The LCExpress delivers the Lacanian Compass in a new format. Its aim is to deliver relevant texts in a dynamic timeframe for use in the clinic and in advance of study days and conference meetings. The LCExpress publishes works of theory and clinical practice and emphasizes both longstanding concepts of the Lacanian tradition as well as new cutting edge formulations.
In this provocative and carefully constructed paper, Russell Grigg’s reconsideration of both Freud’s and Lacan’s notions of mourning and melancholia becomes a further intervention in our understanding of these terms. Grigg firstly challenges the accepted Freudian notion that the work of mourning has an endpoint that erases the lost object, and reminds us of Freud’s own reconsidereitions after the death of his daughter. Building on Lacan’s work, Grigg suggests the term “memorialization,” a memorialization of the object, which “entails leaving a record in the Other, the symbolic, of the object’s disappearance.” Secondly, Grigg notes the parallels between melancholia and psychosis. He points out that Lacan’s notion of psychosis expanded after his invention of the object a, from a focus on invasive imaginary jouissance, a la Schreber, to a focus on the immediate proximity of the real of the object, and Grigg argues that this encounter with the real is also what happens in melancholia. Memorialization, he explains, is what aids the work of mourning through a reconstruction of a phallic function that restores the neurotic’s protection from the object a. However, in melancholia the semblants that veil the real of the object fall, so melancholia is not endless mourning, but rather, an inescapable confrontation with the real.

Nancy Gillespie, Co-Editor
FORGETTING & REMEMBERING

“What is ‘success’ in mourning? Does it lie in remembering or in forgetting?”

Julian Barnes

What is mourning? What is it, really, that a person goes through when he or she loses someone they love, I mean really loves?

And another question. What is it to mourn no longer? What state does the person who has loved and lost find themselves in ‘at the end,’ when they have finally overcome their grief. When one can ‘get on with one’s life,’ as they say? Is it that one has got over one’s loss? In a sense, yes, of course, one has got over one’s loss. But if this means that one has forgotten the person one has lost, then, no, the lost loved one is not forgotten. Even as the pain of loss diminishes, so the memory remains.

What I argue is that at the end of grieving the lost person is not forgotten but commemorated. And it’s this commemoration that I want to speak of.

Freud says something very odd about mourning in his classic paper on the topic. You know the thesis: in mourning each of the memories in which libido is bound to the object is brought up and hypercathexed so that the libido can detach itself from it and the ego can be “free and uninhibited again” at the end of the process.1 I’ve argued against this claim: it is such a manifestly untrue remark that I find it curious that Freud should have made it. It is obvious to the most casual observation that mourning always leaves traces behind, in the form of often painful memories of a loved one. Even though the pain of the memories dulls with time, they remain liable to resurface at special moments such as anniversaries, just as they can also emerge in connection with the most unexpected things: a movie, an item of clothing, a memory of a holiday, or even with a new love. A lost object rarely disappears entirely; an object that was once loved and lost is probably never abandoned without a trace. And yet, according to Freud, mourning involves a process of abandonment of one’s attachment to the memories of the lost object and, as slow and painful as this process may be, there will be a return to the status quo ante. In the ‘normal case,’ he says, there is a withdrawal of the libido invested in the object and a reassignment to a new one. It is only in the pathological case of melancholia that the lost object remains, where, as he says, “the shadow of the object fell upon the ego.”2 But even in normal mourning the lost object always casts its shadow upon the ego. Even if it is true that the normal process of mourning is over when one is free of the object’s hold and can live and love again, the ego never completely loses the mark of the object that has been lost.

As it turns out, Freud does recognise that a lost love object is in fact never completely abandoned and remains irreplaceable. Strangely, it took the tragic death from Spanish influenza of Freud’s fifth child, Sophie, at the age of twenty-six in 1920 for Freud to realise this. Indeed, he recognized that the reason for the continued attachment to the object that keeps the object alive – that memorialises it, as it were – is the very love for the object itself. On February 4th of that same year, 1920, he wrote to Ferenczi of his “insurmountable narcissistic insult.”3 Then, some nine years later on April 11, 1929,

in a letter consoling Ludwig Binswanger who had undergone a similar loss, Freud wrote, “We know that the acute sorrow we feel after such a loss will run its course, but also that we will remain inconsolable, and will never find a substitute. No matter what may come to take its place, even should it fill that place completely, it remains something else. And that is how it should be. It is the only way of perpetuating a love that we do not want to abandon.”

“And that is how it should be,” writes Freud. The mourning does not and should not bring an end to the object’s presence in one’s life. The process of mourning a lost object can go hand in hand with a persistent drive to memorialize the lost person and one’s relationship to him or her. It is as if, out of respect for the person and one’s attachment to him or her, one is bent on maintaining the memory of one’s attachment to the object so that the object itself somehow outlives the psychical work of mourning. This commemoration, carrying the memory of others, is a fundamental feature of mourning and loss. As Goethe is said to have written, “We die twice: first when we die and then when those who knew and loved us die,” (irony of Goethe the exception) and it is as living memorials that we carry the mark of lost loved ones on our souls.

When the mourning is over, the object is still preserved in some way; and this is as it should be. As more or less distressful as the persistent memory of a lost loved one may be, there may be no question for the person who has suffered a loss to want to forget his loss. Moreover, the sadness, the regret, and the pain experienced over a loss can be experienced without having any impact upon the person’s self-regard. One’s life may be impoverished by the loss of a loved one, but without one’s sense of one’s own worth being diminished.

Mourning gives expression to an important push to memorialization as an expression of respect for the dead demanded of and by the bereaved, those who loved and have, in a sense, been left behind by the death of a friend or loved one.

Julian Barnes gives eloquent expression to the dilemma of the griever: What is ‘success’ in mourning, he asks? Does it lie in remembering or in forgetting?

Clearly, the griever sees their mourning in moral terms. When we mourn we are not just narcissistically pained by our loss, which is the “narcissistic wound” Freud refers to, but we also have a moral attachment—a commitment, if you will—to the memory of the person who has gone. What sort of a commitment is it? Well, as we say, we have a commitment to their memory. We have a commitment to memorializing the object we have loved, and this memorialization requires an inscription, of some kind, in the symbolic. The memorialization of what is lost entails leaving a record in the Other, the symbolic, of the object’s disappearance. And because it is registered in the Other, it is crucial that this record be both public and private, both material and psychical. As I argued at the APW two years ago, mourning is every bit as much about public ritual and commemoration as about internal psychical work.

While there are obvious narcissistic components to the process of mourning, where the mourner can become self-obsessed and fixated on his loss, we judge this morally. Again, I quote Barnes:

"Look how much I loved him/her and with these my tears I prove it."  
"Look how much I suffer, how much others fail to understand: does this not prove how much I loved?"

Maybe, maybe not.

I have proposed that mourning is not so much about forgetting as it is about remembering. We can now add that mourning seems to be about finding the right way to remember. Or, as I would prefer, the right way to commemorate.

The rituals of mourning are part of, are essential to, the ‘right’ way to commemorate. The rituals of mourning are so important that the noun ‘mourner’ does not refer to a person’s grief, or at least does so only indirectly. A ‘mourner’ is first and foremost someone performing


a ritual. She is someone who attends a funeral or who is said to be ‘in mourning,’ frequently in a way that is prescribed either by religious law or popular custom. Mourning can mean wearing black; it can last for two weeks or forty days, where the period of mourning is frequently calculated to the day. In some cultures, it is even possible to employ professional mourners to make a public demonstration of grief to honor the deceased. In any case, the practice of mourning is less an indication of the extent of a person’s grief than a ritual that is more or less correctly carried out as a mark of respect for the deceased. Again, even where the practice of mourning is not clearly circumscribed, there are still considerations of propriety that bear on the activities associated with mourning. As Hamlet sarcastically puts it, “Thrift, thrift, Horatio! The funeral baked meats / Did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables.”

But what about the internal work of mourning, the psychical work that a griever undergoes? How are we to understand the psychical process of mourning? Freud’s account won’t do because it is about forgetting, withdrawal of cathexis and reinvestment in a new object – a view which he himself subsequently abandons, even if only implicitly, when he refers to the death of his daughter Sophie and the ethical requirement not to forget.

Let’s think about mourning in terms of memorialising. First, it needs to be based on memorialising in the right way. As Lacan says in the discussion of Hamlet in Désir et son interprétation, Hamlet’s father is not yet dead and walks the stage restlessly at night precisely because he has not been properly memorialised – where, in an era when the values of honour and nobility prevailed, avenging his murder was essential to proper memorialisation. I’ll come back to this question of the ‘right way.’ For the moment, let’s say something about the mechanism of mourning.

In chapter 18, “Mourning and desire”, Lacan briefly comments that mourning is like the inverse of Verwerfung. More precisely, he says that with the grief over the loss of a loved one, a hole opens up in the real such that the subject enters into a relationship that is the inverse of . . . Verwerfung”. Clarifying this, Lacan adds that this hole in the Real “sets in motion . . . the signifier that can only be purchased with your own flesh and your own blood, the signifier that is essentially the veiled phal- lus.” The suggestion here, then, seems to be that the breach in reality created by the loss of a loved one sets in train, in the reverse direction, the process typically involved in the triggering of a psychosis. Instead of the calamitous collapse, as in psychosis, of signifiers that reveal the absence of the Name-of-the-Father, in mourning, the loss unconsciously activates afresh phallic signifiers that libidinally bind one to the love object. This explains why in mourning the memories of the lost object become so vivid, why everything reminds one of the lost object, or why it fills one’s dreams. Thus, whereas Freud took the approach that the work of mourning is a process of relinquishing the features of the object one by one, slowly and painstakingly, Lacan here regards the process as one of the preservation of the object by constructing a memorial to it in the symbolic.

I think that the mechanism of mourning looks more or less like this: the work of mourning consists of codifying imaginary features of the object, i(a), into signifiers lodged in the Other. The painful process of mourning stems from the fall of the semblants that love and desire attach us to, as Freud taught us; but – and this is what Freud did not capture – the work of mourning is the transformation of these semblants into signifiers registered in and endorsed by the Other. It is the combination of ritual as a community event – funerals, mourning practices, etc. – with the individual’s psychical work of mourning that achieves this commemoration. Identification with the lost object, or rather with traits of the lost object, are a part and part only of this process.

This is not the whole story about mourning, which also contains a real dimension involving the subject’s relation to the objet a. In mourning, the painful loss of one’s semblants exposes the underlying object a, the cause of one’s desire and the object that one has put in


place to support one’s castration. This is the exposure to the real of the object \(a\), or at least a particular aspect of it, which is ordinarily hidden by the object’s ideal features. Hidden in mourning, but manifest in melancholia.

We are familiar with this process in our analytic experience where the end of analysis is akin to this process, albeit in attenuated form. This is the ‘slow burn’ that constitutes analysis, which I have spoken about elsewhere. Melanie Klein recognised this as a form of mourning. Recasting Klein, it is possible, then, to think of the progress of an analysis as sort of non-traumatic traumatisation, or, if you wish, as a controlled decline of the imaginary. In analysis the fall of semblants results, not from the slings and arrows of misfortune; rather, the fall of semblants results, slowly, and in a way regulated by interpretation, from the analysis itself. This of course makes analysis a process that has less to do with the healing of wounds, the recuperation of the subject’s identity, or a return to the status quo ante in such cases. Interpretation, and indeed the process of analysis itself, are less brutal means of dissolving the artefacts with which the individual’s narcissism is surrounded. And a gentle awakening, a slow trauma, as when we say a ‘slow burn,’ that is calculated and ratified by the subject, is undoubtedly more beneficial than the unforeseen crisis apt to result from the sadism or cynicism of the Other.

Incidentally, this is where the essential difference between melancholia and mourning lies. In the exposure to the real of the object \(a\), the melancholic subject turns out to be defenceless against the object. The object cannot be memorialized, as it can be in mourning, but instead remains there forever in the Real. The collapse of semblants that otherwise veil the object persists, and the ‘grimace’ of the object, like the grimace of a skull behind a beautiful face, is exposed; for the melancholic, the veil of semblants, the \(i(a)\), over the object \(a\) falls altogether.

Can we understand melancholia as a psychotic process? I believe so. An account might look something like this. The symbolic order regulates imaginary jouissance, subtracting it from the subject in the process. This subtraction of jouissance, which we write as \((-\Phi)\), takes place at the level of libido and the drive. Now, because in psychosis the Name-of-the-Father is foreclosed, the possibility opens up of an excess of imaginary jouissance that is both unregulated and invasive. The disarray and confusion that Schreber, for instance, initially finds himself in is accompanied by invasive imaginary jouissance. Then, over the course of his psychosis, he discovers a new way of regulating his jouissance, which involves constructing a new relationship to the world, which emerges with his delusional metaphor.

The stability of Schreber’s paranoid delusion contrasts with the earlier phase of the disorder when the excess of jouissance simply overwhelms him. In his “On a Question Prior to any Possible Treatment of Psychosis,” Lacan describes the early confusional period of the psychosis as the “subject’s regression – a topographical, not a genetic regression – to the mirror stage,” wherein the relationship to “the specular other is reduced here to its mortal impact.” Schreber’s voices, for instance, speak of him as a “leper corpse leading another leper corpse”; and his body is merely “an aggregate of colonies of foreign ‘nerves,’ a sort of dump for detached fragments of his persecutors’ identities.” Lacan’s analysis is in terms of the distinction between the Imaginary and the Symbolic. The mortification in question is the result of the structural regression to the imaginary relationship. The object in the Real plays no part.

One could speculate that if Lacan had written this text post 1964 instead of in 1958, he would have invoked the role object \(a\) has to play. He would have referred the mortiferous role to the object, not to a regression to the Imaginary. And he would have distinguished between the collapse of phallic signification, “\(\Phi_0\)” in Schema I, and the unmediated presence of object \(a\). In a 1967 address by Lacan to a meeting of psychiatrists at the Sainte Anne Hospital, as part of a series of lectures under the auspices of his friend Henri Ey, we

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find this comment:

It is the free men, the truly free men, who are mad. There is no demand for the petit a, he holds it, it is what he calls his voices, for instance. [. . .] He does not cling to the locus of the Other, the big Other, through the object a, he has it at his disposal. [. . .] Let’s say that he has his cause in his pocket, and that is why he is mad.10

The proximity of the object a in psychosis means that the subject has not separated himself from it as the object cause of desire. This separation, which for the neurotic subject is produced by the Other as locus of speech and language, both regulates and limits his jouissance. In the absence of this separation a plenitude of jouissance is apparent in such typical psychotic formations as erotomania, hypochondriasis, and the persecutions characteristic of paranoia, as well as the feminization of the psychotic subject, or what Lacan calls the ‘poussée-à-la-femme’ we find in many transsexuals, with their unbridgeable certainty and sometimes persistent pursuit of surgical interventions to better approximate their resemblance to their particular ideal of femininity.

In melancholia we encounter the same failure of separation from the object. The depressive function is explained by the fact that the unseparated-off object, in being a ‘piece of the real,’ (‘un bout de réel,’ as Lacan says) leaves the subject exposed and defenseless to its ravages. A comparison with paranoia might help: the paranoiac is prey to the evil Other who wishes him ill; the melancholic is likewise defenseless against the Real of a horrific object, unmediated by the Symbolic.

Lacan talks of melancholia very rarely and does not offer much of an account of affective or passionless psychoses, despite Clérambault’s attention to it. I think we can understand melancholia in these terms: while the neurotic’s access to a libidinal object is via its semblants, in melancholia the veil of semblants falls from the object, leaving the melancholic exposed to the object in the real and at its mercy. This object can be either persecutory, as it is in paranoia, or object-making, as in melancholia.

Thus, when Freud proceeds by comparing and contrasting mourning and melancholia, it is a little misleading. The melancholic suffers not from eternal mourning but from an inescapable proximity to the object in the Real. In neurosis there is a phallic presentation of the object and its semblants, while in melancholia, the encounter with the real object is at stake.

To return to dreams and trauma after a long detour via the object in the real, present in mourning and melancholia, let me refer you to Lacan’s discussion of the dream reported by Freud in the Traumdeutung, “Father, don’t you see I am burning.” Lacan’s genius is to demonstrate the traumatic element at the heart of the dream by taking the very example that Freud had given to illustrate the claim that dreams are the guardian of sleep. As Lacan demonstrates, at the heart of the primary process “we see preserved the insistence of the trauma in making us aware of its existence.”11 And then, “the reality system [. . . ] leaves an essential part of what belongs to the real a prisoner in the web of the pleasure principle.”12 In this preservation of the insistence of the trauma we can detect the link with memorialisation that I have been arguing for, whether in the dream’s traumatic repetition, or there in the memorialisation in mourning, or there in the failed memorialisation of the object in melancholia.

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LACANIAN COMPASS

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