

To Mourn is Permissible

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As I write this, the death toll from the COVID-19 virus in the United States has passed 100,000.¹ For many, death from a viral pandemic on this massive scale has brought to mind the historical parallel of the Spanish Flu pandemic of 1918. That pandemic—almost exactly 100 years before the current one—lingered and had repeated outbreaks in the years following. For psychoanalysts, the most famous death from the Spanish Flu was that of Sophie Freud, the daughter of Sigmund Freud, in January of 1920. Freud wrote many letters informing friends and colleagues of her death, and they take on a variety of tones depending upon the recipient, but all are marked by Freud’s characteristic resigned pessimism. Perhaps the most striking letter of the collection is the letter to his mother, Amalie Freud, which he wrote a day after the death. The letter closes as follows: “I hope you will take it calmly; tragedy after all has to be accepted. But to mourn this splendid, vital girl who was so happy with her husband and children is of course permissible.”² This closing passage is odd, and it may frustrate our attempts to draw lessons from it that could guide our reaction to the current pandemic. Freud’s letter raises the question: why would anyone need permission to mourn? And I will raise a more ominous second question: I said that the death of Freud’s daughter is perhaps the best known of the 1918 pandemic, but can you name another?

The first question immediately turns our attention to Freud’s essay “Mourning and Melancholia” (1917e). In this metapsychological essay, Freud attempts to give an account of “the work of mourning.”³ Mourning, in contrast with its counterpart melancholia, or depression, is a normal response to the loss of a loved one, not a pathological condition. That Freud calls it

“work” suggests that it is a difficult task. He explains his suggestion in this way: “reality-testing has shown that the loved object no longer exists, and it proceeds to demand that all libido shall be withdrawn from its attachments to that object. This demand arouses understandable opposition—it is a matter of general observation that people never willingly abandon a libidinal position, not even, indeed, when a substitute is already beckoning to them.”⁴ The argument is clear: death has deprived the bereaved of a loved one, a “libidinal object” in psychoanalytic vocabulary. Undoubtedly, this loved one was loved, they were the object of libidinal investment because while alive, he or she provided satisfactions and pleasures to the mourner. The loved one has been lost in the real world, but the work of mourning consists of giving the object up mentally. That is to say, the unconscious, which knows neither time nor negation, will continue to look for satisfactions from the loved object and will only slowly release the libido that was attached to that object.

There seems to be little to dispute, here; Freud’s description of mourning is coherent and reasonable. But Russell Grigg, in a brilliant essay, “Remembering & Forgetting,” critiques and revises Freud’s theory.⁵ Grigg summarizes his dissatisfaction with Freud’s model this way:

Freud says something very odd about mourning in his classic paper on the topic. You know the thesis: in mourning each of the memories in which libido is bound to the object is brought up and hypercathected so that the libido can detach itself from it and the ego can be “free and uninhibited again” at the end of the process. I’ve argued against this claim: it is such a manifestly untrue remark that I find it curious that Freud should ever have made it. It is obvious to the most casual observation that mourning always leaves traces behind, in the form of often painful memories of a loved one. . . . And yet, according to Freud, mourning involves a process of abandonment of one’s attachment to the memories of the lost object and, as slow and painful as this process may be, there will be a return to the status quo ante.⁶

Grigg’s summary of Freud is accurate. My question is whether it is a bit tendentious. Grigg says, “what I argue is that at the end of grieving the lost person is not forgotten but commemorated. And it’s this commemoration that I want to speak of.”⁷ Grigg goes on to say that Freud himself

later realized that “a lost love object is never completely abandoned.”⁸ He quotes from a 1929 letter that Freud wrote to Ludwig Binswanger: “we know that the acute sorrow we feel after such a loss will run its course but also that we will remain inconsolable and will never find a substitute. No matter what should come to take its place, even should it fill that place completely, it remains something else. *And that is how it should be.* It is the only way of perpetuating a love that we do not want to abandon.”⁹ Grigg argues that over the course of some nine years after his daughter’s death, Freud came to realize that lost love objects are never really abandoned, but commemorated.

I have no problem with Grigg’s discussion of commemoration. It is an addition to our psychoanalytic knowledge of mourning and a well-needed shift in emphasis. I would simply quibble with the reading of Freud that Grigg undertakes to set up his argument. I do not think that the withdrawal of libidinal investment in a lost love object is the same as forgetting, nor do I think that Freud claims that it is. People who have lost a loved one are indeed, eventually, able to love again. Insofar as we adopt the libido theory to describe this process, the libido that was attached to the love object must, indeed, be freed by the process of mourning to be redirected elsewhere. Grigg’s assumption is that the withdrawal of libido from the object is the same as withdrawal of investment in a memory trace, a kind of forgetting. Of course, the once-loved object is not forgotten. For example, what is it that allows a widower, years after his wife has died, to be on a first date with a new potential partner and to say, without a breakdown or any apparent sadness, “I was married once; she died”? That he is able to say this does not mean that he loved or loves his wife any less. He may cherish her memory but he is ready to redirect his libido. The question, then, is: what is the process that allows us, through mourning, to reduce a loved one to a “mere” memory?

Grigg may have intended his critique of Freud as a kind of straw man argument to set up his consideration of commemoration, which is exactly what this process involves. Grigg fairly summarizes Freud's description of the process, which I quote: "each single one of the memories and expectations in which the libido is bound to the object is brought up and hypercatheted, and detachment of the libido is accomplished in respect of it."¹⁰ This is the familiar onrush of memories that follows the death of a loved one, of which I will have more to say later. The process is a kind of retroaction, or *Nachträglichkeit*. Events that were insignificant at the time are, after the death of the loved one, brought up again, one by one, and reexperienced as traumatic losses.

In common parlance, each of these individual memories must be brought up again and "worked through," by which we mean that the emotion attached to them must be experienced and then given up. This is *not* the same as forgetting. What is left behind after this process is precisely not emotion, but memory. But how is this accomplished?

Freud gives an answer in the latter half of his paper when he is considering melancholia, which he assumes follows a similar process to that of mourning. He wants to consider melancholia (and by extension, mourning) from a topographical point of view, and he asks in what mental systems the work takes place: "the quick and easy answer is that 'the unconscious (thing-)presentation of the object has been abandoned by the libido'. In reality, however, this presentation is made up of innumerable single impressions (or unconscious traces of them), and this withdrawal of libido is not a process that can be accomplished in a moment, but must certainly, as in mourning, be one in which progress is long-drawn-out and gradual."¹¹ This brings us to a well-worn argument of Jacques Lacan's. To account for the working of mental representation and memory, Freud habitually refers to *Wortvorstellungen*, word-presentations,

and *Sachvorstellungen*, thing-presentations. Some, like Jean Laplanche, take the reference to thing-presentations to mean that there are prelinguistic *ideas* in the mind, “things,” that only later have word-presentations attached to them. Lacan says no. The German word *Sache*, he argues—correctly, I might add—does not mean “thing” in the sense of “object.” It means the thing under discussion, the matter, or the affair. In German, the question “*Was ist die Sache?*” means “What’s the issue?” And “*Da ist noch eine Sache*” means “That’s another matter,” in the sense of “thing to be discussed.” In Lacan’s view, *Sachvorstellungen* are not just some prelinguistic ideas, they are already signifiers.¹² The German word for thing in the sense of “object,” on the other hand, is not *die Sache*, it is *das Ding*. And Lacan gives it a special status.

What is crucial in Freud’s description of the process of mourning and melancholia in the passage just quoted is that it is one of the few passages in all of Freud’s writings where he does not write *Sachvorstellung*, but rather *Dingvorstellung*. James Strachey, in the Standard Edition, treats the two terms as synonymous. But following Lacan’s argument, *Sachen* are not things in the sense of brute, real objects. They are already conditioned by the signifier. As Lacan puts it, rather poetically, “the straw of words only appears to us as straw insofar as we have separated it from the grain of things, and it was first the straw which bore that grain.”¹³ He goes on to say, “*Sache* and *Wort* are, therefore, closely linked; they form a couple. *Das Ding* is found somewhere else.”¹⁴

But where? To explore this question, we must ask—bearing in mind, always, that it is the stalk of words that bears the fruit of things—what happens when words (*Wörter*) are attached to things (*Sachen*)? To answer this question, we can modify Lacan’s standard formula for metaphor¹⁵:

$$\frac{Wort}{Sache} \cdot \frac{Sachvorstellung}{das Ding} \rightarrow Wortvorstellung \left(\frac{1}{signified} \right)$$

In our regular use of language, we are familiar with words referring to things (*Sachen*). Because the straw has already borne that grain, we do not usually acknowledge that *Sachen* “refer to” something beyond. In the metaphorizing process of language, we create word-presentations (*Wortvorstellungen*) that signify. In the fractional notation in the middle of the formula, the *Sachvorstellung*, the linguistic counterpart to the *Wort*, refers to, or takes the place of, *das Ding*, which is forever lost to language. The formula for metaphor shows how *das Ding*, on the right side of the formula, becomes *signified*, an element of language. When we enter into language, we lose direct access to *das Ding*. In Lacanian terms, we lose access to the real.

Why, then, is it of crucial importance that in this passage from “Mourning and Melancholia,” Freud deliberately uses the term *Dingvorstellung*? It is because, as he says in a passage quoted above, “reality-testing has shown that the loved object no longer exists.” The loved object has been lost in the real. He labels his description of the process a “quick and easy” answer because it is a kind of shorthand. The unconscious “(*Ding-*) *Vorstellung*” of the object has been lost, and he puts parentheses around *Ding* as a kind of scare quotes because he knows that *das Ding* is not a part of the *Vorstellung*, the unconscious presentation. *Das Ding*, weighty and massive, had already been lost with the entry into language. But with the death of a loved one, it is lost in the real: a real human person has been taken by death. After using his equivalent of scare quotes to warn us of his “quick and easy” formulation, Freud corrects himself: “in reality, however, this presentation is made up of innumerable single impressions (or unconscious traces of them).” The process of mourning, then, is one of calling up each of “the innumerable single impressions” of the lost loved object and realizing that each of these impressions is now only a signified. No longer can we assume the existence of a real Thing beyond it. To be even

more precise, we may note that Lacan calls our relation to *das Ding* an extimate one. This word, familiar to Lacanians, refers to what is most interior and intimate to us and at the same time, most foreign precisely because it is inaccessible to language—not intimate, then, but extimate. And in the *Ethics* seminar, Lacan refers to “the intimate exteriority, or ‘extimacy,’ that is the Thing.”¹⁶ The process of mourning, then, is one of giving up our most intimate relation to *das Ding*. It is not a process of forgetting, but of slowly coming to realize and to accept that there is only remembering. After the painful process is over, at some point in the future, we will be able to say, “I was married once” or “I lost a child.” There is no doubt that we will bear cherished and painful memories, but these memories no longer bear the weight of the real. Instead, they signify.

I do not believe that I really disagree with Grigg because I do not believe that Grigg really disagrees with Freud. The problem is that Freud emphasizes an economic process of detaching libido from the loved object so that it is free to be assigned elsewhere, and that does sound callous and heartless (Freud always falters when he takes the economic viewpoint). But what he is really talking about is committing the loved one to memory, as we commit them to the earth in the ritual of burial. And this is what Grigg calls commemoration.

Grigg emphasizes that there is something particular about our rites of commemoration. They are public. They are ritualized. Our commemoration must be “registered in the Other.”¹⁷ The loved one is memorialized in “signifiers lodged in the Other.”¹⁸ This is, strangely, the same kind of authorization that Lacan speaks of in Seminar V in reference to jokes. A joke cannot, in fact, be a private bit of wordplay that tickles and satisfies only one person. A joke is only a joke, Lacan says, insofar as it is “confirmed,” “ratified,” and “authenticated” by the Other.¹⁹ The Other must add the joke to its store of signifiers. Mourning, likewise, is not simply a private grief. We seek recognition of our pain, and our pain is validated by the Other. This helps to explain Freud’s

seemingly cryptic remark to his mother. He hopes that she will take the death “calmly” and “accept” the tragedy. In other words, he hopes that her economic process of working off whatever libido she had invested in her granddaughter is not too much for her. But to do the public work of mourning is not only “permissible” (by the Other), it is encouraged.

With mourning as commemoration on our minds, then, we can turn to our second question. Why do we remember virtually no one who was lost in the 1918 Spanish Flu pandemic? It would be easy to say that with the passage of time, the dead have been forgotten. But what is more striking is that they were not even remembered at the time. To be sure, in every family who lost one or several souls to the pandemic, there was grief, there was mourning, there were rituals. But the pandemic itself, death on such a massive scale, was barely commemorated, if it was at all. During our current pandemic, many commentators have mentioned the 1939 short novel by Katherine Anne Porter, *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*.²⁰ This work, indeed, takes the 1918 pandemic as its backdrop. But can you think of another novel, poem, or song that memorializes the pandemic? Even in history books, the 1918 pandemic is sparsely treated, and the histories we do have are mostly documentary and not narrative. There seems to have been a lapse in mourning. This does not bode well for us. We have just acknowledged that we mourn publicly. But the question is, can the public mourn?

It may be because individual deaths occur privately, in houses and hospitals, that we have no capacity to mourn the total number of the dead. A rolling pandemic that spreads across the world and stretches out over many months is not an “event.” What is missing is a trigger for the onrush of memories that I referred to before. Freud’s description of the process is quoted above: “each single one of the memories and expectations in which the libido is bound to the object is brought up and hypercathected.” Lacan describes the process further in Seminar VI, where he

compares it to foreclosure in psychosis. In psychosis, what is foreclosed in the symbolic returns in the real. In mourning, what is foreclosed in the real (the deceased is really gone) returns in the imaginary:

What does the work of mourning consist of? . . .
 . . . The subject succumbs to the vertigo of pain, and finds himself in a certain relationship to the missing object . . . whose disappearance is causing him pain. It is clear that the object here has an existence that is all the more absolute because it no longer corresponds to anything that exists.

In other words, mourning, which involves a veritable, intolerable loss to human beings, gives rise in them to a hole in reality [*réel*]. The relationship in question is the converse of the one that I proposed with the term *Verwerfung* [foreclosure] when I told you that what is rejected in the symbolic reappears in reality. . . .

The signifier finds its place here. And at the same time it cannot find its place because this signifier cannot be articulated at the level of the Other. Owing to this, and as in psychosis, all the images that have to do with the phenomena of mourning proliferate in its place.²¹

What Freud and Lacan note about mourning is that it is characterized by a proliferation of painful memories and images that must be attached to signifiers to be tamed and calmed. Can such a subjective process be undertaken by the public? Can we, in America, mourn the deaths of 100,000, a number that is sure to climb higher?

There is at least one description of mourning on such a grand scale. In “The Crisis of the Mind,” an essay written in 1919—not in response to the Spanish Flu, admittedly, but to World War I—Paul Valéry writes in terms strikingly similar to Freud’s and Lacan’s about a proliferation of memories and images:

An extraordinary shudder ran through the marrow of Europe. She felt in every nucleus of her mind that she was no longer the same, that she was no longer herself, that she was about to lose consciousness, a consciousness acquired through centuries of bearable calamities, by thousands of men of the first rank, from innumerable geographical, ethnic, and historical coincidences.

So—as though in desperate defense of her own physiological being and resources—all her memory confusedly returned.²²

For Valéry, all of Europe experiences the onrush of memory associated with mourning. He gives convincing examples.

So, if Valéry is right, it may be possible for the public to mourn, but under what circumstances? And will we meet those circumstances in the COVID-19 pandemic? If the process of public mourning is the same as that for private mourning, it seems that one thing that is required is an *event* of loss. The entire public has to experience the event, as it did on 9/11 or at Kennedy's assassination. Of such events, people often say that they vividly remember where they were and what they were doing. Just as in the process of individual mourning, it seems necessary that that vividness calls up images that must go through a process of signification, what Grigg calls "commemoration."

It is a striking feature of recent history that, more and more, the signification of the onrush of memories and images after an event of loss takes the form of a list of proper names. It seems that, increasingly, the way public mourning is signified is by a list of pure signifiers, too dignified to bear the weight of narrative. The Vietnam Memorial in Washington, DC, is such a list. We find it also in the film *Schindler's List*, in which the list of names is held up on camera and declared an "absolute good."²³ Not only is the list itself proffered, but there is also, in the film, a series of shots of the Schindler Jews, each in close-up on camera, saying his or her name. And the list is repeated at the end of the film as the surviving Schindler Jews each visit Oscar Schindler's gravesite. A series of close-up shots with the declaration of a proper name also appears in the film *Malcolm X*. At the end of the film, school children from around the world each individually stand up and shout into the camera, "I am Malcolm X!"²⁴ At this point, the film is no longer narrative and historical. The school children live in the present day and commemorate Malcolm X's life and death. After a police shooting of yet another African

American, we find the same use of the proper name as the signifier of mourning in the cries of protesters who do not want the victim to be forgotten. They hold up images of the murdered individual and shout, “Say my name!”

With this in mind, it is a hopeful sign that on Sunday, 24 May 2020, *The New York Times* devoted its entire first page to a listing of names of those who died of COVID-19.²⁵ It may be that deaths from a pandemic are too private and accrue too steadily over a relatively lengthy period for them to qualify as an “event.” It may be that the dead of the COVID-19 pandemic are doomed to be forgotten by the public as were those of the Spanish Flu pandemic. It may be that after quarantine and lockdown, a public desire for a return to normalcy will outweigh our individual griefs. But the fact that the process of signification has already started may encourage us to believe that a proper commemoration will take place, that mourning will be permitted.

¹ “U.S. Deaths Near 100,000: An Incalculable Loss,” *New York Times* (New York, NY), 24 May 2020.

² Sigmund Freud, *The Letters of Sigmund Freud*, ed. Ernst L. Freud, trans. Tania and James Stern (Mineola, NY: Dover Books, 1992), 327.

³ Sigmund Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia,” *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol 14 (London: Vintage Press, 2001), 245.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 244.

⁵ Russell Grigg, “Remembering & Forgetting,” *LC Express* 3, issue 2 (May 2016), Lacanian Compass, lacaniancompass.com, accessed 12 March 2020, https://static1.squarespace.com/static/53080463e4b0e23db627855b/t/5741dd8922482e19cfd92774/1463934346176/LCE_V3.2.pdf. The article is unpaginated, but the pages are stable. For convenience, I have numbered them sequentially, 1 through 5, in the references.

⁶ Grigg, 1.

⁷ Grigg, 1.

⁸ Grigg, 1.

⁹ Sigmund Freud, *The Sigmund Freud-Ludwig Binswanger Correspondence, 1908–1938*, ed. Gerhard Fichtner, trans. Arnold J. Pomerans (New York: Other Press, 2003), 196. Qtd. in Grigg, 2 (Grigg’s emphasis).

¹⁰ Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia,” 245.

¹¹ Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia,” 256.

¹² For Lacan on *das Ding*, see Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII (1959–1960)*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Dennis Porter (New York: Norton, 1992), 43–70.

¹³ Lacan, *Ethics*, 45.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Cf. Jacques Lacan, “On a Question Prior to Any Possible Treatment of Psychosis,” in *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 2006), 464–465.

¹⁶ Lacan, *Ethics*, 139.

¹⁷ Grigg, 3.

¹⁸ Grigg, 3.

¹⁹ Jacques Lacan, *The Formations of the Unconscious: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book V (1957–1958)*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Russell Grigg (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017): “confirmed” 18; “ratified,” 59; “authenticated,” 110.

²⁰ Katherine Anne Porter, “Pale Horse, Pale Rider,” in *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* (1939; repr. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1990).

²¹ Jacques Lacan, *Desire and Its Interpretation: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VI (1958–1959)*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Bruce Fink (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019), 336.

²² Paul Valéry, “The Crisis of the Mind,” *Paul Valéry: An Anthology*, ed. James R. Lawler (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977), 95.

²³ *Schindler’s List*, directed by Steven Spielberg (1993; Los Angeles, CA: Universal Pictures Home Entertainment, 2018), DVD.

²⁴ *Malcolm X*, directed by Spike Lee (1992; Los Angeles, CA: Warner Bros., 2005), DVD.

²⁵ “U.S. Deaths Near 100,000: An Incalculable Loss,” *New York Times* (New York, NY), 24 May 2020.