Modernism and Melancholia

Modernity and Loss

We are all of us celebrating some funeral.

—CHARLES BAUDELAIRE,
“ON THE HEROISM OF MODERN LIFE”

It is not difficult to see how modernity—in its meanings as a particular experience of time and as a set of concrete transformations of the material world of everyday life—is related to the experience of loss. The very origin of the word “modernity,” from modernus, meaning “now” or “of today” (as opposed to “of yesterday”) implies a problematic sense of anteriority, the sense that the past is lost and gone.¹ This was a new time-consciousness, one not oriented toward repeating cycles or the promises of divine eternity, but a temporality that was linear, sequential, irreversible, and measurable in discrete units, what would become clock time.

Perhaps since the word’s first usage, around the time of the collapse of the Roman Empire, and at least since the Querelle des Anciens et Modernes, modernity signified an epochal shift, the sense that we live in a historical moment that in its totality is somehow categorically different from the periods that preceded it. Later, the word was used also to characterize the subjective experience of such a difference: the feeling that one’s own experience of the present is contingent, fugitive, and fleeting, that the passage of time itself means that the world around one
is forever eluding one’s grasp, producing, as in Baudelaire, an endless accumulation of losses. ("J’ai plus de souvenirs que si j’avais mille ans.") In either the subjective or epochal, collective sense, modernity and loss would seem to be inextricably linked: to be “modern” is to be separated from the past. In fact, it may be that modernity signals nothing more or less than the impulse to declare the difference of a present moment in respect to the moments that preceded it, to perceive the specificity and difference of one’s own historical moment.\(^2\)

We can read a troubled relation to the past, for example, even in one of the earliest figures for expressing a modern time consciousness, that “we moderns” were “dwarves standing on the shoulders of giants.”\(^3\) The metaphor implies that we moderns are better—more knowledgeable—only because we can stand on the shoulders of the now dead giants who preceded us. It suggests that even as we are able to see farther and better, it makes us feel smaller. This ambivalence is amplified by the figure’s funereal character: we modern subjects owe our “progress” to the dead bodies stacked beneath us on which we stand. We are haunted by the dead even as we are lifted up by them.

As we know, over a period of centuries, regularized clock time organized daily existence in new and various ways. It changed human conceptions of the world and of space itself: a portable clock was the crucial invention that allowed for the measurement of longitude (as detailed in the popular book and TV miniseries *Longitude*) and hence for travel across the oceans and the mapping of the world and colonial development.\(^4\) Standardized clock time also has transformed how people have experienced their bodies and their daily emotional lives, inasmuch as the clock was used (and perhaps invented in order) to measure the workday. This process reached a culmination in the early twentieth century with Fredrick Taylor’s time-and-motion studies and with the advent and broad institutionalization of the Fordist assembly line.\(^5\) “The time is past,” as Paul Valery remarked, “in which time did not matter.”\(^6\)

But it was not only changes in the nature and experience of temporality that altered the quality and scope of loss. The whole conglomerate of transformations that took place and continue to take place under the rubric of “modernization” all bring their own losses (and it is primarily, though not exclusively, these changes with which James, Du Bois, and Platonov are concerned). Industrialization changed the nature of work, not only making it quite simply brutalizing and dangerous, especially in the early stages, but also creating a new situation in which workers
were isolated from each other and from the work process as a whole, substituting the abstraction of value known as “wages” for a sense of value based on human contact or recognition. Moreover, industrialization required peasants to become workers, who in turn needed to become more mobile, and so eroded the traditional community and extended family. The destruction of what is now called simply “the environment” by industrial processes has been lamented at least since the Romantic poets. “All that is solid melts into air” in terms of belief systems as well, as the increasing social and cultural authority of science combined with the secularism of the market greatly diminish the ability of religion to organize and give meaning to everyday life. New technologies of movement and transportation made locality less and less important. The train, for example, was experienced as a radical and upsetting break in the experience of space-time. As is well known, beginning in the eighteenth century and accelerating into the twentieth, massive emigrations of people looking for work, escaping from famine, often moving from the colony to the metropole, meant that more and more people experienced life as exiles, permanent foreigners. Urbanization, in Georg Simmel’s famous argument, increased the shocks the human sensorium was required to absorb—not only automobiles and advertising but also the sheer volume of human faces one sees in a given day—meaning that people became less and less open to the world around them because the everyday life world was more and more something from which one had to shield oneself. New discourses of racial and sexual identity became technologies of identification and administration by the modern state in hospitals, prisons, schools, and elsewhere. The acquisition of an identity that excluded one from the “normal” brought with it the loss of state-provided rights and/or privileges and a sense of being lost, of being left out of the human community more generally. Along such lines, Franz Fanon, for example, described the experience of racial identification as one in which his body was returned to him “sprawled out, distorted, recolored, clad in mourning.” Technologies of war and destruction have continued to become more and more powerful, so that each new war, from the American Civil War up through World War II, was experienced as a shocking revelation at the human capacity to destroy other humans as well as a massive experience of local and personal loss. Think of all the people struck by grief for the 20 million Soviet citizens who died during World War II. And of course the Nazi Holocaust itself engendered a sense of loss so great that it seems to defy the very possibility of mourning.
One could continue. I have here by no means exhausted the ways modernization has been experienced as loss. I want here only to point out that we have, even at first glance, more than sufficient evidence to suggest that one of the central problems of modernity is the attempt to grapple with these losses, with the fact of a new scale, scope, and quality of loss itself. It is in such a context that Freud’s theory of melancholy, composed as the horrors of World War I were beginning to become apparent, begins to look like a symptomatically modern text.¹⁴

However, modernity has also signified on a quite different register as well, a more optimistic, utopian, even revolutionary one. That is, modernity has been understood not only as an experience of temporality and a set of social transformations but also as a project.¹⁵ In this sense modernity was something to achieve: “Il faut être absolument moderne.” Such a modernity-as-project is closely linked to the set of ideas and conversations that came to be called the Enlightenment: the promise of endless human perfectibility, progress, democracy and universal equality, self-determination, better living through the advances of reason in the realms of medicine, technology, economy, and elsewhere—in short, progress and reason, progress through reason.¹⁶ The utopian element of the project of modernity has played an important role in most of the transformative political projects of the twentieth century from the Bolshevik Revolution to the civil rights movement in the United States. More recently, this element has supplied the rhetoric for both the massive state-supported efforts toward the globalization of capital (sometimes simply called “modernization”) as well as the organized opposition to globalization as it has so far taken shape (by way of appeals to universal human rights, to the right to self-determination, or to rational discussion of the global common good as opposed to the “free market”). That is to say, “modernity” has no necessary ideological content, especially recently, and has instead been a site of regular contestation.

Yet precisely the utopian promises of modernity put the modern subject in a precariously depressive position. This is because the promises of modernity are never fulfilled. At any given moment, the preoccupation with the ways the world has not met the promises of modernity renders the world apparently lackluster, stale, and profitless even if (or precisely because) the possibility of transformation always seems to lurk on the horizon. There is the danger that a kind of depressive “learned helplessness” is the eventual lesson awaiting the enthusiasts of the project of modernity.¹⁷ Worse still, it seems that the greater the
hopes placed in science, or technology, or international cooperation, the more dramatic the failures have been, with the thoroughly modern, bureaucratically organized and administered Holocaust as exhibit number one. Silvan Tomkins has suggested that this kind of a situation, one between “Heaven and Hell on earth,” between great hope and catastrophic disappointment, is the paradigmatic “depressive script.”

I propose that this insecure position between the promises of modernity and the realities of modernization is the place of modernism itself. “Modernism,” in this sense, would refer not to any one thing in particular, but to the wide range of practices that attempt in one way or another to respond to the gap between the social realities of modernization and the promises of the project of modernity. We find such practices not only in the literature and arts, but in law or international relations (the League of Nations), economics (Keynes), language (Esperanto), technology (electrification, cinema), and so forth. This means that the situation of modernism is one in which modernization is felt to be incomplete, still in progress, and thus potentially redirected. It also means that the promises of modernity are still felt to be relevant, vital, and achievable.

Thus, it should be clear, I do not here view modernism as a specific set of formal gestures (difficulty, nonrepresentation, etc.) or even a particular representational problem, nor as the aesthetic response to a determining historical factor (such as industrialization, urbanization, the rise of mass culture, or the expansion of capital). Instead I propose to think about modernism as the symbolic space in which what counts as modernity, what modernity is or should be, and for whom, is contested, debated, reevaluated, or otherwise articulated. In relation to any given modernism, in any given social subsystem, one should be able to ask what the relevant aspects of modernization are; what promises of modernity are felt to be still fulfillable; and how this given modernism is or is not motivated by the project of somehow bridging the gap. This means that all of the modernisms share an awareness of a gap between the promises and the social processes of modernity. Within the aesthetic modernisms, this awareness implies a position taken on what the relevant social processes and promises are and a shared sense that art can and should do something about this gap.
Melancholia’s History

I write of melancholy, by being busy to avoid melancholy.

—ROBERT BURTON, ANATOMY OF MELANCHOLY

The discourse of melancholy has a long history, originating, as we know, in the humoral theories of ancient Greece. While there have been several paradigm shifts in this history, as Klibansky, Saxl, and Panofsky have noted in *Saturn and Melancholy*, new understandings or theories have not displaced each other so much as accumulated on top of or adjacent to each other, producing a situation in which contradictory theories and approaches have coexisted at any given moment. Despite this somewhat convoluted and contested definitional scene, there is a remarkable consistency in descriptions of a basic affective experience from the time of the Hippocratic writings through Augustine, William Langland, Shakespeare, Marsilio Ficino, Robert Burton, and Goethe right up to very recent writing on antidepressives and the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)*. Even as the specific forms of melancholia have varied, what Galen, court physician to Marcus Aurelius, wrote in the second century holds true for much of melancholia’s history: “Although each melancholic person acts quite differently from the others, all of them exhibit fear or despondency.” Other symptoms regularly referred to include feelings of hopelessness, an inability to experience pleasure or to sustain interest, self-loathing, guilt and shame, a tendency toward suicide, and a range of physical difficulties such as sleep disturbance, flatulence, and coldness in the hands and feet.

If there is some consistency in descriptions of a certain experience, quite variable have been understandings of its origins, just what type of condition it is, how it relates to other forms of human experience, what its value might be, and how we might cure it, if indeed cure is seen to be necessary. While I am focused here on one particular moment in this history, one in which melancholia is oriented around the problem of loss, it is useful to look briefly at the broader history, not only to appreciate the specificity of the modernist moment’s focus but also to see the long-standing association between melancholia and aesthetic practices whose value is directly related to their origin in melancholy.

In the humoral understanding of melancholia, *melaina-kole* referred
to black bile, a normal substance in the body, of which, reasonably
enough, there could be temporary and/or chronic excesses, resulting in
melancholic illnesses. This schema not only was the earliest but also has
been the longest surviving understanding, retaining currency in one
form or another from Hippocrates until the nineteenth century. (And
it is echoed by recent physiological theories of depression in which the
regulation of neurotransmitters such as serotonin and norepeneprine
play a key role.) In brief, the humoral system posited that there were
four basic humors: black bile, yellow bile, blood, and phlegm. Each hu-
mor corresponded not only with a body part and a combination of ele-
mental qualities but also with the seasons, as follows.

- **Blood**: the heart, warm and moist, spring
- **Yellow bile**: the liver, warm and dry, summer
- **Black bile**: the spleen, cold and dry, autumn
- **Phlegm**: the brain, cold and moist, winter

The humoral theory was part of a whole cosmology in which one’s
individual health and mood were linked to transpersonal forces such
as the season and the elements. As Klibansky et al. write, “[t]hese hu-
mours corresponded, it was held, to the cosmic elements and to the di-
vision of time; they controlled the whole existence and behavior of
mankind, and, according to the manner in which they were combined,
determined the character of the individual.” Health was a question of
proper balance between the different humors, “that state in which these
constituent substances are in the correct proportion to each other, both
in strength and quantity, and are well mixed. Pain occurs when one of
the substances presents either a deficiency or an excess, or is separated
in the body and not mixed with the others.” Various cures, from
changes in diet, purgatives, and bleeding to labor and the avoidance of
solitariness were prescribed over the years in order to restore the proper
balance.

Melancholia could thus refer to two things within the humoral para-
digm. One was a temporary excess of black bile, a condition or illness
that could be cured by restoring balance. The other was a “normal ab-
normality,” a chronic imbalance in the humors in which black bile was
dominant over the other humors in a kind of natural and permanent
way, resulting in a particular temperament. Klibansky and colleagues
write: “The natural melancholic, however, even when perfectly well,
possessed a quite special ‘ethos’, which, however it chose to manifest it-
self, made him fundamentally and permanently different from ‘ordi-
nary’ man; he was, as it were, normally abnormal.” Here, the melancholic was one of the four humoral temperaments, along with the sanguine, the choleric, and the phlegmatic. Depending on one’s temperament, one was more or less inclined toward different imbalances and diseases. In the different seasons, for example, one or other of the humors could be more dominant, which might produce temporary imbalances or changes in everyone but would affect people of different temperaments differently. If one was choleric, for example, then one tended to be dry already, and thus a very hot and dry summer would have a more harmful effect than it would on the phlegmatic, whose cold and moist nature would be balanced by the summer’s heat and dryness.

The distinction between the melancholic as a type (whom we would today call the depressive) and melancholia as a disease or mood created the space for the connection between melancholia and genius to emerge. If one was clearly disabled when suffering from melancholia at its most severe, the temperamental melancholic could have a moderate amount of black bile, enough to create a susceptibility to melancholic illness, but also enough to encourage a certain, somewhat mysterious capacity for great achievement. It was this temperamental melancholia that was linked to “men of extraordinary ability” in the Aristotelian *Problems.* (Klibanksy et al. make the case that melancholia is linked to greatness and creativity in this Aristotelian text by way of an incorporation of the Platonic notion of creative frenzy or mania, a frenzy facilitated by the right, moderate amount of black bile. Beyond this, however, the explanation of the relationship between melancholia and various forms of intellectual achievement remained vague.)

In contrast, within the medieval Christian worldview the sense of dejection and withdrawal of interest that had characterized melancholia became a sin. And not just any sin, but potentially the most offensive of sins, as it indicated a rejection of the glory and presence of God, a failure to see God’s presence in the world. This idea appears to have originated in the early Christian Egyptian desert monks who were, due to their isolated mode of living, particularly subject to such a mood, which John Cassian described as a “weariness or distress of heart . . . akin to dejection” and which was called “acedia.” Cassian wrote that acedia was a particular danger among the solitary monks, producing “dislike of the place, disgust with the cell, and disdain in the company of his brethren,” as well as making one “lazy and sluggish about all manner of work.” The notion of a disease of the black bile did not disappear during this period so much as the sin of acedia existed alongside it as a
kind of spiritual disease. Occasionally acedia was viewed as something that might motivate you to find your faith and to search for the meaning of God (William Langland’s *Piers Plowman* might be read along such lines), and thus even here there appears to be the potential for a positively valued flip side to the depressive phenomenon.

The Renaissance returned to Aristotle and other Greek texts and rescued melancholics from hell, transforming them into geniuses. Marsilio Ficino is the key figure here. In 1489 he published his *Books on Life*, wherein he argued, among other things, that melancholy was the necessary temperament of thinkers and of philosophers, who are inclined to think and brood over things that are impossible and difficult and absent. Ficino also incorporated the astrological tradition of writing about Saturn into his conception, linking the melancholic to the person “born under Saturn.”

Ficino’s text was tremendously influential and signaled a subsequent interest in and positive valuation of melancholy in various forms. It appears, for example, that Dürer drew from Ficino’s text the theory of melancholia that provided the iconography of his *Melancolia I*. Melancholy signified as a kind of heightened self-awareness; it was seen as the mood of the poet and of thought in general, as for example in Milton’s poem *Il Penseroso*, wherein melancholy’s “pleasures” were celebrated. In Hamlet we find the romantic melancholic hero, who suffers a debilitating affliction, to be sure, but is all the more beguiling, complex, and attractive for it. It is his melancholy alienation and indecision that defines Hamlet as a hero and has allowed him to allegorize modern subjectivity more generally for several centuries now. At this moment melancholy even becomes a kind of fashion, a sign of glamour, a pose one might take on.

Implicit if unarticulated in the idea of the temperamental melancholic who achieves greatness is the kernel of another, now almost commonsensical approach to what has been thought of as poetic or heroic melancholy. If the melancholic person knows what it is to fall, as Kristeva puts it, into “an abyss of sorrow, a non-communicable grief that at times, and often on a long term basis, lays claim upon us to the extent of losing all interest in words, actions and even life itself,” then such a person may be inclined to dwell on the sources of her or his grief even when not depressed precisely in order to figure out how in the future to avoid depression. In other words, the aesthetic production of the melancholic may be an attempt precisely to combat depression, not, as one might assume, by way of an escape into aesthetic pleasures but precisely by directing her or his attention toward melancholy itself. As Robert
Burton puts it in his *Anatomy of Melancholy*, “I write of melancholy, by being busy to avoid melancholy.” Kristeva similarly writes that “for those who are racked by melancholia, writing about it would have meaning only if writing sprang out of that very melancholia.”

*The Anatomy* not only celebrated writing about melancholy as a way to avoid it but evidently also promoted the counter-melancholic force of reading about melancholy, to judge by the testimony of readers from Samuel Johnson to Djuna Barnes. Any number of ideas about melancholy emerge in Burton’s remarkably expansive book, in part because Burton seems less concerned to offer a coherent account of melancholy than to find ways to be able to keep writing about it. Thus, we find multiple, overlapping kinds of melancholy, including that universal melancholy which everyone suffers, since suffering is the basic human condition, and melancholies of the brain, the whole body, and the midsection, with various subsets of each, such as love-melancholia and religious melancholia. Among the many advices, observations, theories, and cures proposed in *The Anatomy* (to which I could not hope to do justice here) is the idea that melancholy is a state of interior disorder; by analogy, one may also speak of melancholy states or nations. In his *Melancholy and Society*, Wolf Lepenies picks up on this idea to argue that Burton creates his utopia (the first in English, which takes up the first few hundred pages of *The Anatomy*) by way of a negation of this disordered melancholy. There is thus for Lepenies a dialectical and mutually constituting relationship between melancholy and utopia, one that can be traced through different historical moments, in which utopian thinking is motivated by the desire to find a remedy for melancholia.

Walter Benjamin pursues a similarly dialectical mode of argument regarding the emergence of the Renaissance version of “heroic melancholy.” He writes that “[t]he deadening of the emotions, and the ebbing away of the waves of life which are the source of these emotions in the body, can increase the distance between the self and its surrounding world to the point of alienation from the body.” In the melancholic state, the world becomes a set of objects with no necessary function or meaning, the object world has been emptied of significance, and in this sense it has also been prepared for allegorical transformation. The melancholic state of mind, then, even as it dwells on ruins and loss, is at the same time liberated to imagine how the world might be transformed, how things might be entirely different from the way they are. In this allegorical mode of looking, “any person, any object, any relationship can mean absolutely anything else” (OGT, 186). The melancholy
mind, “in its tenacious self-absorption,” Benjamin writes, “embraces dead objects in its contemplation, in order to redeem them” (157). In this way, the world “is both elevated and devalued” (175). This is how Benjamin reads Dürer’s *Melencolia I*, where the subject has laid aside the “utensils of active life,” which have become instead objects of contemplation; the image depicts the brooding subject in the moment just prior to an allegorical awakening.

Benjamin’s compelling case for a potentially disruptive imagination of radical and redemptive transformation within this melancholic mode of seeing notwithstanding, the retreat into contemplative melancholy could also serve a primarily compensatory, and thus socially affirming, function. In his study of Elizabethan melancholy, Lawrence Babb connects the cultural fascination with melancholy to the historical world in which it arose, suggesting that “the late English renaissance was a period of progressively deepening despondency.” In such a context, melancholy withdrawal “offered—or seemed to offer—an avenue of retreat from a disheartening world. The melancholy man might retire within himself and find compensation for the ills of the world in sober contemplative pleasures.” In this way, even as melancholy retreat might preserve oppositional energies for later expenditure, the comfort it seems to have offered might also be a barrier to the collective action that would be necessary for the transformation of the conditions creating despondency in the first place. This would become a central tension in considerations of the relationship between melancholy and aesthetics.

The Renaissance interest in the relationship between melancholy and genius and the corresponding popularity of melancholy was revived in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In British and German Romanticism, as we know, melancholy is a major theme, from Goethe’s *The Sorrows of Young Werther* to Keats’s “Ode on Melancholy.” Kant writes positively of melancholy in his *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*. At least on a thematic level, across this range of texts, melancholia is presented as a kind of mode of intensified reflection and self-consciousness, and the suffering accompanying it as a soul-ennobling force. To really appreciate beauty or experience love, one must also know melancholy. As Keats writes, “in the very temple of Delight / Veil’d Melancholy has her sovran shrine.”

At the same time, in what increasingly became an autonomous social and cultural sphere, melancholia was becoming medicalized; it becomes a mental illness to be studied, categorized, and treated. Slowly during the nineteenth century the humoral understanding was displaced, and
in this context also the term *depression* began to supplant *melancholia*. With the rise of psychiatry as a discipline, finding the physiological basis of mental illness became a priority. Probably no one contributed more to this practice than Emil Kraepelin, a contemporary of Freud, who developed his own program of clinical observation and research, producing a new system for the classification of mental illness. His influential *Textbook of Psychiatry* went through multiple editions and became a standard text. Constantly revising his clinical categories on the basis of new evidence and observations, Kraepelin made several important distinctions, but none as influential as the one between mood disorders (such as manic depression) and diseases of the cognitive faculties, such as *dementia praecox* (what we call schizophrenia today). To a great extent, contemporary psychiatry originates in the clinically based classificatory systems devised by Kraepelin.

This is where Freud enters the picture, but before moving to an examination of the psychoanalytic theory of melancholia (in the next section), it is worth looking at the recent changes in our understanding of melancholia and depression, changes linked to the wide and effective use of Prozac and other SSRI antidepressants.

The accidental discovery in 1949 by an Australian doctor that Lithium treated manic depression, but not schizophrenia, appeared to confirm Kraepelin’s clinical distinction with physiological evidence. More important, it awakened people to the possibility of an effective antidepressant with tolerable side effects, which in turn motivated the search for other such medications. Over the next forty years, several effective antidepressants were discovered (including imipramine, the monoamine oxidase (MAO) inhibitors, and the tricyclics), but they all had unpleasant side effects. The discovery in the 1970s of the chemical that was eventually branded as Prozac in 1987 was significant not because it treated depression any more effectively than the other drugs (it did not), but because it only affected a single chemical involved in mood regulation—serotonin. It thus lacked many of the previous drugs’ side effects, and therefore became much more widely prescribed, at which point it was learned that Prozac appeared to treat a wider range of symptoms than had initially been expected, including less severe forms of depression.

As Peter Kramer reports in *Listening to Prozac*, Prozac turned out to be effective not just for people suffering major depression, but for people “whose chronic vulnerability to depressed mood has a global effect on their personality,” in other words, the depressive or melancholic. One subgroup of these depressives to which Kramer devotes special attention
is made up of persons who are especially sensitive to loss, the “rejection-sensitive.” These are people who are likely to be thrown into protracted depressive moods by relatively minor slights, losses, or rejections. Disagreements or awkward misunderstandings with a partner or close friend, a bad grade or review, professional rejection or conflict, minor embarrassment or romantic disappointments or rejections, instead of producing a passing pang of shame or sorrow, produce for the rejection-sensitive a longer depression. On the one hand, Kramer was surprised and even occasionally amazed at the extent to which Prozac (or other SSRIs) was able to help his depressive, loss-sensitive patients, as well as how often he heard his patients proclaim that they felt more “like themselves” than before. On the other hand, he saw the possibility for a kind of social engineering by way of Prozac. What, after all, is the ‘right’ amount of sensitivity to loss? Does not our capitalist economy, for example, reward those who are a bit less sensitive to loss, less risk averse, more assertive, and a little bit cheerier? Who is to say that Prozac is not just creating the most socially desirable sort of person, perhaps helping people tolerate an intolerable world? Ultimately, although Kramer was interested in the way the new SSRIs have made it possible to “affect the physiology of mood through medication in stable and useful ways . . . frequently and dramatically enough to raise [a] series of existential questions,” he found that his patients were more likely to have the confidence to be nonconformist—to leave abusive relationships or change professions, for example—when they had been able to successfully keep depressive episodes at bay. Kramer’s confidence in the positive effects of antidepressive medication has only been bolstered in the years since the publication of *Listening to Prozac*, as a number of studies have shown fairly conclusively that depression causes real physiological damage, especially to the brain, and that the more one is depressed, the more one is likely to be depressed in the future.

In his more recent book *Against Depression*, Peter Kramer fashions a response to a question he found himself somewhat surprised to be asked as he unexpectedly found himself cast as an expert on depression and antidepressants. The question in its basic form was some version of “What if Van Gogh had been on Prozac? Would he still have been a great painter?” Would all the melancholy artists and authors of the past have been cured of their depressions and thus also of their creative genius? Drawing on recent studies, Kramer makes the case that depression, or at least what is called “major depression” by the DSM, is a disease, and an extremely debilitating and damaging one. In this sense,
he insists, it cannot be seen as an aid to any kind of intellectual production. He notes that recent research has shown that major depression appears not only to cause brain damage but also to increase the risk of heart disease, not to mention suicide. Kramer calls for nothing less than an end to depression, arguing we should devote ourselves to this task in the same way that we would combat any major, debilitating disease.

While Kramer makes a strong case that there is no reason to think that major depressive episodes are anything worth celebrating, the category of disease on which he insists tends to categorically isolate major depression from other, less severe depressions that may not be as damaging, and also from the depressive personality, a locus of considerable reflection in Listening to Prozac. Consequently, he does not really consider the “I write of melancholy so as to avoid melancholy” phenomenon, which also serves the antidepressive function he promotes, but is associated with the defense of melancholia he wishes to attack.

When I write of an “antidepressive melancholia” or “antidepressive aesthetic practice,” I mean to refer to the phenomenon I have discussed, from Burton up through Kristeva, in which one turns one’s attention to melancholia precisely in order to avoid falling into a depression. That is, I am interested precisely in the practices developed by the depressive, the one who knows depression, to avoid depression. Thus, although I borrow the phrase anti-depressive from the psychiatric context, I mean to add to it a different range of meanings. To be sure, there is no need to promote depression, and I am as enthusiastic a proponent of antidepressive forces of whatever nature as Kramer is. However, the antidepressive can only arise in relation to the depressive. What we would lose through the abolition of depression that Kramer calls for are all the nonmedicinal antidepressive practices, a set of practices that are quite rich and valuable to the depressed and nondepressed alike.

Freud on Melancholia and Loss: Shadow and Precipitate

[I]t [is] possible to suppose that the character of the ego is a precipitate of abandoned object cathexes and that it contains the history of those object choices.

—Freud, The Ego and the Id

Grief and loss have long been associated with melancholia. The tendency of melancholics to brood over the absent and gone has been a
regular theme in a range of genres since the term *melancholia* was coined. Yet theories of melancholia have only intermittently discussed loss as a possible cause. In the tenth century, for example, the Islamic physician Ishaq ibn Imran mentions the loss of loved ones or treasured possessions as potential factors in the onset of melancholia. In the seventeenth century, the influential physician Felix Platter (cited, for instance, by Burton) observed that lengthy grief could lead to melancholia, an observation others would repeat. Still, in these instances, the connection between melancholia and loss remained at the level of a peripheral clinical observation that was not incorporated into the theory of melancholia as such.

Thus, Freud’s proposition that the failure to mourn a loss was the cause of melancholia represents a substantial departure from previous theories. His contention that melancholia was not natural or biological but was the result of the psychic processing of subjective experiences of loss stood in opposition to emergent and influential physiological theories of depression and melancholia (such as Kraepelin’s and Meyer’s). To be sure, Freud picked up on a literary tradition connecting loss and melancholy, as, for example, in *The Sorrows of Young Werther* and *Hamlet*, which Freud mentions in “Mourning and Melancholia.” But whereas Hamlet or Goethe’s Werther may have suffered from melancholias occasioned by loss, these losses were not depicted as phenomena also *interior* to subjectivity. The ghost of Hamlet’s father circulates in the world; for Freud, the ghosts populate the psyche. And it is this aspect of his argument—that in melancholia an emotional tie is replaced by an internalization of the lost object—that makes the paradigm Freud proposes an apt image for modernist subjectivity more generally. That is, we find a range of other narratives and images of internalized loss in the years before and after 1900. This would include not least Baudelaire, who writes, for example, in one of his “Spleen” poems, that his brain has become “like a tomb, a corpse filled Potter’s field / A pyramid where the dead lie down by scores” or, in “The Swan,” of a melancholy that “never gives way” and in which “frailest memories take on the weight of rocks.” In addition, as I will discuss, Du Bois’s theory of double consciousness anticipates the paradigm of melancholic subjectivity rather closely. My suggestion and assumption is that more significant than a new set of ideas about melancholia is the observation and theorization of a new mode of experience, one in which difficult-to-mourn losses have become a central feature of life in a way that has fundamentally affected the nature and structure of subjectivity.
Thus, to be clear, my aim here in examining Freud’s theory of melancholia is not to argue for or against his theory or to assess the many revisions and refinements of his theory from Melanie Klein to Julia Kristeva. Rather, in what follows, I read Freud as offering a kind of baseline paradigm for a modernist theory of melancholia, which will serve more as a point of reference throughout the book than as a theory of melancholia to use. In this, my project is very different from, for example, Kristeva’s, which seeks to establish a theory of melancholia that can be put to use in clinical practice and in readings of aesthetic practices.

The initial insight of “Mourning and Melancholia” concerns an association Freud made as early as 1895, when he noted that “the affect corresponding to melancholia is that of mourning—that is, longing for something lost.” The correspondence of affect led him to hypothesize that melancholia also “must be a question of a loss—a loss in instinctual life.” This idea had been picked up and developed by Freud’s colleague Karl Abraham, who proposed by way of clinical evidence that indeed melancholia and mourning displayed the same affect and that in melancholia, mourning had been for some reason prolonged or blocked. Freud continues this line of inquiry in his essay, setting himself the task of distinguishing between melancholic and nonmelancholic losses.

He begins with what he presumes to be already easily understood—mourning itself. Mourning, Freud writes, “is regularly the reaction to 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, an ideal, and so on” (MM, 243). In such situations, we expect the temporary condition Freud calls “the normal affect of mourning”: the experience of a “painful frame of mind,” a loss of interest in the outside world, in other people, in activity, and in love. The withdrawal we see in mourning, Freud proposes, is due to the energy demanded by what he calls the “work of mourning.” On the loss of an object, Freud explains, “reality testing has shown that the love object no longer exists, and it proceeds to demand that all libido be withdrawn from its attachments to that object” (244). This is difficult, since “it is a matter of general observation that people never willingly abandon a libidinal position, not even, indeed, when a substitute is already beckoning to them” (244). Thus, although “normally respect for reality gains the day,” mourning remains a slow, painful, difficult process.
If libidinal attachment in Freud’s view is something like a set of sticky strings attaching us to the object, then mourning involves the laborious process of disattaching and carefully repairing “each one of the memories and expectations in which the libido is bound to the object” so that the strands of attachment can be used again. As this work of disattachment is carried out, “the existence of the lost object is psychically prolonged” (245). In this task of meeting reality’s “demands,” however, the work of detachment requires a temporary hallucination (a “hallucinatory wishful psychosis”). We must, in essence, pretend that the object is still “there” in some sense in order to disattach from it. When the work of mourning is done, presence and reality have won the day, and the mourner can move on to make other libidinal attachments.

The term *libido* here and throughout the essay, it should be noted, bears a great deal of explanatory weight for a term that remains frustratingly vague throughout Freud. At its most basic, Freud uses *libido* to refer to the energy, the raw stuff of the sexual instinct as it is directed toward objects and translated into the mental (as opposed to the bodily) sphere. In *Group Psychology* he writes that “libido is an expression taken from the theory of the emotions. We call by that name the energy, regarded as a quantitative magnitude . . . of those instincts which have to do with all that may be comprised under the word ‘love.’” So in one sense, Freud uses *libido* to mean the instinctual energy constituting love. Yet the introduction of the idea of “love” here, and his proposition that the “emotional tie” (a term with its own interesting career in Freud, on which more shortly) may be a neutral equivalent to what he calls a “love relationship,” suggests that Freud may also mean something more qualitatively distinct and perhaps more internally differentiated than a quantitative magnitude of instinctual energy. At least this would seem to be the case in “Mourning and Melancholia,” where, as we will see, the key aspect of the libidinal attachment for Freud is not so much “love” as such but the negative feelings (e.g., “hate”) that sometimes accompany love. These negative feelings, we presume, cannot be reduced to or accurately described as libido, unless *libido* is expanded to mean any kind of affective attachment to an object. In any event, here, as throughout Freud, we perceive the lack in Freud’s work of a theory of the affects (on which more later). My own approach to this problem, like that of many of Freud’s critics, is to import a more nuanced understanding of affect where it is helpful.

That said, in “Mourning and Melancholia,” Freud observes that the more persistent state of melancholia shares the characteristics of
mourning but is more confusing to the observer, because the instigating loss is often unclear, even or especially to the melancholic herself or himself. Therefore, in his effort to make sense of melancholia, Freud places a great deal of weight on the one unique feature of melancholia, its self-critical, self-deriding aspect. “The distinguishing mental features of melancholia,” Freud writes, “are a profoundly painful dejection, cessation 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-revilings, and culminates in a delusional expectation of punishment” (MM, 244). He adds, “in mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself” (246).

Freud sees at the source of this devaluing of the ego an internal splitting: “one part of the ego sets itself over against the other, judges it critically, and, as it were, takes it as its object” (MM, 247). In the key move of the essay, Freud argues that the criticism of the self is really a criticism of the lost object that has been transferred to the ego: “reproaches against a loved object which have been shifted away from it on to the patient’s own ego.” Freud explains the logic of the process in the following way.

An object choice, an attachment of the libido to a particular person, had at one time existed; then, owing to a real slight or disappointment coming from this loved person, the object-relationship was shattered. The result was not the normal one of withdrawal of the libido from this object and a displacement of it on to a new one, but something different, for whose coming-about various conditions seem to be necessary. The object cathexis proved to have little power of resistance and was brought to an end. But the free libido was not displaced on to another object; it was withdrawn into the ego. (249)

The cathexis that had been attached to the object is disattached (as in mourning), but instead of being redirected to a supplemental internal hallucination and then, once the work of mourning has been completed, being made available for new attachments, it attaches to the ego itself. (This internalized libido, Freud observes, produces an attachment that bears a resemblance to an early narcissistic stage of object-cathexes, where the child takes her or himself as a libidinal object; he hypothesizes that the melancholic identification may be a regression to this earlier form of attachment.) By way of this redirected, internalized libido the ego is identified with the lost object.

There [withdrawn into the ego], however, it [the libido] was not employed in any unspecified way, but served to establish an identification of the ego
with the abandoned object. Thus the shadow of the object fell upon the ego, and the latter could henceforth be judged by a special agency, as though it were an object, the forsaken object. In this way an object-loss was transformed into an ego-loss and the conflict between the ego and the loved person into a cleavage between the critical activity of the ego and the ego as altered by identification. (249)

Even as Freud presents the process as if it is crystal clear, interesting tensions begin to build within his account, especially concerning the logic of identification. That is, on the on hand, Freud writes of an identification of the ego with the object, as if the object were directly transferred from outside to inside. On the other, he appears to prioritize the withdrawal of the libido itself, suggesting that it is the emotional tie, or the energy that comprised that tie—and not the object as such—that has been imported. “By taking flight into the ego love escapes extinction” (257). Once inside the psyche, this introjected libido needs to find somewhere to direct itself. In order to do this, it splits the ego from within, as it were, projecting out from the ego a new “critical agency” that can be the subject of the emotion, the object of which will be the ego. (Later, this critical agency will be named the ego-ideal and then the super-ego.)

Freud underscores the mediated economy of this process with his metaphorical elaboration of it: “the shadow of the object falls upon the ego.” By “shadow” here he seems to mean the libidinal attachment, or more nearly its negative aspects: the complaints about the object have been redirected toward the ego. But the metaphor of the shadow substantially complicates the picture, for it implies not that the object has been identified with the ego but that it has gotten between the ego and the light. What Freud is here calling an “identification” is a kind of shadow play in which a certain portion of the ego has been marked in the shape of the lost object as darker than the rest. If the shadow itself is the libido, then the libido, like a light, projects the form of the object onto the ego. This means that it is not really the object that is interiorized but the libido, which had been attached to it; it is the libido (or affect) that moves, that is transferred, not the object. Moreover, the ego does not so much become the object as it comes to look like it, at least in its basic outline.

Terminologically, therefore, calling the process “identification” is misleading, inasmuch as its result is not an exact copy (the identity indicated by the term identification), but an imperfect one, carried out through a process of negation mediated by the texture and shape—the
aesthetic, as it were—of the emotional tie. It is closer in its mode of representation to the stencil, the stamp, or the photo-graph, a writing with light. For this reason, I think the connotations of Freud’s term introjection, a neologism he borrows from Sandor Ferenczi (and alternates with identification and incorporation), more subtly gives a sense of this mediated process. Coined in relation to projection, it means literally “to throw in.” Inasmuch as introjection is an interior projection—the psyche as Plato’s cave—it can convey the sense of the object casting a shadow that then shapes or imprints the ego.

So this introjected emotional tie, to reiterate, introduces a particular relationality into the ego, producing a “cleavage” (as Freud writes) in which one part of the ego (the “critical agency”) “rages” against the other. The source of this critical raging, Freud proposes, is an ambivalence present in the emotional tie. While Freud would acknowledge that most emotional ties are ambivalent in one way or another, he writes that “the loss of a love object is an excellent opportunity for the ambivalence in love-relationships to make itself effective and come into the open” (MM, 250–251). Ambivalence is especially likely to be present in those losses stemming not from a death but from the more subtle, socially overwritten, and difficult-to-discern losses of everyday emotional life: “situations of being slighted, neglected or disappointed, which can import opposed feelings of love and hate into the relationship or reinforce an already existing ambivalence” (251). In these situations, in addition to the loss suffered, one may be angry at the refuser, or ashamed, or contemptuous; any number of complicating, negative affects—summed up by Freud under the rubric of “hatred”—may enter into the picture here. “If love for the object—a love which cannot be given up though the object itself is given up—takes refuge in narcissistic identification, then the hate comes into operation on this substitutive object, abusing it, debasing it, making it suffer and deriving sadistic satisfaction from its suffering” (251).

Why, we might still wonder, cannot these ambivalent ties be mourned? What particular difficulty does the ambivalent tie present? Freud has established that if there is melancholia, then there must have been an ambivalent tie, but he does not determine if or why some ambivalent ties might produce melancholia and others not. It is possible, for example, that the melancholic tends to make ambivalent object-cathexes in general, constitutionally. Another solution he suggests, without quite arguing it, is that ambivalence poses a problem for mourning because such ties are likely to be or to become unconscious at the moment of loss.
The losses that stem from slights and rejections may often involve or produce emotions that the person losing may repress for one reason or another. In the case of death, Freud might have mentioned the prohibition on criticism of the recently deceased, itself ample motivation for a repression of the negative components of an emotional tie. Hamlet, for example, we might suggest, falls prey to a melancholic indecision because his emotional tie to his father was ambivalent to begin with, complicated by multiple, contradictory affects and desires: he may have been envious of his father, in a classic Oedipal scenario, in competition for his mother’s affections, or he may have been angry that his father allowed himself to be duped, and/or ashamed of him for the same reasons. With the addition of the usual prohibition on criticism of the dead, the normal process of mourning is blocked. In such situations, it is far more likely that the result will be melancholic, an introjection of the emotional tie; without another place to go, this emotional tie directs itself back toward the ego.

How then do melancholias come to an end, Freud wonders. For he notes that a melancholia, like mourning, sometimes just lifts. He conjectures that there may to the work of mourning be an analogous “work of melancholia.” “Just as mourning impels the ego to give up the object by declaring the object to be dead and offering the ego the inducement of continuing to live 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” (MM, 257). The raging against the ego-as-object has the effect of devaluing the object. Freud suggests that this may encourage an unconscious abandonment of the object; the love would no longer feel the need to preserve itself, and could be dissolved. Or perhaps the internal conflict has the effect of loosening the hold of the object, of altering the nature of the emotional tie. The emotional tie, once introjected, would then be available for a slow alteration that may eventually allow for something like mourning. While Freud himself appears not entirely persuaded by his own idea about how the work of melancholia works, he is more certain that there is some kind of potentially productive labor going on within the economy of melancholia. In this way, Freud leaves open the possibility for a conception of an active, transformative, ultimately antidepressive melancholia.

In *The Ego and the Id*, Freud returns to the problem of melancholia and offers a substantial revision. While he does not quite propose an outright antidepressive melancholia, he does fairly radically rethink his earlier opposition between mourning and melancholia, hypothesizing
instead that *all* losses require some kind of identification or introjection. The simpler view of the work of mourning as a difficult but relatively straightforward process of disattachment and repair appears to no longer be tenable. There is no nonmelancholic loss, no mourning that leaves the ego unchanged. Indeed, he goes even further to argue that the very character of the ego is *formed* by its lost objects.

When it happens that a person has to give up a sexual object, there quite often ensues an alteration of his ego which can only be described as a setting up of the object inside the ego, as it occurs in melancholia; the exact nature of this substitution is as yet unknown to us. It may be that by this introjection, which is a kind of regression to the mechanism of the oral phase, the ego makes it easier for the object to be given up or renders that process possible. It may be that this identification is the sole condition under which the id can give up its objects. At any rate the process, especially in the early phases of development, is a very frequent one, and it makes it possible to suppose that the character of the ego is a precipitate of abandoned object cathexes and that it contains the history of those object-choices.

Here Freud proposes that all losses of sexual objects are dealt with melancholically though the establishment of the object inside the ego. How this melancholic internalization exactly works he is not sure, as his reference to the process, even in this short passage, as an “alteration,” an “introjection,” and an “identification” suggests. Perhaps, he suggests, regression to the oral phase makes it easier to give up an object; perhaps it is a kind of iron law of the id that it only gives up objects if the ego identifies with them. (He notes that in identifying with the object, the ego is, in effect, forcing itself on the id as a love-object: “‘Look you can love me too—I am so like the object.’”) Then, in a rather remarkable leap, Freud suggests that the “character of the ego” is constituted by these losses as a kind of “precipitate of abandoned object cathexes.” This means, furthermore, that the ego thus contains, like an archive or archeological site, “the history of those object choices.” In essence, he is suggesting, our losses become us. Thus, Freud is not only revising his ideas about how the process of melancholic internalization works, he is placing the melancholic mechanism at the very origin of subject formation.

As in “Mourning and Melancholia,” Freud turns to figurative language at a key moment to fill in or cover over a moment of obscurity. Just as “the shadow of the object” suggests a complexly mediated process, so too does “precipitate,” although it is a figure taken from an entirely dif-
ferent rhetorical register. As we know, a precipitate is the result of a chemical process whereby the mixture of two solutions causes a new solid substance to be created, which appears to fall out of the solution. Typically, the precipitate is formed by some part of each of the solutions disattaching from their original compound and coming together to form a third compound. That is, a precipitate contains some part of each of the solutions that have been combined, but does not resemble either of them: indeed it is another kind of thing. If one presumes here that the two solutions are the id and the object, then the ego then is this third, entirely different substance that emerges. The metaphor recalls the notion of Hegelian sublation, that moment in the movement of the dialectic when a contradiction is resolved and the two terms are at once canceled out and preserved or incorporated into a third term. In contrast to “Mourning and Melancholia,” where love preserves itself by refusing to be sublated and then imprints the ego in the image of the object, here there is a full-fledged transformation of the object-attachment.

In sum, then, what we have are two different melancholias, two different ways to internalize a lost object. In one, the depressive one, the ambivalent emotions are internalized without changing, where they then create an internal and antagonistic split; Freud does not abandon this model, and in fact returns to the metaphor of the shadow of the object again later in summarizing his views on melancholia. In the other, the lost object itself is transformed into the “character” of the ego. What Freud leaves behind is the idea of an achievable mourning, if mourning means somehow disattaching from the object without somehow taking in part of the object as part of oneself.

Transference; or, Affects in Psychoanalysis

We would like to have at our disposal a satisfactory theory of affects, but that is not the case.

—ANDRE GREEN

Affect occupies a central but undertheorized place in psychoanalysis. Especially at the beginning of his career (through the 1890s), understanding and working with affects and the emotional tie composed a central element of Freud’s project as he understood it. Later, however, with the invention of what Freud saw as “psychoanalysis proper,” with
the discovery of the unconscious and repression, and with the increasing emphasis on the centrality of the instincts and especially the sexual instinct (or “drive”) in the formation of human subjectivity, affect and emotion tended to be conceptually and rhetorically obscured in Freud’s work. Indeed, Freud was less than sanguine about what he came to see as the confusing nature of the emotional tie, and seemed to spend much of his career distracting himself from it, trying to find ways to limit and contain the past-present and self-other confusions that emotional relationality invoked. Nevertheless, as is often the case with Freud, he accomplished quite a bit of conceptual work regarding that which he hoped to manage or contain (think, for example, of femininity).

The story of affect as a concept in Freud’s work can be usefully understood in relation to his attempts to theorize melancholia. As just shown, Freud argues in his writings on melancholia that “if one has lost a love object, the most obvious reaction is to identify oneself with it, to replace it from within, as it were, by identification.” This “replacement from within” preserves the tie, allowing the affective attachment to live on. This introjection of and preoccupation with this loss can become a problem (as Freud argues in “Mourning and Melancholia”) inasmuch as it leaves us living in the past, unable to create new emotional ties. (The problem is even worse, and especially depressing, if, as we know, we had an ambivalent relation to the object—so that we incorporate this ambivalence as well, which when introjected becomes ambivalence about the self.) On the other hand, as Freud came increasingly to understand, there may be no other way to deal with loss other than through the “work” of melancholia.

Although Freud alternately uses the complex metaphors of the shadow and precipitate to describe the melancholic process, when we see it from the point of view of his analysis of the emotional tie, we may understand the work involved therein to be largely mimetic: the lost object is a model that, in one mediated way or another, some part of the “self” imitates. At times, Freud suggests not only that this mimetic, “identificatory” process is the way we respond to losses, one that may be constitutive of the ego (or super-ego, depending) but moreover that it may be the paradigmatic form of the emotional tie itself. In *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, one of Freud’s most sustained analyses of such ties and of affect more generally, he asserts that “identification is known to psychoanalysis as the earliest expression of an emotional tie with another person” Not only, then, are emotional ties originarily identificatory, but the suggestion is that identity itself is gen-
ered out of this initial moment of identification and affectivity, rather than the other way around. Identification comes before identity.\textsuperscript{70}

What Freud leaves unresolved, however, is the relationship of this first emotional tie to loss. In other words, if (1) identifications come after losses, and (2) identification is our first form of an emotional tie, then might we conclude that this first emotional tie comes after a loss? Or is there an emotional tie \textit{before} loss that is somehow different from those identification-emotional-ties that come after losses? Is there a nonmelancholic identification, a nonmelancholic form of emotional attachment? At times Freud suggests that there is a primary nonmelancholic, identificatory, emotional tie, that as infants we “naturally” form an identificatory, mimetic affective attachment to our first caretakers. Then, as we become aware of them as subjects in their own right, as subjects who can be absent, and (to simplify greatly) as we suffer through the twists and turns of the Oedipal scenario, we lose our parents as objects and then mime and incorporate them anew and again. But the nature and precise mechanism of this “earliest emotional tie” and of our first experiences of loss was never resolved within Freud’s work itself and has, since Freud, been a topic of substantial and productive controversy. In Judith Butler’s reading, for example, our primary caretakers are our foundational objects of mimesis because inevitably they are also the first objects we lose.\textsuperscript{71} Our sense of identity is generated out of this experience of loss: “the self only becomes a self on the condition that it has suffered a separation.”\textsuperscript{72}

In such a view, one that Derrida also suggests in various places, neither relationality nor the miming of something could be said to happen either before or after the awareness of its loss.\textsuperscript{73} The emotional tie requires the ability for melancholic introjection; it is only because we can melancholically imitate an object that we are able to emotionally engage with objects in the world. In order to be able to cope with the absence of our first caretaker—on whom, after all, our life literally depends—and to recognize that person when she or he returns, we imitate this first other in order to preserve something of him or her “in” our “self” (\textit{as} our initial self). This is not simply a process of taking an image of the other inside us, because, at this moment, the distinction between the self and other is not yet in place; our first way of preserving the other in his or her absence is to model ourselves after that person. We are all miming what we lack, in a melancholic process that creates the very possibility of relationality. The “self” is at once the instrument
and creation of this imitative incorporation provoked by a primary experience of absence.

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In *The Studies on Hysteria*, Freud and Breuer theorize that hysteria is caused by affects that have not been “abreacted,” or disattached, from their ideas or memories. For Freud and Breuer (in this text), an affect is a quota of energy (not unlike what Freud elsewhere called the libido), a quantifiable “intensity” that by nature seeks release. Laplanche and Pontalis write that this release usually consists of a reaction to the event that provoked the affect and that “such a reaction may be composed of voluntary or involuntary responses, and may range in nature from tears to acts of revenge.” In the hysterical case, the nonabreacted affect is “strangulated,” embedded like an “internal foreign body” within the psyche. This results in what, borrowing from Charcot, Freud and Breuer call “reminiscences”—the unexpected repetition, escape, or conversion of these affects in sometimes bizarre and often disabling ways and places. Strange pains, linguistic disturbances, nervous tics, and seemingly unmotivated emotional reactions are the hysterical symptoms.

Freud and Breuer found that while it is best if the affect is abreacted at the moment of the event, the strangulated affect will persist unchanged by the passage of time and can be disattached much later. Somewhat to their surprise, Freud and Breuer discovered that it was often possible for patients to gain access to this affect and abreact it if, under a hypnotic trance, they were led to reexperience the past traumatic experience and put it into speech. Freud and Breuer wrote:

[W]e found, to our great surprise at first, that each individual hysterical symptom immediately and permanently disappeared when we had succeeded in bringing clearly to light the memory of the event by which it was provoked and in arousing its accompanying affect, and when the patient had described that event in the greatest possible detail and had put the affect into words. Recollection without affect almost invariably produces no result. The psychical process which originally took place must be repeated as vividly as possible; it must be brought back to its status nascendi and then given verbal utterance.

Being brought back to the traumatic moment under hypnosis produced the first “talking cures,” but only so long as the recollection was accom-
panied by affect—the affect, Freud and Breuer supposed, that had been occasioned by the initial event and had lived on unchanged. Thus, at the moment of the cure there seem to be—although Freud and Breuer do not appear to notice the tension—two kinds of memory at work: a mimetic, repetitive kind of memory and a conscious, narrative, diegetic one. The event must be consciously recollected and narrated (bringing it “clearly to light,” describing it in “the greatest possible detail”). But, as they note, this recollection alone is insufficient. There must also be a repetition or return to the original “psychical process”—in its “state of being born.”

Significantly, Freud and Breuer here suggest that the affect as such is incapable of representation; it cannot qua affect become an object of memory. It can only repeat its appearance, but in paradoxical form; it appears again but as if for the first time: in status nascendi. The therapeutic moment is like a time machine that brings us back to the moment of the birth of the affect. That is, for the affect, there has been no passage of time, hence the moment of therapeutic abreaction is not, strictly speaking, a repetition.

In any event, Breuer and Freud found that for the relief of the symptoms to be effected, both ways of accessing past experience (recollection and this strange kind of repetition) seemed to need to be employed and conjoined: “recollection without affect almost invariably produces no result.” While the phenomenon itself was not difficult to observe, it proved quite resistant to theorization.

One problem was the lack of conceptual clarity concerning the nature and status of the “talk” in the “talking cure.” Although Freud and Breuer were confident in asserting that it is the affect-filled speaking of the traumatic event that effects the cure, it remained a matter of some doubt—and Freud especially felt a need to adjudicate the matter, a need that increased over time—as to whether the curative element of the speech was its element of narrative recollection or of mimetic reenactment. At times Freud and Breuer suggest that reenactment alone could be curative. Bringing the psychic process back to its status nascendi is, as Borch-Jacobsen notes, “neither telling a story nor representing a past event as past.” It is a reliving, a reenactment of the event as if it were present and real. That Freud and Breuer use the term “catharsis” to describe the nature of the talking cure unmistakably references Aristotle’s “imitation of an action” and in doing so suggests that it is the emotionally purgative effects of mimetic rather than narrative representation that cure.
However, Freud and Breuer also assert that the cure is effected insofar as the speech produced by the analysand “brings to an end the operative force of the idea which was not abreacted in the first instance, by allowing its strangulated affect to find a way out through speech; and it subjects it to associative correction by introducing it into normal consciousness.” Here, they suggest that it is precisely by bringing the affect into the realm of the conscious, cognitive mind that it can be “worn down” through the effects of linguistic chains of association, by being transferred from one idea to another. It is as if bringing affects into language allows them to age (and to thereby prevent them from repeating themselves in status nascendi ad infinitum) by putting them into sequential time. Although in the Studies this ambiguity did not seem to bother Freud and Breuer (since they were happily distracted by the efficacy of the “talking cure”), later Freud would become convinced that the affect-filled speech of repetition was ultimately supplemental, a dangerous battlefield that must be confronted on the way toward the associative, narrative, curative force of recollection (but more about this later).

Another (related) problem raised in the Studies concerns the status and function of the analyst himself. Although Freud and Breuer knew that their hypnotic presence was crucial to the cure, Freud was a bit uncomfortable with the intimacy involved in the role and his and Breuer’s lack of insight into what it actually was about the presence of the analyst that allowed the analysand to reenact a past experience. The hypnotic method, which involved a light touch on the forehead and a suggestion—“You feel sleepy,” “You will remember,” and so on—is basically an imitative identification between analyst and analysand. It is by taking on the analyst’s words as one’s own, by allowing the analyst to speak for one and through one, that the hypnosis is effected. As Borch-Jacobsen points out, “the basic phenomenon of hypnotic ‘verbalization’ was that the ‘subjects,’ far from speaking to another, let themselves be spoken by another, while miming the other.” Here we find what is surely one of Freud’s most interesting discoveries: in order to repeat or mime a powerful emotional event from the past, it seems that it is necessary also at the same time to have a mimetic relation to someone in the present. In other words, the mimetic repetition of a past emotion is enabled by the imitation of the analyst, as if it is a question of jump-starting what Walter Benjamin called the “mimetic faculty,” or as if mimesis itself occurs in an entirely distinct temporal register. The help the analyst provides suggests that perhaps what was missing in the ear-
lier moment was the mimetic presence of someone else who could give one a feeling for the reality of the affect, as if one cannot experience an affect without being able to imagine someone else also experiencing it; as if affects are somehow essentially collective.\textsuperscript{81}

The moment of imitation turned out to be a problem for Freud, in part because it affected \textit{him} as well. That is, not only do affects seem to be invoked by imitation and hence to be themselves imitative but also they promote imitation (which was why Plato argued that plays and poetry, relying as they often do on mimesis, should be banned in the ideal republic). In \textit{Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego}, Freud observed that “something exists in us which, when we become aware of the signs of an emotion in someone else, tends to make us fall into the same emotion.”\textsuperscript{82} Emotions are inherently contagious. The dilemma for Freud is that in making himself available for identification and imitation in order to allow the patient to repeat past emotions, he “could not avoid participating in what the hysteric was telling him,” as Lacan noted.\textsuperscript{83} So, soon after the \textit{Studies}, Freud abandoned hypnosis, even though he would occasionally return to it, for example, as “proof”—inasmuch as it was a thing that happened—of the unconscious.\textsuperscript{84} Freud saw his task as fortifying himself against the analyst’s tendency to fall into the emotion of the analysand. But what if, we might ask, this “falling into” the emotion of the other was the cure?

Freud’s desire to avoid the confusions of hypnosis led him to adopt the method of “free association” as his main analytic technique. In principle, this involved no identifying with or imitation of the analyst and thus no affective contagion from analysand to analyst either. Freud would be strictly a reader, an interpreter of the messages bubbling up from the unconscious through the free associations.\textsuperscript{85} However, he found that in the transference the mystery of the emotional tie reappears: “In every analytic treatment there arises, without the physician’s agency, an intense emotional relationship between the patient and the analyst which is not to be accounted for by the actual situation.”\textsuperscript{86} Freud would find that this emotional relationship in the scene of analysis is in effect the transference of an emotion on the part of the analysand from a past relationship onto the therapeutic relationship. Once again, reenactment prevails over narration: “the patient remem-
bers nothing of what is forgotten or repressed, but he expresses it in action. He reproduces it not in his memory, but in his behavior; he repeats it, without of course knowing that he repeats.”

Although the transferential repetition distracts the analysand from remembering and recounting and is therefore a kind of barrier or stalling tactic (“resistance”), it is, in Freud’s view, also the potential key to the cure, since it brings the lost and buried emotions into the scene of analysis. In Freud’s view, this makes the scene of transference a kind of battlefield.

The unconscious feelings strive to avoid the recognition which the cure demands; they seek instead for reproduction, with all the power of hallucination and the inappreciation of time characteristic of the unconscious. The patient ascribes, just as in dreams, currency and reality to what results from the awakening of his unconscious feelings; he seeks to discharge his emotions, regardless of the reality of the situation. The physician requires of him that he shall fit these emotions into their place in the treatment and in his life history, subject them to rational consideration, and appraise them at their true psychical value. This struggle between physician and patient, between intellect and instinct, between recognition and the striving for discharge, is fought out almost entirely over the transference manifestations.

In the transference, the patient repeats the past instead of remembering it. This repetition of what Freud calls here “unconscious feelings” is “hallucinatory” and does not “appreciate time.” The problem, as well as the main interest of the scene, is that the patient thinks that these hallucinations are real: a piece of dream life in the waking world. As Freud sees it here, the cure clearly requires that the unrecognized emotions be put into a rational context and subjected to narrative form and sequential ordering. Yet the underlying problem he is grappling with remains the same as before: the cure can only be effected if a past emotion is repeated (mimed) in the present (and then contained), which appears to require the still problematic mimetic emotional tie between analyst and analysand. In other words, although he thought he had left the moment of identification that characterized hypnosis behind, it turned out that he could not prevent it from returning. The rhetoric with which Freud represents the transferential moment—on the one side, hallucinatory unconscious feelings, instinct, discharge; on the other intellect, recognition, and cure—seems designed more to dramatize the difficulty of the moment than to explain how it works.
Freud saw his analytic task as the renarrativization and re-presentation of the transferred emotions. (The goal: “fit these emotions into their place in the treatment and in his life history, subject them to rational consideration, and appraise them at their true psychical value.”) The transference then appears as a kind of necessary but dangerous detour or supplement. Except the “dangerous supplement” here reverses that of Derrida’s Rousseau; here it is not writing and absence that supplements speech and presence. Rather, emotional presence is the dangerous detour on the way to a narrative representation of the past; the transference of affect is necessary, in fact unavoidable, but dangerous. Freud writes: “It is undeniable that the subjugation of the transference-manifestations provides the greatest difficulties for the psychoanalyst; but it must not be forgotten that they, and they only, render the invaluable service of making the patient’s buried and forgotten love-emotions actual and manifest: for in the last resort no one can be slain in absentia or in effigie.” The analyst must play the role of that (dead and gone) addressee in order to raise the dead emotions. These emotions, as he notes, are actually present—they are not in effigie—and they are actually present because they are conjured through the person of the analyst. This actual ghost from the past must be slain; the time is out of joint, and it is Freud’s job to set it right. Stranger still, the analyst must alternately be the person who will be slain—the instantiation of the dead-and-gone addressee, to whom the emotions are in some sense “really” addressed—and then the slayer who provides the narrative resources of intellect and recognition. For Freud, the negotiation of these two positions came to constitute the analyst’s main task in the therapy.

The confused structure of address in transference produces a reading problem for the analyst. It is not always possible to discern what role you as analyst are playing for the analysand at any given moment: when are you slayer and when slain? Transferential speech may appear to be addressed to the analyst, but in reality it is addressed to a ghostly presence from the past. In this sense it may—even or especially when it seems quite narrative and descriptive—be designed to elicit a particular affective response from the analyst; that is, the “remembering” done in therapy might be alibis for the creation or continuation of the emotional tie with the analyst. The analyst’s task, as Freud sees it, is to read the hidden emotional demand and thus the buried memory being reenacted—an especially tricky task, since the diegetic memory of the past is in fact what the analyst wants from the analysand. The production of the speech that the patient knows the analyst wants was just one way
that speech designed to elicit an emotional response from the analyst often succeeded: this came to be called the “counter-transference.”

Even as Freud’s understanding of what happened in the space of analysis became more sophisticated, his sense of the logic of the cure did not advance much beyond what he and Breuer figured out in the Studies. The basic phenomenon remained the same: “the psychical process which originally took place must be repeated as vividly as possible; it must be brought back to its status nascendi and then given verbal utterance.” The affect must come into being, and it must be put into language.

Once he had discarded the notion that the cure was “cathartic,” he was left mainly with the notion that therapy allowed one finally to leave the past behind, to stop repeating the same old emotions over and over again, or at least to know that one is repeating them instead of repeating them unwittingly. This notion, which has become something like therapeutic common sense, might be rendered as follows: the transference is what allows therapy to become a laboratory in which we get to see our affects in all their messiness play themselves out on a relatively neutral, contained, and autonomous field. During that process, we learn to recognize certain patterns, tendencies of our emotional life. We learn to recognize where an emotion is coming from—what it is repeating and hence can recognize it when it appears and so can dampen its effects. The process allows us to get some distance and perspective on our emotions, to defamiliarize them and to take them both more and less seriously as a result. We can remember, for example: “Oh this emotion, this emotion is not really about my boyfriend or girlfriend or colleague or whoever, it’s about someone else from my past. This is a pattern for me.” Indeed, that moment of recognition is a powerful and necessary one, since it allows one to see one’s affective life in a broader context, and thus to make it newly strange so that it can become the object of analysis and action.

When he does write about affectivity explicitly, as in his “Papers on Metapsychology” (1915), Freud’s rhetoric is different from that of his writings on the practice of therapy itself. Usually, as in the Studies on Hysteria, he conceives of affect as sheer quantity; it manifests as intensity. Thus, affects resist representation, not only by the psyche itself, but by the psychoanalytic theorist as well. Furthermore, because they are
not ideas, and because they cannot be represented, affects cannot, strictly speaking, be repressed. This means that the term “unconscious feelings” that Freud sometimes used (as in “the patient ascribes, just as in dreams, currency and reality to what results from the awakening of his unconscious feelings; he seeks to discharge his emotions, regardless of the reality of the situation”) was—according to Freud’s own theory—at best an imprecise one, and at worst incorrect and misleading. He wrote: “It is surely of the essence of an emotion that we should be aware of it, i.e., that it should become known to consciousness. Thus the possibility of the attribute of unconscioussness would be completely excluded as far as emotions, feelings, and affect are concerned.”

Rather, it is the idea to which an affect has become attached that is unconscious. While affects may attach to unconscious ideas and in this sense be “unconscious feelings,” they do not like to sit still in the unconscious; they always search for a way out. However, Freud has a difficult time generalizing about their paths as they try to make their way out—what we might call their vicissitudes. As Lacan put it: “Freud emphasizes that it is not the affect that is repressed. The affect . . . goes off somewhere else, as best it can.”

Despite this lack of clarity about the logic that affects follow in their movements in Freud’s writings, we can nonetheless discern several things about what affects do do in Freud. If he had written about the vicissitudes of the affects, he might have observed the following.

First, affects operate according to their own temporality, a temporality that is neither linear nor homogeneous. Hence, for example, they reappear in status nascendi. While in linear, clock time, affects seem to be repeating, in that the same affect can occur over and over again (in symptoms, or dreams, or in the transference itself), this is not strictly speaking a repetition, since they appear each time as if they are being born for the first time; they appear always as a becoming.

Second, affects attach (to just about any kind of object—people, things, ideas, desires, thoughts), and they transfer (from one object to another, from one idea to another, and from one person to another, from the past to the present). In The Interpretation of Dreams, Freud hints that transference and attachment might describe the vicissitudes of affect more generally. There, transference refers not to the transference of an unconscious feeling from the past onto the person of the analyst but the general process whereby the unconscious manages to communicate with consciousness. “An unconscious idea is as such quite incapable of entering the preconscious . . . it can only exercise any effect
there by establishing a connection with an idea which already belongs to the preconscious, by transferring its intensity onto it and getting itself “covered” by it.”94 In other words, it is not the unconscious idea itself that travels from the unconscious to the conscious but its “intensity.” Transference here is a kind of communication system between the conscious and the unconscious, where “intensity” can be disattached from one (unconscious) thought and then reattached to another (preconscious) one. Freud suggests that this “intensity” may or may not alter the very nature of the preconscious thought; the intensity may retain something of the unconscious idea itself. Thus the fear or joy or shame or whatever one might feel about some inappropriate and hence repressed object can nonetheless make its way into consciousness by attaching itself to some other object. (In the case of dreams, these other objects are often taken from the residue of daily experience—people you happened to see that day, conversations you just had, the TV show you were watching before bed, etc.)

If we take this “intensity” to be what Freud would elsewhere call affect, then what we have is the suggestion that affects function like shuttles on which messages can make it from the unconscious into consciousness. These passages, as Freud would suggest elsewhere, tend to be ruled by a mimetic logic: affects transfer along paths of likeness. One’s teacher reminds one a little of one’s father, and so one transfers some of the feelings one had for one’s father onto one’s teacher. The similarity, however, can be quite slight, if the affect is trying to make its way out “as best it can”: a similar color of hair, tone of voice, mode of behavior. It is by paying attention to these likenesses that Freud was able to interpret the initial source of an affect, whether in a dream or in analysis.

We might continue this line of thought to suggest that if affect travels along paths of likeness, then the analyst must be ready to be-similar, to be a like-being. In this, the analyst is something like what Christopher Bollas called “an evocative mnemic trace” of the earlier emotional tie.95 To be affected, the other, as self-identical other, must be able to not be there. The function of analysis would then be to provide this identificatory site, the relational prop through which emotions from the past can come into being.

In this way, “falling into” the emotional world of the analysand may be necessary for the cure. Indeed, the mechanism and aesthetic of that “falling into” and the relationship thereby created may in fact constitute the cure. If this is the case, then the will to knowledge and insight
that seems to be the guiding ideology of psychoanalysis may be an alibi for setting up a situation where the analyst is required to read into the words of the patient, to imagine what it is that the analysand is feeling—in other words, to imaginatively imitate the patient. Freud runs into problems when he treats this moment of imitative identification as a mere supplemental step toward the cure and not the point of the therapeutic practice itself, since it is the basic skill required to be emotionally involved in the world.

At its best, psychoanalysis is about learning to invoke, manage, and happily live with ghosts. This is what enables the analysand to make use of objects again, that is to say, to be interested in and to form affective attachments to objects in the world. The analysand needs to be able to see that the internal ghosts can emerge, that ghostly identification can still happen. For it is only within this spectral economy—when the other is a ghost and can therefore be confused with or identified with one’s own internal ghosts—that one can be emotionally present to the present.

However, for Freud, in the final analysis, therapy is curative when it is curative because it makes conscious the unconscious. The emotional tie formed in the space of analysis is useful because it encourages the analysand to accept the analyst’s interpretation, an interpretation that will give the analysand a conscious, cognitive distance on his or her experience. The point, for Freud, is to mourn the losses, to get past them, to get rid of the ghosts. That moment in analysis where affects are represented (mimetically) is valuable (in a supplemental way) only insofar as it presents the necessary material, which can then be contained, narrated, and given meaning.

Even though Freud viewed as analytic failures those moments when he sometimes succumbed to the confusing pleasures of reading and being read into, it is useful to remember that he, too, took pleasure in such moments. This pleasure was likely not just the pleasure of uncovering the truth but also the pleasure associated with the intimacy of the emotional tie itself, the pleasure of affecting and being affected. One example of many would be the climactic exchange between Freud and his patient in his “Notes on a Case of Obsessional Neurosis,” or the so-called case of the Rat Man. Here, the analysand is having a difficult time recounting the source of his trauma. He cannot put the memory into speech. He is trying, though, and he has gotten so far as to be able to explain that what troubles him so much is not something that actu-
ally happened to him but a story someone told him. It was a story about a particular mode of punishment that had been told to him by a man he had been with in the army. Freud, having explained to him the importance of overcoming the resistance if he was to be cured—the importance of putting into speech the traumatic story—nonetheless assures him that he (Freud) will assist him by doing his best to guess the full meaning of any hints given him. Here is the moment of revelation as Freud tells it.

Was he perhaps thinking of impalement?

“No not that; . . . the criminal was tied up . . .”
—he expressed himself so indistinctly that I could not immediately guess in what position—
“. . . a pot was turned upside down on his buttocks . . . some rats were put into it . . . and they . . .”
—he had again got up and was showing every sign of horror and resistance—
“. . . bored their way in . . .”
—Into his anus, I helped him out.97

Here, Freud seems to think that he is offering mainly the resources of cognition and narrative: the analysand is too fearful to recount the repressed memories, so Freud will help him out by offering the clinical, distanced-but-compassionate, just-the-facts voice. But in order to do this, he must identify with the analysand, imagine what he thinks the analysand wants to say but cannot. And so Freud says it: “into his anus.” I cannot help but think that any curative effects here would be generated not from the analysand’s overcoming of the resistance (piercing as Freud’s analysis may be) but the pleasure that might be taken, unconscious or otherwise, in getting your analyst to play a role in your emotional-libidinal drama, indeed to put himself in your place, to identify with you, to the point that he can finish your sentences. That this finish involves an imaginary anal penetration is another turn of the screw.

While Freud may be breaking through the shield of the patient’s resistance here, he is also participating in the production of the speech in analysis in a way that can have powerful emotional effects of its own. That is, the analysand is not himself solely responsible for producing the narration—it is a thoroughly collaborative effort. And while this fact caused Freud endless anxiety about the scientific status and curative powers of psychoanalysis, it may nonetheless be the very “scene-ness”
of the scene of analysis, its dramatic element, that is most attractive and antidepressive about therapy for the patient. It may be, in other words, that therapy is therapeutic not because it enables one to narrativize and make conscious unmourned losses but because it creates the space where one can turn a melancholic relation to one’s past into an emotional tie. This space—one shaped and enacted by one’s affect-filled speech—allows for the imagination of an audience, the knowledge that someone is seeing you and reading into you, and thus identifying with you, confusing his or her self with yours. Thus, it is the affective interaction and emotional tie thereby established in the space of analysis that enables us to live with the return of the ghostly, melancholic memories, to survive through them, rather than to “slay them,” as Freud at times suggests it is the role of analysis to do.

Walter Benjamin: Melancholy as Method

Historical materialism sees the work of the past as still incomplete.

—WALTER BENJAMIN, “EDWARD FUCHS, COLLECTOR AND HISTORIAN”

It is not hard to see that the themes of melancholia and loss are central to Benjamin’s thought. That Benjamin himself—born, as he noted, “under the sign of Saturn”—tended toward depression is well known, and the problem of melancholy recurs regularly in his work, from The Origin of German Tragic Drama up through his writings on Baudelaire and his reflections “On the Concept of History.”

For Benjamin, melancholia is not a problem to be cured; loss is not something to get over and leave behind. However, he is concerned to show that there is more than one way to be attached to loss—all melancholias are not the same—and that everything depends on the how of one’s melancholic attachments. Thus, he persistently critiques a melancholia that leads to inaction and complacency, such as the one he finds in the (at the time) popular poetry of Eric Kästner. In his short 1931 review essay “Left-Wing Melancholy,” Benjamin subjects Kästner to a blistering attack in which he accuses him of promoting the cynical and indulgent pleasure of a political radicalism without the possibility of any “corresponding political action.” In Kästner’s hands, political struggle becomes an object of pleasant consumption, one with which the bourgeois
public can enjoy a “negativistic quiet.” This “tortured stupidity,” Benjamin argues, inevitably leads to “complacency and fatalism.”

We should not take this attack, however, to mean that Benjamin was against melancholy *tout court*, only that for him a melancholy dwelling on loss must always be connected to present political concerns. In fact, Benjamin’s counterintuitive contention is that it is precisely by dwelling on loss, the past, and political failures (as opposed to images of a better future) that one may avoid a depressing and cynical relation to the present. What emerges is the picture of a politicizing, splenetic melancholy, where clinging to things from the past enables interest and action in the present world and is indeed the very mechanism for that interest. Where the flip side of the pathological melancholia from Aristotle to the Romantics was individual intellectual ability and creative genius, for Benjamin it is a historical-allegorical insight. Even though melancholia is a subjectively experienced phenomenon for Benjamin, its source of (potential) value is not the individual or solipsistic creative tendencies or abilities it might bring with it but the way it might allow one to gain access to the historical origins of one’s suffering, and indeed to the logic of historicity itself.

Benjamin saw such a melancholy at work nowhere more emphatically than in the poetry of Baudelaire: “Melanchthon’s phrase ‘Melencolia illa heroica’ provides the most perfect definition of Baudelaire’s genius.” Baudelaire’s melancholy is heroic in the sense that he used his own experience of loss—indeed purposefully sought out experiences of loss—as a way to research historical change. Baudelaire became what we might call a traumatophile in order to assemble, within himself, a set of historical data about a collectively experienced world as raw material for his poetic production. In so doing he also attunes himself to his audience, which, while accustomed to loss, had, in response to it, fallen into an anesthetizing ennui. And then he can direct his transformative, poetic gaze toward his own internal collection of experience-ruins.

If, in the case of baroque allegory (as Benjamin argued in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*), the outside world became a collection of ruins to the precise extent that it was placed under a melancholic allegorical gaze, for Baudelaire it was an internal world of memories itself that was in ruins and ready for allegorical transformation. In this sense, where “the key figure in early allegory is the corpse[,] in late allegory it is the ‘souvenir’ [Andenken]” (CP, 190). We can see this internalized melancholic allegorical way of seeing at work in (among other places) the second of Baudelaire’s “Spleen” poems.
J'ai plus de souvenirs que si j'avais mille ans.

Un gros meuble à tiroirs encombré de bilans,
De vers, de billets doux, de procès, de romances,
Avec de lourds cheveux roulés dans des quittances,
Cache moins de secrets que mon triste cerveau.
C’est une pyramide, un immense caveau,
Qui contient plus de morts que la fosse commune.
— Je suis un cimetière abhorré de la lune,
Où comme des remords se traînent de longs vers
Qui s’acharnent toujours sur mes morts les plus chers.
Je suis un vieux boudoir plein de roses fanées,
Où gît tout un fouillis de modes surannées,
Où les pastels plaintifs et les pâles Boucher
Seuls, respirent l’odeur d’un flacon débouché.

Rien n’égale en longueur les boiteuses journées,
Quand sous les lourds flocons des neigeuses années
L’ennui, fruit de la morne incuriosité,
Prend les proportions de l’immortalité.
— Désormais tu n’es plus, ô matière vivante!
Qu’un granit entouré d’une vague épouvante,
Assoupi dans le fond d’un Sahara brumeux;
Un vieux sphinx ignoré du monde insoucieux,
Oublié sur la carte, et dont l’humeur farouche
Ne chante qu’aux rayons du soleil qui se couche.

I have more memories than if I had lived a thousand years.

Even a bureau crammed with souvenirs,
Old bills, love letters, photographs, receipts,
Court depositions, locks of hair in plaits,
Hides fewer secrets than my brain could yield.
Its like a tomb, a corpse-filled Potter’s Field,
A pyramid where the dead lie down by scores.
I am a graveyard that the moon abhors:
Like guilty qualms, the worms burrow and nest
Thickly in bodies I loved the best.
I’m a stale boudoir where old fashioned clothes
Lie scattered among wilted fern and rose,
Where only Boucher girls in pale pastels
Can breathe the uncorked scents and faded smells.

Nothing can equal those days for everlastingness
When in the winter’s blizzardy caress
Indifference expanding to Ennui
Takes on the feel of Immortality.
O living matter, henceforth you’re no more
Than a cold stone encompassed by vague fear
And by the desert, and the mist and sun;
An ancient Sphinx ignored by everyone,
Left off the map, whose bitter irony
Is to sing as the sun sets in that dry sea.\textsuperscript{107}

Here, the speaker’s interiority, his cavern-like brain, has been stuffed with the material residue of everyday life, from bills and court documents to love letters and plaits of hair. Like Freud, who wrote of the introjected lost object, Baudelaire also writes of a subject who has cast inside himself lost objects. But in this case, the objects are the dead leftovers of human interaction, and indeed, the speaker feels, the dead themselves. Where Freud’s “character of the ego” can be seen as a complex layering of precipitates, here we find a common grave, filled with the anonymous corpses of the poor, which makes a very different kind of archeological site indeed. Even though it is in his dearest dead (“mes morts les plus chers”) that the worms of regret work most diligently, the I of the poem here suggests there is far more than abandoned love objects in his brain. Indeed, he feels as if he contains more dead than lie in the “Potter’s Field,” a vast tomb, or a neglected cemetery. There is in this cavernous brain an enormous but anonymous collectivity, as if the speaker has lost the entire world, the world that Boredom, in “Au Lecteur,” has swallowed with a yawn—a loss that is, for Benjamin, matched by the allegorical resurrection or transformation that is its flip side.

The I of this poem feels as if his experience is an overwhelmingly huge catalogue of stale souvenirs, mute things-that-have-happened to him, which hold their odor only for the figures in a painting. In fact, he is so alienated from his memories that it is as if they belong to ancient history; he is as a pyramid or sphinx: Baudelaire’s “spleen interposes centuries between the present moment and the one just lived” (CP, 166). His experiences do not affect or change him, except, perhaps, to produce regret. Apropos this situation as it is described in Baudelaire, Benjamin writes: “The souvenir is the complement to ‘isolated experience’ [Erlebnis]. In it is precipitated the increasing self-estrangement of human beings, whose past is inventoried as dead effects. In the nineteenth century, allegory withdrew from the world around us to settle in the inner world. The relic comes from the cadaver, the souvenir comes from the defunct experience [Erfahrung] which thinks of itself, euphemistically, as living [Erlebnis]” (CP, 183). This person who is beyond experiencing, who has been enveloped by ennui, feels like a stone, his only
feeling a vague fear. Unseen, unaffected, singing to no one, he is not only emotionally alienated from the world: he has been left off the map altogether (“oublié sur la carte”).

For Benjamin, this is all related to the generalized impoverishment of experience that Baudelaire saw unfolding before him. He explains this decline in the value of experience in the essay “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire” by way of a discussion of Proustian involuntary memory. In Proust’s famous example, the taste of the madeleine allows him to return, with a feeling of affective immediacy, to a moment from the past that had been forgotten. This “intrusion of a forgotten past that disrupts the fictitious progress of chronological time”\(^{108}\) is not an escape from the present, but (paradoxically) a more attentive return to it. In part this is because the interruption of our habitual flow through the rhythms of means-ends rationality is brought about by a material thing—a cookie, a room, a city street. Indeed, one might say that this memory-experience does not really happen \textit{in} the subject, but outside of us in the world of things.\(^{109}\)

While the materiality of \textit{mémoire involontaire} and the fact that it lies “beyond the reach of the intellect” leads Proust to be pessimistic about the possibilities of such memory experiences \textit{in general},\(^{110}\) for Benjamin, the fact that \textit{mémoire involontaire} is individual and subject to chance is a historical fact. “There is nothing inevitable,” he writes, “about the dependence on chance in this matter. A person’s inner concerns are not by nature of an inescapably private character. They attain this character only after the likelihood decreases that one’s external concerns will be assimilated to one’s experience” (MB, 315). The speaker of Baudelaire’s second “Spleen” poem is the very paradigm of the person who cannot assimilate his world by way of experience.

We can see that there is nothing inevitable about this situation, Benjamin asserts, by recalling, for example, that in the past, rituals, traditions, and festivals could work like collective, planned tastes of the madeleine, allowing one reliable access to experience and memory. “Where there is experience \textit{[Erfahrung]} in the strict sense of the word, certain contents of the individual past combine in the memory with material from the collective past. Rituals, with their ceremonies and their festivals . . . kept producing the amalgamation of these two elements of memory over and over again. They triggered recollection at certain times and remained available to memory throughout people’s lives. In this way, voluntary and involuntary recollection cease to be mutually exclusive” (MB, 316). In such a case, the affect-filled experiences of in-
voluntary memory are no longer a matter of chance but are something for which one voluntarily plans. Tradition can work as a support for experience, inasmuch as it connects us collectively to the past, reliably providing us with an intimately felt reservoir of images from the past that exceeds our own private experience.  

Benjamin linked the decline in experience to modernity. A range of historical processes, such as urbanization, the commodity, new forms of technologized war, and factory work required people to shield themselves from the material world around them, to stop being emotionally open to that world and the people in it. Even the simple experience of riding on a bus or railroad, which puts people “in a position of having to stare at one another for minutes or even hours on end without exchanging a word,” would be overwhelming if we felt compelled to have some emotional contact with all the people we see. In such circumstances, the primary function of consciousness, Benjamin argues, is to protect us from the shocks of daily life, to insulate us from disruptive emotional experiences. This prevents us from affective contact with the materiality of the world around us; we do not get outside ourselves, and so we have fewer and fewer memory-experiences stored in the objects and places of our everyday world. In part, consciousness achieves this shielding effect by riding the flow of homogeneous time, placing experience into a “rosary bead” sequence that renders events accessible to “voluntary memory” but at the same time erases its “contents.” (“Its signal characteristic is that the information it gives about the past retains no trace of that past” [MB, 315].) This kind of experience is not really experience at all, but a “moment lived through,” or Erlebnis.

In such social-historical conditions, Proust is right: we are subject to contingency and lucky tastes of the madeleine. In order to affect us, things have to break through the shield of consciousness, an experience Baudelaire actively sought, showing us the length one had to go to have an experience, and at the same time dramatizing why we usually do not. Benjamin suggests that Baudelaire’s attention to the poverty of present experience focused attention on what had been lost, and thus, also, by way of these losses, on the specificity of the present moment. In this way, even as he wrote about the deadening effects of ennui, his descriptions allow the reader to see that this feeling is a product of specific historical processes, and thereby also connected to a shared situation: no person is alone in this feeling.

For Benjamin, an idealized version of Erfahrung—in which involuntary and voluntary memory mingle, where individual and collective ex-
perience are conjoined—remained a kind of center of gravity, not so that he could lament its passing, but so that he could remember to keep looking for the echoes of “experience in its strict form” in whatever secret places they were hiding. Such was the source of his interest in a wide range of practices, including surrealist poetics, traveling to Moscow, and smoking hashish. Indeed, Benjamin saw revolution itself as a collective return to such a mode of experience, a sublation of the rituals and festivals of the past. On the subjective level, revolution would feel like Proust’s involuntary memory, a surprising collective return to a past we didn’t even know we had forgotten, which at the time of uprising would feel uncannily familiar. It would be brought about through a creative, melancholic relation to the images from the past, a relation he aphoristically presents in his now famous theses “On the Concept of History.”

The dialectical image can be defined as the involuntary memory of redeemed humanity.

—WALTER BENJAMIN, PARALIPOMENA TO “ON THE CONCEPT OF HISTORY”

In thesis 7 of “On the Concept of History,” Benjamin makes his case by way of an explanation of the approach to history that must absolutely be avoided. Even it is generated out of the seemingly benign impulses of empathy or curiosity, the “historicist” attempt to reconstruct the past “as it was” is not only depressing but, in direct proportion to its depressiveness, politically irresponsible.

Addressing himself to the historian who wishes to relive an era, Fustel de Coulanges recommends that he blot out everything he knows about the later course of history. There is no better way of characterizing the method which historical materialism has broken with. It is a process of empathy. Its origin is that indolence of the heart, that acedia which despair of appropriating the genuine historical image as it briefly flashes up. Among medieval theologians, acedia was regarded as the root cause of sadness. Flaubert, who was familiar with it, wrote: “Peu de gens devineront combien il a fallue etre triste pur ressusciter Carthage.”

Historians who want to “relive an era,” for Benjamin, end up involved in “a process of empathy whose origin is the “indolence of the heart,” or acedia, that medieval version of melancholia, that sin also known as
sloth, which was suffered by early Christian monks (H, 391). Such a practice is, in essence, an attempt to escape into the past, to transfer one’s emotions to this other time. Historicism is akin to Kästner’s left-wing melancholy, in that it has no interest in the present world, trying instead to “blot it out.” This is a response to acedia, in Benjamin’s view, that will only intensify it, not least because it ignores rather than transforms the conditions that created the depressive desire to escape in the first place.

The fact that this historicist practice is politically conservative exacerbates its depressing quality. “The nature of this sadness becomes clearer if we ask: With whom does historicism actually sympathize? The answer is inevitable: with the victor. And all rulers are the heirs of prior conquerors. Hence empathizing with the victor invariably benefits the current rulers” (H, 391). For the oppressed, the medium of this empathy with the past—“culture”—is hopelessly tainted (“there is no document of culture that is not at the same time a record of barbarism”; 392) because “culture” presents itself as autonomous from its historical conditions of possibility (conditions that include the ways the producers and preservers of “culture” have relied on and benefited from relations of domination). For Benjamin, “cultural treasures” can only be viewed with horror, since they amount to the spoils being held aloft in the triumphal victory parade of the class war. To continue to celebrate these cultural treasures is to step yet again on those who lie prostrate. Moreover, it is also an (un)conscious identification with the rulers of past and present; for the oppressed, nothing could be more discouraging, since one will not find there a recognition of one’s suffering, but justifications for it. One must therefore view history “against the grain,” from the point of view of history’s losers, in an attempt to rescue from a collective past images that have the power to startle one into righteous action.

The “historicist” ignores the moments of struggle and discontinuity behind cultural documents, tending instead toward a model of historical progress, where one thing happens after another in a comprehensible order like “beads in a rosary.” That is, the historicist’s practice is underwritten by “homogenous time”—exemplified in the inexorable second-by-second movement of the clock—which makes it seem as if the past is over and done with. This is means-ends clock time; its mantras are: get over it, forget about the past, time marches on; progress is coming, the future will bring it—so just go with the flow. It breeds complacency. “Nothing has so corrupted the German working class as the notion that it was moving with the current” (H, 393).
If historicism, in giving into homogeneous time, induces acedia and complacency as it disavows relations of domination, then Benjamin’s task (as “historical materialist”) is to produce insight about the nature and history of oppression in a way that is capable of warding off the depression—the “feeling of resignation”—that insights about one’s own oppression can produce. After all, recognizing one’s oppression does not in itself make for revolutionary resistance. The historical materialist must ask: Where is the emotional reward and reinforcement, the affective center of gravity that prevents us from taking pleasure in “cultural treasures,” and instead keeps us listening for “the true picture of the past” that “flits by”?

Historical materialism, Benjamin explains, is a practice of melancholic remembrance “wherein what has been comes together in a flash with with the now to form a constellation” (N, 462), a combination of surprising historico-political insight that brings with it a joltingly electric sense of emotional investment in the possibility of transformation. The constellation, or “dialectical image,” avoids a developmental historical logic, disrupting, like Proust’s madeleine, our sense of a progression through empty time, rendering time not empty and homogeneous, but discontinuous—interrupted. At the same time, such an image shows us the nature and source of our oppression—it shows us where to strike. In this sense, these images from the past are “used,” not “interpreted.”

This also means that the historical materialist must embrace a dual view—one toward present emotionally urgent concerns (those that “appear at a moment of danger”; H, 291) and one toward the storehouse of images of the past, from which images are “blasted” to show us “the constellation which our own era has formed with a definite earlier one.”

One reason the image-constellation formed between the present and an earlier era is emotionally powerful, Benjamin argues, is that emotional investment in the present is, in general, generated out of remembrance. More specifically, our “image of happiness,” he writes, “is indissolubly bound up with the image of redemption” (H, 389), by which he means that we are motivated most by the idea of repairing past wrongs, renewing lost friendships, proving wrong the one who had contempt for us, or winning back the affection of the one who has rejected us. “Happiness is founded on the very despair and desolation which were ours” (N, 479). The image of happiness is not abstract; it cannot be given an emotional heft by speculative wishes. Fantasies about our happiness are always (in one way or another, conscious or
not) given their affective force by the extent to which they respond to a past loss.

Likewise, splenetic anger and the spirit of sacrifice are “nourished by the image of enslaved ancestors rather than by the ideal of liberated grandchildren” (H, 394). The best way to avoid being a pessimist is to “place a taboo on the future,” as Benjamin claims Baudelaire did (CP, 162). The possibility of a melancholic connection to the past is enabled by the particular temporal logic of affect, the fact that, as Freud discovered, affects could live on in the unconscious unchanged, “like a foreign body,” and still hold their full force many years later. Affects are always ready for resurrection; the passage of “homogeneous time” is, as it were, irrelevant to them.

In thesis 2, Benjamin makes a subtle transition from a discussion of individual happiness in relation to one’s own past to a consideration of our collective happiness in relation to a collective past. “Doesn’t a breath of the air that pervaded earlier days caress us as well? In the voices we hear, isn’t there an echo of now silent ones? Don’t the women we court have sisters they no longer recognize? If so, then there is a secret agreement between past generations and the present one. Then our coming was expected on earth” (H, 390).

For Benjamin, it is not only that we are motivated by the abstract desire to redeem the past, but that we actually feel these emotions from the past. There is for Benjamin a definite resonance between our own personal past and a historical, collective past. The past is never solely our own anyway: “what has been forgotten... is never something purely individual,” he remarks in another context. It is as if the realm of the forgotten is not within the individual, but is some vast collective historical space, where it converses with everything else that has been forgotten. “Everything forgotten mingles with what has been forgotten of the prehistoric world, forms countless uncertain and changing compounds, yielding a constant flow of new, strange products.” To recover that which has been forgotten, therefore, puts one into contact with this vast archive of changing compounds and strange products.

When we feel an emotional connection with the historical losers, sensing the similarity between their situation and our own, it allows us to feel the historicity of our own subjectivity and to see how long our “present misery has been in preparation” (N, 481). This moment gives us “a high opinion of [our] own powers,” in Benjamin’s view, because when our own oppression can be linked up to those who have preceded
us, it demonstrates the vast amount of historical time that is condensed within our own emotional lives, allowing us to feel as if our own life was “a muscle strong enough to contract the whole of historical time” (N, 479).

This muscle would contract at a moment of affective abreaction, one not accomplished in therapy but in revolution itself, where images from the past would collide with the present with explosive force.

History is the subject of a construction whose site is not homogeneous, empty time, but time filled full by now-time [Jetztzeit]. Thus, to Robespierre ancient Rome was a past charged with now-time, a past which he blasted out of the continuum of history. The French Revolution viewed itself as Rome reincarnate. It cited ancient Rome exactly the way fashion cites a bygone mode of dress. Fashion has a nose for the topical, no matter where it stirs in the thickets of long ago; it is the tiger’s leap into the past. Such a leap, however, takes place in an arena where the ruling class gives the commands. The same leap in the open air of history is the dialectical leap Marx understood as revolution. (H, 395)

For Benjamin, the French revolutionaries were able to engage in revolution precisely because they seized images from the past—from Rome. In making this argument, Benjamin engages in a polemic with the Marx of The Eighteenth Brumaire. Although it is true that for Marx the French Revolution did borrow a language from the past (and hence that is how he “understood the revolution”), Marx worried about these moments when people seem like they are revolutionizing but are borrowing from the past—it was precisely this borrowing that evidenced “the tradition of all the dead generations” weighing “like a nightmare on the brain of the living.” Marx suggests that we need to figure out how to mourn those losses and finally leave them in the past, to let “the dead bury their dead” in order to create a “poetry of the future.” The coming revolution, therefore, for Marx, would have performed its mourning already; it would not be trapped in the past any longer. For Benjamin however, contra Marx, the revolutionary, say Robespierre, rescues images from the past and resurrects them by imitating them: the French Revolutionaries are “Rome incarnate”; they bring Rome back from the dead. For Benjamin, the structure of revolutionary consciousness is necessarily melancholic; and, conversely, melancholia contains within it a revolutionary kernel.

It is worth noting Benjamin’s somewhat unexpected and certainly unorthodox suggestion that we can understand revolution by analogy to fashion. (“It cited ancient Rome the way fashion evokes costumes of the
past.”) Fashion mines the past in the same way as do Robespierre and the historical materialist. (“Fashion has a nose for the topical, no matter where it stirs in the thickets of long ago; it is a tiger’s leap into the past.”) In the case of fashion, that leap into the past is about selling a product, not about revolution, which is why he says “it takes place in an arena where the ruling class gives the commands.” But, fashion, like the commodity, bears the same melancholy mimetic structure that we see in revolution. Hence, insofar as fashion initiates us into a melancholic historical practice and a nonhomogenous experience of temporality, it can potentially provide us with a kind of revolutionary education.¹²７

This does not mean that the “tiger’s leap into the past” is necessarily progressive or revolutionary. The process is essentially political, open to contestation from the left or the right. For example, the singing of spirituals or “sorrow songs” during the civil rights movement invoked the history of slavery and racism in the United States to potent effect, and the appropriation of the pink triangle by the gay and lesbian rights movement draws some of its force from its recollection of the Nazi oppression of gays and lesbians. But that temporally disjunctive evocation of the past is the same device used to sell a product—indeed one might argue that it is the master trope of the commodity fetish. And the Serbians draw on centuries old images of their conflicts with the Albanians (a church building defaced seven hundred years earlier, for instance) to put the emotional energy behind “ethnic cleansing.” The point is that a melancholic relation to the past is not necessarily of one political slant. Rather, Benjamin’s theory suggests that motives such as retribution and reparation are “fundamentally indifferent to the passage of time,”¹²８ and that there are lots of retribution-reparation feelings and images of unachieved happinesses floating around in that pile of catastrophes we call history.