

**A Surplus of Melancholy:  
|The Discourse of Mourning in Freud, Benjamin, and Derrida**

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One of the most striking features of contemporary discourse in both literary theory and philosophy is the persistence of mourning. Subtext rather than subject, dynamic rather than performance, it emerges in critical texts where one would have expected it to play no more than an insignificant role. Why introduce it into the analysis of capitalist society, of storytelling, of psychoanalytic theory? What one ordinarily grasps as a state of mind, a ritual, or a literary genre (the mourning play) emerges almost by association, as an apparently improper supplement. Marx begins the *Communist Manifesto* with the term “specter,” which Derrida links to the specter of Hamlet’s father and thus to Hamlet’s mourning and mourning in general. A grandson plays his game (*Spiel*) of *fort-da*, and Freud’s account of it screens his mourning in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, in Derrida’s interpretation. From *Spiel* to *Trauerspiel*, mourning repeats itself in the play of ideas. In the latter genre, Benjamin’s topic, German baroque mourning plays, reveals a relatively early instance of the surplus of melancholy that would appear often in Benjamin’s later writing. In these major thinkers, the theoretical and tonal inflections of mourning shade into one another.

Before turning to their work, however, let us separate it from the representation of mourning properly found in elegy and related genres, including texts adopting perspectives distant from a lost arcadia or paradise, whether classical, biblical or psychological. In both direct and distanced kinds of elegy, the “work of mourning” patterns poetic movement, conveying the speaker from a moment of loss to the symbolic recovery of the lost object or person. This figurative movement brings the speaker and his or her community to some type of closure and consolation. In effect, poetic elegy moves backward into loss, in order to move forward. A similar dynamic governs many works of cultural memory, in which collective loss and trauma generate the plots of fictions and films.<sup>1</sup> Not surprisingly, an elegiac mode is discernible in several memoirs (those of Charlotte Delbo and Jacques Derrida, among others) about lost colleagues and cultures.<sup>2</sup> The elements of suffering and injustice that combine mourning with ethical concerns complicate these works still further, as we see in a number of essays on Paul de Man’s wartime writings or in German films that attempt to mourn the country’s role in the Nazi era.<sup>3</sup> Some strategies of representation, moreover, make it seem as if either the repression or the renewal of suffering competed with mourning itself. Although the reparations of elegy are by no means absent from works of collective memory (as we see in the poems of Paul Celan or the paintings of Anselm Kiefer), many intellectual memoirs refuse elegy’s consoling fictions.

The meeting of the experiential and the theoretical within a liminal literary form opens the way to the critical or philosophical discourse that will concern us here. The

memoir, that is, occupies a position between personal discourse and impersonal critique. In ways that would have been hard to anticipate and are in practice belated, the public, putatively impersonal discourse of critique has opened itself to a dimension one might have thought irrelevant and, because of the pressure of the private upon the public, the dimension of mourning has become noticeable. The turn away from formalist analysis, with its insistence upon isolating the literary work from any historical or personal context, is surely a more neutral cause that both prompts us to examine the recent past for the origin of this mourning discourse, and to separate the *subject* of mourning (even if it is present in the work) from the *analysis*—that is, to describe a mode of analysis that reaches beyond the purely formal to the process of mourning. It is when there is some misalignment between the subject and the critical work of mourning that the issue invites closer attention. Neither simple emotional excess nor thematic concern, mourning, in this mode of misalignment, enters as a dynamic or as a theoretical supplement. Two different but related theories of mourning appear in Freud and Benjamin. “Mourning and Melancholia” contains Freud’s central statements on those two conditions, the one normal and the other pathological. At the same time, it intimates an opening in Freud’s thought to a liminality compatible with the generic ambiguity of discourse we noted above in connection with intellectual memoirs. Benjamin’s *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, in which the theory of melancholy derives not from psychoanalysis but from a complex combination of philosophy and dramatic tradition, helps to accommodate mourning and melancholy to each other. Benjamin’s work represents a crucial moment in which the *penseroso* tradition becomes intensified, not only in the baroque drama itself, but in his critical account of it: On the one hand, pensiveness or serious, deep thought as an essential part of melancholy; on the other, allegory as the literary practice that confirms the absence of immanent meaning in the world.<sup>4</sup> The *Trauerspiel*, preoccupied with the work of mourning, solicits a corresponding “mournful” practice on the part of the theorist. Although Benjamin devotes most of his concrete analysis to baroque tragic drama, his precepts extend to general questions of allegory and critique. His speculations, moreover, contain melancholy affinities with both his earlier “metaphysical” writing and his later work on literature, especially “The Storyteller” and the essays on Kafka and Baudelaire, as well as his autobiographical writing in *A Berlin Chronicle*. In Freud, we see a series of intense, partial attachments to aspects of the lost person or object, with ensuing dynamics of detachment or internalization. In Benjamin, the philosophical derivation of melancholy joins the concept of criticism as mortification to work upon allegorical landscapes strewn with “dead objects” and fragments. In his turn, Derrida weaves the work of mourning into close analysis of texts, and into an archive of European ideas and practices.

## I

Imagine that Sigmund Freud, Walter Benjamin and Jacques Derrida have been invited to participate in a symposium on mourning. Each of them is to begin his presentation with an interpretation of *Hamlet*, the play or the character. The three readings transform dramatic mourning into a critical approach—something that will affect critical method without being as determinate as method itself. Freud, who has previously identified Hamlet as the major modern representative of the Oedipus complex—as a universal,

culturally normative figure, now casts him as a melancholic. Contrary to those who consciously mourn the loss of a loved person or object, the melancholic cannot consciously perceive “*what* it is he has lost even when he knows *whom* he has lost” (Freud 1955, XIV: 245). Because the object-loss in melancholia is unconscious, it is puzzling to the observer. The melancholic’s own ego, moreover, appears to him as worthless: “In mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself,” Freud writes (246). An Oedipal everyman in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Hamlet speaks for the pathological position in Freud’s theory of mourning and melancholia. The inversion encompasses not only the change from normal to pathological, but the “loss” of content in the ego—content that may be in part conscious, in part repressed. A third element, a consequence of the second, concerns dramatic appearances, in which the emptiness of the world as it appears to the mourner contrasts with the melancholic’s perception of his empty ego. The self-criticism of the melancholic, true to his psychological situation if not necessarily accurate as to his moral worth, engenders this contradiction: “The analogy with mourning led us to conclude that he had suffered a loss in regard to an object; what he tells us points to a loss in regard to his ego” (247). In both cases we confront a psychological landscape, whether interior or exterior. What Freud tells us points to the instability of the very analogy that linked mourning and melancholia without, however, collapsing it. The structure of loss persists, as do the landscapes of self and world, the first clearly figurative with respect to the latter in melancholia, but in mourning more ambiguous insofar as one loss acts as a metaphor for the perceived emptiness of the world. The ethical ground of the discussion shifts as well, for the melancholic posits a universal guilt evident in Hamlet’s remark, “Use every man after his desert, and who shall scape whipping?” This represents Hamlet’s opinion of himself and “everyone else” (246), Freud notes, adding that it is a sure sign of illness. The melancholic may indeed be—and often is—a cagier figure than the mourner, but the self-deprecation displays a psychological truth about ego-loss whether or not it corresponds to reality. Compared with that of the mourner, the language of the melancholic is apt to undergo one or two additional figurative turns.

Hamlet’s judgments as melancholic join with the self-judgment implicit in his Oedipal repressions: as the prince who mourns the loss of his father, he cannot act against his uncle Claudius, the man who has slain his father and *married* his mother, for Claudius “shows him the repressed wishes of his childhood realized” (Freud 1955, IV: 265). Freud’s reading outlines the doubly specular structure in which Claudius, who has appropriated the place of Hamlet’s father, acts as both symbol and catalyst for self-recognition. The theory of melancholia posits that loss of an object (due to death or some other kind of separation) leads to introjection of that object which becomes, in effect, part of the melancholic’s ego. Contrary to the mourning in which libido is withdrawn from the lost object and displaced onto another, melancholia leads to the withdrawal of libido into the ego, where it enjoins an identification of ego with the abandoned object. “Thus,” Freud states, “the shadow of the object [falls] upon the ego, and the latter [can] henceforth be judged . . . as though it were . . . the forsaken object” (XIV: 249). This transformation into ego-loss resituates 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” (XIV: 249). In these terms, the political responsibility that requires Hamlet to act out the work of mourning by avenging his father’s

murder runs into a psychological impasse in which Hamlet's internalization of the paternal figure stays his hand.

Although Freud's presentation distinguishes between normal and pathological kinds of mourning, it does not do so in an absolute manner. Both entail loss of interest in the outside world and, correspondingly, devotion to mourning itself. What is different in the melancholic person is the self-criticism—superego turned against ego—together with regressive identification and ambivalence. The melancholic, Freud tells us, must have hated the person he has loved—and loss unleashes the hatred. Because love for the object has given way to identification, however, the hatred becomes self-directed. The self-criticism of the melancholic thus casts light upon Oedipal ambivalence. In turn, as Paul Ricoeur points out, mourning must come to an end because of the very narcissistic self-interest that has turned into melancholia in some persons. Like the melancholic, the mourner prolongs the existence of the lost other in the ego until his own ambivalence and narcissism put an end to the process: survival and reconstitution of the self thus bring the trajectory of mourning to a conclusion (1970, 131-132).

Hamlet's melancholy, therefore, is a liminal condition, the product of Oedipal attachments as well as excessive self-blame. (By splitting the father-image, Claudius both justifies the revenge plot and foregrounds the melancholic internalization.) Hamlet is, as he says, "but mad north-north-west": in other directions, his repressions and symptoms lay claim to a different kind of interpretation. If mourning supplies the gauge by which melancholia is both a disease (and dis-ease) of conscience and a narcissistic substitution for "erotic cathexis," melancholia in turn reveals the diversion of mourning into high and low roads. Mourning's slow, painstaking process of detaching libido from the lost object, a process that will eventually end in both freedom and new attachments, appears in melancholia to start from a profound misalignment of ego and world. Either the world is awry ("the time is out of joint") or the ego is shadowed by its own narcissism.

What we have identified as Hamlet's liminality, accompanied by intimations from Freud and Ricoeur that mourning and melancholia are to some degree interrelated, has consequences for literary interpretation. The loss of meaning in self or world, variously attributable to mourning and melancholia, finds a parallel in Lukács's *Theory of the Novel*. Lukács claims that as the loss of Homeric or epic immanent meaning reverberates in later Western literary texts, two distinct character types emerge in fiction: the abstract idealist and the romantic. Each suffers an imbalance of mind in relation to world: the one mind is too narrow and intense, capable primarily of misperception, the other too large, continually creating worlds that eventually collapse under the recognition that they are only fictions. Such misalignments propel differing narratives, exemplified in the fortunes of a Don Quixote (or Michael Kohlhaas) as opposed to a Werther. Just as the speaker in an elegy perceives disparities that solicit repair through the work of mourning, so the protagonist of the novel must repair a misalignment with the world in order to arrive at some meaning: Lukács' interpretation then continues the process, reading each polar type and its narrative as symptomatic of a literary and cultural loss that affects major postclassical genres, the novel in particular. Unable to achieve epic closure and totality, the novel exists in a condition of "homelessness" which casts its shadow upon the theory. It is the critic rather

than the literary avatar who assumes the responsibility of mourning in a process that to some degree replicates what it finds in texts but provides the temporal scope that will situate the loss historically.<sup>5</sup>

## II

Freud's focus upon character should not obscure his concern with the trajectory of mourning—a dynamic in which the “*work of mourning is completed [and] the ego becomes free and uninhibited again*” (1955, XIV: 245); the complete character is formed only through action, or plot. It is Benjamin, however, who returns Hamlet to the domain of formal drama, that of the *Trauerspiel*; as he reminds us, Shakespeare's play is related to it as the ideal is to the mundane.<sup>6</sup> The mourning play inhabits a realm that wavers between mourning and melancholy, the latter removed from pathology by dint of its historical origin in traditional theories of melancholy rather than in narcissistic regression. One of the four basic temperaments, melancholy is the most somber and apt to be the most complex, as Benjamin argues in an excursus on Durer's great *Melencolia I*. He appears to address Freud, retaining an implicit awareness of modern psychoanalysis which he balances against a psychology historically closer to Shakespeare and baroque *Trauerspiel*. Luther's “heaviness of soul” and Lutheranism's “renunciation of ‘good works’” (1977, 138) led to “an empty world” (139) in this historical melancholy scenario.<sup>7</sup> The consequences for dramatic structure are significant. “Mourning,” Benjamin writes, “is the state of mind in which feeling revives the empty world in the form of a mask, and derives an enigmatic satisfaction in contemplating it” (139). Benjamin shifts Freud's terms towards the theatrical and the allegorical. Like Freud, he posits a gaze that preserves the specular, internalizing quality peculiar to melancholy: “Every feeling is bound to an *a priori* object. . . . Accordingly the theory of mourning, which emerged unmistakably as a *pendant* to the theory of tragedy, can only be developed in the description of that world which is revealed under the gaze of the melancholy man” (139). The “special intensification of mourning, a progressive deepening of its intention,” reveals the “[p]ensiveness. . . characteristic above all of the mournful. On the road to the object—no: within the object itself—this intention progresses as slowly and solemnly as the processions of the rulers [in the baroque drama] advance” (139-140). Melancholy is the condition of subjectivity that sets in motion the play of mourning. Its intensifying intention, its pensive attachment to the object, its deep play are externalized in the allegorical dramas. In Hamlet, at least, melancholy surmounts itself because of the specular quality. What is for Freud an obscuring self-absorption becomes for Benjamin a potentially clarifying self-awareness: “Only in a princely life such as this is melancholy redeemed, by being confronted with itself . . . melancholy self-absorption attains to Christianity” (1977, 158). What is not included in German tragic drama becomes the fate of Hamlet, whose self-encounter enables him to pass beyond mourning to redemption. Does this amount to a redistribution of the roles of mourning and melancholy, an assignment of more regularity to melancholy within the work of mourning? Benjamin often seems to associate mourning with ritual and allegorical action, leaving melancholy to its interior, less conscious work.

If the formal inheritance of German baroque drama derives from medieval mystery plays, its conceptual roots are closer to the understanding of melancholy as it had accrued

in philosophic tradition from Aristotle to the Renaissance. The resulting drama re-invests allegorical form with a different philosophy. Against this background, the melancholy man's "work of mourning" limits still further the distinction between the two terms. Benjamin's historical understanding of melancholy underscores the liminality of the concept, inasmuch as it is a basic humor which, when present in excess, becomes pathological. The idea of melancholy itself is indebted to Durer's winged melancholy and to the relations between melancholy and the figure of Saturn. Benjamin cites Panofsky and Saxl's study, which reveals the "spirit of contradictions" shared by melancholy and Saturn: both are slothful and dull on the one hand, and, on the other, intelligent and contemplative. Melancholy was the least desirable of the four humors: an excess could lead to mental illness. Durer's *Melancholy* does not reach this point, however. Her gloom results from "dissociation of theory [of artistic genius] and practice"<sup>8</sup> Melancholy, Panofsky continues, was glorified under the influence of humanistic philosophy and this in turn "entailed the humanistic ennoblement of the planet Saturn. . . . ancient god of the earth." Panofsky concludes that under the influence of Jupiter, symbolized by the magic square in Durer's work, a sublime form of melancholy prevails, rather than a demonic one. Without denying the pathological aspects of melancholy, Benjamin, by way of humoral theory, directs it into the reading of baroque *Trauerspiel* and *Hamlet*. He notes that the German *Trauerspiel* "remained astonishingly obscure to itself, and was able to portray the melancholic only in the crude and washed-out colours of the mediaeval complexion-books" (1977, 151, 158.). Durer's "winged genius, however, presides over the beginning of the "intense life of its [*Trauerspiel*'s] crude theatre" (158). Shakespeare's play redeems baroque drama's contradictions—which included the "baroque rigidity of the melancholic, un-stoic as it is un-Christian, pseudo-antique as it is pseudo-pietistic"—within a Christian framework, or sublimates them within an aesthetic one. Benjamin's implicit acknowledgment of Freud is agonistic, but in the end, by situating the psychological within the contexts of religion and aesthetics, he deepens the analogical relations among all three. Just as dead objects play out their allegorical roles "under the gaze of the melancholy man," so internalized objects assume power in the mind of the melancholic: fragments come to dramatic life. Freud's scenario lends itself to the allegorical, and in turn allegory gives a shape to internalized objects: Benjamin's thesis draws attention to formal as well as hermeneutic matters. In the end, Durer's listless winged melancholy, unable to use her proper faculties (emblemized in the objects strewn about), is associated with Hamlet, whose humoral identity is remarkably germane to his role in psychoanalysis. The way in which *Melancholy* "presides" over the "crude theatre" of the baroque, and the way in which *Hamlet* brings the trajectory of the *Trauerspiel* to a redemptive conclusion highlight the double illumination they cast as governing conceptions and formal models. Benjamin's "constellation" includes Durer, Hamlet and baroque drama in addition to Freud, all brought dramatically and discursively to life under his melancholy gaze.

### III

Derrida's contribution to the discussion on *Hamlet* and mourning begins with a close reading of the scene in which the ghost of Hamlet's father appears on the castle ramparts, followed by a long analysis of Hamlet's remark that "the time is out of joint."

The liminality in this text belongs to the specter, which is “between something and someone”: “One does not know if it is living or if it is dead” (1994, 6). The specter defies conventional orders of knowledge: Derrida names semantics, ontology, philosophy and psychoanalysis. It also defies any order of seeing: invisible between apparitions and beneath its armor, it sees us not seeing it. This is what Derrida calls the “*visor effect*: we do not see who looks at us” (7). This “paradoxical phenomenality” or spirit incorporated as specter, this “ungraspable visibility” or “*non-sensuous sensuous*” leaves room for doubt about the identity of the specter. Nevertheless, as Hamlet’s “Fathers Spirit,” the specter enjoins Hamlet to take revenge upon Claudius, a task or fate that Hamlet curses because “the time is out of joint” for undertaking ethical or political reform. Derrida’s analysis turns first to mourning:

We will be speaking of nothing else. It consists always in attempting to ontologize remains, to make them present, in the first place by *identifying* the bodily remains and by *localizing* the dead (all ontologization, all semanticization—philosophical, hermeneutical, or psychoanalytical—finds itself caught up in this work of mourning but, as such, it does not yet think it; we are posing here the question of the specter, to the specter, whether it be Hamlet’s or Marx’s, on this near side of such thinking). One has to know. (9)

Derrida’s remarks foreground the oxymoron implicit in “the work of mourning,” in which knowledge serves mourning or grieving by providing local habitations and names, and in so doing directs it; in which mourning itself, almost by definition a process of mediation, posits the existence of knowledge and language prior to thought; and in which the indeterminacy of the specter (Hamlet’s, Marx’s or both) symbolizes the indeterminacy of possession—one does not know *whose* specter, singular or plural, is on stage. The three things essential to the identification of the specter or thing include knowledge (bound to the work of mourning in ways prior to thinking as we normally construe it); language (the vehicle by which generation and inheritance work, and in which skulls are connected to spirits—with specters between the two); and work, in particular, a power of transformation. Derrida’s ghost story is no child’s tale: what hangs upon his interpretation of *Hamlet* is no less than the fate of contemporary Europe—a fate retold and foreseen in the play. Derrida’s lexicon of translations into French of “the time is out of joint” settles upon the political inflection supplied by Gide and supported by the *OED*’s citation of the phrase as an ethico-political example; the example and the accompanying images return us to the question of the spectral. The resonance is not unlike Freud’s catalogue of definitions for the *unheimlich* or uncanny. The “specters of Marx” are those Marx identified as well as that of Marx himself: together they represent a genealogy or inheritance of ideas. How can one relate this to Freud’s concept of mourning? Prior to and entwined with knowledge, it intimates a process by which one detaches oneself from the dead (old constructions of Marx or Marxism) and opens oneself, in a kind of spectral uncertainty (dependent upon a prior certainty), to new knowledge of Marx, to his legacy, and to the power of his spirit to transform Europe. It relates mourning to the politics of memory, addressing a “disjointed” now whose time includes both Hamlet’s rotten Denmark and contemporary Europe. A

spectral present reaches from past present through “now” to a future present, which includes a psychological time exerting pressure upon political or chronological time.

Mourning, therefore, is linked to, even an essential part of knowledge. Conversely, knowledge is essential to the work of mourning, which cannot even begin without certain knowledge about the object of mourning: who it is and the likelihood that his remains will remain where they are. Although we may think of knowledge as cumulative, the psychoanalytic process of painstaking separation of ego or libido from each memory of the lost object, which leads to knowledge of reality, represents the knowledge acquired through depletion and discontinuity, acquired by discarding elements hitherto kept in mind. To re-think what one knows through mourning, therefore, is to specify what one knows in order to delimit it and clear a space for the ensuing uncertainty symbolized by specters. As Derrida notes, the *spirit* of mourning inhabits—assumes the dress, like the armor encasing Hamlet’s father’s spirit—a realm neither wholly real nor wholly phantasmal (or literary). The space of mourning is open to—and defiant of—the ontological questions that Derrida names. Scholars, he notes ironically, know the difference between presence and non-presence, actuality and non-actuality. They are therefore less likely to admit such shadowy possibilities as that of the specter, which only the coming of Marx made it possible to address. The specters: to that named by Marx in the *Communist Manifesto* we may add that of Marx himself, which in turn includes the specters that “haunted” him. The work of mourning would, presumably, have to address the ontology of what is traditionally excluded from ontology. *Hamlet’s* revolutionary challenge derives from the spectral effects of the early scene on the ramparts of Elsinore: the ghost in armor with its visor up, conveying a “paradoxical phenomenality” or “the visibility of the invisible,” so that “we do not see who looks at us.” This latter, the visor effect, sets the tone for the effects of the past, to which Derrida returns frequently in this text. His reading of *Hamlet* is superimposed upon his reading of Marx; or, in Derrida’s figure, “the specter condenses itself . . . within the most living life” (109). Because the time is “out of joint,” one must “borrow” from the past. The abstract temporal misalignment is as dis-jointed as the figure of the specter itself, in a borrowing that makes ideas and figuration interdependent. The spectrality of the figure for whom Hamlet mourns, like the specters of the past that Marx conjures up, inserts itself into the process of mourning, as a figure of indeterminacy within knowledge, as a challenge to the “Scholler” who looks without seeing the figure within the armor, or Marx and his constellation of figures within history.

#### IV

The three speakers in this symposium describe linked but separate stances toward mourning and melancholy: all three reflect upon the revisionary relation to knowledge of self and culture within the processes named in either condition; they observe the pressure of their non-linear temporality upon the understanding of self and world; they recognize the spectral element in any personal or political world-building; and they balance the abstraction of both processes against their tendency to appear in figures that are often quasi-allegorical (Hamlet, Saturn, the self-tormentor). What Benjamin and Derrida uncover in Freud’s essay, *qua* metacritical texts, are its aesthetic and political implications.

For Benjamin, the iconography of mourning confronts the schema of melancholy as a state of mind, reconciling them, in the tragedy of *Hamlet*, into a composite structure of religious redemption and aesthetic triumph.<sup>9</sup> To the contrary, Derrida's *Hamlet* does not so much resolve the problematic nature of mourning as reveal the problems it poses to traditional thinkers, especially scholars: "There has never been a scholar who, as such, does not believe in the sharp distinction between the real and the unreal, the actual and the inactual, the living and the non-living, being and non-being ('to be or not to be,' in the conventional reading), in the opposition between what is present and what is not, for example in the form of objectivity. Beyond this opposition, there is, for the scholar, only the hypothesis of a school of thought, theatrical fiction, literature, and speculation" (1994, 11). Marcellus, on the battlements, either suffers from the illusion that scholars know how to speak to specters, or he anticipates the coming of a "scholar"—Marx—who will know how to address specters or who will be "mad enough to hope to *unlock* the possibility of such an address" (12). This undecidability, this temporal disjointure or spectral thought thus identifies a *critical* potentiality in *Hamlet* awaiting Derrida's gesture of opening. Is this, too, a form of metaphorical borrowing, of moving from a crisis of vision *represented* as literal to its figural dimension? At the very least, it subjects the work of mourning and its apparent demand for ontological certainty to a reversal which will be incorporated into critical thought. The problem is that of laying the past to rest without forgetting one's obligations to it, of incorporating history or tradition into one's thinking as the basis for a productive new future.

Although the work of mourning points the way to psychic recovery, as a form of leave-taking it can involve the loss of eros—or an eros of loss. This is often what blurs the line between mourning and melancholy for Benjamin, and what becomes endless work for Derrida. As the specter, the *revenant*, in *Hamlet* demonstrates, one cannot wish or "conjure" the dead away. What is theatrical in one case is historical in the other: the shadow of Marx, Derrida says, is what so many political subjects try to conjure away. The logic he himself wishes to use is a "politico-logic of trauma and a topology of mourning. A mourning by fact and by right interminable, without possible normality, without reliable limit, in its reality or in its concept, between introjection and incorporation" (1994, 97). Derrida's logic recapitulates and extends Freud's historical observation on the mourning that follows traumas to human narcissism: First, historically speaking, the *cosmological* trauma resulting from the Copernican revolution, in which the earth is no longer the center of the universe; second, the *biological* trauma resulting from Darwin's demonstration of the biological descent of man; third, the *psychological* trauma resulting from the psychoanalytic discovery of the power of the unconscious over the conscious ego—this last the most serious (1994, 97).<sup>10</sup> It is Derrida who identifies the "Marxist blow," which, gathering together and subsuming the three prior traumas, exceeds Marxism itself because of the different shapes it assumes: labor movement, eschatology, or totalitarian "world." Whatever form it takes, Marxism inflicts a wound which it tries to deny by softening, assimilation, interiorization—only to have the ghost of Marx reappear and the work of mourning persist without end. Derrida's language here gathers up and re-directs the language of Freud. If Freud has interiorized the language of economics (as in the economic theory of the psyche), Derrida recasts the tension between the psychological and the

economic as one between interior and exterior life. Where analysis is interminable for Freud, the work of mourning is endless in Derrida's account of specters. The two discourses work upon one another. There can be no persistence, no survival of Marx in the contemporary world without the Freudian discourse of mourning, of the uncanny, of the *revenant*. But neither can there be a persistence of Freud without the stage provided by Marx, following Shakespeare, in which the specter, the spirit who comes from the past and leads toward the future, performs the work of the dead. An apparition, Derrida notes, does not do nothing (97).

## V

Despite the stage figures, the spectral shapes, the winged Melancholy presiding over baroque tragedy, one might still claim that it is the *work* of mourning that propels the texts we have been considering. To the degree that their ideas are represented in images, the latter are emblemized, metacritical figures; even the work of mourning can seem curiously abstract as the proper object of a "Schollerly" gaze. Where, then, does the affective dimension of mourning enter this discussion? How would one identify the libidinal dynamic in critical or philosophic texts that do not overtly concern themselves with the subject of mourning? Suppose one were to treat mourning as a tonal supplement, a surplus of energy, implicated in authorial strategies but independent of the ostensible subject. What return would such an investment offer for both author and reader?

Not surprisingly, Freud is the most circumspect—or the most evasive—of our three thinkers. One need not necessarily associate *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (*Jenseits der Lustprinzip*) with mourning: it is in fact Derrida who foregrounds Freud's anticipation and denial of such a connection. In a letter to Wittels, the author of an early book on Freud, the latter writes, "I certainly would have stressed the connection between the death of the daughter and the Concepts of the *Jenseits* in any analytic study on someone else. Yet still it is wrong. The *Jenseits* was written in 1919, when my daughter was young and blooming, she died in 1920" (quoted in Derrida 1987, 328). Freud was, however, still working on the book in January, 1920, when she died. He writes: "I do as much work as I can, and am grateful for the distraction. The loss of a child seems to be a grave blow to one's narcissism; as for mourning, that will no doubt come later . . ." (Letter to Pfister, quoted in 1987, 330). Derrida comments, "The work of mourning no doubt comes later, but the work on *Beyond* . . . was not interrupted for a single day. This letter is situated between Sophie's death and cremation. If the work is a 'distraction,' it is that he is not just working on just anything." Freud writes of the trains that have stopped so that he cannot go to Sophie's funeral in Germany. He writes that neither he nor his wife can get over their oppression at the "monstrous fact" of a child dying before her parents. His work is indeed affected. The interrupted line of filiation, imaged casually in the stopped train lines, has a symbolic relation to the spool and string of the *fort:da*, the game that Sophie's child played and that is to serve as a step toward Freud's theory of the death instinct. Family lines, the fate of children and grandchildren, the fate of psychoanalysis itself: all these balance within the work of mourning, the mournful feelings, the later self-reproaches against impossible youthful jealousy toward siblings. And these in turn relate to the fate of psychoanalysis, whose lines of filiation and affiliation increasingly concern its aging patriarch. Derrida

places this line or “lace” within a scene of writing at the heart of which lies mourning. The claim here is that of a reciprocal relation between theory and mourning, in which it is rarely possible for one to be entirely free of the other. The figure of “overlapping”—Derrida’s arrangement of “Freud’s work after Sophie’s definitive *Fortgehen* with the work of his grandson [in the game of *fort:da*] as *Beyond* . . . will have reported it” (329)—contributes “strings” to “the lace of murderous, mournful, jealous, and guilty identifications which entrap speculation, infinitely. But since the lace constrains speculation, it also constrains it with its rigorous stricture. The legacy and jealousy of a repetition (already jealous of itself) are not accidents which overtake the *fort:da*, rather they more or less strictly pull its strings. And assign it to an auto-bio-thanato-hetero-graphic scene of writing” (336). Whether puppet-show or the “unrepresentable” content of a *fort:da*, an allegory of theory that produces a scene of writing: such a scene is performable only *as* writing, its texture conveying a cadence produced by life supplemented by theory, theory supplemented by life, game, “mid-mourning” (335) and speculation interwoven.

*Specters of Marx* and *Freud’s Legacy* (part of *The Post Card*) place mourning within an analytic context, although what is analytic for Derrida in the latter text foregrounds Freud’s mournful urgency. One may object that it is easy enough to supply the biographical details that reveal the lines of mourning within critical analysis. Derrida’s claim derives from stronger evidence. Mourning does not merely precede the text under scrutiny. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, the footnotes referring to daughter and grandson designate the scene of mourning played out within the theoretical text. Even the game—the *Spiel*—of *fort:da*, in which the first part of going away is played more often, signifies more than the excessive or imbalanced quality of textual mourning. The “work of mourning” is literally and figuratively cast as play—an uncanny anticipation for the child, a symbolic representation of what has already happened for the adult.<sup>11</sup> Child’s play in turn determines this work of analysis that positions itself so as to uncover the death instinct. In Derrida’s reading, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is structured chapter by chapter by a *fort:da* in which Freud’s speculation advances, withdraws, and then advances still closer to its object. Freud cannot admit, however, that his speculation is autobiographical, that he is the grandfather and that the child playing is his grandson. The child’s play, however, is serious inasmuch as it signifies the departures of both parents. At the same time, it represents an early and apparent insignificant form of repetition. But how can a repetition that leads eventually to the death drive be treated as innocent? Derrida, whose non-linearity rarely overlooks other possible lines of filiation, here uncovers, from that line of string in the child’s play, first, the family line extending from grandfather to grandson, in which the daughter is already absent; and second, the line of science, to which psychoanalysis itself must belong. It is as if autobiography were to constitute the place of crossing from personal to public: the daughter, who has “risked” her family name in marriage, is analogous to the scientist who has “risked” his name for the sake of psychoanalysis. (The mother, despite her loss of name, is responsible for the continuity of the family line in Jewish tradition.) “Every autobiographical speculation,” Derrida writes, “to the extent that it constitutes a legacy and the institution of a movement without limit . . . must take into account the mortality of the legatees (1987, 305). Every such writing thus becomes a writing toward

death. At the same time, no theoretical writing can ever be merely theoretical. Shadowed by Freud's autobiography, by the game as a specular version of Freud's theory, the speculation in turn confronts Freud with the image of his own thought. To attempt to "detach" oneself from the pleasure principle (never wholly manageable<sup>12</sup>) is to come closer to the death instinct. The delicacy of these speculative moves, the transformation of child's play into a "work of mid-mourning," the "re-turn" or *revenir* in the *fort:da*, the introjection or incorporation (Derrida, reading Freud, does not decide upon one process or the other) of an object that the ego must eventually acknowledge as gone: the rhythm of these conversions and interlacings of autobiography and theory, mourning and speculation, will inevitably convey a surplus anxiety, tension, anticipation of loss.

One may still argue that concealed mourning, whose contours become recognizable through a hermeneutic process significantly indebted to psychoanalysis is, after all, unsurprising in a text by Freud. Not only does his own experience, biographical as well as therapeutic, supply material for his texts, but his foundational style of thinking includes a self-reflexive component (Bloom 1982, 168-184). The theoretical stakes in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* are as high as they will ever be for Freud, and his lines of filiation, both scientific and personal, appear all too fragile. The strict theorist of psychoanalysis may not wish openly to countenance mourning, whose energies nevertheless appear in the *fort:da* of speculation. This is, of course, what Derrida identifies in Freud, thereby reminding us that mourning is if anything a more overt preoccupation in his own work. *Jacques Derrida*, written with Geoff Bennington, includes, in a series of footnotes, Derrida's meditation upon the approaching death of his mother, invoking in turn Augustine's writing upon the death of *his* mother. Read in counterpoint with Bennington's account of Derrida's ideas, the notes offer a moving evocation of personal and political lines of filiation. This text too exemplifies autobiographical-thanatological-theoretical writing. His earlier essay, "Living On: *Border Lines*" develops an analogous form, where the commentary in footnotes at the bottom of the page represents his dedication to and mourning for his friend Jacques Ehrmann, who had first invited him to Yale. Weaving together themes of survival, translation, triumph and *arrêt de mort*, Derrida relates writing itself (writing, marks, traces) to survival after death. In both works, the autobiographical subtext plays an unsettling spectral role vis-à-vis the main text. The interplay is by no means reductive, however, for the dialectic between death and survival in writing, the "letting go" of mourning and its transformation in speculation, remind us that writing and speculation are heartfelt to begin with, affairs of the heart. The death-knell sounded in *Glas* is not entirely lost, although one may speculate that it is transformed.

In Benjamin as in Freud and Derrida, mourning is associated as much with anticipation as with the death-knell or *glas*. When Benjamin is asked to write a series of sketches about Berlin, he does so with the double awareness of personal loss and political catastrophe—that which was already perceptible in Germany and that which was still to come. *A Berlin Childhood around 1900*, completed early in 1933, began to appear in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* in February, soon after the Nazi accession to power, but publication was suspended by the end of the month. On March 18, Benjamin left Berlin for good. Any of his sketches that appeared in Germany after that time were published under pseudonyms.

Naming and continuity inhere in this crisis as they do in those of Freud and Derrida. The Berlin texts were originally dedicated to a diverse group of four friends. Later, Benjamin crossed out their names and substituted that of his son Stefan, making him the legatee of the one legacy of Berlin he could still leave. Political repression is not only an unnamed condition of the texts, but it directs Benjamin's legacy and makes inevitable the translation of lost time into lost space. The sketches are memory texts that came about, Benjamin writes, "when one day it was suggested that I should write, from day to day in a loosely subjective form, a series of glosses on everything that seemed noteworthy in Berlin" (1978, 305).<sup>13</sup> The process of setting them down, he remarked some years later, would set boundaries to his longing for his native city. It's a bit like getting inoculated against illness; the implication is that a bout of homesickness in the writing will ward off major suffering. However delicate the balance between immunization and quasi-magical ritual, the strategy of deferring the suffering over the impending separation from Berlin, the work of remembrance in the Berlin sketches is inseparable from anticipatory mourning.<sup>14</sup>

The evocation of specters from one's past life is not unlike a critical strategy to be found in many of Benjamin's literary essays, in which a figure or culture from the past seems to reach across barriers of loss and temporality for one last reappearance: the storyteller arises, diminished in stature, from a landscape devastated by technology and war; death makes its ritual appearances in the procession of figures around the clock at Ibiza, first or last, foundation or closure<sup>15</sup>; in Herodotus' *Histories*, Psammenitus, the defeated Egyptian king, bursts into tears not when he sees his son and daughter in the Persian triumphal procession but when he sees an old, impoverished servant among the prisoners: Benjamin cites Montaigne's interpretation that the king, already too full of grief, bursts into tears of mourning at "the smallest increase" (97, 90), and adds that the interpretation is only one of many possible readings. For Benjamin, the story resembles "the seeds of grain which have lain for centuries in the chambers of the pyramids shut up air-tight and have retained their germinative power to this day." Such historical encrypting resembles in turn the interiorization of mourning, in which a lost object becomes introjected or incorporated in the mourner, only to be revealed in a figurative form. No wonder, then, that "Death is the sanction of everything that the storyteller can tell" (94). The figure Odradek, who returns from prehistoric and childhood oblivion in Kafka's fictions, is appropriated into Benjamin's writing, accompanying him as a figure of bungling and misfortune throughout his life,<sup>16</sup> lying in wait, Benjamin writes, to announce his death: "I think that each 'complete life' that . . . passes before the gaze of the dying person is put together from the images [pictures] that the little hunchback has of all of us" (1991, IV: 304 [my translation]).

Nowhere does Benjamin reveal more dramatically his figural conception of the way mourning inhabits both urban life and literature than in his comments on Baudelaire's sonnet, *A une passante*. The unknown woman in black represents more than mourning to the speaker: she represents that most characteristic of urban emotions, love at last sight. Still more, Benjamin continues, beyond the "figure of shock, indeed of catastrophe," the sonnet reveals the "kind of sexual shock that can beset a lonely man," the "stigmata" of metropolitan life. The woman's fleeting glance is reinterpreted by Proust, for whom she is

“the object of a love which only a city dweller experiences. . . . and of which one might not infrequently say that it was spared, rather than denied, fulfillment” (1969, 170). This quintessential urban experience of unfulfillment, a loss unspoken but mutually recognized—“O you I would have loved (o you who knew it too!” (169)—is imaged in the figure of mourning.

## VI

With Benjamin’s reading of an elegiac sonnet, we seem to have returned to the point where we began: a poetic figure in mourning. Unlike Hamlet, however, the woman passing by is anonymous, an object of desire soon to be obscured by the crowd. In this case the speaker’s grief is directed to what might have been. Her advent and disappearance are announced in the same quasi-auratic flash, in a moment of suspended time. Without origin or future, she nevertheless has an afterlife in the novels of Proust. If Proust supplies the figural filiation, the big-city crowd provides the occasion for contingency and mourning; this late essay of Benjamin’s doubles the theoretical use of the sonnet, first as a representation of modernity and second as an expression of cultural loss. The sonnet serves a purpose analogous to that of prose quotation for Benjamin, as the medium for a kind of inverted ventriloquism in which one’s own voice speaks through the voice of the other. If the “mass was the agitated veil . . . through [which] Baudelaire saw Paris” (168), the sonnet supplies a mask for Benjamin’s mourning for the impending loss of another city and for a culture facing annihilation in war. This mode of repetition resembles in its large outlines the repetitions and returns of both *To Speculate—on Freud* and *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (if we follow Derrida’s reading). Questions of the death instinct are less important here than the awareness of mortality and loss written in personal and cultural, literary and philosophical terms. The rhythms of repetition, the hidden figures of loss, the work of mourning as a process of painstaking re-viewing: all these suggest that critical discourse must to some degree replicate the work of mourning in order to move on to new modes of thought and speculation. In this respect, criticism replicates a literature still older than *Hamlet*, for the heroes of classical epic had to encounter the specters of the underworld and mourn their dead before they were able to resume authority at home or found new civilizations.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Toni Morrison’s novel, *Beloved*, and Louis Malle’s film, *Au Revoir les Enfants* exemplify the authorial appropriation of cultural loss that propels the process of memory or what Morrison calls “rememory.”

<sup>2</sup> See Charlotte Delbo, *Auschwitz and After* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994); and Jacques Derrida, *Memoires for Paul de Man* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986).

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<sup>3</sup> See Werner Hamacher, Neil Hertz, and Thomas Keenan, eds. *Responses: On Paul de Man's Wartime Journalism* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1989 and Eric L. Santner, *Stranded Objects: Mourning, Memory, and Film in Postwar Germany* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1992?).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Walter Benjamin (1977, 175): “the allegory of the seventeenth century is not convention of expression, but expression of convention” and 232-235. The very distinction between world and allegorical form, in contrast to symbolic form, is what permits allegory to reverse its scenario from one of ruin to one of redemption (159-163, 232-233).

<sup>5</sup> See Georg Lukács (1971). He comments that “the problematic of the form of the novel is here the mirror-image of a world that is out of joint” (17). See also Timothy Bahti's illuminating discussion of *The Theory of the Novel in Allegories of History: Literary Historiography after Hegel* Lukács' history of the novel sketches a complex dialectic between art and reality that can be woven into a philosophy of history and a typology of forms or what Bahti calls the reading of history as literary form and problem (1992, 182). Lukács himself starts with the premise that “Everything that happens is meaningless, fragmentary, and mournful” (1971, 126). Still another “origin” for Lukács is Schiller's *On Naive and Sentimental Poetry*, which traces the loss of immanence and the substitution of a compensatory form of poetry, the elegiac. Benjamin's “The Storyteller” draws upon both Schiller and Lukács.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Benjamin's remarks, “Only Shakespeare was capable of striking sparks from the baroque rigidity of the melancholic. . . . It is only in this prince that melancholy self-absorption attains to Christianity” (1977, 158).

<sup>7</sup> The evidence for Benjamin's knowledge of “Mourning and Melancholia” is inconclusive. Bahti notes that Benjamin used “mourning” and “melancholia” as synonyms, despite the prior publication of Freud's essay. Nevertheless, Benjamin's “argument on mourning. . . approximates Freud's thesis on melancholy as an obsessive unwillingness to give up a dead or departed love-object. . . .” (Bahti 1992, 329-30, n.17). Anselm Haverkamp points out the “advantage” to Freud of “gaining historical pertinence” through Benjamin's work on baroque melancholy. Haverkamp claims that “even if the name is not mentioned, the signs of an encounter with Freud are unmistakable. In the derivation of melancholy from mourning, in the comprehension of its increased, ‘heavy measure of sadness,’ hence in the common root of the work of mourning, Benjamin obviously agrees with Freud” (1996, 11-13). The two disagree on important issues, however, among them the relation between mourning and melancholy, in which Benjamin finds more interdependence than Freud acknowledges.

<sup>8</sup> See Panofsky (1955, 157-171).

<sup>9</sup> For an extensive analysis of this process of reversal, see Bahti (1992, 268-290).

<sup>10</sup> See Freud (1955, XVII: 141).

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Benjamin's passage on *déjà-vu* as an “echo of the future” in *A Berlin Chronicle* (1978, 59).

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<sup>12</sup> See Derrida (1987, 283) and, for a somewhat different argument, Ricoeur (1970, 324-337). Both Derrida and Ricoeur point out that despite their apparently antithetical relation, the pleasure principle and the reality principle are in some respects either interdependent or reconcilable.

<sup>13</sup> *A Berlin Chronicle*, written first, is more autobiographical than *A Berlin Childhood*, which is composed of a series of set pieces about the city.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Benjamin's comment about the spectral figures of people he's known in Berlin: "Noisy, matter-of-fact Berlin, the city of work and the metropolis of business, nevertheless has more, rather than less, than some others, of those places and moments when it bears witness to the dead, shows itself full of dead. . . ." Childhood awareness of those moments, he adds, shows that the child is "as dearly attached . . . to the realm of the dead. . . as to life itself" (28).

<sup>15</sup> Cf. the figure of the procession in 1977, 140.

<sup>16</sup> See Hannah Arendt's "Introduction" to *Illuminations*, 6-7, Benjamin's *Ein Berliner Kindheit um Neunzehnhundert* (1991, IV.1: 302-304), and "Franz Kafka" (1969, 127-134).

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