writes, "Each single one of the memories and hopes which bound the libido to the object is brought up and hyper-cathected, and the detachment of the libido from it is accomplished" (166). In this description, the problem of memory sounds

relatively straightforward. I dredge my memory for all the ties to you. This may take time and considerable effort, but Freud makes it sound doable. However, later in the essay, he seems to revise this picture, writing "...it often becomes evident that first one, and then another memory is activated and that the laments which are perpetually the same and wearisome in their monotony nevertheless each take their rise in some different unconscious source" (177).<sup>5</sup> Here we have a picture of memory not as a contaminated river, but as a fountain that erupts from some partly visible and partly invisible source. Now it is not just a problem of seeking out all the attachments I can think of, but working through ones I cannot think of – attachments that remain unconscious. The "work" of mourning now consists in letting each memory run its course without knowing when, where, or how it will grip me. Years later, brought down to tears, for no reason, right back where I started. When does mourning end? Jonathan Lear writes, "...what is astonishing is that once the mind has been traumatized (by a real-life event) it will begin to traumatize itself."<sup>6</sup> Does any life have clean borders between remembering and forgetting, or are the impacts of every loss bound to reverberate, as Lear suggests. If the mind does begin to "traumatize itself," what keeps us from melancholia?

## **2. The work of melancholia**

Both mourning and melancholia result in a long and painful internal labor. Freud emphasizes that there are several features these two conditions share. However, the nature of the melancholia's labor and the success it can expect radically differs from mourning. The outward

appearance of the person in mourning and the melancholiac are essentially the same, with at least one crucial difference. Melancholia's features include:

“...Profoundly painful dejection, abrogation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity, and a lowering of the self-regarding feelings to a degree that finds utterance in self-reproaches and self-reviling, and culminates in a delusional expectation of punishment” (165).

Mourning shares all of these traits except the fall in self-esteem, which becomes the defining feature of melancholia. From an outside perspective, this feature, “an impoverishment of...ego on a grand scale” (167), distinguishes melancholia from grief and makes us “suspect a morbid pathological disposition”(164) in the melancholiac. The melancholiac exhibits consistent but atypical behavior in reaction to her severe loss of self-esteem. Her ego is depleted and she in fact believes (and repeatedly tell us) she is worthless, but “...shame before others, which would characterize [one who is normally devoured by remorse and self-reproach] is lacking in [the melancholiac]...” (168). The observed lack of shame in the midst of so extreme a “self-reviling” opens a gap in the otherwise secure self-conception of the melancholiac. His own self-image points to what Freud calls “the melancholic contradiction”: “From the analogy with grief we should have to conclude that the loss suffered by the melancholiac is that of an object; according to what he says the loss is one in himself” (168).

From Freud's point of view, the analogy with grief begins to break down at this point. We expect that the melancholiac has suffered the loss of a loved object, but her own description and behavior indicate a loss of her self. And yet, this loss in self-esteem comes without the normally attendant shame. How and why has the melancholiac become an object for herself, which she is then capable of losing?

The critical difference between mourning and melancholia relates to what is originally experienced as lost, and the effect of that first loss on one's sense of self and sense of the world.

Freud writes, “in grief the world becomes poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself.” Melancholia is occasioned by a more abstract experience of loss, in which “the object has not perhaps actually died, but has become lost as an object of love” (166), or the loss is in some sense unconscious – “one cannot see clearly what has been lost...[or the patient] knows whom he has lost but not *what* it is he has lost in them” (166). The world “becomes poor and empty” in grief in part because the world is actually left without the beloved – a whole shared world has passed away with them. In melancholia, it is not clear what has been lost. At the very least, the melancholiac cannot tell us *what* or *who* she has lost. There is something crucial about being able to name and to say aloud who or what has been lost – speaking is a critical step in healing.

### **3. Narcissistic Identification, Sadism and the Ambivalence of Love**

What goes wrong for the melancholiac? Freud describes the origin of melancholia as a malfunctioning of the normal process involved in forcibly abandoning a certain libido position. Neither the one who mourns nor the melancholiac wants to give up on their lost love, yet Freud claims mourning accomplishes this work of detachment and redirection, while melancholia results in a deepening of attachment and an inability to let go.<sup>7</sup> Rather than transferring libido to a new love object, the melancholiac withdraws the free libido into himself, directing it at his own ego, which he henceforth identifies with his lost love. Rather than let his love go, he consumes it. This internalization of libido disrupts the ego, breaking in two. Freud writes, “In this way the loss of the object became transformed into the loss of the ego, and the conflict between the ego and the loved person transformed into a cleavage between the criticizing faculty of the ego and the ego as altered by the identification” (170). In the consumption of the lost love object and the redirecting of libido at one’s own ego, there arises an internal split between ego and super ego.

This is one of Freud's stories of the birth of conscience. The internalization of libido and identification of the ego with the lost love object explain the absence of shame in the melancholiac: his low self-esteem is in fact directed at someone else, someone "the patient loves, has loved or ought to love" (169). The melancholiac is a split personality, at odds with himself.

By withdrawing his libido inwards, the melancholiac finds a way (perhaps the only way) of saving his love. Freud claims, "...by taking flight into the ego love escapes annihilation" (178). Love finds refuge in the ego so that it doesn't have to be abandoned in reality. However, the ego pays a price for its identification with the love object; namely, it loses a piece of itself. The melancholiac's "...narcissistic identification with the object then becomes a substitute for the erotic cathexis, the result of which is that in spite of the conflict with the loved person the love-relation need not be given up" (170). Freud calls this retreat inward "a regression from one type of object-choice to the primal narcissism" (171). It is this move to primal narcissism that begins to make sense of the melancholiac's utter disregard for himself and his life. Freud writes in "On Narcissism," "...we see...an antithesis between ego-libido and object-libido, the more of the one is employed the more the other is depleted..." (547). For the melancholiac, who has collapsed his object-libido onto his ego, there is a pervasive and deadening depletion on every side. The object-libido projected onto the ego-libido turns the ego into an object for itself and sucks the life out of it. The love-relation that takes refuge in the ego infects the ego with a sickness – as if the ego has consumed something already dead and infected with death. Freud writes, "the complex of melancholia behaves like an open wound, drawing to itself cathectic energy from all sides...and draining the ego until it is utterly depleted" (174).

What kind of love-relation is it that the melancholiac internalizes and that tears him apart? Was this ever love to begin with? Well into the essay, Freud attempts to further differentiate mourning and melancholia, clarifying the situations that might give rise to melancholia as:

“Extend[ing] beyond the clear case of a loss by death, and include[ing] all those situations of being wounded, hurt, neglected, out of favour, or disappointed, which can import opposite feelings of love and hate into the relationship or reinforce already existing ambivalence” (172).

The one prone to melancholia must have this experience of ambivalence in love – a love tinged with hate.<sup>8</sup> Does the way in which one loves already determine a predisposition to melancholia? Melancholia begins with a strong emotional conflict, with a sense of having been profoundly wronged or abandoned by a loved one. Faced with being left alone in the world, the melancholiac tries to double herself. Freud gives us a picture of a tormented, or tortured love-relation in which “the relation to the object is no simple one; it is complicated by the conflict of ambivalence” (177). This line echoes “Instincts and Their Vicissitudes,” where Freud reminds us: “Love and hate, which present themselves to us as essentially antithetical, stand in no simple relation to each other.”<sup>9</sup> There is no simple opposition between love and hate, the one undoing the other. Freud describes the melancholiac as deeply conflicted all the way down. The melancholiac’s ambivalence goes all the way back to the way she falls in love in the first place. Love and loss remain tied together for her – 2 sides of the same coin. In some sense the melancholiac is drawn to love objects that reflect her ambivalence back at her. Her melancholy love seeks the fulfillment of its own prophecy: the expression of her melancholy mood.

Love and hate find refuge in different parts of the melancholiac’s ego, and “...the melancholiac’s erotic cathexis of his object thus undergoes a twofold fate: part of it regresses to identification, but the other part, under the influence of the conflict of ambivalence, is reduced to

the stage of sadism...” (173). Melancholia involves a 2-part regression to primal, long-abandoned states of the ego. The first regression, the narcissistic identification, saves the love-relation. This regression returns to the stage in which the “ego wishes to incorporate [the] object into itself, and the method by which it would do so, in this oral cannibalistic stage, is by devouring it” (171). The second regression, to sadism, attacks the love-object, which is now the ego, and engenders a “tendency to suicide” (173). Overwhelmed by the object it has itself ingested and in some sense become, the ego becomes capable of killing itself.<sup>10</sup>

Freud elsewhere traces this second regression characterized by an admixture of hate, to an instinct for self-preservation.<sup>11</sup> He writes, “The ego hates, abhors and pursues with intent to destroy all objects which are for it a source of painful feelings.” (IV 101). When the ego has become an object for itself – and an object that is the source of painful feelings – an early mechanism for self-preservation awakens and makes the contradictory demand that the ego destroy itself in order to save itself. This is a return to what Freud calls the “purified pleasure-ego,” which divides the world into pleasurable and painful, and tries to eject everything painful to the outside. The melancholiac is an ego that, having radically retreated inwards, tries to turn itself inside-out, to empty itself of everything painful – which will mean emptying itself of itself. This instinct represents a return to an early state of unconscious mental processes, before the reality-principle took hold.<sup>12</sup> The ego retreats backwards through an original transformation, reversing the move from pleasure-ego to reality-ego. Left with a pleasure-ego and consumed with pain, it is not surprising that life strikes the melancholiac as essentially, devastatingly disappointing.

#### **4. Mania**

Freud ends the essay by asking why mourning and melancholia, which seem to share certain economic conditions of excess or displaced libido, do not culminate in the inhibitions and joy characteristic of mania once they have finally run their course. “Why then does [normal grief] not set up the economic condition for a phase of triumph....” (176)? Why are mourning and melancholia specifically slow and painful conditions that persist or pass away without any sudden lifting of grief? If there is an economic relationship between psychic energies, why is extreme grief not followed by extreme joy? Freud’s short answer to these questions is that the energy required of mourning and melancholia gets dissipated over time. The sheer length of effort required in mourning seems to neutralize the excessive energy required for its work. For the one who mourns, there is a systematic passage from a preconscious to a conscious acceptance of loss. The loss eventually takes its place fully in consciousness and becomes a part of the person’s new reality. However, for the melancholiac, “this way [from preconsciousness to consciousness] is blocked...” (178). The melancholiac is aware of his state, aware of his own self-loathing, yet he remains unaware, essentially unconscious, of everything significant about his condition. The ambivalence of his love-relation that remains entirely hidden to him is also his best hope for recovery – if the hate he directs at himself loosens the libido’s hold on the love-object, then he may give the object up before the hate consumes him. However, this “recovery” will mean giving up some piece of his own ego. It’s not clear what kind of recovery that will be.

## 5.

### **What Hamlet Knows**

One broad way in which Freud distinguishes mourning and melancholia is by describing the former as the experience of a *conscious* loss and the latter as an *unconscious* loss. But by the end of the essay, one wonders whether this distinction holds up. Is the melancholiac so deeply

unconscious of his own condition? Conversely, isn't there something unconscious about the experience of a loss for the one who mourns? Isn't there always a way in which loss remains unnameable, unknowable, unfathomable?

Freud himself seems conflicted about this distinction. Near the end of the essay he underscores the "conflict of ambivalence" (177) central to the melancholic constitution and writes,

"These single conflicts cannot be located in any system but the Ucs, the region of memory-traces of things....Constitutional ambivalence belongs by nature to what is repressed, while traumatic experiences with the object may have stirred to activity something else that has been repressed. Thus everything to do with these conflicts of ambivalence remains excluded from consciousness, until the outcome of melancholia sets in" (178).

In the topology of the mind, Freud assigns the melancholiac a more expansive, predominant "region of memory traces." The melancholiac has a disproportionately large unconscious. There is a vast area of memories tinged with love and hate that remain inaccessible to the melancholiac, but that risk stirring one another to the surface at any moment. Just as there seems to be a particularly melancholy type of love, there seems to be a particularly melancholy type of memory. Both seem volatile and prone to expression in disruptive, unforeseeable ways. This kind of disruption is typical of repression generally, which is "...at first successful, but does not hold."<sup>13</sup> Melancholia is one symptom of the constant energy repression requires – energy expended to "reject and keep something out of consciousness."<sup>14</sup> Melancholia, love, hate, memory, the unconscious, and repression are linked in a chain, or woven together in a web. Pull one thread and the rest will follow. For the melancholiac, there are countless ways of coming undone. It takes significant work to live a life so much in the shadows of reality and cordon off so much space for the unconscious.

However, Freud also describes the melancholiac as having "a keener eye for the truth than others who are not melancholic" (167). He goes on, "...for all we know it may be that he

has come very near to self-knowledge; we only wonder why a man must become ill before he can discover truth of this kind” (168). It is in the following line that Freud mentions Hamlet:

“...there can be no doubt that whoever holds and expresses to others such an opinion of himself – one that Hamlet harboured of himself and all men – that man is ill, whether he speaks the truth or is more or less unfair to himself (168).”

There’s no point arguing against the melancholiac’s self-reproaches. His critical faculties may seem exaggerated, he may seem to blow things out of proportion, to be obsessive and consumed, but Freud suggests that the melancholy sense of self and self-description may in fact be accurate. Is there a link between melancholia and self-knowledge? Do we need to fall ill to discover or speak the truth? The melancholiac is at once unconscious of everything significant that might help him recover, and radically conscious of some significant truth about himself. Ironically, it is part the knowledge he has that will make and keep him sick.

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How will you live with an absence? This is one way of putting the riddle that runs through “Mourning and Melancholia.” It is a riddle that will have to be answered anew with each loss. You are here, and each loss opens an elsewhere you cannot occupy or bridge. There are ghosts in your life, and so, you’ll have to ask yourself which life you are most living – the one in which life and the living win out, or the one in which the dead win. The ghost of his father leaves Hamlet alone with the devastating line “Adieu, adieu, Hamlet. Remember me.”<sup>15</sup> It’s a cold goodbye, a twist of the knife, to command your son to remember that which he is unable to forget, to nail him to his grief. Hamlet, feeling the riptide of the dead, promises,

“Remember thee?  
Yea, from the table of my memory  
I’ll wipe away all trivial fond records,  
All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past,  
That youth and observation copied there,  
And thy commandment all alone shall live

Within the book and volume of my brain  
Unmixed with baser matter.” (I, 1.2, 98-104).

Hamlet vows to reserve all of his memory for his father’s death. Forget youth, forget the past. There begins the melancholy that eats away at him. True to his word, he gives his mind over to one memory and promises to be a living tomb. But what is memory if you have renounced the past? And how long can you live with death?

## II. Julia Kristeva

“maybe they’re wounds, but maybe they’re rubies”  
each as painful as a sun

Frank O’Hara, from *Ode to Willem de Kooning*

Freud’s account of mourning and melancholia focuses on recovery from the experience of a loss, without offering an adequate picture of loss, recovery, or love. Ultimately Freud’s description of recovery as a return to a state of relative equilibrium seems inadequate. What if recovery includes an ability to preserve your loss as lost – to refuse return or replacement? What if love issues not from an ego that is whole, but from a fractured ego seared by its previous losses, changed, damaged and nonetheless willing to divide itself yet again.

Julia Kristeva appropriates Freud’s description of mourning and melancholia and supplements it with a compelling theory of imagination and sublimation. Unlike Freud, Kristeva does not draw a sharp distinction between mourning and melancholia. Instead, she looks towards sublimation as a way of describing how one lives with a gap. Kristeva suggests one goes on in a life seared with loss by imagining another life. In this way, Kristeva, unlike Freud, does offer a third way between total forgetting and radical memory. Her description entails “a

past that does not pass by.”<sup>16</sup> As a way of concluding, I’d like to briefly consider her response to and correction of Freud’s “Mourning and Melancholia” in her book, *Black Sun*.

## **1. Meaning in Despair**

Kristeva tells us she plans to “examine matters from a *Freudian point of view*” (10).<sup>17</sup>

She continues,

“On that basis, I shall try to bring out, from the core of the melancholy/depressive composite, blurred as its borders may be, what pertains to a common experience of *object loss* and of *modification of signifying bonds*” (10).

Kristeva recognizes the clinical difference between depression and melancholia, but she is also aware of the slippage between the two, the way in which depression might turn into melancholia and the features shared by both conditions. Kristeva looks for a common occasion at the root of depression and melancholia. Accordingly she asks; what does it mean to lose? Is loss meaningless?

In *Black Sun*, Julia Kristeva considers life from the perspective of “...those who are racked by melancholia” (3). However, Kristeva – unlike Freud - is not interested in explaining melancholia so that it might illuminate something about the life of a healthy mind. Instead, Kristeva’s interest in melancholia hinges on her thesis: that “...there is meaning only in despair” (6). Kristeva will ultimately refine this thesis to include an account of imagination as essentially melancholic and a claim that “...the artist consumed by melancholia is at the same time the most relentless in his struggle against the symbolic abdication that blankets him...” (9). The one most melancholy (least able to bear life) is also the most creative (most able to imagine another life). This is Kristeva’s paradox: imagination responds to a loss, and so performs its work out of the depths of melancholia. Yet melancholia itself threatens to render life meaningless, and meaning threatens to render imagination useless. The artist pinned to her despair *makes* meaning, even as

despair unravels meaning. We might call this a *Penelope – paradox*. The only way to ensure there is still work to be done –that nothing is finished, that one hope still remains – is to make sure every work remains undone.

While Freud tried to make mourning meaningful, Kristeva takes the radical step of reserving meaning for mourning alone. In this way, Kristeva highlights and exposes the gloss, or ideality, of Freud’s account. Simultaneously, by making a distinction between masculine and feminine depression, a distinction between the kinds of work we have to do to overcome an original loss, Kristeva deepens Freud’s characterization of melancholia and its links to primary narcissism. In the opening chapter, Kristeva, like Freud, traces melancholia back to narcissism:

“Conscious of our being doomed to lose our loves, we grieve perhaps even more when we glimpse in our lover the shadow of a long lost former loved one. Depression is the hidden face of Narcissus, the face that is to bear him away into death, but of which he is unaware while he admires himself in a mirage” (5).

Narcissism plays a critical role in subject formation and the tendency to depression. How one undergoes an original loss, and the traces that first separation leaves, inform our experiences of subsequent loves and losses, and perhaps more importantly, our expectations of how we can love and what we have to lose.

Kristeva describes the depressive complex as particular in and particularly relevant to women.

“[A woman’s] difficulty consists in woman’s process of psychosexual maturation: there is a long path to travel, which, schematically, consists in tearing oneself away from symbiosis with the mother. This is where we all come from, but women are held within it more powerfully because they are of the same sex as the mother.”

Of this transition toward the world of abstraction, rules and activity, I would say that may be called but few are chosen, for many women remain prisoners of this maternal embrace, and this imprisonment directs them toward either passivity or melancholy.”<sup>18</sup>

A woman’s identification with her mother complicates her psychosexual maturation and exacerbates the conflict of ambivalence Freud describes as central to the melancholic constitution. Women, by virtue of the identification with their mothers, undergo a different

separation, detachment and redirection of their love, all of which make them especially prone to a certain depressive mood. In *Black Sun* Kristeva devotes a chapter to what she calls “Illustrations of Feminine Depression” (69). Through her attention to the specificity of our gendered relationship to loss and love, Kristeva dispels some of Freud’s leveling mythologization of melancholia. Kristeva wants to shows us depression, black, glaring and consuming. Meaning, she offers, looks like this abyss. It is just this hard.

Kristeva makes room for the strange work of melancholia – a work that is never complete in a life that is never whole. In doing so, she revises the Freudian characterization of melancholy as an unsuccessful counterpart to mourning. With Kristeva, a new possibility opens. It is the possibility that the experience of a loss might find a permanent place in one’s life, might in fact be a condition of one’s life. In this picture there is no “success” in the work of mourning that forgets or gets over a loss. Instead there is a difficult balance, or oscillation, between what one can bear and what one cannot, in which the unbearable and the bearable lend each other meaning even as they threaten to dismantle one another.

## **2. Sublimation**

Kristeva’s account of imagination outlines a third way between memory and forgetting. She describes the melancholy person as “...riveted to the past, regressing to the paradise or inferno of an unsurpassable experience.” She continues, “Melancholy persons manifest a strange memory: everything has gone by, they seem to say, but I am faithful to those bygone days, I am nailed down to them, no revolution is possible, there is no future...” (60). Imagination is the work of mourning that preserves loss by creating a new symbol in which it can live. Out of the depths of a futureless memory, imagination projects forward a new possibility. This is, I think,

partly a reaction to the interminable passage of time. I told myself there was no future, and still the days pass. Imagination lets me set up a time outside of time. Loss does tear us apart (from each other, and inside), but Kristeva describes being torn apart as an integral part of being. The split occasioned by some experience of loss necessitates an imaginative leap in which I set up a new system of meaning and memory.

This is the work of sublimation, a work Kristeva describes being able, “to remake nothingness, better than it was and within an unchanging harmony, here and now and forever, for the sake of someone else...beauty emerges as the admirable face of loss, transforming it in order to make it live” (99). What I could not hold onto in reality, I make permanent in another realm.

She continues,

“In place of death and so as not to die of the other’s death, I bring forth – or at least I rate highly – an artifice, an ideal, a ‘beyond’ that my psyche produces in order to take up a position outside itself – *ek-stasis*. How beautiful to be able to replace all perishable psychic values” (99).

Imagination and the works it produces represent a survival of idealization. Rather than repress, I express my loss – giving it another form, another face. This is the reverse of the melancholiac’s deadly internalization of his lost love object in an attempt to save it. Sublimation moves things to the outside, setting up a “beyond” and transferring meaning to a place of new rules where reality can no longer threaten to pass the final verdict.

However, there remains the paradox of the melancholy drive to sublimate: “the imaginary constitutes a miracle, but is at the same time its shattering; a self-illusion, nothing but dreams and words, words, words...” (103). There is no total sublimation – no completely successful work of abstraction from the perspective of one who has made the leap to the imaginary. Making your mourning into a work of art may make it bearable, but it will not unmake it or remake it as it was. Transformation is not replacement. Reflecting back at you, the work you set up looks meaningless in comparison with your very real experience of loss, with the strength of your

attachment and the depth of your mood. This is the endless tension Kristeva is so careful to preserve. Mourning and melancholia can find a beautiful expression. We can find comfort in the works that reflect back at us another's sleepless grief, in the cathartic experience of being presented with an occasion to mourn again without the immediacy of our own loss. In some way we want to be brought back to the clarity of melancholia – the focus of grief. It is a way of safekeeping loss, of returning to it. It is a way of knowing ourselves. And yet we balance between the meaningful and meaningless, a sense of the *here* and an *elsewhere*. Meaning is not fixed in either realm. That is its cruel grace. We are bound to lose, and it's bound to be meaningful.

### **3. Ending**

It is worth thinking about what kind of experience necessitates creatively *working on* reality to make it bearable or livable. Kristeva suggests despair is characteristic of this experience. Depression and melancholia have an intimate relationship with imagination and sublimation. However, does imagination issue *only* out of despair? What about the creativity issuing from a great love, a great joy or a great joke? Would Kristeva say these are already forms of meaning, ways of sublimating that have successfully transformed some primary sadness and wound? What about smaller feats of sublimation, not master paintings, canonical novels, poems and films,<sup>19</sup> but postcards, doodles, lists, letters: the many and varied ways we might try to pull ourselves together every day. Do these smaller works reflect a lesser, or less true, less deep despair – or another mood altogether? Are our works proportionate to our loves and our losses?

There is something that rings true about Kristeva's account, but there may yet be other ways of describing the work of surviving a loss. Moving on may entail the work of forgetting and detaching, as Freud would like, or it may entail a work of art, as Kristeva would like. Kristeva certainly helps fill out the phenomenological picture of depression and grief. However, I will conclude with the suspicion that both Freud and Kristeva try to make the work of moving on too explicit: as if there is only one way to survive a loss, as if we always love and lose in the same way, and as if moving on is paramount in our experiences of loss and trauma.

There may be a strange love that inhabits anyone who has loved and lost. It is a love in reserve, a love reserved. You may not find a place for it ever again, or its place may be just that, in reserve. It is astonishing when one can love again. This doesn't always happen, or not right away, but in time. It will not be the same, nor will it entail a clean return to an earlier self. Changed, hardened, hurt, broken, and with all this baggage, yet able to bear up and give in. This is what I think Jonathan Lear is describing when he talks about "being able to tolerate absence" and moments of "break" that are "possibilities for new possibilities."<sup>20</sup> Without nostalgia for or idealization of loss, there is a way of moving forward and staying behind simultaneously, a balancing-act as Kristeva suggests, but more routine and less dramatic than she describes. There will be many breaks and the trick will always be to find new ways of moving on with them. You are no longer here where I am. Rather than try to join you where you are or fasten an image of you where I am, I am going to keep you in reserve. That is, I'm going to let you go and hold onto you nonetheless. I'm not sure if that is a form of depression, mourning or melancholia, but I think it is way of living with a memory that keeps us both in tact.

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<sup>1</sup> Sigmund Freud, "Metaphysical Supplement to the Theory of Dreams," in *General Psychological Theory*, edited by Philip Rieff (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997) 151.

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<sup>2</sup>Is mourning really so *normal* and straightforward? Is it useful to make a distinction between the normal and the abnormal (or pathological) in grief? The impulse for making this distinction reflects an attempt to differentiate between immobilizing grief and something less disruptive, less permanently damaging. But what if there are not two separate conditions? What if there are a variety of ways in which grief informs the lives of the grieving – a way in which grief *is* permanent, but not necessarily permanently immobilizing?

<sup>3</sup> Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia,” in *General Psychological Theory*, Edited by Philip Riff (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991) 164. All subsequent references will be made in text.

<sup>4</sup> Freud, “On Narcissism: An Introduction,” in *The Freud Reader*, Edited by Peter Gay (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1995) 553.

<sup>5</sup> There is, additionally, the “difficulty of distinguishing unconscious phantasies from memories which have become unconscious.” Sigmund Freud, “Formulations Regarding the Two Principles of Mental Functioning,” in *General Psychological Theory*, Edited by Philip Riff (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991) 27. The problem of distinguishing between various unconscious influences makes the possibility of detachment exponentially more difficult, if not impossible. I cannot dredge my memory for all the traces of you and I cannot fully work through each memory as it finds its way to the surface because I cannot even trust my own memory. In a sense, I cannot even find my memory.

<sup>6</sup> Jonathan Lear, *Happiness, Death and the Remainder of Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000) 78.

<sup>7</sup> I am ultimately suggesting that these two alternatives do not exhaust or adequately describe the possibilities for enduring a loss. Somewhere between “getting over it” and “being consumed by it” there is a way of moving forward with a line cast back to your lost love (and to yourself as you were before your loss). This line is not weighty like an anchor. It threads through you. This is another way of saying that every new love will stitch through this line without undoing it, without replacing it. There is no replacement; “Block it up with Other, and t’will yawn the more.” But there is also nothing neurotic about reserving a place for a loss that cannot be covered over, emptied, or replaced. This isn’t repression. It’s a way of living with a memory.

<sup>8</sup> In “Instincts and Their Viscissitudes,” Freud writes “It is particularly common to find [love and hate] directed simultaneously towards the same object, and this phenomenon of their co-existence furnishes the most important example of ambivalence of feeling.” Sigmund Freud, “Instincts and Their Viscissitudes,” in *General Psychological Theory*, Edited by Philip Riff (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991) 97. If this ambivalence is so common, why does Freud reserve it for the melancholic in “Mourning and Melancholia?” Is this ambivalence typical of any love-relation? Conflicts of ambivalence play a strong explanatory role in Freud’s characterization of melancholia, but it is ultimately unclear why Freud reserves these conflicts for a particularly melancholy love. I return to these questions briefly in section 5.

<sup>9</sup> Freud, “Instincts and Their Vicissitudes,” 101.

<sup>10</sup> This indicates the strong pull of original states of consciousness and the tendency to regress towards more and more original conditions. In this case, it is a regression towards a primal experience of hate, which is older than love; “The relation of hate to objects is older than that of love.” Freud, “Instincts and Their Vicissitudes,” 102.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* 103.

<sup>12</sup> In his description of the early stages of consciousness, Freud describes unconscious mental processes as “older, primary processes.” Sigmund Freud, “Formulation Regarding the Two Principles of Mental Functioning (1911)” in *General Psychological Theory*, edited by Philip Rieff (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991) 21. Freud goes on to explain the increasing significance of the outside world as a result of a new principle that takes hold in the mind: “...the mental apparatus had to decide to form a conception of the real circumstances in the outer world and to exert itself to alter them. A new principle of mental functioning was thus introduced; what was conceived of was no longer that which was pleasant, but that which was real, even if it should be unpleasant” (22). The reality principle comes to the aid of the pleasure principle, which cannot find the satisfaction it seeks. Rather than be repeatedly disappointed, the ego sets up a new principle, with new demands and new aims. Crucially, Freud claims this adaptation is not a “dethronement of the pleasure-principle, but only a safeguarding of it” (26). The reality-principle takes some of the pressure off the pleasure-principle. Freud claims this is a momentous step that makes way for taking *action*. This is then another way in which a certain regression renders the melancholic helpless.

<sup>13</sup> Sigmund Freud, “Repression (1915),” in *General Psychological Theory*, Edited by Philip Riff (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991) 114.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* 105.

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<sup>15</sup> William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, included in *The Oxford Shakespeare, Tragedies*, edited by Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987) Act I, Scene 1.5, line 90.

<sup>16</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun*, translated by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989) 53. All subsequent references will be made in text.

<sup>17</sup> Kristeva's book deserves much closer attention than I will be able to give it here. In this paper I am primarily interested in the way Kristeva relates to Freud and how she attempts to revise his characterization of melancholia. For the sake of focus, I have confined myself (primarily) to Chapters 1 and 4 of *Black Sun*.

<sup>18</sup> Julia Kristeva, "A Conversation Between Julia Kristeva and Ariane Lopez-Huici," in *Uncontrollable Beauty*, edited by Bill Beckley with David Shapiro (New York: Allworth Press, 1998) 327.

<sup>19</sup> Kristeva's examples in chapters 5 - 8 of *Black Sun* are Holbein's painting, *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb*; Nerval's poem, "El Desdichado;" Dostoyevsky's novels and Duras' films.

<sup>20</sup> Jonathan Lear, *Happiness, Death, and the Remainder of Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001) 130.