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# Melancholy Philosophy: Freud and Benjamin

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## Texte intégral

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In his 1917 essay “Mourning and Melancholy”, Freud recognizes two mutually exclusive responses to loss — mourning [*Trauer*] and melancholia [*Melancholie*]. This sharp distinction between the two responses has long since become almost

synonymous with the understanding of a normal versus a pathological reaction to loss, and the clear demarcation between them. At the outset of Freud's article the two responses would seem closely related, but the question of the acceptance and acknowledgement of the loss complicates the picture and draws them apart (244). Both Freud's mourner and melancholic begin with a basic denial of their loss and an unwillingness to recognize it. But soon enough, the mourner, who is reacting in a non-pathological manner, recognizes and responds to the *call of reality*, to let go of the lost-loved object and liberate libidinal desire. This is the point of divergence with the melancholic who remains sunken in his loss, unable to acknowledge and accept the need to cleave and in a self-destructive loyalty to the lost object, internalizes it into his ego, thus furthermore circumscribing the conflict related to the loss. The lost object continues to exist, but as part of the dejected subject, who can no longer clearly define the borders between his own subjectivity and the existence of the lost object within it. The structure of this melancholic response is conceived by Freud as an antithesis to the basic well-being of the ego, the survival of which is put at risk.

2 Benjamin's understanding of loss and its affect provides a challenge for the Freudian fixed distinction between mourning and melancholy. Benjamin's challenge is not direct, namely he does not explicitly criticize Freud's texts, but nevertheless alludes to them in a different manner that has been described in terms such as a "constellation" (Nägele), a "long-distance love affair" (Rickels), dependence (Hanssen) and "intertextuality" (Ley-Roff), hence stressing the indirect character of this relation. I understand the affinity between Benjamin and Freud as that which does not lie in such types of relation, but rather in a certain concern with the name "melancholy" and with Benjamin's desire to unfold it. As he claims in the prologue to his book on the *Trauerspiel* (*The Origin of German Tragic Drama*): "[...] philosophy is — and rightly so — a struggle for the presentation [*Darstellung*] of a limited number of words which always remain the same — a struggle for the presentation of ideas." (37, translation altered): to this, the idea of melancholy seems to be a perfect exemplar, as it is a concept that can almost be conceived as collapsing under the weight of its own history. This historically-laden idea attracts Benjamin so much because of the special way in which the encumbrance of different meanings, opposing implications and astounding similarities has filled it up to its rims. Unfolding and disclosing the "name" melancholy, or as Benjamin would choose to designate it in other contexts, the "idea" of melancholy, is the crux of his exploration of the term. In that sense, it is important for Benjamin to unfold an existing Idea rather than inventing a new one, since he sees the struggle for presentation of the already existing, as what stands in the midst of the philosophical enterprise.

- 1 Clewell suggests that the distinction between mourning and melancholia which is presented so secur [\(...\)](#)

3 The division between mourning and melancholy is completely absent from Benjamin's book on *Trauerspiel*, in which he uses the terms *Trauer* and

*Melancholie* interchangeably, not surrendering to the distinction between normality and pathology which psychoanalysis has made commonplace. Benjamin summons melancholy at the end of the second part of the *Trauerspiel* book in order to reinforce and enrich his discussion of the special type of sadness and mourning expressed in the *Trauerspiel*. In this, he employs melancholy in order to understand mourning and does not use any form of differentiation between them. It is my claim that Benjamin poses a challenge to Freud's overly secure distinction, by providing an alternative located between the two facets of the Freudian division, drawing from both, without being identical with any of them. Benjamin does not view melancholy as an illness to be overcome or cured, but rather as a mood or disposition towards the world. Feeling is transformed into mood, thus overcoming the philosophically problematic libidinal relation to the object in Freud, translating it into an attitude towards the world, rather than a pathology.<sup>1</sup> In this essay, I shall examine three intersection points between the two thinkers, showing in what way Benjamin transforms Freud's psychoanalytic and subjective approach to a philosophical attitude or mood. Benjamin's understanding of melancholy can be examined on two levels — one is his treatment of the baroque *Trauer* and allegory, and the second, is the application of the term to his own work. I will address both these levels by presenting three points in which Benjamin encounters Freud: (1) loss; (2) loyalty and commitment to the object; and (3) work.

## Loss

- 2 Agamben pushes this further to claim that the melancholic actually lost what was never hers to have (...)

4In "Mourning and Melancholy" Freud writes that "Mourning 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" (234). Whereas in melancholy "the object has not perhaps actually died, but has been lost as an object of love [...] In yet other cases one feels justified in maintaining the belief that a loss of this kind has occurred, but one cannot see clearly what it is that has been lost [...] This would suggest that melancholia is in some way related to an object-loss which is withdrawn from consciousness, in contradiction to mourning, in which there is nothing about the loss that is unconscious" (245). In other words, loss stands in the midst of the two diverse reactions, but in the first it is a conscious and locatable one, while in the second the deep feeling and sorrow for the loss, becomes unconscious. A loss has occurred, but it is unclear who or what was in fact lost.<sup>2</sup> Needless to say, this is not to undermine the painful dejection and sorrow of the melancholic — it might even be said that his affliction is even greater, inasmuch as he cannot locate the ground for the pain. Following this analysis, Freud claims that if "in mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself" (246), thus

locating loss in the midst of both mourning and melancholia, albeit on different levels. The mourner's loss seems to have drained out the world itself, stretching out the site of loss to contain everything but the dejected subject. The melancholic on the other hand, experiences a different kind of loss, that of the ego. The loss of the ego that Freud inscribes to the melancholic is the aftermath of the loss of love. It comes about when the lost object is internalized into the pain-stricken ego, consequently splitting it apart, dividing it from the inside and rendering the ego itself lost. The internalization of the loss, presents an interior absence within the ego, turning the latter into the battlefield of separation, which at the end of the process is emptied out. The schizophrenic divide within the ego, creates a space in which the ambivalence and hatred originally produced with regard to the loss, is turned towards the self. The pathological identification with the lost object is thus the ground upon which the ego attacks itself.

5Several portrayals of loss can be identified in Benjamin's *Trauerspiel* book. The book as a whole deals with *Trauer* and is therefore at its outset always-already a discussion of loss and the response to it. However, more closely related to melancholia than to mourning, this loss is not clearly accounted for in the book, or at least not specifically located. Nevertheless allusions to it are scattered everywhere and its symptoms — such as the melancholic's distaste for life, his detachment from the world, etc. — are all the more present in the plays and their configuration. Loss, as I read it, is in fact, the condition of the possibility of *Trauerspiel*, which is structured as abounding responses to this loss in its subject matter. Thus, as in Freud, loss occupies both the condition and the arena of its effect.

- 3 The question of legibility and loss as its condition remains central to Benjamin throughout his wo [\(...\)](#)

6Loss as a condition of possibility is present quite strongly in the actual subject matter of the book. Benjamin discusses the conditions under which a work of art can be criticized or matter can be the material of philosophical work, under terms of loss. He writes of the *Trauerspiel* plays that “from the very beginning... [they] are set up for that erosion [*Zersetzung*] by criticism which befell them in the course of time.... Criticism means the mortification of works... the settlement [*Ansiedlung*] of knowledge in dead... [works]” (181-2). The discussion of death and loss here becomes the condition of legibility of the works in this case the *Trauerspiel*. Terms like erosion, death of *Schein* and ruins, all allude to the extinction of the material aspect of the work. In order to approach it critically, something in the work must be lost. This loss can be understood in sundry meanings, to all of which Benjamin's use of the term “mortification” is crucial. The activity of criticism as mortification positions it first and foremost in the material. In states of erosion, ruin or degradation, something is exposed in the material, opening it up for the critical gaze. Mortification locates truth in the material, and furthermore — in dead material, that is, in the material that has lost life and has become mere material. The work must be lost as a pre-condition to reading it.

“Mortification” should be understood here as what befalls the work or as what the critic is bringing upon it. Following that, the “body” of the work, should be understood literally: the work has a living body, and when it dies and life flows out of it, it remains a corpse, devoid of life, ready for its autopsy. Benjamin also alludes to the special position of the *Trauerspiel* specifically, which is not only a corpse but a corpse from the moment of its birth. In other words, what is so exemplary about the *Trauerspiel* for Benjamin is its constant state of death, or put differently — its constant internal reference to being lost. From their very beginning, these plays are already in a state of decomposition and putrescence. It is as if the *Trauerspiel* was a genre stillborn. This points to the fact that Benjamin’s choice of the *Trauerspiel* is not accidental but exemplifies his interest in this extreme case of a living-corpse or living-dead.<sup>3</sup>

7Understanding loss as a condition of possibility appears in the *Trauerspiel* book in another image, that of emptiness. Freud’s claim that the mourner sees the world as empty after experiencing the loss of his loved-object is echoed in Benjamin’s discussion of the baroque religious ambient as well as in the *Trauerspiel* itself. Benjamin notes that the great baroque playwrights were Lutherans and were thus located in the midst of an antinomic relation to the everyday — a relation which reverberates in the plays they write. Lutheranism denies “good works” since those cannot be dependant upon for redemption. Only external grace which would come about only through faith and not deeds, could bear redemption with it (*Trauerspiel* 138). This creed empties-out the everyday life and deeds, since they become meaningless in terms of redemption. Conceiving the everyday as futile and trifling has produced melancholy in great men, writes Benjamin, mentioning even Luther himself as having suffered from melancholy and a “heaviness of soul”. Hamlet as the exemplary figure of Lutheranism also contains a strong protest against it in his melancholy. Benjamin writes of Hamlet that his words “contain both the philosophy of Wittenberg and a protest against it. [...] Human actions were deprived of all value. Something new arose: an empty world [...] For those who looked deeper saw the scene of their existence as a rubbish heap of partial, inauthentic actions” (*Trauerspiel* 138-9). Here Benjamin combines the empty world Freud ascribes to the mourner, with a melancholic reaction. The meaninglessness of the world empties it out, causing baroque men, playwrights and Hamlet as a paradigm — to sink into melancholy. In this combination between mourning and melancholy, one can say the empty world of the mourner, has been internalized into the ego, causing it to empty out as well. The empty world stands as a ruin of meaning inhabited by nothing significant or redemptive; it is lost.

8The issue of the abstract nature of the melancholic loss and specifically its non-intentional character is crucial in Benjamin and arises in various contexts. First and foremost it appears in the prologue to the *Trauerspiel* book where Benjamin writes that “truth is the death of intention” (36). This statement is a complex and obscure one and it embodies one of the most essential attributes of Benjamin’s special object-relations. Elsewhere Benjamin explains the relationship between

sadness and intention as follows: “sadness [...] would be boundless, were it not for the presence of that intentionality which Goethe deems an essential component of every work of art, and which manifests itself with an assertiveness that fends off mourning. A mourning-game [*Trauer-Spiel*], in short” (Selected Writings, Vol. 2, 373). Here, sadness and mourning stand as opposites to intention, and intention has the capability to fend them off. This citation parallels the characterization of the melancholic — the fact that there is no object to which one can direct his sorrow, turns the melancholic’s eyes inward in a Nietzschean gesture, only to find his own lost conscious. It seems that being intentional is what blocks and produces a border for otherwise infinite and boundless sadness. Intentionality has the power to encapsulate sorrow, to set it within the threshold of the intended object, thus stopping it from expanding boundlessly and curelessly. Benjamin’s notion of non-intentionality presents a certain type of object relations which should be maintained with the critical object — the object of truth.

## Loyalty and Commitment

- 4 The destructiveness is come upon by Freud through his analysis of the extreme self-reproach of the (...)
- 5 For a compelling discussion of the ethical dimensions of melancholy, see Comay.
- 6 Freud writes in a letter to Binswanger who has just lost a son, about his own loss of his daughter (...)

9The second point of intersection with Freud’s text is that of the deep loyalty and commitment the melancholic confers on his loss. The melancholic is establishing identification with the lost object, by allowing it into the confines of the ego and turning it into an integral part of him. As Laplanche writes with such insight, “Far from being my kernel, it is the other implanted in me, the metabolized product of the other in me: forever an “internal foreign body” (256). This laden state of destructive internalization, I argue, is an embodiment of the endless commitment and responsibility the melancholic feels towards his object. For the melancholic, the only way to keep the object is to destroy it.<sup>4</sup> It seems thus that the model of loyalty Freud is suggesting is that of extreme destructiveness. Not only does the melancholic patient not acknowledge the loss up to a pathological level, but he also destroys the lost object in the attempt to keep it. The devouring of the object into the self is the means by which the subject tries to keep the object from being lost.<sup>5</sup> The loved object takes flight into the sanctuary of the ego, in order not to be extinguished. No mourning is possible here, the work of parting is blocked in melancholia, writes Freud, since there is a basis of ambivalence that wishes to hold the object and to let go of it at the same time.<sup>6</sup> Freud advocates killing off the traces of attachment to the other, as a means to reestablishing mental health and returning to life. This demonstrates that Freud professes that a subject can in fact exist without traces of what he has lost, or in other words, the

healthy subject for him is capable of repudiating attachments to lost others (Clewell 60). This avowal would turn extremely problematic in Benjamin who, I argue, understands the work undertaken in mourning not as an overcoming and effacement of loss, but rather as the deepest articulation of its everlasting traces.

10The work of mourning can be seen not as a healthy response, but rather as an egotistic one. The selfish aspect in mourning introduces a narcissistic self-love that is related to extreme subjectivity. Freud's text suggests, therefore, that the event of loss is an opportunity for understanding that "the people we love are imminently replaceable and that we necessarily fail to appreciate exactly how other they are [...] in this model [...] the loss of a love object is understood as a temporary disruption of the mourner's narcissism" (Clewell 45-6). At the other end of mourning, stands melancholia, with its overwhelming commitment to loss, which takes over the psyche at the price of giving up the well-being of the self and the ego. The melancholic act of internalization circumscribes the loss and sacrifices the self for its sake. The economy of the self becomes marginal in relation to the responsibility towards that which was lost. The absence cannot be replaced by anything since no symbolic mediation will ever be sufficient, not even memory. The melancholic thus gives up the external world as a source for the construction of the self, and is destructively satisfied by his own split tormented interiority, that becomes an expression for his endless loyalty.

11Benjamin discusses the dialectics of loyalty when he describes the figure of the courtier in the *Trauerspiel*. The courtier betrays the prince, and instead maintains loyalty to the objects of kingship: "His unfaithfulness to man is matched by a loyalty to these things to the point of being absorbed in contemplative devotion to them... Loyalty is completely appropriate only to the relationship of man to the world of things. The latter knows no higher law, and loyalty knows no object to which it might belong more exclusively than the world of things" (*Trauerspiel* 156-7). The courtier betrays the prince at the moment of crisis, when "the parasites abandon the ruler, without any pause for reflection, and go over to the other side." The courtier reveals an almost inconceivable unscrupulousness which indicates a dismal and melancholic submission to an order of material constellations rather than that of human morals (*Trauerspiel* 156), thus choosing material objects upon the prince. The example of the courtier functions here to illuminate the distinct position of loyalty in relation to the ethical realm. Loyalty cannot function as the highest law in the realm of human relationships, insofar as it cannot encompass an ethical relation. In this realm, loyalty cannot encompass and embody an ethical relation; it can only become possible when turned upon something *lifeless*: only in the world of things can human devotion function as the highest possible law — it is only then that responsibility loses its ethical nature and turns into blind devotion. But the choice to be invested in non-living things immerses the courtier in and subjects him to the earthly and material, thus detaching him from the human world. These two mutually exclusive options, the material and the human, present the faithlessness to the prince as the obverse of the faithfulness to things. The latter being a dead realm, a realm of despair and

immobility, but nevertheless, the only one which can contain meaning (even subjective arbitrary meaning). In opposition to meaning which is fleeting and elusive, the presence of objects is irrefutable and dependable. However, this deep tenacity also has a flip side in which utter loyalty becomes entangled with betrayal (*Trauerspiel* 157). There is a dialectics inherent in loyalty: the deepest devotion is always saturated with a secret wish to take over the thing, to take over meaning. In that sense it is very similar to the destructive loyalty of the melancholic that, filled with commitment and devotion, destroys the object within the confines of the melancholic consciousness. The objects are also an eternal reminder of the emptiness that remains after all meaning and faith is gone. The power of this emptiness lies in its capacity to be filled with meaning again. The image of the world of things is an image of loss, but a loss which has a potential, albeit partial, for recuperation.

- 7 These two extremes can be seen in two of the figures Benjamin is occupied with elsewhere: the coll [\(...\)](#)
- 8 This can be found especially in the early “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man” (*Select* [\(...\)](#))

12 Understanding loyalty means understanding a feeling towards the object, be it any one two extremes: complete love and devotion, or the secret wish to take over. In both cases, the object does not remain what it was, and is transformed into something completely different which is couched in the intense feeling towards it, which in one case empties it out, and in the other tears it away from everything that is not complete and total love.<sup>7</sup> The place from which Benjamin is approaching his objects of philosophical work, is from within such commitment which stands between love and destruction, devotion and a take-over. The melancholic commitment to the loss, including its problematic sides, receives echo in Benjamin’s philosophical and historical enterprise.<sup>8</sup>

## Work

- 9 It is interesting that in his 1917 “Mourning and Melancholia,” Freud is stressing the element of w [\(...\)](#)

13 The third and last intersection I want to construct between Benjamin and Freud is that of the concept of work [in the sense of *Arbeit* and not *Werk*]. This might be the most important element in my discussion, since it illuminates the way in which Freud’s argument for pathology may turn to be philosophically and critically productive in Benjamin. If the notion of commitment was derived from the melancholic stance, Benjamin draws the concept of work from the mourner. The *Trauerarbeit* [work of mourning] is what Freud defines as the servitude that the mourner performs in the long and intense process of detachment from the lost object (note here the interesting relation that can be constructed between *Trauer-arbeit* and *Trauer-spiel*, work and play).<sup>9</sup> After the call of reality has been

accepted, there is work to be done. This is the point in which the reality-principle takes over and directs the mourner to the important work of detachment which is aimed at living once again, freed from mourning. The long and arduous process of the work of mourning maintains the lost object within the psyche, gradually accepting the fact that it is indeed lost and working a way out of the attachment to it. The work is composed of a slow and painful working through of each of the memories and strands attaching the dejected subject to the object, which Freud defines as a thousand links (256). The detachment from the loss is done thereupon, through an extremely meticulous work of untangling the attachment, which is largely composed of memories.

14 However difficult and even unbearable this work may be, it nevertheless ends with a complete loosening of all points of attachment to free the subject so that “the ego becomes free and uninhibited again” (245). In other words, the cutting of the strands of attachment is dictated by the voice of reality, so that the work of mourning is directed towards life and life-energy. This is the point in which the principle of life takes over and directs the mourner to focus himself on the important work of detachment and uninhibited life. The aim of the process of detachment has thus, nothing to do with the object itself, but with the subject which has to be freed from it. The object here is only a problem that we should push aside in order for reality to prevail. “Mourning impels the ego,” Freud writes, “to give up the object by declaring the object to be dead and offering the ego the inducement of continuing to live” (256). Evidently, this is a point from which the melancholic is as far as can be. Not only does he not detach himself from the object, but he internalizes it — consequently *preventing the possibility to detach*. When the object becomes part of him, such work of mourning is no longer feasible. Lacking the necessary distance and blurring its borders with the subject — the lost object is left to decay within the melancholic, without the possibility of disposal. Freud indeed mentions the possibility of work in melancholy but neglects it immediately, since being incorporated in the melancholic and divested of its independent and external status, the object is rendered unworkable (257). Whether it is because the loss is un-identifiable or because the lost object was already incorporated into the melancholic subject himself — no work can be executed, since the loss is itself lost.

- 10 “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man” can provide a good place to explain what such an [\(...\)](#)
- 11 Note the curious relationship between the “Trauerarbeit” and “Trauerspiel”: work of mourning and p [\(...\)](#)

15 I argue that Benjamin combines melancholy and its deep acknowledgement and responsibility towards loss, together with work — and more specifically with philosophical work. Thereupon, Benjamin does not view work as what should be directed towards a detachment from the object, aimed at rendering it absent, so that the subject will be become free again. Rather, work is aimed at presenting the object, giving it a voice and consequently redeeming it. Lagache’s definition of the

work of mourning as “killing death,” (486) will not suit us here. It is not Life that is inaugurated, but rather *lifelessness*. Benjamin is transferring the concept of work from the realm of mourning to that of meaning, thus the work of expression will be a deepening of the loss, an extended deadening of the object. The object will not be disposed of but presented and given a voice,<sup>10</sup> and thus saved. Philosophy is not waiting to return to life after detaching itself from the lost object. Rather, it comes to its fullness from within this deadening. In other words, the work Benjamin is proposing is that of rendering the object *present, and not absent* (as the mourner does). It is a work that lacks neither the pathology of melancholia, nor the normality of mourning — it is a sad work,<sup>11</sup> in that it is still, almost heavy, lacking the libidinal-life energy, which makes melancholy so destructive, and mourning so easily parting.

16I have now reached the crux of my talk. I will now present the other end of loss in Benjamin — not the one standing as a pre-condition to the work of loyalty and responsibility, but that which lies at the completion of this work: a loss which is not an effect of *work*, but of *rest*.

17In contrast to Freud’s concept of work, which effaces all traces of loss, Benjamin work very distinctly harbors and intimates such evocations. Benjamin conception of work in the preface to the *Trauerspiel* book, is clearly not concerned with the eradication of the traces of loss and destruction, on the contrary — it emphasizes them. In his description of the mosaic as an image of the philosophical idea, Benjamin writes that the latter’s particles are always glued together in a manifest manner. “And the brilliance of presentation depends as much on... [the] value [of the fragments of thought] as the brilliance of the mosaic does on the quality of the glass paste” (TS 29). Not only is the puissance of the picture not affected by its fragmentation and ruin-like quality, but it is intensified by just that. The glue becomes a condition for the forcefulness of the picture. It is this “failure” in the picture, which harbors its strength, and it is the traces of that which was destructed and lost, which present themselves in the truth. There is never a complete closure or concealment of the loss, but the philosophical work and its result, constantly bear it within them. The product of the philosophical work, the idea, which is produced from the condition of loss, will always bear its traces (Butler 468). This strengthens my claim for the work of presentation and expression instead of that of detachment. Benjamin is therefore not overcoming loss as he does not mourn, but works through it and is engaged with the loss itself, and the presentation *of* this loss.

- 12 I am indebted to Friedlander’s book for numerous ideas that profoundly concern Benjamin’s writings ([...](#))

18One of the most captivating implications Freud offers in his text is the illuminating insinuation that the melancholic’s lost object is *half-alive*. It is an object already lost and thereby not living, but is not yet completely dead since it still exists in one way or another, within the melancholic consciousness. It is thus

half-alive, one *buried-alive*. The pathology of the melancholic state is that it cannot let go, unable or unwilling to part and bring itself to rest. However, rest is also absent from the object itself, which hovers between life and death, powerless in the face of the destructive melancholic energy clinging to it. Relocating Freud's account in the realm of meaning under Benjamin's transformation of the pathology of the lost object, the terminology of stillness or rest might gain auxiliary meaning. Not only does stillness arrest the destructive agitation, but it also *brings the object to rest*.<sup>12</sup> The philosophical work of expression, the work that presents the object in its fullness while being devoid of intention, is also that which brings it to rest. However, bringing to rest is not meant here in the sense of burial that would conceal the object from sight in order to mollify the detachment — rather, it is bringing to rest in the sense of deadening or deepening death, and bringing to a complete rest. A complete philosophical expression would mean exhausting and draining from life, thus removing the object from the sphere of being half-alive, and deadening it. In other words, presenting meaning does not imply endowing the object with life or rebuilding its ruins, but rather bringing to rest in completing the process of its extinction. Bringing to rest therefore, is closely related to actualizing and securing meaning, which are both based on the cessation of life or its draining into congealed significance. This significance is attained by *retaining* the loss, rather than by overcoming it.

19Bringing to rest moreover requires detaching, but in a very different sense than the detachment of mourning. The work of mourning entails cautiously reviewing every memory and point of attachment to the object. There is something very *personal* about this type of work. The subject is working through his own strands of attachment to the loss. This goes hand in hand with the subjectivity that stands in the midst of the psychoanalytic project. The aim of the process of detachment has nothing to do with the object itself, but with the *subject* which has to be freed from it. The object here is only a problem that we should push aside in order for reality to prevail. The Benjaminian project takes a different direction altogether. The detachment which occupies an important place in the process of expression is intended towards freeing the *object itself*, bringing it to rest, and not freeing a subject from it. The mourner is detaching in order to make the object absent, whereas Benjamin detaches through the process of expression in order to make the object present. Consequently, detachment here means presentation and not concealment or suppression. Benjamin work has a strong commitment to knowledge and articulation of the object — and in that way is putting it to rest and comes to terms with it.

20In that sense, loss stands at both ends. It is a condition to the work of expression, since it functions as the condition to making the object legible in the first place. At the second end stands loss as a state in which the object is fully expressed and drained of life (in Benjamin's words). Bringing to a rest, deadening or burying, are also forms of loss. All potential of life and potentiality in the object are lost at the end of the process, but this is the only way to completely express it "at a standstill". Benjamin situates his philosophical work at the core of loss, and

calls for the understanding and the acknowledgement of that loss, together with a strong commitment and work it requires. Hence, loss which was the precondition to philosophical legibility and work is likewise present as the outcome of this work. “All purposeful manifestation of life... have their end *not in life* but in the expression of its nature, in the representation of its significance” (Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, Vol. 1, 255, my emphasis). That said, the work of philosophical expression takes place at the end of the object’s life, at the point of its utmost loss. There, philosophical work imparts rest.

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## Notes

**1** Clewell suggests that the distinction between mourning and melancholia which is presented so securely by Freud, is also questioned by him. She claims that in order to part, we first need to identify, and in that sense mourning becomes the condition for melancholia. This claim does not cancel out the distinction, but rather positions the two responses or structures as working together (61).

**2** Agamben pushes this further to claim that the melancholic actually lost what was never hers to have (thus maintaining a relationship with the imaginary). In this claim, we are confronted with a situation in which not only the object is lost, but the loss itself is lost as well. The difficulty to overcome such a loss stands exactly in its being without locus, in the inability to direct any "work" whatsoever to anything.

**3** The question of legibility and loss as its condition remains central to Benjamin throughout his work and reaches its most lucid formulation in his last texts on

history and the Arcades Project (Specifically in convolute N).

[4](#) The destructiveness is come upon by Freud through his analysis of the extreme self-reproach of the melancholic. Freud understands it as something that is actually not directed towards the self, but towards the lost object. However, since this object was internalized and became part of the self – the criticism and aggressiveness is now turned towards the patient himself. The attempt to murder or annihilate the other, actually becomes self-murder, or suicide – since that other is now part of the self. Consequently, self killing is only possible when the subject turns itself into an object, otherwise it would oppose the most basic will to life in Freud (252).

[5](#) For a compelling discussion of the ethical dimensions of melancholy, see Comay.

[6](#) Freud writes in a letter to Binswanger who has just lost a son, about his own loss of his daughter Sophie: “We know that acute mourning resulting from such a loss will come to an end but that we shall remain inconsolable and shall never find a substitute. Whatever occupies this place, even if it does so completely, *will always remain something else*. And, to tell the truth, *it is right that it should be so*. It is the only way we have of perpetuating a love *we do not wish to give up*” (Cited in Lussier, 671, my emphasis).

[7](#) These two extremes can be seen in two of the figures Benjamin is occupied with elsewhere: the collector and the allegorist. Each presents one of these options of understanding loyalty. See Pensky (240-6).

[8](#) This can be found especially in the early “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man” (*Selected Writings*, Vol. 1, 62-74); *The Arcades Project*; and “On the Concept of History” (*Selected Writings*, Vol. 4, 389-400).

[9](#) It is interesting that in his 1917 “Mourning and Melancholia,” Freud is stressing the element of work in the process of mourning, whereas in his “Draft G [Melancholia]” (Standard Edition, Vol. 1, Extracts from the Fliess papers, 200-206), written probably in 1895, he emphasizes the element of longing over that of work (200). It seems that in this earlier essay, the escape from such longing was not yet evident to Freud, thus situating mourning and melancholia as much closer to one another than in the later essay.

[10](#) “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man” can provide a good place to explain what such an expression would mean, specifically in what sense Benjamin is aiming at expression of the object itself, or giving it a voice by man, in the phase before the fall, after which this expression is transformed into empty chatter (*Selected Writings*, Vol. 1, 62-74).

[11](#) Note the curious relationship between the “Trauerarbeit” and “Trauerspiel”: work of mourning and play of mourning.

[12](#) I am indebted to Friedlander's book for numerous ideas that profoundly concern Benjamin's writings as well as Rousseau's, especially that of bringing meaning to a "rest".

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## Pour citer cet article

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