

# Mourning as Melancholia – Works of Grief in Contemporary Literature and Theory

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## **Introduction: Mourning as Melancholia**

This study argues that the surge in recently published literary and theoretical ‘works of mourning’ has helped to reshape the way in which we read, write, and think about the experience of loss and bereavement. In my study, I will retrace the perspectives that this newly emerged discourse on grief and grieving emanates from, to further examine how mourning narrators situate themselves socially, and to learn more about how they express their precarious affective position in and through the literary and theoretical texts that they write. The following chapters will essentially observe how three triangulated concepts—grief, narrative, and identity—are today negotiated: while the texts that I will discuss pinpoint the lasting impact that the experience of loss has on a bereaved person’s identity, they also illustrate how this impact is captured in and in fact structures them.

Even at first glance, recently published autobiographical, fictional, and theoretical accounts of mourning tend to challenge established assumptions about what grief is how we should deal with it. It is for this reason that I will reassess the often taken-for-granted psychoanalytic notion of grief. Doing so will not only allow me to understand the resistance embedded in these stories of loss. Approaching the discourse on grief from the critical point of view emanating from these texts will also make it possible to reassess Sigmund Freud’s notion of mourning and its antipode, melancholia. While Freud perceived mourning as a healthy and necessary process that enables the mourner to work through and get over his or her loss by externalizing it, the psychoanalyst regarded melancholia as a problematic and pathological condition: here, the bereaved person fails to detach and replace the lost object and instead holds onto it by identifying with an enigmatic and never fully comprehensible sense of loss. While ‘normal’ mourning is, therefore, cast as a stabilizing and restorative measure, ‘pathological’ melancholia is presented as destabilizing and disabling.

With these first assertions in mind, it is striking to find that contemporary narrators insist on their identification with the losses that they seek to tell. Instead of working toward the closure and consolation that the psychoanalytically framed ‘work of mourning’ offers, they continue to identify with their relation to the loved and lost person. As a consequence, they remain inconsolable, vulnerable and impaired. Based on this observation, I will argue that the bereaved narrators I discuss can be termed melancholic figures. Not only do they present grief as incomprehensible and potentially interminable, they also strongly identify with the vulnerability that their grief confronts them with and exposes them to.

In elaborating on this newly developing perspective in both literary and theoretical texts, this study answers to the demand for an academic reflection on the changing

conceptualization of the complex experience of contemporary grief. It investigates the interventions that the examined authors make by critically evaluating the cultural critique and the narratological inquiries that emanate from these texts. In doing so, this study also seeks to answer the question of why (literary) texts appear to have become *the* medium for articulating changes in how we feel about mourning. As this study is grounded in the observation that we today mourn our losses differently than we did thirty, fifty, or a hundred years ago, it also opens up questions that are of crucial concern to reformulations that have recently emerged with regard to the theorization of emotions. Affect theory and the history of emotions have, for instance, been met with heightened interest in a variety of academic disciplines, including the field of North American Studies. It is for this reason that my dissertation hopes to make an important contribution to an expanding discussion on what it feels like to be essentially and fundamentally bereaved.

In order to introduce the questions that these first observations raise, let me turn to Ralph Waldo Emerson's "Threnody," an elegiac poem that addresses the death of Emerson's five-year old son.<sup>1</sup>

The eager Fate which carried thee  
Took the largest part of me.  
For this losing is true dying,  
This is lordly man's down-lying,  
This is slow but sure reclining,  
Star by star his world resigning. (455)

The lyrical voice here tells the story of a mourning father, who experiences his son's death not only as a partial loss of himself, but also as his own "true" death. The process of mourning—or dying—is depicted as a slow fall and a gradual resignation from the world. Speaking of the deceased in the third person and calling him "the wondrous child," (456) the elegy initially appears accepting of the finality of death. Soon, however, the lyrical voice falters; it becomes increasingly elusive and instable. Especially its tendency to address the lost child illustrates the mourning father's uncertain perspective:

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<sup>1</sup> In the Norton Anthology of *Emerson's Prose and Poetry* (2001), a footnote provides further information of the author's biographical background: "Deeply affected by his son's death, Emerson is said to have murmured over forty years later, near death, 'Oh, that beautiful boy.' Edward Emerson says that the first part of the poem was written shortly after Waldo's death, and the second part some time later, through the dating is not definitive" (*Emerson's Prose and Poetry* 455, footnote 1)

I had the right, few days ago,  
Thy step to watch, thy place to know;  
How have I forfeited that right?  
Hast thou forgot me in new delight?  
I hearken for thy household cheer (456)

These lines show that the child is not fully given up. The overpowering presence of its absence continues to dominate the father's reality. Feeling forgotten and left behind, he waits and listens for his son's voice, expecting to hear it around the house. In Emerson's essay "Experience," the same death plays a subtle and yet equally substantial role.<sup>2</sup> In comparison to the poem, the essay is a more belated, less personal reflection on grief. Yet its opening question already resonates with a profound sense of uncertainty, as it asks: "where do we find ourselves?" (198). The narrator then situates himself on a staircase going up and down farther than he is able to see: "all things swim and glitter. Our life is not so much threatened as our perception. Ghost-like we glide through nature, and should not know our place again" (198). It is from this 'displaced' perspective that Emerson reviews his bereavement. He explains that in certain "moods" we tend to embrace "suffering," hoping "that here, at least, we shall find reality, sharp edges and peaks of truth" (199). This hope, however, fades as he realizes that even acute suffering remains ephemeral. Because his emotional pain, or grief, does not impair him physically and he manages to carry on with his life, Emerson begins to question the immediacy of his relation to reality: "the only thing grief has taught me, is to know how shallow it is. That, like all the rest, plays about the surface, and never introduces me into the reality" (199). Grief has, in other words, taught him how superficial his relation to a seemingly solid external world really is: "souls never touch their objects. An innavigable sea washes with silent waves between us and the things we aim at and converse with" (200). His sense of detachment and individuation crystallizes in the observation that "in the death of my son, now more than two years ago, I seem to have lost a beautiful estate,—no more. I cannot get it nearer to me" (200). That he survived this loss proves to him that his bond to the child had never been essential:

Some thing which I fancied was part of me, which could not be torn away without tearing me, nor enlarged without enriching me, falls off from me, and leaves no scar [...] I grieve that grief can teach me nothing, nor carry me one step into real nature. The Indian who was laid under a curse, that the wind should not blow on him, nor water flow to him, nor fire burn him, is a type of us all [...] our relations to each other are oblique and casual. (200)

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<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of "Experience" as a text primarily concerned with mourning, see also Sharon Cameron's essay: "Representing Grief: Emerson's 'Experience,'" In: *Representations 15* (1986).

While letters written by Emerson in the immediate wake of the child's death bespeak an immediate sense of despair and hopelessness, they nevertheless already display the sense of estrangement and resignation that the essay resonates with. In a letter written to Margaret Fuller on the day after his son passed, Emerson states: "my world this morning is poor enough." His loss is thus metonymically enlarged and described as having caused a rupture between him and the world. The letter ends with a question that—it is missing the question mark—he does not dare to raise: "shall I ever dare to love anything again."<sup>3</sup> In a second letter from the same day, this sense of separation is further intensified: "With him has departed all that is glad & festal & almost all that is social even, for me, from this world. My second child is also sick, but I cannot in a lifetime incur such another loss."<sup>4</sup> In these accounts, the impact of death and grief appear to threaten the bereaved father's life.

When Emerson resumes his habit of writing letters only a week later, his attitude has, however, changed: "I chiefly grieve that I cannot grieve [...] Must every experience - those that promised to be dearest & most penetrative,—only kiss my cheek like the wind & pass away?"<sup>5</sup> This last letter echoes the essay's statement that grief can 'teach' us 'nothing' other than its own insufficiency. The fact that the loss of a person whom he considered to be a part of himself does not physically harm or even kill him lets Emerson conclude that he is bound to nothing—that all 'relations' are in fact 'casual.' With this almost fatalistic perspective in mind, a new sense of ambiguity emerges in Emerson's famous concept of an absolute, radical subjectivity. On the one hand, its way of turning perception into both maker and marker of reality turns the individual into the God-like creator of its own universe; its creative powers appear boundless. Yet this same freedom encloses the individual in its own solipsistic world. Its fully self-made reality renders a concrete connection to another person—and to reality—impossible.

The extent to which his son's death changed Emerson's worldview can, of course, only be estimated. The fact that his grief made him aware of the precarious, contingent, "casual" nature of his relations may have contributed to his assessment of reality as nothing but a fleeting and superficial construct that can neither move nor touch him. While these observations indicate an enormous rupture, Emerson transforms the here articulated sense of estrangement and isolation into a celebration of the present: "since our office is with moments, let us husband them [...] Let us treat the men and women well: treat them as if they were real: perhaps they are" (204). When, however, keeping the speaker's

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<sup>3</sup> See: Emerson's letter to Margaret Fuller from Jan. 1842 (*Emerson's Prose and Poetry* 552)

<sup>4</sup> See: Emerson's letter to Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, dated Jan. 28, 1842 (*Emerson's Prose and Poetry* 552).

<sup>5</sup> See: Emerson's letter to Carline Sturgis from Feb. 1842 (*Emerson's Prose and Poetry* 552).

bereavement in mind, it appears that ambivalence shines through the celebratory gesture: confronted with death and grappling with his own grief, Emerson at once rejoices in and resigns himself to the uncertainty and the fleetingness of his self-made universe.<sup>6</sup>

Why, one might ask, does this study open with an insight into Emerson's grief? I chose this entrance because Emerson's essay illustrates how an experience of loss can change a bereaved person's worldview. This observation alone shows that grief has a deep and lasting effect on the mourner's identity. And Emerson's decision to channel grief into two very different literary forms further raises the question of when, why and in what form grief can be translated into a written text. In doing so, it raises the question whether the text can in fact adequately reflect its narrator's lost sense of coherence without necessarily seeking to rehabilitate it. Does the text, in other words, automatically assume a reconstructive function or can it also be understood as merely immersed in the experience that it investigates and perhaps even performs as a gesture or a ritual?

It would in this context be rash to neglect the literary genre that devotes itself to the mournful experience of losing a beloved person. Frank Kelleter has noted that, since elegies belong to the oldest literary forms, the negativity of losing a person and the productivity of writing a text may be structurally related.<sup>7</sup> He suggests that articulating one's loss can serve the function of preserving the memories attached to the deceased. The act of writing may therefore not only be a vessel for emotional release; it also offers comfort and consolation because it fixes the imaginary and immaterial realm of memories by translating it into a written and permanent text. From this perspective, it appears only logical that the shock and chaos of loss has traditionally been countered by a desire for the inherently bound form of the text, which may thus become a source of solace.<sup>8</sup> Many of the contemporary works of literature that are concerned with grief could certainly be defined as elegies, and yet they are, interestingly, rarely affiliated with this perhaps too archaic genre. While themes of loss and bereavement feature prominently in literary texts of various genres, grief literature is, unlike love literature, rarely shelved according to this thematic focus. It may be for this

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<sup>6</sup> For a 'skeptical' reading of Emerson's oscillation between the contrasting 'moods' of hope and despair, see Stanley Cavell's book *Emerson's Transcendental Etudes* (2003), particularly his essay "Thinking of Emerson," p. 10-19.

<sup>7</sup> In a similar vein, Eric Santner talks about a loved one's biography as a "literary obituary" (36).

<sup>8</sup> In his essay "Die Kunst am Ende: Joan Didions Bücher über das Sterben," Frank Kelleter writes: "Elegien dürften zu den ältesten Formen der Literatur überhaupt gehören. Schon der bloße Akt des Schreibens scheint ursächlich mit der Erfahrung eines Verlustes zusammenzuhängen. Kelleter therefore calls writing a tool of memory, a comforting "Erinnerungstechnik" (542). He explains, in greater detail: "Der historische Erfolg elegischer Literatur hat durchaus mit ihrer Wiederholbarkeit zu tun, oder genauer: mit dem beruhigenden Weiter wohlgeformter Worte, Bilder und Erklärungen für etwas, das anderenfalls eine singuläre Katastrophe, das Ende einer Welt wäre. Traurige Geschichten berichten mit großer Routine und oft merkwürdiger Schönheit davon: Gestorben wird immer" (543).



reason that psychoanalyst and author Darian Leader has an epiphany when conducting research on the link between loss and literature:

After browsing through the non-fiction and finding nothing new, I turned to the fiction shelves. Here were books from every corner of the world, written by young novelists, seasoned favourites and the greatest masters of the past. So many of them were clearly stories of loss, separation and bereavement. For a moment, the sheer quantity of works puzzled me. I had spent weeks puzzled by the absence of literature on my research theme, and now I was confronted with shelf after shelf of work on little else. It then occurred to me that perhaps the scientific literature on mourning that I had been searching for was simply *all literature*. This sea of books on every imaginable topic was in fact the scientific literature on mourning. And this set me thinking about the relation between mourning, loss and creativity. What place did the arts have in the process of mourning?  
(6)

Leader relates the observation that grief's literary omnipresence often goes unnoticed to his larger claim that since the publication of Freud's celebrated essay "Mourning and Melancholia" in 1917, theorizations of grief have not precisely come a long way. He notes that: "little had been written about mourning by later generations of analysts. There had been countless descriptions of the behavior of people coping with loss, but much less on the deeper psychology of mourning" (5). While many scholars confirm, often dismissively, that Freud remains *the* authority when it comes to the theorization of grief, Leader suggests that the literary field may have, rather inconspicuously, over-compensated this apparent lack.

Although Leader's statement certainly rings true,<sup>9</sup> I will argue that the twenty-first century has brought about a new kind of grief literature, one that relies on the traditional form of the life story while also questioning its premises and imperatives. The following analyses will show that the authors in question no longer portray grief in the Freudian tradition. While the psychoanalytical concept of grief originally supposed that the mourner has to work through and externalize his or her grief in order to 'get over' it and recover a former level of wellbeing and functionality, recent theoretical and literary texts focus primarily on the aspect of identification and incorporation. They cast grief as a transformative experience that confronts the mourner with his or her own vulnerability and injury.

As already mentioned, Freud associated the identification with loss not with the 'normal' process of mourning but with the 'pathological' condition of melancholia. It is for this reason that this study calls the grieving narrators that it observes 'melancholic mourners.' It

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<sup>9</sup> One must only think of Shakespeare's Hamlet, a character that is often described as steeped in maddeningly intense bereavement. For a discussion of Hamlet's grief, see for instance Anton Kirsch's essay "Hamlet's Grief" (1981). In his study *Stranded Objects*, Eric Santner claims that Hamlet's position derives from a process of "blocked mourning" (36). When further arguing that Hamlet appears "destined to remain captive to an elegiac loop," the author essentially turns Hamlet into a self-destructive and highly narcissistic melancholic figure (36).

argues that this reversal of the Freudian narrative can be understood as a way of resisting an all-pervasive (and arguably neo-liberal) demand for the production and ultimate perseverance of seamlessly significant life stories. By replacing these requirements with the oppositional practice of crafting narratives that try to neither ‘make sense’ of the experience of loss nor integrate it as a meaningful episode into the structure of the story of self, the selected texts insist on the unproductivity and meaninglessness of both a loved person’s death and the mourner’s feelings of grief. This means, essentially, that contemporary texts do not only rewrite and thus redefine the traditional (psychoanalytic) concept of grief. They also explicitly criticize the notion of the grief work’s rationalistic economy. While not all texts refer explicitly to the originally negatively connoted concept of melancholia, the fact that the narrators and characters who populate these texts hold on to and identify with their grief, and thus with the woundedness and injury that this precarious position implies, shows that they can nevertheless be described as melancholic figures. Understanding melancholia as a form of resistance against the functionality and productivity that determines Western modernity, these texts can be read as both an intervention against these imperatives and an affirmation of the vulnerability that defines, at least from the melancholic’s perspective, our understanding of what it means to be a person.

An aspect that should not be ignored when discussing the recently emerged discourse on bereavement is the fact that the terrorist attacks of September eleventh, 2001 certainly created a new perspective on mourning in the United States.<sup>10</sup> The unexpected and traumatic experience of death occurring in the midst of a seemingly secure and extremely well-functioning social space such as lower Manhattan’s financial centre not only drilled, as Sandra Gilbert put it, “a black hole in the American psyche,” it also produced “a gaping wound out of which a new awareness of mortality and even some new ways of mourning emerged” (xxi).<sup>11</sup> While the ‘works of mourning’ to be discussed in my study focus on

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<sup>10</sup> The New York Times’ series “Portraits of Grief,” which began to be printed immediately after the terrorist attacks (they appeared for the first time on September 15<sup>th</sup>, 2001) is often referred to as a recent and outstanding example of a literary or journalistic negotiation of public mourning. The entire collection of these portraits was compiled in book form and published as *Portraits: 9/11/01, The Collected “Portraits of Grief” from the New York Times* (2002). For a more detailed discussion on the impact that the terror attacks had on the American public, see MaryAnn Snyder-Körber and Andrews Gross’ issue of the journal *Amerika Studien/American Studies* dedicated to this topic: *Trauma’s Continuum – September 11<sup>th</sup> Reconsidered* (2010), especially Snyder-Körber’s article “Lost and Found Lives: The Portraits of Grief and the Work of September 11<sup>th</sup> Mourning” (2011).

<sup>11</sup> One recent development in mourning practices is the emergence of digital memorial sites, such as the so-called “Virtual Memorial Garden.” The website describes itself as a place where one can “create an online virtual memorial for a lost loved one.” Its founders state: “This site has been created for the preservation and continuation of the love we will always have for our departed loved ones. This is a place where you can build an online virtual memorial in remembrance; a place where visitors with a common bond can share their losses. We can continue to celebrate those lives” ([virtuallmemorialgarden.net](http://virtuallmemorialgarden.net)).

private, personal forms of grief and do not discuss cases of communal or national mourning, they are nevertheless set against the background of an American landscape that was recently unsettled by a confrontation with death and grief.

This may be one reason why contemporary literature features narrators whose severely destabilized worldview is captured in stories that present grief as a rather incomprehensible experience. They do so by refusing to tell a coherently emplotted, conventionally significant story. By insisting on their lasting vulnerability, these narrators tell utterly disrupted, disoriented life stories that do not conform to the imperative of a happy ending. Joan Didion's highly influential memoir *The Year of Magical Thinking* (2005), in which the author mourns her suddenly deceased husband, will be discussed next to Dave Eggers' autobiographical and yet at times fantastical *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* (2000). And Siri Hustvedt's psychoanalytically inspired negotiation of grief, which can be traced through her diverse body of fictional and nonfiction works, will provide additional analytical foci. Theoretical works to be investigated include Roland Barthes's reflections on the death of his mother in *Camera Lucida* (1980) and the posthumously published *Mourning Diary*, which was only released recently, in 2010 (in both the original French and its English translation).

The literary texts are either rendered from an autobiographical or an auto-fictional point of view. While their referential 'truth value' may vary, all narrators reconstruct their lives in the form of the story that they tell. Since this dissertation moves across literary genres while at the same time focusing on the 'life story,' it makes sense to engage the concept of narrative identity as a theoretical backdrop. According to theorists such as Paul Ricoeur, the Imaginary<sup>12</sup> plays a vital role in the construction of the individual's narrative identity because it stabilizes an inherently fragmented identity that depends, despite its reliance on biographical episodes, on creative processes of selection, arrangement, interpretation, and emplotment. According to Ricoeur, a life story only becomes intelligible when appropriating the form of a (fictional) plot<sup>13</sup> and thus resembles a familiar narrative pattern. At the same time, such patterns must be tailored to the individual story. Because the process of self-interpretation therefore produces a plot that is as much entangled in the referential as in the imaginary, the individual's identity can, even when appearing in its most elaborate form as an autobiographical narrative, never be categorized as *either* fiction *or* fact. When

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<sup>12</sup> For a delineation of the 'Imaginary,' see for instance Winfried Fluck's explanation of the term through the work of Wolfgang Iser, who complicated the idea of an oppositional relation between fiction and reality (*Das kulturelle Imaginäre* 19).

<sup>13</sup> Hayden White defines 'plot' as "a structure of relationships by which the events contained in the account are endowed with a meaning by being identified as parts of an integrated whole" ("The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality" 13).

approached from this perspective, the categorical difference between autobiographical and autofictional storytelling loses its sharp contours. The question of artifice may, therefore, not so much vary in type as in degree. These considerations lie at the heart of my dissertation, as they allude to the intersection of its three pivotal concerns, grief, identity, and the personal narrative.

It has already been mentioned that this study raises the question of how grief affects the mourner's identity and further observes how these effects are translated into a narrative text. Yet it also explores the restorative or, by contrast, inquisitive functions that such narratives can assume today. Peter Brooks' 1992 book *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* develops an interesting perspective on the question of how we relate to and rely on narrative structures. It makes sense to ponder the specifics of this relation before tackling the question of how the experience of loss affects the mourner's life story. Because Brooks' book focuses on the form and function of the 'plot' as well as the act of 'plotting,' it chiefly investigates "how stories come to be ordered in significant form" (xii). This inquiry entails, of course, the rather essential idea of the presumably universal human desire for a meaningful story—with the help of which lives assume a causally connected and reassuringly coherent linearity. By defining narrative as "one of the large categories or systems of understanding," and thus as a mediator between the individual and its world, Brooks appears insistent on the indispensability of a significant narrative structure (xii). At the same time, he appears well aware of the fact that narrative is a historically mutable construct, and that its modes of representation change in accordance with the demands of their socio-cultural context. Despite the fact that he concedes that we have today "become more suspicious of plots" and "more acutely aware of their artifice," he nonetheless insists on our dependence on a plot and our desire for a unifying story (xii).

This insistence pertains directly to the point that this study makes, namely that contemporary grief narratives often resist the demands of conventionally 'plotted' life stories. They reject, to be more precise, the functionality and inherent productivity that the story's drive toward meaning entails. At the same time, mourning narrators neither simply cease to tell their stories nor do they render them in a completely incomprehensible fashion. This raises the question of their particular story's intention, of the design that both enables them to be written and prohibits them from being drawn to a conclusive end. Brooks notes that although the twentieth century has realized "the limits of storytelling" (285), they nevertheless persist. While plots may "have become extraordinarily complex, self-subversive, apparently implausible," they have never been fully dismissed:

Telling the self's story remains our indispensable thread in a labyrinth of temporality. It is of overwhelming importance to us that life still be narratable, which may mean finding those provisional, tenuous plots that appear to capture the force of desire that cannot speak its name but compels us in a movement—recursive, complex, unclosed—toward meaning. (285)

Brooks here settles on a compromise: by suggesting that narrative is motivated by the human desire for storytelling, he explains why life continues to be framed in narrative terms. Yet he also acknowledges that the desire to craft a self-explanatory narrative can never be fully satisfied. It can, in other words, “never quite speak its name” and yet it “insists on speaking over and over again its movement toward that name” (61).<sup>14</sup> The movement that is described here applies to the grief narratives in question: we read stories that present grief as something that defies meaning, and that consequently poses an obstacle to the production of a linearly motivated plot. The fact, however, that these narratives articulate—and incorporate—their own incapability, that they construct plots that revolve around an enigmatic, unspeakable core illustrates that meaning remains the specter that shapes even the most subversive of these stories.

While my dissertation can only discuss a few literary and theoretical examples in greater detail, it is my impression that recently published literature resonates with a more general and even unprecedented sense of sadness. While authors have always drawn characters that mourn the loss of a loved person, a home country, or an ideological belief, a heightened awareness of the severe effect that the death of a loved person has can today be detected. Scenes that depict moments of acute grief figure as frequently as characters deeply immersed in mourning.<sup>15</sup> One of the characters in Chris Adrian's novel *The Great Night* (2011) speaks, for instance, about her “huge capacity for suffering,” which she metaphorically describes as “vast empty chambers [...] that could be filled with only one thing” (288): a deep and lasting sadness. In the novel, sorrow is neither portrayed as an emergency nor as the mere absence of happiness. Instead, it is an emotional state that, being neither fleeting nor transitory, presents a vital part of every character's emotional scope.

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<sup>14</sup> Similar observations have been made by Adriana Cavarero (*Relating Narratives, Storytelling and Selfhood*) and Judith Butler (“Giving an Account of Oneself”), both of whom will be discussed in subsequent chapters.

<sup>15</sup> Mourning literature transcends generic boundaries. There has been an outburst of works of fiction concerned with mourning in recent years. Don DeLillo's *The Body Artist* (2001), Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005), and Nicole Krauss' *Great House* (2010) are literary examples illustrating the growing interest in the phenomenon of grief. At the same time, the sub-genre of the mourning memoir has seen an unparalleled upsurge. Joyce Carol Oates's *A Widow's Story*, Meghan O'Rourke's *The Long Goodbye*, Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking* (2005), David Rieff's *Swimming in a Sea of Death* (2008), Anne Roiphe's *Epilogue* (2008), and Darin Strauss' *Half A Life* (2010) are examples of recent autobiographical accounts concerned with grief.

Jonathan Safran Foer and Nicole Krauss are two authors who are similarly invested in questions of loss and grief. Their fictional works feature child characters whose sadness does not only have a lasting impact on, but in fact defines their personalities. Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005) is a story told by a protagonist who lost his father in the terrorist attacks on the twin towers in 2001. Krauss's 2010 book *Great House* is a collection of interwoven stories that converge in their shared emphasis on the theme of grief. Here, a character speaks of the severe effect that her mother's death had on her father's physical and mental capabilities:

I used to find him in his underwear, unshaven, with the blinds drawn. A meticulous, even a vain man, in a stained undershirt. It took him a full year before he began to dress again. Other things were never righted or repaired. Something toppled within. His conversation gave way to gaping holes. (194)

What does one make of these snapshots of paralyzing impairment, of scenes that resonate with stagnation and despair? Adrian's *Great Night* exemplifies in greater detail how the imploded dynamics of bereavement are played out in contemporary fiction:

It wasn't his memory she was seeking there [...] she wasn't seeking anything. She was doing just what it looked like she was doing, lying about, half-awake and half-asleep, passing the time and waiting for something to change. Because it seemed very clear to her, in those first few days, that what she felt was so intolerable that it couldn't possibly last, and if she did nothing to distract herself from it, she'd use it up, and then she'd be able to get up, and move about, and care once again about her duties to her people, about her constitutional obligations to dancing and singing and feasting and praising the movements of the stars. She didn't consider at all—she didn't dare to consider—that the sources of grief inside her might be inexhaustible. (271)

Prior to her bereavement, the protagonist had been unaware of her 'inexhaustible' and apparently infinite 'sources of grief.' She recalls that in the immediate wake of her loss, she expected mourning to be a temporary emotional state that would subside and eventually resolve itself. Only with time does she realize that she will never recover her former level of wellbeing, functionality, and optimism. She will thus also not resume the "constitutional obligation" of pursuing her personal happiness. In Adrian's book, grief deeply affects, disrupts, and transforms the mourner's identity. What is more, it is no longer reduced to a negative image or lack. Adrian thus not only inverts the narrative's progressive momentum. He also asks his readers to pause over his mourning characters' incapacities and grief's unproductiveness, inviting them to ponder the meaninglessness of bereavement.

Similar tendencies can be observed in autobiographical texts. A *New York Times* article written by Joyce Carol Oates and Meghan O'Rourke, two authors of so called 'grief memoirs,' calls non-fictional grief literature a "growing genre" (n.p.). The article's title

“Why We Write About Grief” already raises the question that it seeks to answer, namely why literatures of loss resonate so strongly with readers today. The article highlights three intersecting aspects that recur in today’s literature. It firstly addresses the issue of comprehension and control. O’Rourke states that: “writing has always been the way I make sense of the world. It’s a kind of stay against dread, and chaos” (n.p.). Because grief is often described as an unpredictable, unfamiliar, and even chaotic experience, writing is portrayed as something that helps the mourner to “understand or just get a handle on grief” (n.p.). The act of writing thus functions as a reflective tool, as “an act of attempted comprehension” and “control; we are so baffled and exhausted by what has happened, we want to imagine that giving words to the unspeakable will make it somehow our own” (n.p.). Joyce Carol Oates is more skeptical, she doubts literature’s potential to reestablish this lost sense of control: “profound losses leave us paralyzed and mute, unable really to comprehend them, still less to speak coherently about them” (n.p.). And yet she did turn her private diary into a published book that takes note of her seemingly incomprehensible bereavement. She thus not only poses the question of how to tell a story that exceeds its teller’s comprehension. She also asks whether it would be more befitting not to write, and to instead let the meaninglessness of a beloved person’s absence stand as the void that it is. This conundrum is the first main point that the literature establishes.

The second point emanates from the observation that mourning rituals have disappeared from the public sphere. For a long time, grief was a socially integrated practice. In 1630, John Winthrop included it, in his famous sermon “A Model of Christian Charity,” in a list of communal obligations when he said that: “we must delight in each other, make others’ conditions our own, rejoice together, mourn together, labor, and suffer together” (105). The western world’s modernization is often associated with dynamics of economization and optimization. In the course of the twentieth century, these dynamics have drawn increasingly narrow circles around the individual. It comes, therefore, as no surprise that they have also affected the experience of grief. Regardless of whether psychoanalytical theory was shaped by or helped to shape the redefinition of grief as a strictly private, no longer publicly practiced affair, it was Sigmund Freud who introduced the idea of the ‘work of mourning’ (or, as in the German original, ‘Trauerarbeit’). His way of describing grief not only as a clearly delineated process, but also as a coping mechanism soon became *the* way to negotiate grief. Because of grief’s gradual and yet thorough privatization, encountering a mourning person is today often an awkward endeavor. O’Rourke writes:

Most people are uncomfortable around loss. Friends talk to you about ‘getting through it’ and ‘moving on’ and ‘healing.’ We shy away from talking about death, not out of cold-heartedness, but out of fear [...] death is scary. I think this is part of why there are so many memoirs and movies about loss: they create a public space where we can talk safely about grief. (n.p.)

The author understands writing as a ritual that replaces earlier, communal forms of expressing and communicating grief. Today, the mourner is no longer a publicly recognized figure, discernible, for instance, through her black clothes. She can also no longer channel her grief into culturally defined rituals. As a consequence, she may be inclined to take up the habit of writing instead. In making this ritual of writing public, she then recreates a social space for mourning, albeit not one of ritual or habit but of the written word.

Thirdly and finally, the article’s authors insist on their continuing love for the deceased. O’Rourke writes that the “unmovable fact—that she will never be here again—hurts me because I love her. (My love did not die when she did.) That strange, kinetic commingling of love and pain has been, for me, the atmosphere of grief” (n.p.). This statement indicates that grief literature rejects the psychoanalytical theorization of grief, the economic rationale of which is geared towards the detachment from the loved object and its eventual replacement. Chapter one of this study demonstrates not only how the fields of psychology and psychotherapy have converted Freud’s theory into so called ‘stage models,’ with the help of which the mourner works toward overcoming grief. Freud’s grief work narrative will also be held against Max Weber’s critique of a paradigmatically American—and Protestant—work ethic in order to understand why modern individuals identify so strongly with the work that they perform and the productivity that this work implies. The discussion will highlight why lasting forms of grief are problematized in a society that tends to evaluate its members by both their functionality and their happiness.<sup>16</sup>

Oates is acutely aware of the imperatives and requirements that accompany grief today. She writes about the “strange sort of expectation that grief should conform to a general pattern or principle” (n.p.). The failure or refusal to oblige to such ‘patterns’ is a common trait of the theory and literature that will be discussed in the following. Some authors do so by questioning happiness’ normative dimensions. Others write against the imperative to ‘get over’ their losses and become their old confident selves again. All of them, however, invert

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<sup>16</sup> The question of how one deals with grief raises, of course, quite substantial ethical and socio-political questions. Without wanting to moralize the argument, I believe that it is important to take the premises that the discussion on loss is based on into account: it could certainly be argued that the briefly sketched social criticism essentially laments the secularization of mourning practices, asking, essentially, to reintroduce an ethics of compassion, neighborly love, or selfless sacrifice. While this may indeed hold true when applied to political or sociological discourses, this dissertation does only provide the social situation of grief as a background and as the literature’s setting.



Freud's detachment theory by professing a strong belief in the identification with and incorporation of the void that their losses evoked.

One could certainly question this reading and interpret the narratives' critical perspective as a continuation of the long-standing American tradition of literary counter cultures.<sup>17</sup> One could even argue that these texts perpetuate the prevailing image of grief as something very private, as an almost tabooed topic that is no longer spoken about and must therefore be poured into written narratives. From this perspective, it would be feasible to say that the texts are made of the same social fabric that they seek to denounce. While such a reading certainly applies to the expanding genre of self-help guides,<sup>18</sup> which often reduces Freud's early grief theory to an all-applicable program, the literature in question is not motivated by a similarly univocal, easily graspable agenda. In Dave Eggers's *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, for instance, the linearity and coherence of the autobiographical story is constantly interrupted by the ironic employment of inappropriate fictional micro-plots, which shatter not only the autobiographical form, but also complicate the narrator's reliability. Joan Didion's account resonates with a similarly disorienting perspective. Toward the end of her book, she admits that the "craziness is receding but no clarity is taking its place. I look for resolution and find none" (225). Both narratives remain as undirected and disoriented as their narrators' perspectives. While they may not adequately fit the label of the counter narrative, they do reject the prevailing cultural narrative of grief. Whether the uncertainty and disorientation that these works resonate point toward a redefinition of grief is one of the questions that this study aims to answer.

The notion of the 'cultural narrative' leads to another, crucial question that this study raises. While the instances of loss that these texts revolve around are experienced as catastrophes, they are not bound to political events or natural disasters. They thus differ from individualized stories of traumatic grief that are embedded in a broader historical context and can, for instance, be linked to the history of slavery or the holocaust. Stories that revisit such contexts often possess an exemplary character. They make a socio-historical situation, and with it the grievances and tremendous losses of many, tangible and accessible through the personal story of one protagonist. Literature that refers to such extraordinary, often

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<sup>17</sup> Particularly in the North-American context, literary examples abound. One must only think of transcendentalist writers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson or Henry David Thoreau, the latter of which famously propagated 'Civil Disobedience' in his self-titled essay (1849). To list a second example, one could refer to the Beat generation's exploration of alternative life-style, which canonical works such as Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957) both declare and depict.

<sup>18</sup> Popular examples of self-help guides include Samuel J. Hodges and Kathy Leonard's book *Grieving with Hope: Finding Comfort as you Journey through Loss*, David Kessler and Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's guide *On Grief & Grieving: Finding the Meaning of Grief Through the Five Stages of Loss* (2004) or Martha Withmore Hickman's *Healing After Loss: Daily Meditations for Working Through Grief* (1994).

violent circumstances certainly shares similarities with the works that I observe. Both often center on the reconstruction of personal memories and thus focus primarily on the affective and the imaginary. Yet they also refer to a shared past when pursuing an at times restorative, at other times rather destructive project of retrospective world making.

Literature that revolves around politically induced experiences of grief includes numerous canonical American novels. Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), for instance, brings to light the deadening forces of slavery by portraying grief as a tangible reality, and often as the only form of love available to enslaved people in North America. In the novel, three generations of women share a house that is haunted by the ghost of a baby that was killed by its mother (the novel's protagonist Sethe) in order to prevent it from being returned to slaveholding Kentucky. In Morrison's book, grief can be seen, heard, and felt. When the only central male character enters the protagonists' house for the first time, he steps "smack into a pool of pulsing red light" (11). When "walking through it, a wave of grief soaked him so thoroughly he wanted to cry" (11). The house is, in other words, 'soaked' in loss; it is integrated into the folds of the women's lives and yet fully exhausts them. Both Sethe and her elderly mother, who lost all of her children to violent deaths, are so fully captivated by their grief that they perceive their surrounding world as drained of color.

In the course of the novel, it is made evident that the protagonists' decision to engage in the "risky" business of loving their children condemned them to a life of grief. For Sethe, "grief [...] started when she jumped down off the wagon" (105) after she had escaped from slavery, claimed her freedom and "stretched out my arms" so that "all my children could get in between" (188). Towards the end of the book, Sethe loses her mind and becomes convinced that the daughter, whom she both killed and mourned ferociously, has returned to her. As her feelings of guilt and grief fade, she also resigns from the world. While her obligation to her remaining children kept her alive thus far, she feels that she can now finally "sleep like the drowned, have mercy. She come back to me, my daughter, and she is mine" (241). In the end, Sethe becomes fully absorbed in the death that haunted her all along. Especially her inability to see colors after she killed an essential part of herself—namely her daughter—proves that Morrison's perspective on loss differs vastly from that of Emerson. Morrison's novel shows that slavery's way of inducing grief by systemically destroying loving relations has an immediate impact on the bereaved protagonists, whose relational ties determine them, despite all odds. This is why Sethe dies a social and emotional death when she murdered her child. While the baby's 'return' revives her momentarily, it also signifies her death as a rational person: she eventually gives in to the maddening grief that had already occupied her house for a long time.

W.G. Sebald's *Austerlitz* similarly revolves around politically induced forms of grief. The novel revisits the traumatic history of the 'Kindertransporte' during the Nazi regime. Not unlike Morrison, Sebald blends historical fact and fictional story when telling the story of his displaced protagonist.<sup>19</sup> The text, which resonates with a sense of uncertainty and incomprehensibility, presents the 'unspeakable' trauma of the holocaust without resolving or even fully formulating it. While the book's protagonist recovers his long buried personal history in the course of the book and finds out that he was, as a child of Jewish descent, sent on a 'Kindertransport' from Prague to London in order to escape deportation, this newly found knowledge does not grant him a more comprehensive understanding of who he is or what he has lost. Even revisiting places that played a significant role in his early childhood does not enable him to feel more than distress regarding his own uncertain identity: it remains "impossible" for him "to attain even the lowest step on the way to self-knowledge" (215). The protagonist's inaccessible self-comprehension echoes the much broader problem of representing the holocaust without explaining it—and thus running the risk of turning it into a coherent, or meaningful story. *Austerlitz* circumvents this imminent threat, as its protagonist remains unable to place his losses.

This explains perhaps why he can only address his loss indirectly, by way of detours. Various animals and their instinct to return to their place of belonging are, for instance, drawn into the narrative. The fact that a pigeon, even when abandoned "in the middle of a snowstorm over the North Sea [...] will infallibly find its way home," moves Austerlitz deeply (114). He adds that it remains unknown "how these birds, sent off on their journey into so menacing a void, their hearts surely almost breaking with fear [...] make straight for their place of origin" (114). Austerlitz tries to bridge the same 'void' by retracing the journey that escapes his memory. It is not until the final pages of the book that he realizes that he will never reach his journey's point of origin, that it will be his task to keep on searching, to stare into the abyss of his own story—and thus also into the historical 'void' that the holocaust opened up. Another way in which grief is presented in the book is equally evasive. When the protagonist returns to Prague, he meets his 'nurserymaid' Vera, who still lives in the apartment that once neighbored that of Austerlitz's family and whose interiors have remained entirely unchanged. Vera is portrayed as a mournful figure: she dedicated her life to the memories of the dead and maintained their material world in its original

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<sup>19</sup> While Sebald's text is keenly aware of the discourse surrounding the aporia of writing the 'unspeakable' trauma of the holocaust, it has nevertheless been criticized for having narrativized, and fictionalized, that which it presents as exceeding human comprehension. In his article "Lost and Found: Disorientation, Nostalgia, and Holocaust Melodrama in Sebald's 'Austerlitz'" (2006), John Zilcosky debates whether Sebald gives in to the same "melodramatic inclinations" that he declares dreadful (697).

condition. She tells Austerlitz that she was, after his mother had been deported and he had been sent off to England, “hardly in her right mind.”

She had tried to pick up broken threads and could not believe that everything had really happened as it did. None of her endless attempts later to find out my whereabouts in England or my father’s in France had produced any results [...] And in this way the years had raced by, seeming in retrospect like a single leaden day. She [...] did what was necessary to maintain herself, but almost all her feelings had been extinguished, and she had not truly breathed since that time. Only in the books written in earlier times did she sometimes think she found a faint idea of what it might be like to be alive. (205)

As in Morrison’s novel, grief is here depicted as an emotional and social death. Immersed in grief, Vera’s life has come to a standstill; it encloses her in a temporal vacuum. At the same time, her grief has a comforting dimension because it is linked to a concrete locale and the memory of a particular person. Austerlitz’s grief in contrast remains as uncertain as his story. It is imbued with the same homelessness that defines Morrison’s characters.

The way in which grief is depicted in both books bears certain resemblances to its negotiation in the works that I will discuss in greater detail. And yet, while losing a partner, parent, or child unexpectedly can have a similarly traumatic effect and certainly impairs the ‘surviving’ relatives, it simply happens—either due to sickness or a sudden accident.<sup>20</sup> Whereas the mentioned novels by Morrison and Sebald are embedded in broader narratives, the literature that this dissertation is concerned with is largely self-referential. It does not highlight a specific political event or historical period, but rather brings to light life’s contingency, its fragility and thus also our vulnerability. The catastrophe that occurs in works like Didion’s *The Year of Magical Thinking* is an almost ordinary one, and yet one that proves life-changing to those affected by it. The following analyses will focus on complicated and yet ‘domestic’ forms of grief that result from the individual’s relational disposition. I do, of course, not argue that the experience of losing a loved person must necessarily lead to a life that is permanently and irrevocably impaired. Often, a seemingly in-built resilience wins the upper hand so that the pain of separation grows less acute and fades over time.<sup>21</sup> I also do not claim that the experience of contemporary grief has recently been rewritten at large. It would be more accurate to say that I observe a number of works

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<sup>20</sup> While several comparable literary works have already been listed, one could also think of Tom Ford’s film *A Single Man* (2009), the opening scene of which introduces the main character as a man so deeply immersed in mourning after having lost his life partner that he is determined to take his life at the end of the day. For the film’s protagonist, life has lost its meaning: it has—quite literally—been emptied out.

<sup>21</sup> For a more detailed account of bereaved people’s tendency to recover from the losses they have suffered, see George Bonanno’s *The Other Side of Sadness* (200). In his book, Bonanno addresses the issue of resilience. While also mentioning ‘chronic’ and ‘complicated’ grief, the book focuses on the ‘natural’ resilience that most people exhibit when faced with loss or personal tragedy.

that draw attention to the fact that grief *can* have a severely destabilizing, literally life-threatening, and certainly lasting effect.

Psychiatrists tend to call sustained, potentially interminable responses to loss ‘prolonged’ or ‘complicated’ grief.<sup>22</sup> When coming across a study that distinguishes between “uncomplicated” and “complicated” (one could also apply Freud’s terminology and instead say ‘normal’ and ‘pathological’) grief, Didion tries to place her own bereavement within these categories. According to the study that she references, complicated grief appears in situations where “the survivor and the deceased had been unusually dependent on one another” (47). Didion wonders how to define ‘unusually dependent,’ asking whether this term applies to certain categories of human relationships such as “husband and wife,” or “mother and child” (54). Eventually, the author diagnoses herself with a case of such complicated grief, admitting that after forty years of marriage, she had indeed come to rely on her husband’s company and care.

In the most recent edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (2013), which is often abbreviated as DSM-5, ‘complicated’ forms of grief are for the first time likened to treatable mental disorders (see also chapter one of this study). As a consequence, physicians are now allowed to treat recently bereaved patients medically, for instance by describing anti-depressants. Unsurprisingly, this decision was a highly controversial one. Critics feared that this redefinition would restrict the ‘normal’ time span allocated to grief, would in short further economize the ‘work of mourning.’ These recent changes in the medical framing of grief demonstrate what contemporary authors take issue with and write against. In order to pinpoint aspects that characterize the literary negotiation of this newly emerging, ‘domestic’ form of grief, let me turn to Mark Slouka’s essay “Nobody’s Son.”<sup>23</sup> Here, the narrator introduces his father’s death and his own grief as anything but “unusual.” He writes that there was, in fact, “nothing remotely tragic” about it:

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<sup>22</sup> In her 2009 *New York Times* article “After a Death, the Pain That Doesn’t Go Away,” Fran Schumer argues that approximately fifteen percent of all people who lose a close relative fail to cope with their grief and thus become unable to carry on with their life as before. Schumer refers to such forms of grief as “complicated” or “prolonged grief disorder” (n.p.). Referencing Katherine Shear, a professor of psychiatry at Columbia University, Schumer claims: “There is no formal definition of complicated grief, but researchers describe it as an acute form persisting more than six months, at least six months after a death. Its chief symptom is a yearning for the loved one so intense that it strips a person of other desires. Life has no meaning; joy is out of bounds.” Interestingly, Shear was the first to publish a study on what she called “the syndrome of complicated grief” (n.p.) She also developed a new treatment method for the condition and conducted the first clinical study that evaluated different form of treating complicated grief. See also Katherine Shear (et al) “Complicated Grief and Related Bereavement Issues for DSM-5” (2011).

<sup>23</sup> Slouka’s “Nobody’s Son” was published in the online version of *The New Yorker* on January 6, 2014.

Nothing happened. An old man [...] complained of feeling weak, sat down on the stoop of 74 Vinohradska street, and died [...] He'd lived a long, heartbreaking, and extraordinary life, lived it, on the whole, more decently than most, and when he came to the end of it, he died. It doesn't get more ordinary than that—the dying part, at least. (n.p.)

Slouka adds, almost as if formulating an afterthought: “Except that he was my father” (n.p.). The paradox of the ordinary tragedy that the author presents alludes to the complex situation in which grief is lived today. Slouka's essay is exemplary in showing that the chasm between presence and absence is not easily bridged: “I lost my father this past year, and the word feels right because I keep looking for him. As if he were misplaced. As if he could just turn up,” he adds, like a set of keys or a missing book (n.p.). The sense of unreality that is created by the loved person's absence creates a world that, missing an essential element, no longer appears whole. Slouka talks about his urge to pick up the phone and call his father or to drop him an email. He knows that his father is gone, and yet the significance of his death somehow escapes him. Slouka's experience of the untenable reality of death and loss cannot only be traced back to Emerson's “Experience.” It also resurfaces in many literary texts which describe this sense of ‘unreality’ as a defining trait of grief. C.S. Lewis, in his influential book *A Grief Observed*, explains why the world felt so out of tune after his wife had died. He, too, kept on waiting for her to show up again, which is why he likens grief to anxious waiting. The feeling of suspense, he follows:

Comes from the frustration of so many impulses that had become habitual. Thought after thought, feeling after feeling, action after action, had H. for their object. Now their target is gone. I keep on through habit fitting an arrow to the string; then I remember and have to lay the bow down. So many roads lead thought to H. I set out on one of them. But there's an impassable frontier-post across it. So many roads once: now so many *culs de sac*. (41)

Lewis implies here that the habit of viewing the other as a reference point, as the implied addressee of one's thoughts and actions, does not cease together with the loved person. While his observation explains why grief proves so utterly immobilizing and destabilizing, it also demonstrates that we indeed function relationally, whether on an actually acted out or merely imagined level. Because personal identities rely, today more than ever, on close familial or loving relations, their cessation can deeply impair the mourner's worldview. The cited statement alone illustrates how immediately grief affects the mourner's identity. And since identities are today in addition often thought of in narrative terms, the link to storytelling as a reflective, compensatory, or inquiring tool suggests itself. This makes the fact that contemporary authors reject the Freudian narrative and the psychological programs that followed from it all the more interesting, especially when bearing in mind that the grief

work model offers the promise of a coherent story, and could thus help the bereaved person to embed the experience of loss in his or her personal narrative.

And yet Slouka declines the offer of such a consoling narrative pattern explicitly when he says that he is “not selling this as any kind of blueprint, any kind of three- or five- or eight-step program to anything at all; as far as I can tell, there is no after-map [...] this terra is your own, brother, and as incognita as they come” (n.p.). He thus admits to the uncertainty of his own unsettled perspective. Describing himself as disoriented, he observes that he presents an obstacle to the societal apparatus: “Back in February, I smelled him coming out of the supermarket, a smell like wool and books and stale tobacco, and I put the paper bags down and just stood there for a few seconds, a bespectacled fool in a winter hat, blocking traffic” (n.p.). Slouka here portrays himself as unfit—and therefore as no longer fitting into a broader narrative of progressive movement. Unsurprisingly, this sentiment increases in proportion to his gradual rejection of the ‘grief work’ narrative which would have offered him comfort, closure, possibly even recovery.

When the narrator asks a friend who also lost a parent whether it “gets better” with time, the friend merely answers: “it changes” (n.p.). The idea of grief as potentially endless, and *as* change, is crucial: it designates a shift from a rationale of detachment to one of identification, and thus to the integration of an unsignifiable void. This shift produces the narrators’ open perspective, which in turn determines his painfully precarious disposition. When addressing his own vulnerability, Slouka refers, rather emphatically, to another author: “Graham Greene counseled that you should write with a splinter of ice in your heart, advice I’ve taken, well, to heart. Except that I’m fresh out of ice lately. My heart feels overfull, vulnerable, and part of me, nursing grief as a tribute, prefers it that way” (n.p.). This inconclusive conclusion shows that he does not perceive grief as a way to end his loving relation. Instead, it becomes his way to continue the relationship that continues to define him. Slouka’s narrative persona could consequently be read as a melancholic mourner, as a person who identifies with and incorporates a loss that he fails to fully grasp. In his canonical essay “Mourning and Melancholia,” Freud argues that while in mourning, “it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself” (246). While in the former, the mourner externalizes his loss, he draws it into his ‘ego’ in the latter, which is why the loss of the other also designates a partial loss of the melancholic’s self. The following chapters will examine narrators, who not only identify with their intractable grief, but also seek to integrate it into their stories. Their narratives create a room in which the identification with loss, and the stories derived from this identification, can be told without having to assume a fully comprehensive form.

The first chapter retraces the social history of the conceptualization of grief. It will show that the individual experience of grief is highly dependent upon the cultural context that frames it. The fact that it was once clad in public rituals but is today primarily perceived as a private feeling already indicates how vulnerable and variable a concept grief is. In order to highlight the dynamics that shaped our contemporary idea of grief, I will reassess Freud's psychoanalytical theorization of the 'work of mourning' by aligning it with Max Weber's critique of a paradigmatically American 'work ethic.' Recent sociological approaches that address the social construction (and determination) of emotions will crucially factor into a discussion that focuses on the functions that theoretical and narrative texts about mourning can carry out today.

The second chapter will focus on Dave Eggers' *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*. In this work of 'creative nonfiction,' the narrator Dave describes the year following both of his parents' death. Not only does Dave leave his hometown—and thus the world of death and decay—to embark on a project of original 'worldmaking' in his chosen destination of Berkeley, California; his escapist efforts also reflect the narrative's tendency to divert from an autobiographical mode of storytelling in order to move toward the liberating realm of the fictional and fantastic. The narrator's dissatisfaction with an often inappropriate, not sufficiently dramatic reality is compensated through the ironic integration of fictional micro-plots. He implements scenes from comic strips, action movies, and theatrical plays into his narrative. The integration of these generic literary formats serves both stabilizing and destabilizing functions, as they simultaneously distract from, and draw attention to the devastating pain of grief that Dave both at once represses and indirectly integrates into his utterly inconclusive story.

Chapter three retraces Roland Barthes's concern with the lacerating pain of (amorous) suffering. The chapter observes how the critic's perspective changes after his mother's death. A close-reading of Barthes's posthumously published *Mourning Diary* as well as his late *Camera Lucida* will highlight that Barthes insisted as much on the meaninglessness of his mother's death as on the intractable uniqueness of her being, the latter of which he intended to capture in an envisioned, but never realized literary text called *Vita Nova*. His failure to render his mother's essential being without imbuing her death with conventional meaning had a grave impact on Barthes's worldview: it essentially changed his perspective on the relation between the writing subject and the written text.

Siri Hustvedt's fictional and non-fictional works will present the analytical focal point of this study's fourth and last chapter. Her narratives exhibit characters that are defined by their affective ties and unconscious desires. It is through the experience of grief that the



severe consequences of their relationally constituted identities are brought to light, often in a painfully deconstructive way. Despite the fact that Hustvedt, who is well versed in psychoanalytic theory, relies heavily on Freud's assertions, she tends to draw characters that are captivated by a melancholic form of grief that arises from their complex and often ambivalent relationship to the deceased.

This brief outline shows that these 'works of mourning' grapple with an experience of essential loss that has capsized a life story. Almost univocally, these texts insist on the meaninglessness of loss and aim to tell a life story that is unusual in its refusal to incorporate all of its essential episodes in a significant way. The question arises, therefore, how to write and read a life story that no longer 'makes sense.' What does one make of these 'unproductive' narratives, of stories that are not good for anything and do not teach us how to mourn better, become better, or improve ourselves? Is it really feasible to say that we should hold onto grief, should remain vulnerable, and should even let that vulnerability define us? Does that not force the bereaved narrator into the paralysis of complete stagnation? What if, to speak with Emerson, the only thing that grief teaches us is that grief 'can teach us nothing'? What do we gain in accepting that grief does not 'work' according to a program; and that we may not 'get over it' by applying a five-step model?

In trying to answer these questions, a few assumptions will guide the analyses. It seems, first of all, that most texts redefine grief as change, and therefore as unpredictable and frightening. By admitting to grief's unruliness and complexity, authors and narrators draw attention to the fact that the social discomfort with grief results from the often neglected fact that life is contingent upon factors that exceed the individual's control: this observation in turn suggests that they cease to perceive life as the product of hard work, and thus as something that has to be actively achieved and earned. It will be interesting to see how this redefinition of grief relates to the close connection between grief and identity that the texts imply. C.S. Lewis uses the figure of the amputee to describe the crucial changes that mourning brings about: while in most cases "the fierce, continuous pain will stop," the amputee may experience recurring pains throughout his life (46). He may, to a certain extent, remain wounded, and therefore changed: "bathing, dressing, sitting down and getting up again, even lying in bed, will all be different. His whole way of life will be changed" (46). Similar dynamics shape the literary and theoretical representations of loss that I examine.

I secondly claim that contemporary literature and theory does not exhibit heroic resilience in the face of adversity, or rather tragedy. Yet this appears to be precisely the point: to feel defeated and write about it without succumbing to narrative's tendency to transform single

events into a significant whole or a unifying story. With this particular observation in mind, the following analyses ask whether the life stories of bereaved narrators can indeed be read as melancholic rituals. At first glance, such a reading appears feasible, especially when accepting that the practice of writing and publishing literary ‘works of mourning’ replaces and at the same time reintroduces the public ritual of grieving. I would like to propose that the gesture of writing—continuously, repeatedly, habitually—could in fact be understood as a ritualistic reworking of the experience of loss and bereavement. Yet instead of being directed outward, towards the loved person’s externalization and one’s own subsequent detachment from him or her, the narrators in question identify with the loss that they articulate. In doing so, they recount the incorporation of something that seems barely comprehensible: they perform, in short, the paradoxical continuation of a love that has ceased to exist. I believe that this melancholic identification with the emptiness or void of loss is the strongest common denominator of these texts, which resemble one another in their similarly fragmentary, dispersed, and disoriented perspective.

Before moving to the discussion of grief’s social genealogy and cultural receptiveness, I would like to take a moment to ponder its conceptualization as an emotional state. What does it mean to frame grief as a feeling or an affective condition? In his book *Politics of Affect* (2015), Brian Massumi refers back to Spinoza<sup>24</sup> when defining affect as “the power ‘to affect and be affected’” (ix). He thus binds affect to the relational, or more precisely to the realm that opens up *between* people in the moment of their encounter. Massumi specifies that for him, “to affect and be affected is to be open to the world, to be active in it and to be patient for its return activity” (ix). This statement is important when rethinking the mourner’s avowed, often acutely painful sense of openness. While this openness derives from the lack of direction that the other’s absence induces, it also produces a particular sensibility *toward* the world. What applies to affect in general thus also holds true for the specific case of grief: both are products of an encounter with an ‘other’ and the world that was created by their shared relation. When defining affect, as Massumi does, as an “openness to being affected,” and thus as an openness to the world, one recognizes both its relational and its inherently social character. While we often associate affect primarily with the individual’s inner life, its interiority, it thus also exerts an immediate impact on our relationally shaped individual identities. From this point of view, it becomes obvious why losing a loved person can have such destabilizing effects on the mourner’s identity.

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<sup>24</sup> For more information on Benedict de Spinoza’s delineation of affect’s relation to feelings and emotions, see his influential work *Ethics*, which was originally published in 1677.

Raymond Williams strikes a similar note in his book *Marxism and Literature* (1977), where he addresses the sociality and structural character of our innermost, seemingly inalienable feelings. Williams claims that emotional states deeply affect our “social consciousness,” which cannot be reduced to fixed belief systems or categories, but rather emerges in and through our relations (130). He explains that we tend to regard “culture and society” as the finished products of past events (128). By habitually converting our relations and identities into “formed wholes,” we dismiss the opportunity to understand them as processes that continually form and frame us. While we tend to regard the social as that which has already become explicit, we frame “all that escapes or seems to escape” the known as the “personal” or “subjective” (128). Because this dichotomy between an easily graspable sociality on the one hand and a fleeting reality of the subjective and emotional on the other is rather reductive, Williams insists that the social should not be limited to such “fixed forms” (129). Instead, it should include the more complex reality of uncertainties that cannot yet be fully articulated, but that nevertheless affect us deeply. Williams defines the latent, emergent, or not-yet-fixed dimensions of the social as “*structures of feeling*” (132). These ‘structures’ pertain, interestingly directly to that which is often cast as the ‘private,’ the ‘subjective’ or the ‘emotional.’ What we feel is therefore not only organized in a certain way, it also follows particular trends. While our ‘structures of feelings’ are therefore socially constituted, their systematic nature is not always recognizable. It is, on the contrary, embedded in the social that is still emerging and not yet articulated.

Williams claims that newly emerging ‘structures of feeling’ often come to the fore through artworks or emerge in literary texts. He thus turns the arts into a laboratory for new ideas, thoughts—and feelings. When we apply this hypothesis to works that have recently begun to reformulate the idea of what it means to feel at a loss, it becomes possible to argue that these ‘grief works’ communicate changes that have of late occurred in our *structures of feeling*. While the literature and theory in question may not yet explicate where exactly these changes lead or what social repercussions they imply, it does point toward the reemergence of the concept of melancholia as a literary trope and a theoretical theme. And because it does so based on the recognition that our relational ties constitute us, it not only reassesses grief but also invites us, as readers, to acknowledge and accept the lasting effect that the experience of loss can have on the stories that we tell both about ourselves—and about the ones we have lost and yet continue to love.

## I. Worlds of Grief: From a Psychoanalytic Model to a Sociological Critique

This chapter explores the conceptualization of grief in the Western world, with a particular focus on the U.S. American cultural landscape. Asking how grief is conceived of today, it will not only observe how mourning is present and absent from today's social realities, but will also provide an insight into past and present discourses on grief. Because the literary and theoretical elaborations that this study discusses emerged out of a very specific (post)modern social fabric, this chapter explores the particulars of these texts' genealogical context. While presenting, above all, a discourse analysis, it nevertheless focuses on the intervention that the analyzed material makes through its explicit and implicit resistance against prevalent dynamics of economization and optimization. As already mentioned, I will put a particular emphasis on Sigmund Freud's influential idea of the 'work of mourning' and the economic rationale implied in his psychoanalytic conceptualizations.<sup>1</sup> Holding Freud's views against Weber's critique of a paradigmatically North American 'work ethic' will allow us to better understand in what ways contemporary texts address the rationalization and economization of affect in general, and of grief in particular.

Before taking a closer look at these issues, it is important to note that two main strands of academic literature on grief can be determined: the first, traditional approach, based on Freud's psychoanalytic theory and further developed within the field of psychology, is complemented by a more recent sociological conceptualization. While this chapter compares both approaches, it understands the recent sociological strand as a reformulation of earlier psychoanalytic and psychological theories. This becomes a particularly relevant observation when taking into account that this sociological critique correlates with the criticism voiced in contemporary literary and autobiographical texts: authors of both fields, literature and sociology, understand grief as affected by the forces that are often held responsible for the modern world's 'disenchantment,' which Max Weber famously defined as an "Entzauberung der Welt."<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, recent sociological theorists have applied Weber's general argument to the specific realm of the emotions, and thus also to the case of

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<sup>1</sup> In the original German, the work of mourning is called "Trauerarbeit." The choice of wording bespeaks the procedural and functional character attributed to grief. According to Darian Leader, 'the work of mourning' "echoes the concept he had already introduced in his book *The Interpretation of Dreams*, 'the dream work' or 'the work of dreaming.' The dream work is what transforms a thought or wish we might have into the manifest, complex dream. It consists of displacements, distortions and condensations, equivalent to the mechanisms of the unconscious itself. Freud uses the same kind of expression to talk about mourning to indicate, perhaps, that it isn't just our thoughts about the lost loved one that count, but what we do with them: how they are organized, arranged, run through, altered" (28).

<sup>2</sup> Weber first used the impression in a 1917 essay entitled "Wissenschaft als Beruf," but it reoccurred in his later work. The following discussion will focus on Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, which the author composed in 1904-05 and which was translated into English in 1930.

mourning: they argue that the thorough rationalization of Western modernity has affected and continues to shape our experience of loss. It therefore makes sense to compare the psychoanalytic discourse—with its focus on the psyche's interiority and neglect of the social dimension—to the sociological critique which per definition understands affective experiences and their expression as socially generated.<sup>3</sup>

In the context of the societal changes that the Western world's modernization has brought about, issues of individualization, fragmentation, and commodification are often aligned with altered dynamics of social interaction and subject-hood. And it indeed appears that both are today increasingly defined by an economic rationale that is geared toward the maxim of efficiency and productivity. When this argument is applied to the changing conception of grief, the same terms can be held responsible for the mourner's marginalized societal situation. The social criticism inherent in the selected texts thus echoes a much broader narrative, as it essentially also revolves around the side effects of the Western world's rationalization that went—one should add—hand in hand with the decline of communal ties and the erosion of a supportive social network. While it would be reductive to condemn modernity's capitalist systems and nostalgically celebrate a lost sense of communal belonging, the mentioned criticism proves enlightening because it disentangles affect's relation to modernity, and to capitalism. In doing so, it asks whether and in what ways the imperatives that drive modern capitalistic societies modulate affect. And if they do so, has the modern subject perhaps internalized the imperatives of functionality and self-control so thoroughly that it has come to rely on and in fact identify with them?

When trying to answer this question, the first observation pertains to the fact that grief has lost its significance as a communal and public practice, and that mourning rituals have disappeared due to the imposition of a social 'taboo.'<sup>4</sup> As a consequence, death and bereavement have been removed from the realm of the familiar and the mourner is no longer recognized as a socially integrated public figure. With these first impressions in mind, this chapter seeks to find out whether the mourner's marginalization can be traced back to the observation that grief has—despite all therapeutic efforts to achieve the opposite—always refused to be reduced to anything but an utterly unproductive and potentially interminable process.<sup>5</sup> While this question already indicates an affirmative

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<sup>3</sup> In *Why Love Hurts* (2012), Eva Illouz describes the exposure of the social basis of our ideological convictions as sociology's principal incentive. She argues that from a sociological perspective, an experience must always be seen within the institutional social structure that organizes it. Even that which one perceives to be one's most individual behavior and feelings can be traced back to the social and communal structures that motivate them (32-33).

<sup>4</sup> See: Geoffrey Gorer's essay "The Pornography of Death" (1955), p. 49-52

<sup>5</sup> Historical and cross-cultural studies of emotions have confirmed that the experience of grief varies

answer, one could certainly also claim that emotions are inherently functional mechanisms—and that grief must therefore fulfill a very particular purpose.<sup>6</sup> Nico Frijda has drawn attention to the fact that the functionality of affect is a “basic Darwinian presupposition” (131). When exploring this functionalist interpretation, he discovered that emotions “might not merely be functional because they watch the individual’s interests, but also because they may serve as social regulators” (131). Happiness is, for instance, an emotion whose close connection to metaphors of growth and gain could be said to reinforce a cultural narrative that propagates productivity and functionality as a person’s greatest assets. When regarded from this perspective, it seems that the ‘pursuit of happiness’ does not only prescribe and structure a very particular sort of emotional behavior, but also helps to perpetuate the ideological paradigm that shaped it. While such a reading certainly appears feasible, how does it account for emotions that resist such a “functional interpretation”? Frijda claims that seemingly “dysfunctional” emotions” such as “grief and sorrow” serve the purpose of indicating to the subject that it has been (131). This, however, does not mean that sadness and despair can always be transformed into useful practices. While they certainly signal the physical and psychological reaction to social changes and are therefore both reasonable and significant, they can nevertheless not always be externalized in the form of purposeful behavioral mechanisms.

At the same time, affect’s close connection to the fields of ‘habit’ and ‘practice’ makes the fact that emotions are normally associated with a person’s inner life and are therefore often perceived as essentialist and individualistic all the more interesting. The fact that even ‘internal’ feelings are followed by the ‘external’ effect that they have on our behavior proves that they are both at once shaped by and exert an influence on their social context.<sup>7</sup> It

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depending upon social and cultural constituents. Charmaz and Milligan state: “constructionist perspectives on emotion emphasize that both felt and expressed emotions result from an individual’s socialization into the emotional culture of a given group. Expressed (or displayed) emotions are clearly constructed” (521). A similar argument has been developed by Lyn Lofland in her article “*The Social Shaping of Emotion: The Case of Grief*” (1985).

<sup>6</sup> This assumption invites the question of how affect has been framed historically and theoretically. Arlie Hochschild’s book *The Managed Heart* provides a helpful overview of various approaches to theories of emotion. The author distinguishes between the “organismic” model on the one hand and the “interactional” on the other (201), both of which have emerged in the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Charles Darwin, William James, and later Sigmund Freud are named as advocates of the organismic model, which dismisses the influence of social and cultural factors. Theorists like John Dewey, Hans Gerth, C. Wright Mills, and Erving Goffman developed ‘interactional’ models of emotions. Whereas organismic theories emphasize similarities, for instance between the emotional behavior of human beings and animals, in order to prove that emotions have an organic cause and are not socially constructed, interactional theorists stress differences that prove that emotions do in fact derive from their social context.

<sup>7</sup> In *What is an Emotion? Classic and Contemporary Readings* (2003), Robert Solomon comments that “thinkers have traditionally been more invested in reason than the affective side of the human mind” (ix). He proposes that affect has often been neglected while reason has, at least since the Enlightenment, been celebrated. Yet Solomon emphasizes that reason and emotion must not necessarily be regarded as in

is, consequently, important to keep in mind that while emotions are often either naturalized or presented as a given, they can never be fully disentangled from the social structure that they derive from.<sup>8</sup> One could here speak with Robert Solomon, who wonders whether one could even “fall in love [...] if one had been raised in a culture where romantic love was virtually unheard of?” (2).

These preliminary thoughts on the utility and productivity of affect increase in complexity as soon as one takes the mourner’s specific perspective into account. Not only does the issue of identity become prevalent in this context, it must also be linked to the specific dynamics that determine our affective self-formation. When assuming that modernity has indeed turned the individual’s ability to function flawlessly and fulfill its societal tasks into both a virtue and an obligation, Freud’s concept of the ‘work of mourning’ can be reread as a behaviorist manual that helps the individual to generate a productive and positive, in short a ‘healthy’ self-image. At the same time, such a reading stands in contrast to the observation that mourners today often feel as if they lost their place in the world. And sociologists like Charmaz and Milligan confirm that intense grief can be “a searing disruption that not only inundates the bereaved person’s emotions but also destabilizes his or her life and self” (519). Since this implies that the important role that close emotional relations play today may only become tangible in the moment of their disintegration, it can also be assumed that the literature under analysis in this study grapples with the tension inherent in affect, which has both a constitutive and destabilizing force.

After summing up the psychoanalytic approach and its sociological renunciation, this chapter will retrace the social history of death and bereavement. Meghan O’Rourke and Joan Didion’s grief memoirs will then serve as literary examples that demonstrate the social criticism negotiated numerous mourning memoirs. Inquiring how the experience of grief is shaped by the social situation in which it appears leads to much further reaching, systemic question, which essentially ask whether the recently emerged critical reassessment of grief reformulates the highly influential and still prevalent psychoanalytical theory and its application in the field of psychotherapy. This question will be embedded in a larger theoretical discussion, which focuses on the economic forces that determine our social interaction and subjectivity. Instrumental rationality’s impact on the emotional sphere in general and on grief in particular will be a particular concern, because the resistance against

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opposition to each other. Our emotions are in fact “often intelligent, indeed, sometimes more appropriate and insightful than the calm deliberations we call ‘reason’” (1).

<sup>8</sup> See also: Catherine Lutz’s essay in the anthology *What is an Emotion? Classic and Contemporary Readings* (2003) where she argues for emotions as cultural constructs and accordingly speaks of “unnatural emotions” (142-3).

modes of emotional rationalization constitutes a recurrent motif in much recent grief literature. I argue that grief memoirs renegotiate and reintegrate the idea of permanent injury and incapability, which ideological imperatives of achievement and wellbeing have for a long time undermined or dismissed. The fact that autobiographical accounts tend to be written in the wake of a deeply personal and yet universal crisis raises the question of how these narratives crystallize a perhaps paradigmatically modern sense of personal precariousness and uncertainty. This chapter thus essentially debates what can be gained by looking at texts that are determined by a severely destabilizing sense of loss.

### **Freud's Legacy: Psychoanalytic Grief Theory and the 'Work of Mourning'**

Today's psychological approach originates in Sigmund Freud's theory and practice of psychoanalysis.<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, Freud remains the most widely cited authority on the topic of grief, despite the fact that many of his assumptions have been subjected to harsh criticism.<sup>10</sup> Freud's famous early essay "Mourning and Melancholia" (1917) is primarily concerned with the 'pathological' condition of melancholia and dedicates only a short section to the 'normal' condition of grief. Yet this section, which outlines 'the work of mourning,' has become *the* model for the psychological conceptualization of grief. That being said, it is quite remarkable that Freud's later revisions have remained largely unnoticed.

And yet I do not mean to argue that Freud's theory fully submits to the imperative of instrumental rationality. His method of analysis in fact resists this trend. According to Philip Rieff, our "talk" is normally "selective in order to be efficient. Efficiency is the aim of most discourse" (333). Psychoanalysis, however, is "characterized by its deliberate anti-efficiency" (333). It circumvents the "impulse" that normally structures our thoughts and conversations, namely the impulse to speak selectively and thus coherently. Rieff goes so far as to conclude that: "rational thought, because it is selective, is not therapeutically useful" (333). Does Freud's purposefully irrational program thus reject the imperative of

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<sup>9</sup> Nicholas Rand condenses Freud's early theory. He writes that Freud's work is based on three main assumptions, the first of which revolves around the idea that "neuroses in adults result from the vicissitudes of infantile sexuality" (lii). He secondly rephrases Freud's idea that "a childhood neurosis, possibly unnoticed, must have preceded the adult one" (lii). And he thirdly summarizes Freud's conclusion that "finding the disturbing factors in the progress of infantile sexuality and elaborating them through transference leads to their dissolution, that is, to a cure of the adult neurosis" (lii).

<sup>10</sup> Geoffrey Gorer confirms that: "one short essay by Freud—Mourning and Melancholia [...] dominates all the psychological studies of grief and mourning written since that date. Much of the later work is in the nature of exegesis on this text" (*Death, Grief, and Mourning in Contemporary Britain*, 118). Kathleen Woodward reinforces that "Mourning and Melancholia" must be described as a "founding" document, but also as a "puzzlingly constraining text" (94). She elaborates that: "discussions of mourning have not developed in a particularly fertile way theoretically" (94). She explains the lack of a more 'fertile' development by implying that Freud cast "the difference between mourning and melancholia in clear-cut binary terms, and this false opposition has paralyzed discussions of mourning ever since" (95).



instrumental rationality? Sure enough, the analytical situation was originally designed to echo the “timelessness and indifference to logic with which the unconscious operates” (333). Yet this idea of the analytical practice differs vastly from therapeutic situations today, especially as the latter’s institutionalized structure no longer allows for such unrestricted, open-ended practices.<sup>11</sup> What is more, Freud distinguishes the internal world of the therapeutic situation from the patient’s external ‘reality.’ It is by way of the irrational method of analysis that the patient is supposedly reintegrated into the normatively demanding societal structure. Freud, it seems, thus rejects rationality solely within the frame of the therapeutic situation. Rieff goes so far as to argue that the psychoanalytic program is based on the assumption that “everything in the psyche is produced for use. Play itself is a practical effort” (131).

When we apply this observation regarding the general utility of the psyche’s workings to the realm of affect and emotions,<sup>12</sup> must we not inevitably come to the conclusion that Freud also regarded them as functional mechanisms? Approaching his concept of the ‘work of mourning’ with these considerations in mind may help to explain why Freud frames grief as an outcome-oriented, seemingly ‘economical’ process. Peter Brooks has noted that Freud typically made use of “three conceptual descriptions of mental life: the topographical, the economical, and the dynamic” (42). In the cases where Freud described mental life in economic terms, he not only referred to “the motor force of the drive or instinct,” but also spoke about a “psychic motor or steam engine, with the instinctual providing a reservoir of fuel” (42). The choice of vocabulary is telling: Freud clearly makes use of the “engines and motors of nascent industrialism” and symbolically aligns them with the human psyche. While this may not be surprising when keeping in mind that Freud wrote at a time that was steeped in industrial change, it is nonetheless interesting to note that he regarded the psyche as a productive, striving mechanism. His concept of both the ‘drive’ and the ‘instincts’ must thus be understood as implying a certain directedness, or an urge to progress forward.

With regard to his specific view on the feelings of grief and the process—or work—of mourning, Freud initially merely admits that “mourning over the loss of something we

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<sup>11</sup> In her book *Shaking Woman*, Siri Hustvedt states that: “although American psychiatry was once heavily influenced by psychoanalysis, the two disciplines have grown further and further apart, especially since the 1970s. Many psychiatrists have little or no knowledge of psychoanalysis [...] Large numbers of American psychiatrists now leave most of the talk to social workers and stick to writing prescriptions. Pharmacology dominates” (19).

<sup>12</sup> According to Robert Solomon, “Freud did not develop a theory of emotion as such, but his psychoanalytical theories radically changed the whole idea of emotions and sorts of phenomena that theories of emotions are supposed to explain” (98). Particularly Freud’s emphasis on the unconscious led to the recognition that we are not always aware of the ‘drives’ that structure our mental processes—and thus also our emotions.

have loved or admired seems so natural” that it appears “self-evident” (“On Transience” 305). At the same time, he admits that grief remains “a great riddle” to psychoanalysts, “one of those phenomena which cannot themselves be explained” (305). This statement from his 1915 essay “On Transience” articulates the conceptual threshold between Freud’s early theory of mourning and his revised later perspective. He here already articulates doubts regarding his initial conviction that complete detachment is a precondition for and enables a full recovery from grief. Unable to explain why mourning proves such an excruciatingly painful process and why the mourner hesitates to abandon its libidinal attachment, Freud comes to question the necessity of closure and consolation:

Why it is that this detachment of libido from its objects should be such a painful process is a mystery to us and we have not hitherto been able to frame any hypothesis to account for it. We only see that libido clings to its objects and will not renounce those that are lost even when a substitute lies ready to hand. Such then is mourning. (305)

As this quote shows, Freud’s original and his later approach explicate different understandings regarding the “economics” of mourning. In his early work, most notably in “Mourning and Melancholia,” Freud distinguishes clearly between these two titular conditions. While mourning is described as the conscious reaction to the shock of a loved person’s death, melancholia is perceived as an illness, which does not necessarily result from identifiable loss, but which can also be an unconscious reaction to the failure of a relationship that had been marked by “conflict due to ambivalence” (251). Freud states that: “although mourning involves grave departures from the normal attitude to life, it never occurs to us to regard it as a pathological condition.” Instead, “we rely on its being overcome after a certain lapse of time” (244). Interestingly, Freud thus naturalizes mourning precisely because of its allegedly temporary character. It is also for this reason that he draws a sharp line between “normal mourning” and the “pathological” condition of melancholia. And yet both conditions share similar “mental features,” such as a “profoundly painful dejection” and “cessation of interest in the outside world,” which can lead to the “inhibition of all activity” (244). What is more, both can result in a temporary “turning away from any activity that is not connected with thoughts” of the lost love object (244). While mourning thus “contains the same painful frame of mind” and “the same loss of interest in the outside world,” which also characterizes melancholia, these symptoms do not stand for themselves, but are instead dedicated to the overarching task of completing the work of mourning. The mourner’s solitary focus on thoughts pertaining to the deceased is

thus not an expression of suffering in and of itself. It is rather understood as the mourner's "exclusive devotion to mourning," a commitment that leaves no room "for other purposes or other interests" (244). While such behavior may, as Freud notes, appear pathological, it is in fact a part of the productive work of mourning and thus serves a reconstructive purpose. Freud concludes that: "the inhibition and loss of interest are fully accounted for by the work of mourning in which the ego is absorbed" (244). The tedious 'work' is thus legitimized by its effect of returning the mourner to a former state of wellbeing and functionality. It can be concluded that normal mourning differs from pathological melancholia because here, the mourner actively works through her grief. In melancholia, the same "inhibition" occurs, yet no productive outcome is reached. As a consequence, the condition is categorized as a pathological condition, and therefore as a problem (244).<sup>13</sup>

This reading shows that at the time of writing "Mourning and Melancholia," Freud viewed grief as a temporary condition that can "pass off without leaving traces of any gross changes." He names "reality-testing" as the method through which the grief work is carried out (252). During this phase, "each single one of the memories and expectations in which the libido is bound to the object is brought up and hypercatheted" (252). This means that the lost object is thoroughly reassessed; it is examined from all possible angles and its multiple single images are combined to form a complete memory object. Freud states that if this process of reality-testing is carried out successfully, "detachment of the libido is accomplished" (255). He reinforces that "each single one of the memories" is challenged "by the verdict of reality that the object no longer exists." Accordingly, all "narcissistic satisfactions," which the subject "derives from being alive," persuades it to "sever its attachment to the object" (255). While it could be assumed that this process is experienced as satisfying, Freud observes that it does not include "a phase of triumph." Puzzled by this observation, the analyst admits that he cannot explain the "economic means by which mourning carries out its task."<sup>14</sup> Why must it be such a tedious, painful endeavor? Freud vaguely ascribes the procedural character to the fact that the image of the mourned object,

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<sup>13</sup> Rieff says that regarding "the cultural significance of the neurotic character, Freud is entirely specific. Neurotics are rebels out of weakness rather than strength [...] Instead of being repressed and turned inward as the neurotic is, the normal personality is active and outgoing" (353). While "normal attitudes lead to some active achievement in the outer world," a neurotic or anxious personality derives from "a libido which has 'found no employment'; therefore, the dream, like work, has a 'moralizing purpose.'" (353). Rieff argues that this "economic metaphor discloses Freud's ideal of health as well: a fully employed libido" (353). This explains why neurosis is often associated with a sense of inadequacy, weakness, and even failure.

<sup>14</sup> In his later paper *Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety*, Freud returns to but admits that he knows very little about the 'economics' of pain. He merely asks: "when does separation from an object produce anxiety, when does it produce mourning and when does it produce, it may be, only pain?" without offering an answer to his own question (169).

which is “made up of innumerable single impressions,” must be reactivated one by one before it can be ultimately detached (256).

Despite this explanation, Freud’s essay nevertheless remains hung up on the ‘economics’ of mourning, particularly because it appears that grief fails to take the most efficient route to recovery. Despite this structural ambiguity, which is at odds with the productivity that determines the work at large, Freud remains insisted upon the fact that eventually, the problem is resolved and “mourning is completed.” Interestingly, it is merely noted that as this point is reached, “the ego becomes free and uninhibited again” (245). Freud thus closes his essay by stating that as the object is “abandoned as valueless,” the mourner finds consolation in a replacement. While the ‘grief work’ (or, as in the German original, ‘Trauerarbeit’) is thus presented as an almost schematic process whose achievement consists in ‘overcoming’ the loss of the object, it nevertheless temporarily absorbs “all the energies of the ego” (254). By defining mourning as work, Freud interprets the mourner’s temporary ‘unworldliness’ as a dedication to the tasks of the ‘work,’ whose purpose he repeatedly points to. In doing so, he turns it into a procedure that cannot only be fully understood, but can potentially also be monitored and controlled. Although mourning is therefore sketched as a straightforward operation, Freud does not view complete detachment as an automatism. Instead, it is precisely the subject’s “opposition” to it, which triggers his temporary withdrawal from the social realm (244). Yet it is also this same withdrawal that leads to the acknowledgment of the other’s death and thus paves the way for the mourner’s detachment. It can be followed that the work’s ‘otherworldliness’ does not undermine but on the contrary reinforces its compliance with Western paradigms of productivity and progress.

And yet, how exactly does Freud explain the moment of detachment, which resonates with both resolution and closure? It is stated that the work of mourning comes to an end at the moment when the lost object has been observed, examined, ‘tested’ from all possible perspectives and the work has, therefore, exhausted itself. Leader has suggested that the grief work performs the task of ‘shifting’ the image of the deceased person to the “level” of “signs” (102). The work of mourning thus accomplishes an estrangement; the loved object is removed from the immediate reality of the mourning subject by being shifted to the representational realm. When reading the process of mourning as such a shifting of registers, reality-testing could be understood as a process of memory-making, which frames the many fragmented appearances and transforms them into a fully reflected, complete image of a person, which the mourner recognizes as “separate” from him- or herself (104). The level of reflexivity that is thus achieved is interesting with regard to its relation to

language and literature. One could argue that literary works reiterate this very process by shifting the already framed image of the loved person to yet another level of self-conscious representation. By transforming it into a literary figure or integrating it into a text, they remove it from the realm of memories and secure it in the fixed form of a literary monument. Despite the consistent logic of such a reading, I do not believe that it can be applied to contemporary stories of grief. The fact that their authors are unwilling to separate themselves from the loved person and appear hesitant to abandon their exile of grief indicates that their identification with it persists and cannot easily be abandoned.

Let us, however, return to Freud: while the ‘work of mourning’ appears to be rather conspicuous process, the same does not apply to melancholia, whose complicated character results from the ambiguous relationship to the lost object. This means that here, the same process of reality-testing has a different outcome; it does not lead to the mourner’s libidinal detachment. As a result, the melancholic’s feelings remain torn: “hate and love contend with each other” (“Mourning and Melancholia” 256). Caught in this conflicted situation, the melancholic on the one hand “seeks to detach the libido from the object” while he on the other tries to “maintain this position of the libido against the assault” (256). It is precisely this ambiguity that Freud’s later revisions revolve around. Because he gradually comes to realize that ambiguity cannot solely be ascribed to the pathological condition of melancholia, but instead also plays a part in ‘normal’ mourning, he cannot but rethink the clear-cut distinction between both conditions.<sup>15</sup>

Before moving on to these revisions, it is worth taking a closer look at the details pertaining to the condition of melancholia. Although the melancholic’s object-loss is, as in mourning, followed by a phase of social withdrawal, this solitary phase does not achieve a similarly definitive end: instead of resulting in libidinal detachment and reinvestment, it is returned to and “withdrawn into the ego.” As a consequence, an identification with the “abandoned” object is established and the “object-loss” is “transformed into an ego-loss” (249). In Freud’s early understanding, the notion of identification is perceived as problematic, because it forecloses the possibility of a libidinal reinvestment and can therefore impair the subject’s full social restoration. And yet Freud mentions, if only in passing, that such

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<sup>15</sup> Rieff notes that for Freud, the difference between normality and neurosis is only “a matter of degree.” The acceptance of such a view, that “the commonplace is saturated with the abnormal, the pathological—that psychopathology no longer deals with the exception but with the ordinary man,” greatly influenced the social perception, and the moral judgment, of neuroses and ‘abnormalities’ (354). Despite the fact that Freud thus established the view that normality cannot always be assumed to be the status quo, he nevertheless formulates it as “an ethical ideal” (355). Rieff argues that the Freudian doctrine established normality as an ideal because it essentially suggests that the individual should always strive to ‘overcome’ its neuroses and thus relieve itself of its abnormal tendencies.

identification may also enable the continuation of the love relationship, which ends with libidinal detachment and replacement in the case of mourning. He says that in melancholia, “love escapes extinction” by “taking flight into the ego” (257). This statement shows that in the early theorization, externalization and identification appear as diametrically opposed and mutually exclusive processes. The melancholic person’s way of incorporating its loss prohibits the ‘healthy’ work of mourning to take place. Put differently, the grief work invites the mourner to symbolically kill the dead and sever the attachment. Melancholics, in contrast, remain tied to their losses and consequently do not fully return to an external world that demands the acknowledgment of the lost object’s death. The melancholic person’s simultaneous situatedness in two worlds thus disables the process of externalization and consequently forecloses the possibility of a complete detachment. These observations show that while it would certainly be feasible to argue that these texts perform the work of mourning, one can also read them as accounts told from the perspective of narrators, who neither fully inhabit the world of the living nor that of the dead, but who instead create an alternative third space, namely that of melancholic grief.

I have already shown that Freud’s initial grief theory did not allow for much ambiguity. When Freud later reformulates his approach, however, the distinction between mourning and melancholia loses its contours. In her insightful article “Mourning beyond Melancholia,” Tammie Clewell notes that Freud’s early work is based on the belief that one’s love for another person “derives from one’s self-love,” which is why in the case of grief, the mourner must simply “reclaim the libido invested” (47). According to this perspective, libidinal detachment is a precondition for love’s reinvestment. At the same time, this also means that the operational causality of the grief work theory is threatened as soon as libidinal attachment is no longer perceived as projected self-love alone. This makes it all the more interesting that Freud, when reassessing melancholia in his 1923 paper “The Ego and the Id,”<sup>16</sup> admits that he had previously not realized how “common and how typical” a phenomenon identification is. He now proposes that identification plays a central role in the formation of a person’s “character” (28). Not only does Freud therefore revalidate the role of identification in the early stages of self-formation, he also no longer perceives identification as the “pathological failure to mourn” (29). Instead, he understands it as “the sole condition under which the id can give up its objects” (29). In order to account

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<sup>16</sup> Owing to larger modifications in his thinking, “The Ego and the Id” complicates the notion that the mind is divided into two portions, the “repressed unconscious” on the one hand and the “conscious ego” on the other. No longer drawing a sharp line between the unconscious and the ego, he begins to perceive parts of the ego as also belonging to the unconscious (17). Following the theory of Georg Groddeck, he calls one entity of the mind the ‘ego’ and calls “the other part of the mind,” which is merged with it and nevertheless acts as if it were the unconscious, the ‘id’ (23).

for his reevaluation, Freud explains how a young child deals with the loss of its primary love object by identifying with it. And because the child's way of 'introjecting' its love interest resembles the melancholic's identification with loss, the latter must not only be normalized, it must also be recognized as exerting an important and not solely destructive effect on the mourner's identity.

How did this recognition then change Freud's conception of grief? In "The Ego and the Id," the author states that when a love object has to be given up, this demand often leads to an "alteration of his ego which can only be described as a setting up of the object inside the ego" (29). Freud now claims that this very incorporation—or identification—becomes "the sole condition" under which the object can then be given up. This revision appears paradoxical only as long as one thinks in oppositional categories, with melancholic identification on the one hand and libidinal detachment followed by replacement on the other. When one, however, understands identification as a precondition and essential element of grief, one must also rethink Freud's initial image of the mourner, who in the end becomes "free and uninhibited again" ("Mourning and Melancholia" 245). The revised model importantly no longer demands the object's full abandonment. Instead, it solidifies the transformative impact that the process of mourning has on the bereaved person's identity. A person's 'character' is no longer taken to be an autonomous, self-generated entity, but is instead understood as produced by the "history" of its "abandoned object-cathexes" ("The Ego and the Id" 29). It is thus not only affected, but is even formed by the losses it has experienced. These observations show that Freud, by the time of writing "The Ego and the Id," no longer employs a concept of subject-formation that understands object-love as projected or disguised self-love. It is, in fact, quite the other way around: the lost object becomes sustained in and an integrally constitutive part of the mourner's identity. This means that the concept of consolatory substitution is replaced by the notion of mourning as a continuous reconfiguration of our most important relations and attachments. And yet one should not forget that Freud also states that it is through the identification with the lost object that the same can be given up. Instead of fully dismissing the notion of detachment, Freud's later theory merely insists that this detachment is not always geared toward externalization, but can also be integrated into the mourner's 'ego.' With these considerations in mind, it becomes possible to argue that Freud's reconceptualization of mourning enables a potentially interminable notion of grief.<sup>17</sup> Freud's later account, this much is for sure, spells out what his earlier work indicated, namely that identity is based on

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<sup>17</sup> See also: G.H. Pollock's book *The Mourning-Liberation Process* (1989), particularly page 31ff.

the self's relations. And it further suggests that a person is made off her losses, and that they in fact constitute her continuously and from early on.

In my attempt to understand this complex relation between externalization and identification, I stumbled upon a letter written by Freud in 1929. Having learned that his friend Ludwig Binswanger recently lost a loved one, Freud writes to him: "Although we know that after such a loss the acute state of mourning will subside, we also know we shall remain inconsolable and will never find a substitute" (*Reminiscences of a Friendship* 84). The letter continues with an affirmative evaluation of the described inconsolability, arguing that grief is in fact the only way to continue the love that one does not wish to give up. Freud further explains that although it may be likely that one eventually builds new intimate relationships, these bonds will never resemble the one that was lost:

We will never find a substitute [...] No matter what may fill the gap, even if it be filled completely, it nevertheless remains something, this is how it should be, it is the only way of perpetuating that love which we do not want to relinquish. (84)<sup>18</sup>

The discussed psychoanalytical revisions already explain why a later relationship can never be the exact replica of an earlier one: since the subject identifies with the losses it suffers, it is altered in the process. This means that it enters into a new relationship from a slightly different vantage point. Its libidinal attachment will thus be shaped according to the constantly evolving form of the self. Although the idea of detachment is, as we have seen, not wholly dismissed, the schematic structure of the 'work of mourning' gives way under these reformulations. The acceptance of identification as a valid part of the mourning process alters Freud's conception in two ways: it acknowledges the possibility of enduring inconsolability, which means that one may remain in mourning without ever completing the grief work. And it secondly indicates that, just as the identification with one's first (ultimately lost) love objects becomes a constituent of the child's character, losses that are experienced later in life can have similarly powerful effects.

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<sup>18</sup> The original German version of the letter sheds light on how Freud's personal history affected his changing perspective: "Man weiß, daß die acute Trauer nach einem solchen Verlust ablaufen wird, aber man wird ungetröstet bleiben, nie Ersatz finden. Alles, was an die Stelle rückt, und wenn es sie auch ganz ausfüllen sollte, bleibt doch etwas anderes. Und eigentlich ist es recht so. Es ist die einzige Art die Liebe fortzusetzen, die man ja nicht aufgeben will [...] Gerade heute wäre meine verstorbene Tochter sechs- und dreißig Jahre alt geworden." See: *Sigmund Freud, Ludwig Binswanger: Briefwechsel 1908-1938* (222). Freud's letters show that in addition to the death of his daughter, the loss of his four year-old grandchild also affected him deeply. While he lost his daughter first, it was shortly after the child's death that Freud wrote: "I don't think I have ever experienced such grief [...] I work out of sheer necessity; fundamentally everything has lost its meaning for me." Freud wrote this letter (addressed at Katá and Lajos Levy) in June 1923, in the same year that "The Ego and the Id," in which he revised his theory of grief, was also published (*Letters of Sigmund Freud*, 344).



### **Freud's Followers: From Identification to Incorporation**

Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, co-authors of renowned works such as *The Shell and the Kernel: Renewals of Psychoanalysis*, are among the most influential of Freud's critics. While they do not, as their book's title shows, entirely dismiss psychoanalytical theory, they question many of Freud's premises and readings. Their variation on Freudian themes proves enlightening, as it suggests two things at once: while a positive identification with the lost object may lead to renewal and growth, a more complex and perhaps ambivalent form of identification may just as well highlight the unattainable and unfathomable otherness of the loved person, which melancholic mourning brings to light.

At first glance, Abraham and Torok's focus on the psyche's 'functioning' certainly correlates with Freud's 'economical' map of the human mind. They also share Freud's view that psychoanalysis' primary task lies in restoring the psyche's functionality by working through and surmounting traumatic obstacles. And yet they deviate from him in their focus on two very particular mental processes: they hold the first of the two, which they call *introjection*, responsible for the individual's "mental organization" (7). Interestingly, the concept of introjection has often been likened to Freud's grief work model because it engages a similar rationale of working through traumatic experiences. Nicholas Rand notes, however, that for Abraham and Torok, introjection amounts to more than a form of "purgative release of bottled-up emotions" (8). They instead perceive it as a general "driving force of psychic life," and thus as a process that ensures the subject's functionality by restoring it in times of crisis (8). This, however, does not mean that introjection cannot be compared to the work of mourning, particularly since both 'work' towards the "gradual acceptance of loss and the withdrawal of the survivor's libidinal attachments from the lost object-of-love" (8). Yet while the Freudian mourning process is instigated by an external event, Abraham and Torok define introjection as "a constant process of acquisition and assimilation" (9). They argue that it is through this ongoing process that growth and maturation occur: "we continually introject; that is, we open and fashion and enrich ourselves, transcend trauma, adjust to internal or external upheaval and change, create forms of coherence in the face of emotional panic and chaos" (14).

This raises the question whether the second concept that Abraham and Torok work with, and which they set in opposition to the 'healthy' process of introjection, can also be linked to Freud's 'pathological' rendering of melancholia. For Abraham and Torok, the process of *incorporation* obstructs "the spontaneous work of introjection," as it produces a psychic 'crypt' inside the subject (16). Once an inassimilable trauma that failed to be introjected is sealed into such a crypt, it can no longer be accessed—and can therefore also neither be

accepted and integrated nor externalized and detached. The juxtaposition of both processes shows that Abraham and Torok distinguish, just as Freud does with regard to mourning and melancholia, between good and healthy introjection on the one hand and bad and harmful incorporation on the other. While both processes respond to the impact of trauma, they deal with it in oppositional ways, by either introjecting it into the ego in order to ultimately sever the bond to the other or by incorporating it and thus holding on to the loss they have suffered. These observations lead us back to the question of identification: does identification play a role in one or even both of these processes? And can one thus indeed draw a parallel to the melancholic condition?

Abraham and Torok explain that for Freud, “the trauma of objectal loss” leads to the lost object’s temporary “incorporation” (111). They propose that in every process of mourning, the ego momentarily identifies with the “incorporated object,” yet it does so for a certain period of time. During this time, the work of mourning is carried out, the subject’s “internal economy” is readjusted, and the subject’s libidinal “investments” are redistributed (111). Freud thus presents incorporation—and with it the subject’s identification with the lost object—as belonging to the ‘normal’ mourning process: it is precisely through this temporary identification that the object’s detachment and the subject’s subsequent restoration can be reached. Yet Abraham and Torok dispute this point: they take issue with the fact that Freud’s early works portray the subject’s love for another as nothing but a disguised and essentially narcissistic form of self-love. Abraham and Torok divert from this Freudian doctrine when proposing that: “introjection does not tend toward compensation, but growth” (113). It does, in other words, not strive toward externalization and detachment, but instead works toward a permanent identification with the lost object, which it integrates into its psychic landscape. This means that for Abraham and Torok, introjection *and* incorporation function by way of the subject’s identification with the object that it internalizes—yet one does so for the better, the other for the worse. While in introjection, this identification leads to the subject’s acceptance of change and alteration, incorporation installs the lost object as a foreign entity within the subject’s psyche.

In his foreword to Abraham and Torok’s book *The Wolf Man’s Magic Word: A Cryptonymy* (1986), Jacques Derrida discusses this distinction between incorporation and introjection. He confirms that the process of incorporation amounts to a “refusal to mourn” whereas introjection designates a healthy part of the mourning process. In incorporation, Derrida stresses, “I pretend to keep the dead alive, intact, safe (save) inside me,” yet I do so only in order to refuse “to love the dead as a living part of me” (xvi). While the object’s “cryptic incorporation” does therefore signal an “impossible or refused” mourning process, Derrida

remarks on its inherently paradoxical structure: “by resisting introjection, it prevents the loving, appropriating assimilation of the other” (xxi). In doing so, it preserves “the other as other” (xxii) and does not, as happens in introjection, fuse it into the self’s ego. The loved and lost object does therefore remain a “foreigner in the Self,” it continues to be an irreducible ‘other’ that can neither be assimilated nor appropriated (xxx).

With regard to the mourners that tell today’s tales of grief, the question of ‘otherness’ is of vital importance. While identification plays a central role in recent grief narratives, it does not appear to be an identification that seeks to reduce the other’s alterity in order to make it part of the self. It often on the contrary appears as if mourning narrators are puzzled by their difficulty to represent the person they have lost—and to thus fully explain the relation that continues to hold them in thrall. The observation that contemporary mourners often declare themselves unfit to render the loved person’s uniqueness made me question the Freudian grief work paradigm. I realized that the often-dismissed condition of melancholia—as well as the related process of incorporation—in fact describes the situation of contemporary mourning rather adequately. It therefore appears that many contemporary narrators who present themselves as in mourning, are in fact much rather steeped in melancholia.

It is interesting to note that despite their initially critical stance, Abraham and Torok do not veer too far from Freud’s assertions. Almost as if retreating to the safe haven of established psychoanalytic theory, they eventually realign their own concepts with those of the theory’s founding father. In the end, they essentially argue that introjection, like mourning, “puts an end to objectal dependency” whereas incorporation, like melancholia, “creates or reinforces imaginal ties and hence dependency” (*The Shell and the Kernel* 114). Despite having paved the way for a positive reevaluation of identification, they thus adopt the juxtaposition between mourning and melancholia and apply it to their readings of introjection, which leads to withdrawal and detachment, and incorporation, which suggests prolonged—and harmful—attachment. When assessing the specific situation of loss, they further adopt Freud’s assumption that in the case of a complex and ambivalent relationship, loss can lead to the harmful incorporation of the lost object, which then culminates in the melancholic condition. As this study’s argument is based upon the observation that contemporary narrators can often be described as melancholic mourners, the mechanics of incorporation appear particularly interesting. Abraham and Torok describe introjection as a realistic “process” and incorporation as a “fantasy” (125). They elaborate that since reality is always prone to change and alteration, investing in fantasies can become a way to resist this constant flood of change. It is, in other words, through fantasies (such as that of incorporation) that we object to change: we encapsulate the lost object as a foreign entity

and thus refrain from confronting its loss. Instead of working through loss and accepting the “major readjustment” that it necessitates, incorporating the lost object “exempts the subject from the painful process of reorganization” (126).

This means, essentially, that the object’s incorporation signals the mourner’s refusal to engage in the work of mourning and accept the changes that this ‘work’ would bring about. In that way, incorporation is also “the refusal to reclaim as our own the part of ourselves that we placed in what we lost” (127). The way in which incorporation therefore inverts the rationale of detachment and withdrawal by insisting on the other’s persistence as an ‘other’ is interesting for the precise reason that it seems to invite a comparison to the condition of melancholia. Yet incorporation does not only imply a strong identification with what has been lost, it also literally preserves the ‘other’ in its original form—as a foreign object hidden within the mourner’s ego. As a consequence, the subject can neither make the loss its own nor can it externalize it. Incorporation thus leads the subject into a situation of complete immobility, stagnation, and silence. In the literature that this study discusses, narrators often express their sense of being unable to adequately place or communicate their feelings of grief. And yet they are all self-confessed mourners, whose work is fully dedicated to the attempt of rendering their inexplicably painful experience.

Although incorporation and melancholia can be clearly distinguished, both concepts share important similarities: they are both portrayed as ‘pathological’ because they invert the ‘healthy’ rationale of detachment and reinvestment. In addition, Abraham and Torok suggest that the identification that is part of melancholia follows the incorporation of the object. Not only do they refer to Freud’s portrayal of melancholia as “an open wound,” they also identify this as “the wound the melancholic attempts to hide, wall in, and encrypt” (135). In doing so, they describe melancholia as rooted in the ‘encryption’ that incorporation performs. Yet melancholia erupts only when and if the crypt that the incorporation created breaks apart, for instance when reopened through a second(ary) experience of loss. In the moment of feeling that the crypt is about to break apart, “the whole of the ego becomes one with the crypt” so that, as a consequence, the “interminable process of mourning” that the incorporation attempted to hide is now brought to the psyche’s forefront: melancholia therefore performs what the previous incorporation used to hide (136). The melancholic’s full identification with its loss is consequently nothing but the paradoxical continuation of cryptic incorporation: while the object was first sealed off and remained inaccessible, it now comes to determine the mourning subject. Although the melancholic thus openly identifies with its loss and does no longer hide it, it remains unable to heal the wound that determines it (142). Because the wound of melancholia arises from

the concealed, carefully hidden, and even unconscious crypt, it can, I would propose, be felt and can yet never be fully understood. Melancholia can thus be understood as the condition that the ego constructs in order to disguise the wound's source, knowing that stating it openly "would prove fatal" to its topography because it would essentially confront the subject with its dependence on the ultimately lost and utterly irretrievable object (142).

### **Shifts in Psychoanalysis: Towards a Relational Understanding of the Self**

Having outlined the development of psychoanalytic notions of mourning and melancholia, it is interesting to note that what is conventionally extracted from this rather complex discourse on what it means to mourn is the assumption that the mourner has to 'work' through his or her grief. Although Freud defines this process as painful and time-consuming, his theorization has predominantly been employed in psychological models that follow a rather outcome-oriented logic striving for resolution and recovery. What is more, psychologists have used Freud's theorization to solidify the idea that 'normal' grief can turn into a pathological disorder if it is not carried out adequately. While these interpretations do not stay true to Freud's evolving perspective, they are based on his distinction between 'normal' and 'abnormal' responses to loss. And indeed, Freud never fully abandoned the distinction between healthy and unhealthy forms of mourning. He began, however, to distinguish complicated cases, which he set apart from the pathological condition of melancholia. At the same time, he normalized certain aspects of the melancholic condition, so that the border between these conditions was blurred. Interestingly, this is the precise point that several of the most influential critiques of Freud's work emanate from: Karl Abraham and Maria Torok were not alone in arguing that ambiguity cannot only be linked to melancholia, but belongs to all relationships, and thus to all reactions to loss.

Melanie Klein, whose work has instigated a recent shift in psychoanalytic theory as it focuses on the individual's relations to others instead of its inner drives, follows a similar agenda: it essentially centers on the question of the 'pathological.' In her paper "Mourning and Its Relation to Manic-Depressive States" (1940), she argues that: "the mourner is in fact ill, but because this state of mind is common and seems so natural to us, we do not call mourning an illness" (96). She further proposes that: "the child goes through states of mind comparable to the mourning of the adult, or rather, that this mourning is revived whenever grief is experienced in later life" (96). Because this experience of 'original' mourning, which Klein calls the "infantile depressive position," is repeated whenever a loss occurs in later life, depression and mourning are not only closely related; they in fact perform the same motion. The baby's "depressive feelings" arise when it mourns the mother's breast or

the bottle. The fear of losing the mother together with the object representing her is overcome through an internalization: the parent becomes a good internal object in the infant's "inner world," which is responsible for both its wellbeing and its anxieties in later life. Klein argues that whenever severe loss occurs in his adult life, the mourner unconsciously fears to have lost his originally stored "internal 'good' objects" (104). Because every experience of grief thus reactivates these first fears and anxieties, Klein likens grief to an illness. Not surprisingly, she also draws a connection between a manic-depressive person and one who "fails in the work of mourning." According to Klein, both pathological conditions occur in cases where the person was "unable in early childhood to establish their internal 'good' objects and to feel secure in their inner world" (120). As a consequence, this person never had the chance to fully "overcome the infantile depressive position" (120). Klein thus detects a metonymic relationship between the loss of a loved person in the 'external world' and the absence or loss of a securely established, much larger 'inner world,' which a person's wellbeing and mental stability depends upon. Although Klein does therefore by no means do away with the pathologization of grief, and in fact moves all feelings of loss into the realm of the potentially pathological, she also perceives the 'infantile neurosis' as a precondition for the development of strong and 'healthy' emotional bonds. In this way, it can be argued that her work naturalizes the pathological.

In addition, Klein's emphasis on the formative relation between the child and its environment marks a contrast to Freud's focus on the individual's inner drives and unconscious motifs. It is for this reason that Klein is often associated with a school of psychoanalysis that is conventionally subsumed under the title 'relational psychoanalysis.' While in recent years, this school has been primarily linked to the American psychoanalyst Stephan A. Mitchell, whose book *Object Relations in Psychoanalytic Theory* (which he co-wrote with Jay R. Greenberg) was published in 1983, influential critics like Melanie Klein, D.W. Winnicott, and John Bowlby paved the way for this recent shift in the discourse on psychoanalytic theory. All three theorists emphasized the important role that the social 'other' plays in the child's mental development. While Winnicott (1896-1971) did so by accentuating mother-child relations, John Bowlby (1907-1990) developed a particular attachment theory, the name of which alone already indicates a departure from Freud.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Neal L. Tolchin, who traces the "emergence of unresolved grief" and "blocked mourning" in Herman Melville's fiction, explains that "Bowlby revises received Freudian definitions of mourning as decathexis" (171) and emphasizes the possibility of prolonged attachment, which then disables the "cathartic grief reaction" that Freud attributed to 'normal' mourning processes.

In his book, *Playing and Reality* (1971), Winnicott suggests that whenever a baby looks at the mother's face, it is not aware of the fact that it sees another person, but believes that it in fact sees itself. Quite clearly, Winnicott's theory is influenced by Lacan's famous 'mirror stage' model (see also chapter four). Yet for Winnicott, it is the mother who functions as the mirror. Christine Marks points out that it is through the relationship to her that "the child learns to distinguish between me and not-me" (180). This shows that Winnicott believes the child's identification with its caretaker to be of vital importance. Its attachment to the other in fact builds the foundation of its own, independent identity. This also means that Winnicott is convinced that "without a stable, caring, mirroring, holding other, the self is incapable of forming a sense of intact subjecthood" (183). John Bowlby's views extend those of Winnicott, as his work focuses on the detrimental effects that the lack of such a stable 'holding environment' can have on the child's development. In his book *Loss: Sadness and Depression* (1980), Bowlby states that:

Intimate attachments to other human beings are the hub around which a person's life revolves, not only when he is an infant or a toddler or a schoolchild but throughout his adolescence and his years of maturity as well, and on into old age. From these intimate attachments a person draws his strength and enjoyment of life and, through what he contributes, he gives strength and enjoyment to others" (442).

With these considerations in mind, it is anything but surprising that Bowlby regards loss and grief as a serious threat to both the child's and the adult's identity. The theorist in fact terms it one of the most dilapidating and traumatic experiences that a person faces in the course of his or her life.

The recent shift towards a relational understanding of psychoanalytic theory make it particularly interesting to take a look at the current debate on mourning's relation to mental illnesses and depressive states. In 2013, the American Psychiatric Association released a revised version of the *Diagnostic Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM).<sup>20</sup> In an informative article on the topic, Kenneth J. Doka explains that the DSM is so highly influential because insurance companies generally "require the assignment of a DSM code by a treating clinician before considering reimbursement" (n.p.). The most recent revisions of the DSM prove particularly interesting because they determine that grief should be treatable as a mental illness. In earlier versions, bereavement was defined as a personal

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<sup>20</sup> In an article published in *The New York Times* in January 2013, Paula Span explains that the DSM sets "criteria and standards for defining and classifying mental illnesses. Used extensively by psychiatrists, physicians, psychologists, counselors, social workers, and other mental health practitioners, the manual provides a guide to diagnosis and treatment of mental illnesses including depression, anxiety, adjustment disorder, bipolar disorder, and schizophrenia" (n.p.).

crisis, but not as a pathological condition. Sadness, moodiness, and insomniac episodes were not categorized as ‘appropriate’ symptoms of normal mourning, and did therefore not classify as symptoms of a mental disorder. Because these symptoms resemble those of depression, preceding versions of the DSM included a ‘bereavement exclusion’ clause, which prohibited diagnosing a bereaved person with depression for at least two months after the death of a significant person (unless the patient had severe suicidal tendencies). The updated DSM, however, wanted to draw attention to the fact that people often do not ‘get over’ grief after the prescribed amount of time. While the committee drafting the new DSM therefore debated whether to include conditions such as ‘complicated grief disorder’ or ‘prolonged grief disorder,’ it eventually merely removed the mentioned ‘bereavement exclusion.’ Although this may seem like a minor change, the removal has in fact major consequence: it essentially allows clinicians and therapists to treat recently bereaved persons as (if) depressed.

Those who favored the removal of the ‘bereavement exclusion’ argued that mourning should not automatically lead to an exemption from medical treatment. If all symptoms indicate a depressive disposition, it should, in other words, be possible to be treated as such. Patients should, in other words, not be deprived of help that they may urgently need. It was further argued that other instances of loss, such as that of one’s home or employment, were never considered exceptional cases. The proponents of the bereavement exclusion’s removal clarified and criticized that symptoms of grief tend to be perceived as part of a *natural* and *healthy* process, and that recovery therefore becomes not only the expected, but also the prescribed outcome. One could, however, just as well turn this argument on its head and argue that the medicalization of recently bereaved persons, which the removal enables, perpetuates the over-arching goal of reinstating the mourner’s functionality and does therefore in fact undermine the persistence of grief as a complex phenomenon. This may be why on the other end of the spectrum, critics of the latest revisions have argued that precisely because it is often impossible to distinguish “symptoms of depression from that of normal grief,” the removal of the ‘bereavement exclusion’ could lead to an over-diagnosing of depressive states. Without the exclusion, one could be diagnosed with depression when feeling “empty, listless or distracted, a month after your parent or spouse dies” (Span, n.p.). What is more, the potential treatment of mourners with antidepressants could not only further solidify the pathologization of grief, it also plays into the hands of pharmaceutical companies, for whom mourners have become potential new patients ever since the DSM has enabled physicians to ‘treat’ grief medically.



And yet it is certainly true that the latest revisions complicate grief by conceding that although it is often a ‘normal,’ transitory and healthy process, it *can* also involve a depressive condition. They suggest, more precisely, that under circumstances that pertain to its temporal persistence or symptomatic severity, grief can turn into a pathological condition. When it does, in short, not subside, it is likely to become viewed as a psychiatric disorder in need of therapeutic or medical treatment. It thus almost appears as if the discourse on grief has concluded a full circle to arrive, once again, at Freud’s initial distinction between mourning and melancholia, with the additional side-effect of having transformed the ‘pathological’ case of melancholia into a depressive condition. At the moment when ‘pathological’ forms of grief become treated in the same way as depressive states, it does in fact seem that the drive towards easy and fast solutions has established a new normative ideal on how society should deal with the bereaved.

What may, however, stop this development from taking full form is the fact that depression is today often framed as a neurologically caused biological deficiency—and that it obviously makes little sense to apply the same explanation to grief. At the same time, one could also argue that the new developments may be greatly beneficial to mourners with depressive tendencies, who will now no longer be denied treatment. The opposing views that structure the recent debate on grief’s medicalization show how deeply social an issue grief is: while mourning may today no longer be a public practice, it nevertheless continues to play a central role in the negotiation of society’s wellbeing and weaknesses.

Sandra Gilbert has commented on the institutionalized embeddedness of psychoanalysis when saying that ever since the publication of Freud’s essays, “a range” of theorists have “deployed a rhetoric of wellbeing and illness in analyzing what later came to be called the stages of grief” (256). And it is certainly true that the application of Freud’s grief theory and its transformation into psychological and medical practices can be divided into several phases. First, grief was moved to the realm of the potentially ‘abnormal.’ From this already precarious position, it was utilized. To cite just one well-known and influential example of this deployment, it suffices to listen to Colin Murray Parkes, who in his book *Bereavement: Studies of Grief in Adult Life* (1978) claims: “I know of only one functional psychiatric disorder whose cause is known, whose features are distinctive and whose course is usually predictable. And that is grief” (20).<sup>21</sup> Within the discourse of applied psychotherapy, grief was then further compartmentalized into several stages. When looking at Elisabeth Kübler-Ross’s influential model of the “Five Stages of Grief” (*On Death and Dying*, 1970), one can

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<sup>21</sup> Numerous other authors developed similar arguments. David Lindemann, for example, talks about the mourner as a ‘patient’ and diagnoses various ‘symptoms’ of grief (1944).

easily discern what popular psychology has made of Freud's 'work of mourning.'<sup>22</sup> Kübler-Ross is, however, by no means an exception: especially in the 1960s and 1970s, it was common to define grief as a linear process consisting of several (normally three to five) stages.<sup>23</sup> Pathological forms of mourning were said to occur when the last stage of this process was not reached because the mourner did not confront the loss it suffered, refused to perform the 'work of mourning,' and consequently failed to reach a moment of detachment and closure. It is often implied in these adaptations that such maladaptive behavior is not only irresponsible, but also leads to the mourner's social exclusion. These models thus turn mourning into a predictable and thus controllable mechanism. And by moving it into the realm of the latently pathological, they pave the way for its societal marginalization.

It should not go unnoticed that more recent studies<sup>24</sup> within the field of psychology have begun to challenge the theories and practices that were based on but drastically—and wrongfully—simplified Freud's psychoanalytical model. Scholars like Charmaz and Milligan question the long prevalent view that full detachment is a necessary precondition for grief's resolution. What is more, they make use of empirical studies to show that grief cannot always be 'worked out' and 'gotten over.' Arguing against the conception of grief as an illness, they instead suggest that: "survivors may never recapture the selves they had been before the loss" (528). By replacing terms like 'recovery' with more open-ended ones, they allow for the possibility that the experience of loss is followed by a "lack of closure" (528). Despite the fact that a paradigm shift can thus indeed be perceived in the field of psychology since the 1980s, it is important to note that the traditional conception continues to dominate the public view of grief. Support groups, grief counseling, and self-help guides still tend to be based on outcome-oriented models such as Kübler-Ross's stage theory.<sup>25</sup> The

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<sup>22</sup> For further examples of this approach, see G. Engel's article "Is Grief a Disease?" (1961). The author here describes the three phases of mourning as an "initial phase of shock and disbelief [...] followed by a stage of developing awareness of the loss, marked by the painful effects of sadness, guilt, shame, helplessness or hopelessness." Finally, the mourner reaches "a prolonged phase of restitution and recovery during which the work of mourning is carried out, the trauma of loss is overcome, and a state of health and well-being re-established" (126). Similar models were developed by Peter Marris (1958), John Bowlby (1961), Gerhard Schmied (1985), Charles E. Hollingsworth, and Robert O. Pasnau (1977).

<sup>23</sup> Most often, an initial phase of shock and disbelief is followed by a second phase of 'intense grief' during which the mourner, as in the Freudian model, withdraws from society. The third/last phase is said to be characterized by the mourner's reorganization of its personal identity and his reintegration into society. Heidemarie Winkel has defined these models as "coping theses" (62).

<sup>24</sup> See for instance Tony Walter's 1996 essay "A New Model of Grief: Bereavement and Biography" or Helena Lopota's study *Current Widowhood: Myths and Realities*, also from 1996.

<sup>25</sup> In *American Cool*, Peter Stearns confirms that from the 1920s on, "most therapists dealing with grief moved toward what has been called a 'modernist' approach. Freud valued grief as a means of freeing individuals from ties with the deceased, but he had made it very clear that detachment was the ultimate goal and had warned against the stunting that could result if grief was not transcended fairly quickly"

fact that the psychological discourse continues to frame grief in economic terms, employing vocabulary that stresses aspects of achievement and success, proves that Freud's argument has been simplified to such an extent that it could be reduced to a work process. Charmaz and Milligan comment on this of conflation of 'grief' and 'work' when stating that in the United States, "work is the metaphor and guiding logic for resolving grief" (230). Although recent reconceptualizations tend to include Freud's later perspective,<sup>26</sup> they cannot undo the fact that his theory has morphed into psychotherapeutic and soon perhaps medical practices that are based on a concept that lends itself to an economic interpretation.

### **Freud and Weber: From the Protestant Ethic to the Work of Mourning**

The trajectory of rather recent and radical revisions of psychoanalytical grief theory is sketched here because sociologists, who harshly criticize the psychological perspective, usually only take the traditional models into account while ignoring these newer developments within the field. It is from this perspective that they argue that the dominant psychological discourse implicitly conforms to the rationale of economic maxims and consequently strives for efficiency, productivity, and control. The sociological discourse thus embeds the traditional conceptualization of grief in a further-reaching critique of Western modernity, arguing that the psychological approach does not only oblige to the demands of modernity, but also proves its all-pervasive power. It may be for this reason that sociologists like Charmaz and Milligan have noted that "residuals of the Protestant Ethic" shape today's cultural imperative to "grieve according to rules and schedules" (530). In a structurally related argument, Neal L. Tolchin links society's changed attitude toward grief to the rise of capitalism. He is convinced that from the mid-nineteenth century on, grief has been appropriated "by the discourse of the age's commercial spirit" (9). And Tolchin's observations indeed appear valid, especially when taking into account how the idea of the 'grief work' shaped modern mourning practices.

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(159). Stearns explains that later therapeutic maxims were based on the Freudian assumption that the mourner's main task consisted in "the severance of bonds with the deceased or departed" (159). As a consequence, "therapy or counseling should work toward this process of withdrawal, and those who retained grief symptoms must be regarded as maladjusted" (159).

<sup>26</sup>Psychoanalytically informed theorists have recently begun to pay closer attention to the full range—and complexity—of Freudian theory. They point out that more traditional interpretations focus almost exclusively on Freud's early grief theory while ignoring the crucial changes that his later works contain. Only recently have Freud's later texts become the focus of the theoretical preoccupation with grief: rediscovering the figure of the melancholic, theorists such as Judith Butler have developed more integrative and even affirmative concepts of grief. These approaches embrace Freud's late re-signification of identification as a component of mourning.

Taking a closer look at Max Weber's influential *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905)<sup>27</sup> proves enlightening in this context. Not only was Weber a contemporary of Freud's and thus embedded in the same social discourses, his work also delineates the evolution of a U.S. American 'work' mentality that can be aligned with Freud's work of mourning. In order to explain the "spirit of capitalism," Weber refers to Benjamin Franklin, the very embodiment of the 'homo economicus' (22). As is well known, Franklin's autobiography revolves around questions of utility, efficiency, and productivity. Yet Weber points to the double bind that is at work here: the acquisition of money is combined with "the strict avoidance of all spontaneous enjoyment of life" (25). He explains that this almost paradoxical implosion of cause and effect is grounded in the biblical renunciation of idleness, which leads to a reevaluation of the individual's commitment to its work. This rationale can only be understood when also taking the idea of a professional 'calling' into account. When understanding this calling as the "obligation which the individual is supposed to feel and does feel towards the content of his professional activity" (25), it becomes evident how it can be linked to Freud's idea of the grief work: the ability and obligation to perform one's daily work does not only take center stage in the evolution of modern Western societies, it also informs processes of identity construction.

Having detected the 'spirit of capitalism' in Franklin's account, Weber illustrates how professional activity transformed into a 'calling' (39). While at first glance, the Lutheran concept of *sola fide* does not appear to invite this reevaluation of worldly activity, Luther understood the individual's 'work' as an "expression of brotherly love" and thus as beneficial to the greater good of the community (40). While both Luther and Calvin wanted to be saved through faith and trust in God alone, Luther emphasized internal contemplation. Yet for Calvin, "faith had to be proved by its objective results" (40). In order to show that they belonged to those whom God had chosen to save, individuals had to practice their faith 'effectively.' Interestingly, this "*fides efficax*" implies an economic rationale that led to an emphasized commitment to labor processes, and to the individual's belief in a 'calling.'

In his book *Cool Capitalism*, Jim McGuigan explains that believing in the doctrine of predestination did not, as one would perhaps expect, have the "psychological effect" of producing resignation or passivity, but instead motivated Calvinists "to prove their election to the next world through meaningful action in this one. This orientation translated into a particular approach to work" (14). These observations explain how a very specific type of ethical conduct emerged: because the believer's life on earth fulfilled the sole purpose of

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<sup>27</sup> Weber's book was originally published as two longer essays in 1904 and 1905. In 1920, it for the first time appeared in book-length form.

demonstrating his faith in God (and thus in his own predestined salvation), all ‘unnecessary’ luxury was exempted from it. This meant, in short, that all “irrational impulses” were to be avoided. Thus, a state of “constant self-control” became the ultimate ideal (60). As a result of this new ascetic ideal, the social realm was gradually rationalized and economized. The notion of self-control is interesting as it can be applied to the modern figure of the mourner, who is not only expected to ‘keep her face,’ but who can also scrutinize herself for ‘losing’ the same in moments of deep despair.

While Weber’s argument appears convincing, it does not explain why the individual’s commitment to its ‘work’ should also determine its societal integration or exclusion. Only when we understand that “a man’s life in his calling” was predominantly “an exercise in ascetic virtue, a proof of his state of grace,” can we grasp why only ‘meaningful’—or rational—work was regarded to be of value (84). According to Weber, the new norms that ascetic Protestantism established gradually imbued all areas of life with a rationalizing spirit that largely restricted spontaneous expressions of joy. When considering the case of grief, it only makes sense to assume that this ‘spirit’ would also devalue and dismiss spontaneous, unstructured and inefficient expressions of grief because it would regard them as useless, unproductive, and surely incompatible with its demand for the all-encompassing utilization of human conduct. *The Protestant Ethic* suggests that the described ascetic ideal did not only have an effect on the individual’s attitude toward its work, it also determined social and emotional behavior. Although the religious idea of the calling became secularized over time, its traces can still be found in the utilitarian rationale that is often applied when evaluating the use value of an object or, for that matter, a person.<sup>28</sup> The ability to work—and to be as efficient and productive as possible—turns the individual into a person contributing to the greater good of the society. When this argument is turned on its head, the mourner, who may temporarily or even permanently lose her ability to function ‘effectively,’ emerges as a figure who does not resonate the demanded progressive rationale and who therefore becomes, qua her incapability, a potential societal outcast.<sup>29</sup>

While Weber’s critique illustrates how the psychoanalytic concept of grief helped to solidify the condition’s economization and ultimate privatization, it is interesting to note

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<sup>28</sup> For a more recent discussion of the United States’ Protestant heritage, see Robert Bellah’s concept of American civil religion, which he developed in his influential 1967 article “Civil Religion in America.”

<sup>29</sup> Even today, dynamics of rationalization affect our social behavior. When looking at how death and grief are negotiated at the workplace, one realizes that the bereavement policy of most businesses is solely defined in temporal terms. In the United States, employers are allowed to take a three-day leave when a relative dies. It has been argued that “business policies *lead* rather than reflect societal views of grief and practices toward it” because employees, who are not given the time to grieve extensively, are less likely to share their grief with co-workers. The display of grief is thus not only confined to the private realm, it is also reduced to a necessary minimum (*Handbook* 525).

that sociologically oriented scholars approach grief from a vastly different angle. They tend to draw on theories of symbolic interactionism and relationality in order to emphasize grief's destabilizing character.<sup>30</sup> By emphasizing the important role that recognition plays in the process of subject formation, they for instance show that the loss of an essential relationship can injure a mourner's self-image so severely that he is cast into a state of disorientation and uncertainty.<sup>31</sup> Yet we do not even have to turn to the field of sociology to make such observations: even within the field of psychoanalysis, many of those who have followed in Freud's footsteps have diverted from the discipline's founding father at precisely the point where the question of our relational set-up becomes a pivotal concern: scholars like Abraham, Klein, and Winnicott have all emphasized that we are made of both, our relational ties and their inescapable losses. The experience of grief appears, ironically, as the most immediate way to verify this very observation. Regardless of whether we discuss psychoanalytic, psychological, or sociological approaches to grief, zooming in on the question of grief's impact on the mourner's identity makes sense for the particular reason that all of these readings grapple with the same difficult task of explaining a phenomenon that often escapes us precisely because it concerns us so immediately.

### **The Rationalization of the Emotional Sphere**

In her celebrated book *Saving the Modern Soul* (2008), Eva Illouz argues that sociologists have traditionally not adequately acknowledged the realm of emotions as belonging to their field of research.<sup>32</sup> Illouz argues that it has long been neglected that instead of being "presocial or precultural, emotions are cultural meanings and social relationships" (11).

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<sup>30</sup> One of the mentioned sociological perspectives, developed by Lily Pincus, suggests that grief must be understood as the individual's response to the loss of a particular relationship. Her statement is based on the assumption that close relationships are constitutive markers of personal identities. She employs an identity concept that does not originate in an authentic and essentialist core self, but understands self-consciousness as a product of social interaction: "in studies of child and personality development it is now widely accepted that from the moment of birth people should be seen less as isolated entities than in their interactions with others, and especially in their close emotional relationships" (24).

<sup>31</sup> Gerhard Schmied draws on George Herbert Mead's theory of symbolic interactionism when speaking about the primary impact that family members have on the self's formative process. Schmied applies Mead's social theory to the emotional realm, arguing that the individual's identity is not merely determined through social conduct and recognition in general, but is also through the feelings that one directs towards those whom one identifies with. From this perspective, feelings of loss and experiences of intense grief are reevaluated as decisive factors in the complex dynamics of self-understanding.

<sup>32</sup> In 1983, Arlie Rüssel Hochschild put forward a similar argument. In her book *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*, she mentions the common "practice among social scientists of ignoring emotion or subsuming it under other categories" (201). She explicates several of the ways in which we compartmentalize and control our emotional behavior. Hochschild for instance draws attention to the fact that we tend to treat emotions "like anger or jealousy" as if they presented "an independent presence or identity" within us (202). When we, for instance, speak about 'expressing,' 'getting in touch with,' being 'haunted,' 'gripped,' or 'overwhelmed' by an emotion like anger, we frame it as something foreign that does not belong to us, but rather presents an "independent, outside agency" (203).

Catherine Lutz follows a similar train of thought. In her essay “Unnatural Emotions,” she explains that although it may appear intuitive to think that nothing is “more natural and hence less cultural than emotions” (142), they must nevertheless be regarded as culturally developed social constructs. Besides confirming that “words like ‘envy,’ ‘love,’ and ‘fear’” are usually used in contexts that concern the private and the personal, Lutz draws attention to the fact that they are normally “used to talk about devalued aspects of the world—the irrational, the uncontrollable, the vulnerable, and the female” (143). Evidently, her argument is in line with the conclusions that I have drawn when applying Weber’s critique to the case of grief. Yet Lutz takes the argument another step further when she claims that the prevalent tendency to view the emotions as “a psychobiological structure and an aspect of the individual” must be thoroughly revised (144). Only when the important “role of culture” in the experience of our emotions is acknowledged can we begin to understand that feelings are not only socially shaped, but that they can also be appropriated to fulfill particularly ‘meaningful,’ that is to say socially beneficial, ideological functions.

As if to add to these considerations, Illouz claims that even when we become aware of how our emotions are culturally modulated, our way of expressing them will probably echo the norms of the social context that produced them. As others before her, she draws a parallel between the advent of Western modernity and the crucial emotional changes that it has brought about. When we in fact assume that emotions are culturally constructed,<sup>33</sup> we must also acknowledge that they play a defining role in similarly impressionable processes of subject formation. Since these interdependent factors establish an almost circular argument, in which cause and effect create a maelstrom of confining forces, I am reminded of the way in which Weber traced a by now fully secularized rationalistic imperative back to their religious roots: while we may no longer be able to ‘feel’ their genealogy, these same imperatives continue to determine the way in which emotions are evaluated today.<sup>34</sup>

In her book, Illouz focuses on the tension that our simultaneous desire for autonomy and recognition creates. While the former articulates the individual’s wish for self-determination and control, the latter addresses its relational dependence. These two contradictory aspects of modernity, the imperative of self-control and -reliance on the one

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<sup>33</sup> Poststructuralist theorists, who perceive identity not only as a mutable and flexible category, but also argue that identities are always “mediated through continuous interaction with the environment,” would certainly agree that emotions are culturally shaped (*I am because You are*, 4). When speaking about the ‘postmodern condition,’ Lyotard has in addition famously argued that: “no self is an island; each exists in a fabric of relations that is now more complex and mobile than ever before” (15).

<sup>34</sup> Illouz draws on Axel Honneth’s theory of recognition, which he elaborates in his book *The Struggle for Recognition* (1996). Honneth argues that the dynamics of recognition that prevail in Western modernity differ from those in more traditional societies: recognition is now primarily achieved on an individual and emotional level and is thus no longer exclusively dependent on class affiliation and social status.

hand and the intensified dependence on emotional bonds on the other, coincide in a condition that Illouz terms “emotional capitalism” (*Saving the Modern Soul* 243).<sup>35</sup> This newly coined term is in line with Weber’s critique; it confirms that unnecessary activities and emotions have become increasingly restricted within the social realm. While capitalism has today been liberated from its religious roots, certain characteristics of modernity, such as the devaluation of all things ‘useless’ and ‘unproductive,’ can indeed be traced back to the Protestant emphasis on continuous progressive activity. Both Weber’s argument and Illouz’s sociological critique thus essentially explain that modern societies have eliminated public mourning rituals and marginalized the mourner because both present obstacles to the societal apparatus. In that way, their claims can also be linked to Freud’s early concept of grief, which is geared towards a clearly defined end.

I hope to have shown that Freud himself complicated his ‘economic’ concept of grief over time. And yet, when taking the simplistic and rationalistic interpretations, which were derived from the Freudian doctrine, into account, Weber’s emphasis on modernity’s rationalistic tendencies explain why the mourner is today perceived as potentially dysfunctional—and therefore as a threat to the wellbeing of society. This marginalization can in turn be linked to the simplified notion of mourning as a controllable procedure and its utilization as a ‘work’ process. With these observations in mind, it indeed appears feasible to argue that this concept of grief correlates with the modern economization of the individual’s social and emotional capacities.

In the context of her larger argument, Illouz points out that in the course of the twentieth century the psychoanalytical discourse evolved into a defining American cultural narrative.<sup>36</sup> As family structures underwent a fundamental transformation, a framework that explained and legitimized these changes was called for. Illouz argues that Freudian theories became popular in the first half and were institutionalized in the second half of the century because they combined “two central and contradictory aspects of modern selfhood:” while promoting the idea of a self that is “turned inward,” they also defined the same as a “rational” entity (*Saving the Modern Soul* 50). Although psychoanalysis often focuses on introspection and feeling, it is nonetheless a “rational method” that employs practices of

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<sup>35</sup> Hochschild essentially put forward a similar argument when she proposed that “that the development of late capitalism, with its emphasis on a service economy, is marked by the production and manipulation of the emotions as themselves commodities” (23).

<sup>36</sup> Illouz is by no means the only theorist who speaks about psychoanalysis’ influence on Western societies. As early as 1959, Phillip Rieff diagnoses “a whole society dominated by psychotherapeutic ideals” (355). When trying to explain “this tyranny of psychology,” he finds its cause in “the individual’s failure to find anything else to affirm except the self” (355). Having lost both, his “faith in the world” and in God, the modern individual takes refuge in what Rieff calls a new “science of self-concern” (355).



“self-examination” to ‘free’ the self from its irrational, uncontrolled, and maladaptive impulses. Psychoanalysis must thus be understood as scrutinizing everything “within us that is not rational—our affects, our instinctual strivings, our fears, fancies, dreams, and nightmares” (51). This argument does not only reinforce the discussed imperative of rationality, it also turns self-control and self-improvement into society’s ultimate objectives. Just as Illouz, Peter Berger’s early essay “Towards a Sociological Understanding of Psychoanalysis” (1965) is remarkably clear in its critical assessment of psychoanalysis’ influence on American social life, its culture, and its popular psyche. Berger argues that: “psychoanalysis has become a part of the American scene. It is taken for granted in a way probably unparalleled anywhere else in the world” (26). He calls the institutionalized apparatus that surrounds the actual theory and practice of analysis “the counseling and testing complex,” arguing that it has spread to all kinds of professional branches (27). Because of its thorough social implementation, psychoanalysis has not merely become a widespread cultural phenomenon, but has even morphed, so Berger, into “a way of understanding the nature of man and an ordering of human experience on the basis of this understanding” (27). He goes so far as to argue that some of psychoanalysis’ “root assertions,” such as that of the ‘unconscious’ or the ‘drive,’ are today no longer questioned, but rather taken for granted.<sup>37</sup>

Yet Illouz does not claim that one here observes the one-directional display of an economic dominance that is exerted onto the individual through mechanisms of (psychoanalytical) rationalization. On the contrary, it is precisely because “economic transactions” have become so thoroughly naturalized that “emotional transactions” implicitly echo and thus perpetuate them (59). This cultural modulation of the emotional sphere is, for instance, at play whenever psychologists propagate rational methods in order to negotiate and adjust their patients’ emotional behavior.<sup>38</sup> What can be drawn from an observation of these

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<sup>37</sup> Berger traces the success of psychoanalysis back to the Western world’s industrialization. He argues that the increasing segregation between the economic realm and that of the family led to the proliferation of the ‘private’ sphere. Yet this new dichotomy between the private and public realm also led to a similar split in the individual’s identity, and thus caused a severe “identity crisis,” as people were unsure of how to negotiate their newly divided private and public selves (36). Since most professional sectors could not easily be identified with, the private realm gradually became their primary identifier (36).

<sup>38</sup> As an example of these dynamics, one could refer to what Jessica Mitford calls the ‘death industry.’ The fact that undertakers clothe grief in terminologies of healing and recovery proves that the therapeutic discourse has today become a cultural master narrative. Mitford elaborates on death’s commodification in her book *The American Way of Death* (1963). She observes the funeral industry’s sales strategies, which are often masked as ‘ethical’ procedures, but essentially oblige to the rules of free market capitalism. Mitford argues that death and grief’s commodification enhances its public avoidance. The fact that embalming, which sustains the decaying body in a state of apparent repose, became a common practice in the United States after World War II indicates that funeral homes play a crucial part in the avoidance of a direct confrontation with death. That the “death industry” is fully invested in masking and marketing

mechanisms is the fact that the current pathologization of ‘complicated’ grief does indeed result from the economization of our emotional sphere. The demand for closure and resolution, which is often clothed in ‘coping’ or ‘healing’ terminologies, bespeaks the economic rationality at work in the modern conceptualization of loss.

Because it appears that the “rationalization of emotions” went hand in hand with its antidote, namely the “emotionalization of economic conduct,” Illouz proposes that contemporary American society is today under the rule of an “emotional capitalism” (60). Rationality and feeling are, in other words, no longer juxtaposed but converging categories. What is more, the field of psychology has popularized the idea that the success and failure of love relationships are incumbent upon the individual’s will power. The sense of responsibility, which is thus handed over to the self-determined subject, can be linked back to the psychological handling of grief in the twentieth century: the mourner is handed both the power and the responsibility to overcome his or her distress. It is at this point that the arguments of Freud and Weber coincide: in both cases, work processes empower the individual and move the inherently contingent into the realm of self-exerted control.

Next to the imperative of ‘healing,’ a second factor has played a central role in shaping the experience of grief in the twentieth century. Illouz argues that the emergence of a consumer culture has led to a process of fragmentation and differentiation on both the economic and the emotional level. Yet the discourse of self-improvement and recovery has also turned emotions into commodities that are evaluated, and then either promoted or dismissed. While suffering can certainly become a condition that the self identifies with, it can never rest in it. Instead, it must ‘work’ to overcome its unhappiness and return to a condition of wholesomeness and wellbeing. Contemporary narratives of grief can be read as staging an intervention against these tendencies because they refuse to be fully subsumed by the paradigms of emotional capitalism. And yet it would be reductive to argue that they fully and consciously emancipate themselves from the modes of efficiency and productivity, which the conceptualization of grief relies on. The literature’s ‘rebellious’ moment lies, rather, in questioning the individual’s power to control its own story of love and loss. Its narrators reject the idea of being fully held accountable for maintaining a satisfying degree

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death and grief can further be seen in the fact that undertakers often call themselves “funeral directors,” coffins have become caskets, hearses have been turned into coaches, the deceased body is called the “loved one,” the ashes of those who were cremated are called “cremains,” and the embalmed body is displayed in a “slumber room” (17). The mourner’s position is also often evaluated in economic terms, as the funeral industry suggests that the moral commitment to the deceased can be measured by the financial investment in the funeral (14). Businesses for instance sell lingerie and shoes for corpses, suggesting that these items are a demonstration of “consideration and thoughtfulness for the departed” (34).

of happiness. Of course, this way of reading the presented texts raises the question of an alternative. Where, to put it differently, does the critique of such imperatives leave the individual? It is crucial to understand that happiness is not generally dismissed or devaluated in these narratives. Instead, authors and scholars who rewrite the experience of grief seek to broaden the realm of emotions that the individual is allowed to identify with.

### **Modernity's Imperatives and The Pursuit of Happiness**

In her book *The Promise of Happiness* (2010), Sara Ahmed discusses the role of happiness in contemporary Western cultures, stating that happiness is commonly understood as the ultimate “object of human desire” (1). Providing the individual with a sense of “purpose, meaning and order,” the concept is rarely challenged. It has, on the contrary, become a “consensus” that motivates and monitors social action (2). Only recently have scholars begun to develop a critical perspective on happiness, arguing that it has become a normative concept that reevaluates certain life concepts as appropriate while banning others from its realm. From the perspective of feminist, queer, and black studies, happiness has thus been redefined as a means of social in- and exclusion. Ahmed suggests that the focus on happiness reinforces an economic rationality, an observation that appears confirmed by the fact that the economic sector explicitly employs vocabulary derived from “positive psychology.” When commenting on these cyclical dynamics of influence, Ahmed calls contemporary Western societies “feel-good industries” (3). When applied to the question of narrative, and to the format of the ‘life story,’ it can surely be ascertained that a *happy ending* is today not only often framed as a personal achievement, but also as an obligation.<sup>39</sup> Ahmed confirms this observation when arguing that the *pursuit of happiness* has become more than a constitutional right: it has been redefined as a responsibility. Her comments thus echo Weber’s emphasis on the individual’s obligation to contribute to the greater good: the narrative of happiness can certainly be seen as catering to the same societal demands. Interestingly, Ahmed’s way of viewing happiness as a normative ideological concept entails the marginalization of the unhappy subject, which is in this context defined as a person resisting prescriptive “happiness scripts” (59). Her observations certainly appear valid when applied to the figure of the mourner, who fails to perform according to dominant imperatives of wellbeing. What is more, the experience of grief also confronts the individual with the fact that he or she is not as self-determined as assumed. We can

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<sup>39</sup>The imperative of a normatively defined *happy ending* applies, of course, primarily to personal narratives and not to literary works at large. Genres such as the tragedy or the elegy are based on a severe crisis, which marks either their beginning or their end. The argument presented here is, therefore, relevant only in the context of autobiographical, self-reflective storytelling.

conclude that people do in fact shy away from unhappiness because it confronts them with the uncontrollable and contingent dimension of their lives. The reality of unhappiness proves, in other words, that a happy state is never fully of one's own making:

The word *happy* originally meant having 'good hap or fortune,' to be lucky or fortunate. This meaning may now seem archaic: we may be used to thinking of happiness as an effect of what you do, as a reward for hard work, rather than being 'simply' what happens to you. (22)

When accepting that one does not fully control one's emotional condition as it depends upon interpersonal relationships, one begins to understand why happiness is often perceived as a promise lying ahead. It motivates and moves, enables and restricts action. Viewed from this perspective, happiness could be described as continually fueling and perpetuating the cultural master narrative of productivity and utility. It goes almost without saying that the movement hereby created is directed toward the personal narrative's *happy ending*. This observation triggers the question of how to situate a person located outside the consensus of happiness socially. What lies at the core of Ahmed's argument is a "critique of the concept of adjustment" and its demand to become aligned with "a world that has already taken shape" (78). She wants to break with this alignment in order to allow for alternative ways of living and feeling. One could in this context ask: what could be won by re-instating the *unhappy ending* in personal narratives? What would be gained if sorrow and stagnation, which prove neither cathartic nor progressive, would be reinserted? Could one even ascribe meaning to a story that is perforated with insignificant silences, that refuses to arrange its events in a coherent and conclusive order and instead continues to return to the moments that rupture its continuity?

Perhaps, it is necessary to recognize the unforeseeable and uncontrollable aspect of one's 'luck' in order to be able to reevaluate unhappiness as an essential component of human experience. In its current form, happiness appears as a promise that one 'works' towards and thus secures as the end point of one's life story. Adding 'negative' feelings such as grief to the canon of feelings that function as permissible identifiers could have a tremendous effect on narrative forms of self-presentation, as it would open up a new room for episodes that are inefficient and even 'useless.' Such a broadening of self-identifying categories could lead to the recognition that mourning may be more than a temporary incapacitation and a process that 'works' towards resolution. Ideally, it could reintegrate mourning into the cultural canon of accepted personal narratives. Ahmed concludes by saying:

We might need to attend to bad feelings not in order to overcome them but *to learn by how we are affected by what comes near*, which means achieving a different relationship to all our wanted and unwanted feelings as an ethical resource. I think what is underestimated by affirmative ethics is the *difficulty* of giving our attention to [...] certain forms of suffering. The desire to move beyond suffering to reconciliation, the very will to ‘be over it’ by asking others to ‘get over it,’ means that those who persist in their unhappiness become causes of the unhappiness of many. (216)

By perceiving unhappiness in its own right, one may be able to learn how to live with one’s own as well as with another person’s grief. Mourning posits the subject outside the realm of happiness; it may even make her aware of the concept’s normative and rationalistic dimension. By managing to reintegrate suffering into the social fabric and allowing the mourner to pause over her injury, what might be won is a moment of self-reflection that binds the individual not only to its happiness, but also to its suffering.

### **Contemporary Grief in a Historical Perspective**

The critical sociological perspectives that are discussed in this chapter bear the implication of a time when one’s grief was alleviated because it was acknowledged, and eased because it was shared. The following overview of the social history of death and bereavement does not only confirm that profound transformations in the experience of love and grief emerged with the rise of modern societies, it also explains where, why and at what points these changes occurred. Although Philippe Ariès published his studies on the social history of death and bereavement mainly in the 1970s and 1980s, he remains the most widely cited authority on the topic: even authors of grief memoirs refer directly to him. Meghan O’Rourke and Joan Didion, whose work will be discussed subsequently, simplify his argument by citing his most renowned statement: “a single person is missing for you, and the whole world is empty. But one no longer has the right to say so aloud” (*Western Attitudes Toward Death* 92).<sup>40</sup> Although Ariès’ cultural critique may crystallize in these two sentences, his historical analysis reaches much further. It specifies how certain dynamics of ‘modernization’ have shaped today’s often taken-for-granted conflation of individualism and identity.

Ariès determines that, until the early middle ages, death was conventionally clothed in a public ritual that the family and friends of the dying person participated in. In addition to being a rather familiar sight and a public event, it was, interestingly, also not yet perceived as a moment of complete and final separation. Ariès attributes the rather unimpassioned medieval attitude to the fact that people identified predominantly as part of a larger

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<sup>40</sup> Ariès’ words echo those of Freud, who in “Mourning and Melancholia” said that when immersed “in mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself” (246).

collective and were less concerned with their individual destiny. Only when this communal sense of self-awareness gave way to an unprecedented concern for individuality were people's attitudes toward death also gradually transformed. Due to this larger development, death gradually became "increasingly thought of as a transgression which tears man from his daily life" (58). The new conception of death as a full and final separation had a tremendous impact on the experience of grief. In the early middle ages, when death itself was considered 'tame,' mourning had an almost 'wild' appearance. Ariès draws on the depiction of the mourner in the *Chanson de Roland*<sup>41</sup> where "the most violent scenes of despair" break out after the death of a close friend or family member (142). Here, scenes of grief show the mourner fainting as well as embracing and kissing the dead body. Unable to let go, he trembles, weeps, and tears his hair in agony. Although the literature records that it was indeed "possible to die of grief," this intensely expressive way of lamentation "was usually enough to release the friend's grief and make the fact of separation bearable" (143). Ariès implies that because these gestures were expressed spontaneously, they functioned as a consoling outlet for grief. However, the gradually changing attitude toward death also affected mourning practices. In the later middle ages, "it no longer seemed as legitimate or customary to lose control of oneself in order to mourn for the dead" (327). An increasing emphasis on self-control emerged around the fourteenth century: loud and "violent lamentations" disappeared completely when the clergy resumed the responsibility of reciting the prayers for the dead, leading the funeral procedure, and organizing the entourage of paid mourners. It follows that the expression of grief lost its spontaneous character, became ritualized, and ceased to function as an immediate emotional vessel at the moment when death was personalized and professionalized. While replacing earlier and more spontaneous forms of grief, the emerging ritualistic practices also served the function of making the mourner publicly visible. As a consequence, a grieving person could not only be recognized by the social community, but could also be attended to and cared for.

Death's personalization and grief's ritualization went hand in hand until the beginning of the nineteenth century, when a "new intolerance of separation" arose (*The Hour of Our Death* 59). Ariès links this emerging phenomenon to a new form of affectivity. As familial relationships became increasingly based on interpersonal trust and emotional bonds, the individual's death was imbued with unprecedented significance. Not surprisingly, these

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<sup>41</sup> The *Song of Roland*, or *La Chanson de Roland* as it is called in the original French, is the oldest surviving epic poem of French literature. Scholars estimate that it was written around 1100. The existence of various manuscripts testifies to the great popularity, which the poem enjoyed in the centuries following its production. It is the first and most elaborate example of the *chanson de geste*, a literary form that flourished between the eleventh and fifteenth centuries.

tendencies were further intensified during the romantic period:<sup>42</sup> a passionate conceptualization of death, which was redefined as a confirmation of infinite love, became the new norm.<sup>43</sup> Unsurprisingly, this newly felt ‘intolerance’ of a loved person’s death also transformed grief into an increasingly painful condition.<sup>44</sup> Gerhard Schmieid has noted that the shift from the identification with a strong communal network to the focus on close family bonds marks a key distinction between the pre-modern and the modern condition.<sup>45</sup> With the rise of the romantic concept of familial love, emotional relations began to play an increasingly important role in the framing of the individual’s identity. This is why the death of a loved person also began to have a more severe impact on the mourner.

While this development explains how the rise of individuality and affectivity has influenced the experience of death and grief, the rapid social transformations of the twentieth century had at least as grave an impact on the same. Ariès draws a parallel between the radical social changes and the transforming negotiation of death and grief, arguing that both did not simply “disappear” from public view.<sup>46</sup> They were, on the contrary, turned into something “shameful and forbidden” (*Western Attitudes toward Death* 85). In order to fully understand this transformation, it is worth retracing the trajectory that Ariès maps out:

In the early twentieth century, before World War I, throughout the world of Western culture, [...] the death of a man still solemnly altered the space and time of a social group that could be extended to include the entire community. The shutters were closed in the bedroom of the dying man [...] the house was filled with grave and whispering neighbors, relatives, friends [...] The period of mourning was filled with visits; visits of the family to the cemetery and visits of relatives and friends to the family. Then, little by little, life returned to normal, and there remained only the periodic visits to the cemetery. The social group had been stricken by death, and it had reacted collectively, starting with the immediate family and extending to a wider circle of friends and acquaintances [...] The death of each person was a public event that moved, literally and figuratively, society as a whole. It was not only an individual that was disappearing, but also society itself that had been wounded and that had to be healed. (*The Hour of our Death* 559-560)

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<sup>42</sup> The proliferation and commercial success of consolation literature in the United States’ nineteenth century illustrates this transformation. For further information, see Ann Douglas’ article “Heaven our Home: Consolation Literature in the Northern United States, 1830-1880” (1975).

<sup>43</sup> For more information on America’s ‘romance with death’ in the nineteenth century, see Lewis O. Saum’s article “Death in the popular Mind of pre-civil war America” (975). The author gives a detailed account of the United States’ cultural obsession with death, which he understands to have derived from both the staggering rate of child mortality and a dedication to communal moral duties.

<sup>44</sup> Peter Stearns, in his book *American Cool: Constructing a Twentieth Century Emotional Style* (1994), has commented on the fact that American Victorian culture embraced grief as an overwhelming and consuming, yet vital and inevitable experience.

<sup>45</sup> I am here drawing on an argument developed by Gerhard Schmieid in his book *Sterben und Trauern in der modernen Gesellschaft* (1985).

<sup>46</sup> Ariès’ study is very specific in its observation that one no longer *sees* public signs of death today: because funeral home’s have replaced the traditional hearse with a less distinguishable limousine, one remains, for example, unaware of the funeral procession on its way to the cemetery.

Ariès' description of how grief once affected its societal environment shows that he regards the communal recognition of ritualistic mourning practices as significant.<sup>47</sup> At the same time, the metaphorical allusion to the wounded and healing communal body testifies to the fact that Ariès is embedded in the same coping narrative that he criticizes. This built-in affirmation of a progressive model notwithstanding, his statement reinforces that death and grief did once not only occupy a designated space within the communal whole, but were also agents determining the dynamics that moved "society as a whole."<sup>48</sup> It comes as no surprise that Ariès juxtaposes this nostalgic glance into the past with a sharp criticism of the contemporary situation, stating that particularly in "the most industrialized, urbanized, and technologically advanced areas of the Western world," death has been relocated to the social margins (*The Hour of Our Death* 560). Interestingly, his argument rests on the same socio-historical coordinates that Geoffrey Gorer also refers to: in both cases, World War I is understood as a crucial watershed.<sup>49</sup> And Peter Stearns appears to extend these scholars' arguments when he confirms that "a major change in American middle-class emotional culture" occurred "between approximately the end of World War I and midcentury" (2).

### **Narrative and Identity: From the Communal Story to the Solitary Novel**

Walter Benjamin made a similar observation in his seminal essay "The Storyteller," which is based on the observation that the individual's ability to communicate personal experiences appears to be in decline. Stating that: "it is as if something that seemed inalienable to us, the securest among our possessions, were taken from us," Benjamin not only reiterates the narrative of modernity as an age of uncertainty and insecurity (83). He also contextualizes this development in precisely the same way as Gorer and Ariès:

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<sup>47</sup> Richard Schechner's study *The Future of Ritual, Writings on Culture and Performance* (1993) points out that while scholars originally associated ritualistic practices with the 'sacred,' secular rituals have also been widely discussed. Schechner notes that rituals can generally be characterized as "overdetermined, full of redundancy, repetition, and exaggeration" (230). This set of descriptive adjectives proves interesting with regard to Western modernity's heightened emphasis on productivity, efficiency and utility. When understanding rituals, as Schechner does, as repetitive and rather unproductive behavioral patterns, one could certainly read them as decidedly anti-modern practices. It may be for this reason that it was with the advent of modernity that mourning rituals began to disappear from the public sphere.

<sup>48</sup> David E. Stannard confirms that the perception of death depends on the degree to which a death affects the community's social fabric. With regard to the United States, he observes that until the beginning of the nineteenth century "smaller, more unified, simpler societies were the rule in America." As a result, "death generally brought with it a substantial disorganization of the community's structure" (x).

<sup>49</sup> Sandra Gilbert also wonders how technological advancement has affected our perception of death and mortality. She asks: "how can we reconcile the escalating proliferation of images of ugly death with an imperative to conceal or repress the factuality of mortality? How, in other words, reconcile death denial with death display?" (230).



With the [First] World War a process began to become apparent which has not halted since then. Was it not noticeable at the end of the war that men returned from the battlefield grown silent—not richer, but poorer in communicable experience? [...] For never has experience been contradicted more thoroughly than strategic experience by tactical warfare, economic experience by inflation, bodily experience by mechanical warfare, moral experience by those in power. A generation that had gone to school on a horse-drawn streetcar now stood under the open sky in a countryside in which nothing remained unchanged but the clouds, and beneath these clouds, in a field of force of destructive torrents and explosions, was the tiny, fragile human body. (84)

Interestingly, Benjamin perceives the war not so much as having caused but rather as bringing to light particular symptoms of modernity. From this perspective, the economical strategies and technological advancement of twentieth century warfare can be viewed as products of previously implemented dynamics of instrumental rationality. It is thus not the war as a political event in and of itself, but rather the way in which it is waged, which produces the precarious situation that Benjamin brings to life. Gorer is convinced that the unprecedented number of casualties must be held responsible for the Western world's deritualization. He argues that death became such a common incident that it lost its extraordinary status. He basically asks, as Leader here does: "what sense would it make for a community to mourn each dead soldier when the corpses were hardly even countable?" (72). It can therefore indeed be assumed that the erosion of public mourning rituals in the first half of the twentieth century fostered the private and contained image of modern grief that emerged in its second half.

Benjamin is predominantly interested in the larger implications—and narrative consequences—of this development. He draws the image of a "tiny, fragile human body," of a person standing in a metaphorical force field of unfathomable powers, apparently on the verge of being crushed. Benjamin thus casts the individual as having lost a previously contained degree of self-determination and control. It is precisely from this vantage point that he diagnoses, famously, the individual's growing incapacity to communicate its experiences. For him, it is this new sense of insecurity, from which the decline of the story and the rise of the novel have sprung. Benjamin suggests, therefore, that the ability to tell and receive stories is related to the individual's ability to partake in another person's death or integrate his neighbor's mourning into his own story. The societal development sketched by Benjamin sounds familiar:

It has been observed for a number of centuries how in the general consciousness the thought of death has declined in omnipresence and vividness. In its last stages this process is accelerated. And in the course of the nineteenth century bourgeois society has, by means of hygienic and social, private and public institutions, realized a secondary effect which may have been its subconscious main purpose: to make it

possible for people to avoid the sight of dying. Dying was once a public process in the life of the individual and a most exemplary one; think of the medieval pictures in which the deathbed has turned into a throne toward which the people press through the wide-open doors of the death house. In the course of modern times dying has been pushed further and further out of the perceptual world of the living. There used to be no house, hardly a room, in which someone had not once died [...] Today people live in rooms that have never been touched by death, dry dwellers of eternity, and when their end approaches they are stowed away in sanatoria or hospitals by their heirs. (93-4)

Evidently, Benjamin thoughts coincide with those of Ariès to such an extent that both authors use almost identical terminology. Both begin with the once ‘omnipresent’ and therefore ‘natural’ reality of death. Both then move on to a transformation that becomes tangible in death’s institutionalization and expresses itself in the alienation from its once familiar presence: they note that as death was “pushed [...] out of the perceptual world of the living,” it apparently began to establish its own alternative worlds (94). With time, these enclaves—Benjamin speaks of “sanatoria and hospitals”—were institutionalized and became spaces whose names alone allude to their function of caring for the sick and dying. While these observations appear valid with regard to sickness and death, the same does not hold true for grief. Instead of transferring the mourner to a separate social environment, it is the private realm that has, rather diffusely, been designated its dwelling place.

In the context of his larger argument, Benjamin contrasts the age of storytelling, in which life and death were still organically entwined, with the modern age, which is above all marked by the individual’s compartmentalization into utilized units. Commenting on how the changing attitude to death and the capacity to exchange experiences are related, he says that not only “a man’s knowledge or wisdom, but above all his real life—and this is the stuff that stories are made of—first assumes transmissible form at the moment of his death” (94). How is this idea, of death informing and even enabling life stories, to be understood? Benjamin suggests that, in the moment of death, a person’s life unfolds in front of him in a series of images. Through this retrospective glance, the dying person can grasp the “unforgettable” and thus gains “authority” over the living (94). This authority is, so Benjamin, the story’s point of origin: because the storyteller appropriates the situation of the dying person, he has “borrowed his authority from death” (94). It thus appears, as Peter Brooks has also pointed out, that as “death writes *finis* to the life,” it also “confers on it its meaning” (22). Brooks essentially argues that Benjamin makes a claim for the “necessary retrospectivity of narrative” precisely because the ending holds the power to bestow meaning into the narrative, to close and therefore finalize it (22). When we apply this assumption—that the meaning of life only becomes clear to us in the moment of death—to the question of narrative, we may become able to understand our desire for a story that

contains and explains us. With a nod to Benjamin, Brooks claims that what we “seek in narrative fictions” is nothing less than the “knowledge of death” that has been removed from our contemporary lives (95).

It is certainly valid to argue that the social disappearance of death prevents people from ‘borrowing’ the second sight of the dying, which may in turn be why they can no longer tell all-encompassing stories. As the moment of death, in which the bigger picture is grasped, vanishes from view, the ensuing alienation affects the storyteller’s capacity to craft stories whose universal truth-value is both timeless and expansive. These observations lead to the question whether storytelling did not, in its original form, prepare for and integrate death because it carried it out as a symbolic gesture, as an anticipatory ‘as if.’ Surely, the story’s embeddedness in a communal network and the novel’s solitary character reflect their respective socio-historical contexts. While Benjamin states that: “the ‘meaning of life’ is really the center about which the novel moves” (99), this meaning can no longer be securely attained. The paradigmatically modern novel instead describes the incomprehensibility of human experience; it articulates the inability to render an organically interwoven, inclusive ‘Truth’.

While the storyteller and his listeners are familiar with the sight of death and can therefore assume an authorial position that permits them to take a retrospective glance at the entirety of their life in the form of a significantly bound story, the novelist and his readers are no longer in a position to do so. It is for this reason that in the novel, this task is projected onto and taken up by the character, whose life also becomes meaningful in the moment of its completion—or death. The reader of the novel thus derives meaning from the lives and deaths of the novel’s characters: reading about and witnessing their (symbolic) deaths allows her an insight into the otherwise not longer palpable experience of dying and grieving. It is, in other words, the modern individual’s alienation from death that renders a more immediate self-story impossible. No longer familiar with the unifying and signifying ‘practice’ of storytelling, the reader of the novel comes to rely on a character, with whom he identifies. Of course, Benjamin does not merely assert that people fail to tell each other stories in the same old ways. I instead believe that he observes the decline of a relationally conditioned self-understanding that once enabled the individual to tell his or her life story in its entirety. The intricate knowledge of life’s beginning and endings, the familiarity with the reality of birth and death once enabled the individual to tell a life story fully, to in fact look back onto her birth and also image her own death. This self-exceeding knowledge once motivated the story because its teller’s communally generated self-understanding was not confined to its own autobiographical coordinates.

I am convinced that Benjamin's essay can be read as a comment on the interrelation between narrative and identity, which will be the focal point of the following chapters: the example of our changing attitude toward death and grief shows that the particular form that narratives assume echoes the way in which we relate to others, and to the world. The intricate link between this changing attitude and the ability to make our selves understood shows that our relation to death always reflects our self-understanding. Benjamin takes this idea another step further: he regards a life story that cannot project its own outcome—and therefore does not know itself fully—as fragmented and disconnected, not only from its environment but also from its teller's self. Yet how exactly does the disappearance of death and grief affect the individual's daily experience in the twenty-first century? The increasing invisibility of death manifests itself, as already noted, in all institutionalized realms of societal care. Death's masking as a medical failure or a disease has for instance accelerated the process of de-familiarization and estrangement. While up to the early twentieth century, death occurred mainly at home and therefore retained a certain public dimension, its massive relocation to the hospital in the 1950s alienated the individual from its proximity. Ariès states that while “the burden of care and unpleasantness had once been shared by a whole little society of neighbors and friends,” the circle of caregivers “steadily contracted until it was limited to the closest relatives and even the couple” (*The Hour of Our Death* 575). As a consequence, an increased level of personal responsibility clashed with an increasing demand to devote oneself to one's professional occupation, one's ‘calling.’ Yet Ariès' critique does not primarily focus on these institutional regulations. It reaches further to show that this modern conception has been internalized and naturalized to such an extent that it guides the individual's social interaction and prescribes a certain habitus:<sup>50</sup>

One must avoid—no longer for the sake of the dying person, but for society's sake, for the sake of those close to the dying person—the disturbance and the overly strong and unbearable emotion caused by the ugliness of dying and by the very presence of death in the midst of a happy life, for it is henceforth given that life is always happy or should always seem to be so. (*Western Attitudes toward Death* 87)

Once again, it appears that the constitutional *pursuit of happiness* has evolved into an imperative that legitimizes the avoidance of death. Ariès claims that: “the interdiction of death in order to preserve happiness was born in the United States around the beginning of the twentieth century” (94). It is certainly an accurate observation that the United States' ideologies of economic growth and self-improvement were from the outset linked to notions

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<sup>50</sup> In the 1950s and 1960s, it was common to keep dying persons uninformed of their severe situations. A 1963 study conducted by Geoffrey Gorer shows that terminally ill patients were often kept ignorant of their condition while close family members were informed.

of individualism and happiness. But can the factors that changed the attitude toward death also be applied to the case of grief? Ariès perceives the “rejection and elimination of mourning” as a “great milestone in the contemporary history of death” (*The Hour of Our Death* 575). It would be reductive to claim that grief itself has disappeared or that people no longer mourn. However, according to today’s norms of affective control, mourners no longer openly display their sadness. In fact, the opposite appears to be the case: “by withdrawing and avoiding outside contact, the [mourning] family is affirming the authenticity of its grief” while at the same time “adopting the discreet behavior that society requires” (578).

The fact that the response to loss is no longer channeled into publicly visible ritualistic gestures can thus be linked to the observation that the expression of intensely negative emotions has become a strictly private affair: this also means that because grief has been shed of its social function, it no longer affects society at large. Grief’s public nature used to require the community to observe the immediate reality of death. At the same time, it allowed its members to engage in and spend time with their own (essentially useless) sorrow and despair. And yet it would nevertheless be misleading to think that because grief was redefined as a private, purely emotional and thus internal process, its removal from the public sphere is nothing but a logical consequence of modernity’s movement toward the thorough rationalization of all social and personal realms. One must go one step further and take a look at how grief is today conceptualized *within* this private sphere, particularly as it appears that one is here faced with a situation in which the mourner no longer accepts the severity of her own grief.

Today, it appears more challenging to live bereavement openly than to revert to the pretense of having overcome it.<sup>51</sup> Gorer complicates Ariès’ argument by suggesting that the mourner’s social isolation results from a two-directional mechanism: while bystanders may indeed shy away from the uncontained display of sorrow, the mourner’s fear of losing self-control plays a similarly decisive role. The way in which imperatives of social control have culminated into forms of self-depreciation and denial is further detailed by Lili Pincus, who states that people are today “full of admiration for the bereaved who keep ‘a stiff upper lip’ and behave ‘maturely’” (13). These dynamics suggest a high degree of affective control, as they essentially imply that, as Gorer put it, “rational men and women can keep their mourning under complete control by strength of will or character” (*Death, Grief, and*

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<sup>51</sup> Gorer describes that when he, after his brother’s death, refused invitations to social events, explaining that he was “in mourning,” he received responses of “shocked embarrassment, as if I had voiced some appalling obscenity.” Apparently his friends and acquaintances no longer knew how to treat a “self-confessed mourner” (*Death, Grief, and Mourning in Contemporary Britain* 14).

*Mourning in Contemporary Britain* 111). When turned on its head, this of course also means that lasting grief tends to be “treated as if it were a weakness, a self-indulgence, a reprehensible bad habit instead of a psychological necessity” (113). Peter Stearns, who attests the twentieth century a “growing hostility” to negatively connoted emotions, remarks on the fact that “a major opinion survey in the early 1970s listed the ability to keep one’s temper as one of the five most commonly desired character strengths” (140). As an increasingly ‘cool’ emotional style replaced earlier, more passionate forms of affective self-expression, grief’s “potentially consuming qualities inevitably drew growing disapproval” (153). While nineteenth century Victorian culture had still valued grief’s capacity to fully consume the mourner and take him away from reality, the twentieth century began to attack the condition’s uselessness.

Having sketched the larger development of grief’s privatization, economization, and pathologization, it is interesting to note the most recent developments in the public discourse on grief. Sandra Gilbert ascertains that the cultural attitude toward death and grief grew so conflicted that by the 1980s and 1990s, “a number of major social organizations” began to address the social situation of death and grief in the United States (xxi).<sup>52</sup> Since then, activists of the “death and dying movement” or the “death with dignity movement”<sup>53</sup> have worked to establish cultural practices that acknowledge and support the dying and the grieving. Grief counseling and therapeutic support groups at hospitals, churches, and funeral homes have become as common as self-help guides. A closer look at the movement advocating a recognized grief culture shows, however, that the newly emerged professional sector of grief counseling is still largely based on traditional psychological models. Counselors mostly employ stage models and thus remain embedded in the described imperatives of resolution and recovery.

The proliferation of hospice culture is generally perceived as another indication of a changing attitude toward grief. It implies an increasing sense of social responsibility and provides a social space for a dignified death. Hospices are designed to restore a personal and humane dimension to death and in addition recreate a social space where grieving is not prohibited or constrained. Ideally, the process of dying is here determined by the personal

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<sup>52</sup> AIDS activists were among the first groups to promote new forms of mourning and memorializing friends and family members. The so called AIDS memorial quilt can be seen as one manifestation of this movement. Initiated in 1987, it continues as an ongoing and growing project that today consists of more than 48,000 individual panels, which are sewn together by friends and families of persons who have died of AIDS. Custodian of the quilt is the non-governmental NAMES Project Foundation.

<sup>53</sup> For further information on these movements, see Lyn H. Lofland’s book *The Craft of Dying: The Modern Face of Death* (1978) or Daniel Hillyard and John Dombink’s study *Dying Right: The Death with Dignity Movement* (2001).

wishes of the dying person and the surrounding family. While Heidemarie Winkel admits that the institutionalization of hospices within the technologized and rationalized society may indeed be a way toward a more affirmative attitude toward death and bereavement, she does not perceive this movement as breaking with the continuity of modernity. Hospices on the contrary further enhance the dynamics of professionalization and differentiation that I have observed above. Since they are alternative and separate social spaces, hospices in fact confirm the historical trajectory toward individualization, societal fragmentation, and rationalization. As if to prove this precise point, Siri Hustvedt's novel *The Blazing World* (which is discussed in chapter four) illustrates that even when a patient is released from the hospital to die at home, her death remains determined by its methodology. In the novel, the dying protagonist assesses her own situation as follows:

I have come home to die, but dying is not so simple in this our twenty-first-century world. It takes a team. It takes 'pain management.' It takes hospice at home. But I have been strict with them. This is my death, not yours, I said to the goddamned social worker who oozed compassion when we planned the final step, how to die 'well.' An oxymoron, you idiot. I said NO to the grief counselors with their sympathetic faces peddling denial and anger and bargaining and depression and acceptance. I said NO to professional mourners of all kinds and their goddamned clichés. (357)

The narrator's fierce rejection of the grief counselors' stage model shows that she regards both dying and mourning as painful, unpredictable, and inherently insoluble processes that do not follow a prescriptive patterns and can therefore also not be imbued with the linearity of an unambiguous—and positively progressive—narrative. The narrator instead insists on her own suffering and her anger at having to die an untimely death.

Notwithstanding these objections, it can be ascertained that death and bereavement have received increasing public attention since the 1980s. As already mentioned, the terrorist attacks of September eleventh, 2001 added a whole new dimension to the discourse on mourning in the United States. Works such as Joan Didion's *Year of Magical Thinking* (2005) and Dave Eggers' *Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* (2000) may have resonated so strongly with its American audience because they were met with a new sensibility for the difficult and yet necessary tasks that mourning faces today. The historical overview that I have here presented, has shown that emotions are vulnerable to social change and transform in accordance with the norms of their specific cultural context. It has further illustrated that today, the experience of loss has an immediate impact on the bereaved person's identity: when experiencing intense grief, the latent fragility of the modern self manifests itself. Because identities are today primarily established through the

recognition of significant others, their loss can shatter the bereaved person's world and interrupt the coherence and continuity of its life story.

### **“The Myth of Self-Improvement and Control”—Insights into Grief Literature**

In order to complicate the schematic and prescriptive structure of the psychological model of grief, sociologists tend to stress the aspect of persistent suffering. Without denying that grief often includes changes in feeling, they reject the notion that grief is always fully resolved. Phases of intense suffering may, as Charmaz and Milligan point out, turn into a different form of lasting sorrow: “the disbelief and numbness associated with news of the loss” may, for example, dissipate while the feeling of “sadness remains” (520). While the event of death evidently marks the beginning of the bereaved person's grief, “its ending or resolution is often much less clear and may never occur” (520). It is often the case that an initially an overpowering feeling and constant state of suffering assumes an episodic structure over time: since memories tend to trigger “pangs of grief,” they can reactivate an unpredictable, irregular pattern of “uncontrollable feelings of sadness” (520). Recent sociological considerations thus call grief's linearity and predictability into question.

Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking* (2005) and Meghan O'Rourke's *The Long Goodbye* (2011) emphasize the complicated position of a mourning narrator. In her memoir, O'Rourke reflects on the loss of her mother, who died of cancer in her mid-fifties. Despite the fact that Joan Didion's account deals with the sudden death of the author's spouse, both books follow similar trajectories: they are motivated by their narrators' reflections on the overwhelming and unfamiliar experience of intense grief. Both authors turn the narrative into their means of ordering the chaos that initially determines their experience of loss. And both accounts are informed by research conducted on the topic; they draw on renowned grief studies when reflecting on their own social estrangement. This is why in the course of their stories' trajectories, both women begin to actively shape the counter-discourse that structures their accounts. They do so first of all by presenting their utterly disoriented perspectives in a way that demonstrates the extent to which their identity was constituted in dialogue with and through the deceased person. Thus notions of self-referential independence are replaced with relational dynamics of interdependence. A second observation follows directly from this first one: the narrators present themselves as having lost their footing in the social fabric because they are no longer able to convey a coherent self-image to the world. And because they come to realize that their vulnerability and insecurity is not so much acknowledged as avoided, they eventually feel misrecognized, marginalized, and socially excluded.



The first claim made by both narrators pertains to their environment's inability to address bereavement directly and provide consolatory gestures. Meghan O'Rourke comments on the helplessness that she recognizes in herself as well as in others:

In the days following my mother's death, I did not know what I was supposed to do, nor, it seemed, did my friends and colleagues [...] Some sent flowers but did not call for weeks. One friend launched into fifteen minutes of small talk when she saw me, before asking how I was, as if we had to warm up before diving into the churning, dangerous waters of grief. Other sent worried emails a few weeks later, signing off: 'I hope you're doing well.' It was a kind sentiment, but it made me angry. I was not 'doing well.' (12)

While this statement already introduces grief literature's critical potential, the opening of O'Rourke's book delineates its range of argumentative points in greater detail. It is worth to be quoted at full length, as it can serve as a guideline for the analysis to follow:

As grief has been framed as a psychological process, it has also become a private one. The rituals of public mourning that once helped channel a person's experience of loss have, by and large, fallen away. Many Americans don't wear black or beat their chests and wail in front of others. We may [...] weep or despair, but we tend to do it alone, in the middle of the night. Although we have become more open about everything from incest to sex addiction, grief remains strangely taboo. In our culture of display, the sadness of death is largely silent. After my mother's death, I felt the lack of rituals to shape and support my loss. I was not prepared for how hard I would find it to reenter the slipstream of contemporary life [...] As I drifted through the hours, I wondered: What does it mean to grieve when we have so few rituals for observing and externalizing loss? What *is* grief? (13)

O'Rourke links the professional 'framing' of grief within the field of psychology to its privatization and the disappearance of communally practiced and publicly recognized mourning rituals. Interestingly, she does not distinguish between the social appearance of grief (wearing black) and emotionally conveyed forms of sorrow (wailing in front of others). Both forms of self-expression are nostalgically evoked to reconstitute an almost archaic-seeming figure of the mourner. The author appears to view rituals as both a guide through grief and as a way to practice it publicly. Their disappearance is, therefore, held responsible for the mourner's marginalized social position. This impression is enhanced by the fact that O'Rourke perceives grief as a world in and of itself, as a closed space existing separately from the "slipstream of contemporary life" (13). Her way of asking how society could have possibly lost sight of grief already hints at an implied answer: the literature goes hand in hand with the sociological critique in arguing that the modernization and industrialization of the Western world had a severe impact on our modes of emotional self-expression. What, however, are the precise aspects of modern societies that are held accountable for the rationalized and impoverished emotional competence of its members?

In trying to answer this question, it is helpful to return to the idea of self-determined individualism, which must be understood as the backdrop against which the memoir's criticism is set. O'Rourke says:

One of the ideas I've clung to most of my life is that if I just try hard enough it will work out. If I work hard, I will be spared, and I will get what I desire, finding the cave opening over and over again, thieving life from the abyss. (99)

This 'idea,' as O'Rourke calls it, that 'hard work' makes for a 'good life' and leads to happiness echoes the imperatives commonly associated with the ideological figure of the *self-made men*, which can be connected to the concept of the 'calling.' It is this paradigmatically American belief in self-determination and self-improvement through hard work that O'Rourke calls into question: she repeatedly returns to her shaken belief in hard work and self-control, recognizing that the slippage in her worldview has opened up a crevice between herself and most of her peers: "because many had not gone through a terrible loss or major illness, they were still operating as planners, coordinators, under the star of entitlement, from which I had been abruptly banished" (232). Her insights lead O'Rourke to the conclusion that grief has been marginalized because it calls naturalized notions of self-determination into question:

I had felt, however benignly or unconsciously, the world around me wanted my grief stifled and silenced; it threatened a particular lie of the moment and class I lived in, the myth of self-improvement and control, the myth of meritocratic accomplishment leading to happiness and security. (232)

This statement is lucid in its criticism of the "myth of self-improvement and control," which functions via its built-in imperatives of accomplishment and achievement. Defined as a promise and an overarching goal, "happiness and security" await the hard-working subject. The mourner, however, does not seem fit to actualize this program. Because grief confronts her with the inability to meet these standards, it brings to light the naturalized and normative imperatives of happiness that O'Rourke finds herself confronted with.

As in O'Rourke's *The Long Goodbye*, a deep-seated cultural critique can also be detected in Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking*. Three interrelated points of criticism emerge here: the bereaved narrator first of all learns that she knows very little about what grief is and feels like. She secondly realizes that she is expected to live her grief in privacy and without any 'indecent' emotional outbursts. And she, thirdly, finds herself confronted with the expectation that grief is merely a passing malady, and that after a certain period she will get over her loss to recover a former state of wellbeing and productivity.

In the beginning of her account, Didion merely admits that her routine way of dealing with a crisis proved useless in the case of grief. Whereas she would “in time of trouble” normally “read, learn, work it up, go to the literature,” she realizes that “given that grief remained the most general of afflictions, its literature seemed remarkably spare” (44). She finds contemporary self-help literature mostly “useless” while admitting that “the professional literature”—she refers mainly to psychological and sociological studies—at least grants her an insight into her own “condition” (44). While we may read her initial attempt to understand her own condition by rationalizing it as in line with the modern conception of grief, it is interesting that it is only when she comes across Emily Post’s 1922 ‘book of etiquette’ and reads its chapter on funerals that she finally feels understood. Post’s precise “instructions” as well as her emphasis “on the practical,” for instance her advice on what to feed mourners after a funeral, “spoke” directly to Didion: “there was something arresting about the matter-of-fact wisdom here, the instinctive understanding of the physiological disruptions” that accompany the feeling of loss (58). Didion links her observation to the social history of grief: she claims that Post “wrote in a world in which mourning was still recognized, allowed, not hidden from view” and explicitly references the arguments of Ariès and Gorer before returning to Post’s book:

One way in which grief gets hidden is that death now occurs largely offstage. In the earlier tradition from which Mrs. Post wrote, the act of dying had not yet been professionalized. It did not typically involve hospitals [...] Death was up close, at home. The average adult was expected to deal competently, and also sensitively, with its aftermath. When someone dies, I was taught growing up in California, you bake a ham. You drop it by the house. You go to the funeral. In the end Emily Post’s 1922 book of etiquette turned out to be as acute in its apprehension of this other way of death, and as prescriptive in its treatment of grief, as anything else I read. (60-61)

The nostalgic glance at “this other way of death” hints at the defamiliarization that the professionalization of death and the rationalization of grief have brought about. According to the trajectory laid out here, death and grief were, when Post published her book in 1922,<sup>54</sup> still integrated into the realm of daily life, but have since been removed from it. It revolves, more precisely, around death’s compartmentalization into several branches of institutionalized ‘care.’ O’Rourke is even more specific when contemplating death’s

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<sup>54</sup> In his study *American Cool*, Peter Stearns mentions Emily Post’s book of etiquette. He argues that by promoting a “variety of mourning symbols and ceremonies,” Post revives an almost Victorian, and thus rather outdated approach to grief: “her main advice was that readers should acknowledge the intensity of grief and respect its varied courses, expressing active sympathy when the afflicted sought company but also respecting their privacy. Grief had no sweetness in this portrayal, but its vigor was viewed as inevitable” (163). In contrast to Didion, who assumes that Post’s recommendations reflected the social situation in which she wrote, Stearns believes that Post promotes practices that had already gone out of fashion in the early twentieth century.

medicalization, going so far as to claim that “our squeamishness about death has impoverished the ways we die” (192). Although her mother died at home, she did not experience her death as an integrated event:

They took my mother’s body away so quickly [...] At the time the speedy removal felt natural, perhaps because I had no idea what to expect. Now, however, there is a blankness at the center of it that troubles me. We’re too squeamish for the ritualistic act of cleansing and purifying, the washing of the body, that used to take place in other times, and still does, in other places, but I wonder if it might have helped me to take care one last time of the body I’d cared about my entire life. (256)

As in Didion’s account, the contemporary situation is compared to a time when people had not only the time but also the tools to gradually let go of their loved ones. It thus appears that a particularly modern source of the pain of separation derives from the suddenness of the rupture that removes the deceased from the realm of the living. This raises the interesting question of how the non-experience of death and the lack of rituals affect our bereavement. Is grief today so often connected to questions of trauma because it is experienced as an unexpected, even unthought-of shock? Has death’s removal from the dailiness of social life turned the feeling of loss into an enigma, a diffuse and disorienting affective condition lacking both feature and form? And has the disappearance of a guiding structure of ritualistic practices perhaps paved the way for the implementation of the psychoanalytically framed ‘work of mourning’? Must the latter in fact be understood as having replaced the former? And if so, does not the tension between the longing for mourning rituals on the one hand and the criticism attacking the schematic ‘work of mourning’ on the other create a paradoxical tension? It is certainly true that the simultaneous rejection of a prescriptive *manual* and the desire for a supportive structure, which both authors initially hoped to find in the ‘professional’ literature on grief, appear incompatible. I would, therefore, argue that the observed narrative perspectives inadvertently revolve around the tension between freedom and restraint: while the mourner longs for consolatory structures, these structures should not diminish but rather highlight the chaos and stagnation of her bereavement.

This observation relates to the main tension that mourning memoirs negotiate: their narrators feel marginalized, but they also withdraw from their social environment. When zooming in on the described situation, one finds that the mourner helps to create these contradictory dynamics. O’Rourke claims that her environment is unable to adequately respond to her loss. Yet her behavior is defined by the same shifting helplessness as that of her peers. After having returned home from her mother’s funeral, she admits that she “didn’t know what to do with [her]self” (124). Instead of pausing over her disorientation,

she concludes that: “the world seemed to push [her] away” (125). At a later point, she becomes more explicit about her own withdrawal: “with other people, with strangers, I count the hours until I can go be alone and get back to my secret preoccupation, my romance with my lost mother” (202-03). While her behavior supposedly results from a lack of social recognition, the privatization of grief does not only structure her environment’s attitude, but also guides her own behavior: she naturalizes grief’s private character by calling it her “secret occupation.”<sup>55</sup> In doing so, she reinforces the very dynamics she attacks and thus perpetuates the circumstances that she so adamantly criticizes.

An excerpt from Francisco Goldman’s grief memoir *Say her Name* (2011)<sup>56</sup> illustrates even more clearly how the psychological model of private grief influences the mourner’s self-perception. The author’s statements show that the social exclusion is not forced upon the mourner by way of a unilateral operation:

One of the most common tropes and remarks in the grief books I’ve read is about the loneliness of the deep griever, because people and society seem unable [...] to accommodate such pain. But what could anybody possibly do or say to help? Inconsolable doesn’t mean that you are sometimes consolable. The way things are has seemed right to me; it’s all been as it should be, or as if it could not be any other way. I even feel grateful for some of the most appalling things that have been said to me—Why can’t you go back to being the way you were before you met Aura?—Because they starkly demarcate a border, showing you a truth about where you are now, whereas a supposedly sensitive comment might only soften that border a little, but never make it less impenetrable. You have to, can only, live this on your own. (334)

Goldman claims that a person in deep mourning is inconsolable, can therefore not be helped by others, and should thus naturally be devoid of comfort and company. As O’Rourke, Goldman presents grief as a hermeneutically sealed world: a “border” exists between the country of grief and the rest of the world, which—governed by happiness—the mourner no longer belongs to. The literary examples show that their narrators actively exclude themselves. They have naturalized the social isolation of those who suffer to such an extent that the demarcation of the two worlds does not only appear as a given, but even as the desired set-up. They thus fail to relate to others in exactly the same way that others fail to relate to them. At the same time, the paradoxical exile that the mourner is trapped in also

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<sup>55</sup> An early article by Eric Lindemann assesses the mourner’s withdrawal from her social environment. It focuses on the tension between a certain “restlessness, inability to sit still, moving about in an aimless fashion” on the one hand and a simultaneous “lack of capacity to initiate and maintain organized patterns of activity” on the other. Lindemann concludes that the “bereaved is surprised to find how large a part of this customary activity was done in some meaningful relationship to the deceased...” (124).

<sup>56</sup> In his autobiographical novel or fictionalized memoir *Say Her Name* (2011), the American novelist and journalist Francisco Goldman retraces the life-story of his wife Aura Estrada, who died in a surfing accident in 2007. The book records the couple’s love story at the same time as it documents Goldman’s devastating experience of grief.

becomes her narrative's point of departure. These narrators draw an alternative 'world,' one that is not only fully governed by suffering, but that also builds on their narrators' identification with their losses.

That modernity has transformed grief into a private affair has already been noted. What has, so far, only been mentioned in passing is the interdiction imposed on public displays of sadness and sustained forms of suffering. Meghan O'Rourke states:

No one was telling me that my sadness was unseemly, but I felt, all the time, that to descend to the deepest fathom of it was somehow taboo. (As my father said, 'you have this choice when you go out and people ask you how you're doing. You can tell them the truth, which you know will make them really uncomfortable, or seem inappropriate. Or you can lie. But then you're lying.')

 (128)

The author here grounds her difficulty to communicate her sadness in the subject's arguably unacceptable negativity. She in other words perceives the gravity of her despair as the source of her felt social exclusion: as long as she does not conform to the 'appropriate' demand for happiness and instead displays her sadness, others will feel "uncomfortable" around her. O'Rourke thus feels something similar to the 'border,' which Goldman erected between the normatively 'happy' world of public life and the private setting of 'sadness' in which the mourner dwells. Her statement that "private grief and public mourning" were once closely aligned is historically well informed (155).<sup>57</sup> It implies that the gap between the public and the private sphere was once bridged by a set of rituals that provided a guideline for the interaction between the mourner and her surrounding community:

The disappearance of mourning rituals affects everyone, not just the mourner. One of the reasons many people are unsure about how to act around a loss is that they lack rules of meaningful conventions [...] Rituals used to help the community by giving everyone a sense of what to do or say. Now, we're at sea. (159)

The disappearance of rituals first of all causes the bystander's insecurity as much as it intensifies the mourner's disorientation.<sup>58</sup> And it secondly robs the mourner of the possibility to express her grief openly.<sup>59</sup> To O'Rourke, it appears that her only means of

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<sup>57</sup> According to Gorer, Western societies had, up to the beginning of the twentieth century, "explicit rules of behavior which every mourner was meant to follow." As a result "everyone knew how it would be appropriate for him or her to behave and dress when they suffered a bereavement and how to treat mourners" (*Death, Grief, and Mourning in Contemporary Britain* 63). Gorer is convinced that the ritual functions as a tool of emotional release because it channels and guides mourner's emotions.

<sup>58</sup> For further information on the psychological functions that rituals can serve in times of crisis, see also Thomas D. Elliot's article "Bereavement: Inevitable but not insurmountable" (1955).

<sup>59</sup> O'Rourke refers to Gorer's article "The Pornography of Death" (1955), which initiated a new discourse on grief by drawing awareness to the "taboo" that had been imposed on the subject of death and grief in the twentieth century. Gorer argues that the twentieth century witnessed "an unremarked shift in prudery; whereas copulation has become more 'mentionable,' [...] death has become more and more

expressing her loss lies in talking about it, in trying to explain herself to others. Since the communication of intensely ‘negative’ emotions appears, however, to be met with resistance, O’Rourke longs for alternative ways of displaying her grief (157). Other authors of grief memoirs, such as Carol Henderson, confirm this view. In her book *Losing Malcolm: A Mother’s Journey through Grief* (2001), she expresses a similar longing for rituals as a means of protection, as a “buffer” between herself and her social environment (144). Feeling “weak” and “vulnerable,” she wishes for a visible sign—for instance a black veil—that would tell those she encounters to treat her with care (145).

In his seminal study *Death, Grief, and Mourning in Contemporary Britain* (1965), Gorer recalls that during the early twentieth century, funeral parades were still a common feature of British street life. The author remembers the feeling of being given, in the wake of his father’s death in 1915, black mourning clothes to wear: “I wore these insignia of woe feeling, despite my unhappiness, somehow distinguished, in nearly every sense of the word. I was apart; and this was somehow fitting and comforting” (3). These descriptions reconcile the paradoxical notion that the mourner both at once shies away from social encounters and bemoans his social isolation.<sup>60</sup> That is to say: if rituals indeed function as tools of recognition, their power to locate grief culturally and socially is not to be underestimated. It is certainly true that public rituals could potentially heighten the mourner’s visibility. Recent grief memoirs demand not only that the mourner is granted time to pause over the rupture that the loved person’s death has caused, they also call for new forms of social recognition. It may be due to the past’s more conscientious practice of rituals that the mourning narrator’s longing for social acceptance is often articulated by referring to a time when western societies still provided both a social and symbolic space for the mourner’s distress instead of clothing its impatience in metaphors of healing and progress.

The literary examples link the experience of bereavement to two transformative processes that are closely entwined: grief is presented as destabilizing the bereaved person’s personal identity so that a process of social repositioning becomes necessary. O’Rourke argues that when in mourning, “you’re not just reconstituting the lost person” and redefining your relationship to her, you also have to “grow into the shocking new role you play on a planet without her” (228). The readjustment of a social position that was defined through the relation to the deceased has to be reconfigured and the mourner’s social status must

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‘unmentionable’ as a natural process” (50). Jack Goody’s 1975 article “Death and the Interpretation of Culture: A Bibliographic Overview” develops a similar argument.

<sup>60</sup> While Gorer’s study focuses on the situation in Great Britain, a similar case could be made for the United States. David G. Mandelbaum’s article “The Social Uses of Funeral Rites” argues that “American culture has [...] become deritualized. Persons bereaved by a death sometimes find that they have no clear prescription as to what to do next. In such cases each has to work out a solution for himself” (5).

accordingly be newly defined. Didion admits that she initially had “trouble thinking of [her]self as a widow. I remember hesitating the first time I had to check that box on the ‘marital status’ part of a form” (208). And Gorer confirms: “every death entails some changes in the social position and the status of the surviving kinsmen” (*Death, Grief, and Mourning in Contemporary Britain* 84). Depending on the relationship to the deceased, such changes range from slight to severe. Some, such as the death of a spouse or a parent, are so “profound that most languages have special words” for them. Categories such as ‘widow’ or the ‘orphan’ acknowledge the thus defined subject as essentially bereaved (84). This way of adjusting a person’s social status shows that our identities are thoroughly defined by our relations to others. When having to rename ourselves because we are no longer a husband or wife, a child or parent, we are confronted with the necessity to renegotiate both, our personal and our public identities. O’Rourke speaks of a process of “reclamation:” she *claims* that when losing a loved person, “you have to reassess your picture of the world and your place in it” (228). While contemporary grief literature glances back at a better past, its subversive socio-political critique is in keeping with contemporary discourses on identity politics.<sup>61</sup> Particularly the latter’s tendency to perceive social recognition as a precondition for affirmative forms of identity re-appropriation can be related to the case of the mourner. It highlights the importance of reestablishing individual and publicly sanctioned forms of acknowledgment and integration. That ritualistic practices are the sought-out form of consolation is interesting for the precise reason that the narratives in which this desire is articulated could be read as having taken over the function that the ritual previously fulfilled: they ultimately recreate the mourner’s social recognition.

This goes hand in hand with the observation that contrary to many psychological approaches, grief memoirs reject imperatives of healing and recovery. The mourner refuses to ‘let go’ and ‘move on,’ although her social environment encourages her to do so:

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<sup>61</sup> Identity politics have emerged as a political and academic discourse in the United States since the 1970s. The term subsumes a range of political activity and theory that focuses on the social injustice faced by members of marginalized and misrecognized communities. Situated within academic and social movements such as second wave feminism, Black and queer studies, identity politics advocates the reclamation and resignification of previously stigmatized forms of group membership. Rather than accept the perspective of the dominant culture, marginalized social groups are asked to re-appropriate dismissive terminology in order to establish a more affirmative identity. Influential works include Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), Charles Taylor’s *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (1989), or Axel Honneth’s *The Struggle for Recognition* (1996).



I felt that the world expected me to absorb the loss and move forward, like some kind of emotional warrior. One night I heard a character of *24*—the president of the United States—announce that grief was a ‘luxury’ she couldn’t ‘afford right now.’ This model represents an old American ethic of muscling through pain by throwing yourself into work; embedded in it is a desire to avoid looking at death. (154)<sup>62</sup>

O’Rourke’s way of referencing a pop-cultural format’s dismissal of grief as a “luxury” that one cannot afford when engaged in more pressing affairs (such as saving one’s country) suggests that she does not regard the mourner’s social invisibility as the sole product of certain modernization processes. Instead, she focuses on our apparent desire to avoid death and grief. It is in this context that the importance of productive work is again related to grief’s tendency to deconstruct the notion of self-determined subjectivity. O’Rourke’s example echoes an argument developed by Judith Butler in her book *Precarious Life* (2004). Here, Butler reflects on the Bush administration’s response to the terrorist attacks of September 11. Similar to the fictional U.S. President in the TV series *24*, Bush declared, only ten days after the attacks, the period of mourning to be over. In his opinion, it was now “time for resolute action to take the place of grief” (29). Butler elaborates on Bush’s refusal to allow for a sustained period of suffering:

When grieving is something to be feared, our fears can give rise to the impulse to resolve it quickly, to banish it in the name of an action invested with the power to restore the loss or return the world to a former order, or to reinvigorate a fantasy that the world formerly was orderly. (29-30)

This argument is based on the observation that fear and insecurity may create an urge for quick resolution. In the example used by Butler, this “impulse” led to a political plan for action that was designed to mend the damaged American self-confidence. The rationale at work thus completely neglects the possibility that the shock of injury may have already profoundly altered the self-image, whose confidence it sought to restore. Although Butler develops an explicitly political argument, her way of showing that vulnerability poses a potential threat and must therefore be kept at bay resonates with the increasing rationalization that, according to Weber, is symptomatic of modern Western societies. What, however, could be won by following Butler’s suggestion to endure grief’s vulnerability? Would it indeed be possible to acknowledge and allow for sustained notions of suffering? Perhaps, recognizing that currently prevalent identity formats are largely devoid of notions of vulnerability and contingency could indeed become the first step towards their reformulation. When we, in addition, realize the need to complement the

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<sup>62</sup> O’Rourke here refers to the TV series *24*, a Fox network production that was produced and broadcasted between 2001 and 2010. The series focuses on a fictional Counter Terrorist Unit, depicting its struggle to protect the United States from foreign terrorist attacks.

individual's celebrated self-determination and –reliance with its simultaneous precariousness and other-dependence, we may indeed be able to arrive at a more open-ended conceptualization of what it means to be at a loss.

In Didion's account, the dynamics of rationalization and control are brought to light in a very different and yet structurally related way. A scene depicting the hospital that her husband was brought to after collapsing at the dinner table and where she learns about his sudden death, opens with a man introducing himself as 'her' social worker:

He had with him a man he introduced as 'your husband's doctor.' There was silence. 'He's dead, isn't he,' I heard myself say to the doctor. The doctor looked at the social worker. 'It's okay,' the social worker said. 'She's a pretty cool customer.' They took me into the curtained cubicle where John lay, alone now. They asked if I wanted a priest. I said yes. A priest appeared and said a few words. I thanked him. They gave me the silver clip in which John kept his driver's license and credit cards. They gave me the cash that had been in his pocket. They gave me his watch. They gave me his cell phone [...] I thanked them. The social worker asked if he could do anything else for me. I said he could put me in a taxi. He did. I thanked him. 'Do you have money for the fare,' he asked. I said I did, the cool customer. When I walked into the apartment and saw John's jacket and scarf still lying on the chair [...] I wondered what an uncool customer would be allowed to do. Break down? Require sedation? Scream? (16)

The scene's minimalist language and its narrator's dry reporting voice echo the efficient and mechanical hospital procedure that it depicts. Both Didion's account and the hospital staff focus solely on organizational transactions. All forms of interaction appear standardized, impersonal, and almost mechanically conducted; they are guided by administrative guidelines. The hospital staff remains a nameless triad of vaguely sketched and prototypical figures defined by their professional occupation: the social worker, the doctor, the priest. Although the procedure is based on fixed regulations, the personnel's behavior is deprived of consolatory rituals and in fact appears designed to prevent excessive emotional disclosure. The possibility that going through the motions of the administrative tasks that await the bereaved could in themselves be perceived as a ritual is negated by the narrator, who depicts the experience not so much as 'channeling' her emotions than as a measure to prevent an outwardly emotional response. After having been categorized as a "cool customer," the narrator responds to her 'caregivers' in much the same way that they approach her. She fulfills her role as the polite and passive recipient of the news that her husband has just died. It is only after she has left the scene and finds herself without company that Didion reflects on her 'cool' behavior and begins to think about the irrationality of her rational response. Whereas the public realm of the hospital seemed perfectly attuned to guiding her through the situation without causing a scene involving an

emotional “break down,” the private space of her apartment *feels* like the natural place for the release of previously contained emotions.

These observations reinforce the impression that the public sphere, which may not only be our social identities’ playground but also its laboratory, is largely devoid of spontaneous displays of emotions that are related to feelings of loss. In order to classify as a rational person, one ideally avoids ‘indecent’ public displays of emotional distress. While it is fairly easy to distinguish between an absent public culture of grief and an accepted private dimension of it, this does not mean that the increasingly narrow circles drawn around grief have not yet reached the subject itself. On the contrary, the prescribed attitude toward grief has indeed also changed the personal experience of it. Grief’s public dimension has not merely been rationalized; this rationalization has also been internalized by the mourner and thus affects her immediate feelings of loss. It is therefore not surprising that the hospital has become the common and even ‘natural’ place for the sick and dying. From a critical sociological point of view, medical institutions are designed to prevent the family, and thus society at large, from having to interrupt its daily routines and productively structured lives. This observation certainly applies to Didion’s hospital scene, where emotional control plays an important role. While the hospital staff appears relieved that the narrator assumes the role of the ‘cool customer,’ their similarly ‘cool’ behavior implies that the newly bereaved tend to challenge established norms of affective control. In fact, a person struck by grief is potentially viewed as a troublemaker who, as Charmaz and Milligan point out, is likely to cause “disruptive scenes” (525).

Francisco Goldman comments explicitly on the ‘cool’ *habitus* that governs social life. He describes how his failure to act according to the norms that regulate social conduct marks him as an outsider because it threatens to rupture the façade of general wellbeing:

I still regularly imagine that Aura is beside me on the sidewalk. Sometimes I imagine I’m holding her hand, and walk with my arm held out by my side a little. Nobody is surprised to see people talking to themselves in the street anymore, assuming that they must be speaking into some Bluetooth device. But people do stare when they notice that your eyes are red and wet, your lips twisted into a sobbing grimace. I wonder what they think they are seeing and what they imagine has caused the weeping. On the surface, a window has briefly, alarmingly, opened. (10)

Goldman here presents himself as a “window” that grants us a view into an alarming alternative reality, namely the solitary, secretive world of grief. The window into this world is only “opened” in moments when the mourner fails to keep his countenance and, as it were, *loses it*. Goldman’s estranged self-perspective, his way of seeing himself through the

eyes of the generalized other, proves that he is acutely aware of both, society's expectation to live grief privately and his own inability or unwillingness to meet this expectation.

Didion takes Goldman's perspective a step further: she does not simply interpret the societal glance at her, but projects its gaze onto herself, which is why her failure to meet the standards of affective control begin to trouble her. Her sense of inadequacy becomes evident when she states that in the wake of her husband's death, she "could not trust" herself "to present a coherent face to the world" (168). Despite both narrators' different interpretation of their lack of self-control, their experiences lead to similar sentiments of social isolation. It is interesting that Didion, who previously questioned the role of the 'cool customer' that she was ushered into, now diagnoses her lacking countenance in a self-dismissive tone as an emotional deficiency: "I see a doctor, a routine follow-up. He asks how I am. This should not be, in a doctor's office, an unforeseeable question. Yet I find myself in sudden tears" (169). Although she has known this doctor for a long time and regards him a good friend, she scolds herself for returning his kind question with an inappropriate outburst of tears. Didion blames herself, in other words, for having confronted the friend with a 'window' into her own solitary grief-world (169-70).<sup>63</sup> And yet it would be rash to conclude that Didion has so thoroughly internalized the rationale which she had previously criticized, that she does not recognize it in herself. Her reflections on the issue of self-pity demonstrate that she is aware of the complex character of her despair:

People in grief think a great deal about self-pity. We worry it, dread it, scourge our thinking for signs of it. We fear that our actions will reveal the condition so tellingly described as 'dwelling on it.' We understand the aversion most of us have to 'dwelling on it.' Visible mourning reminds us of death, which is construed as unnatural, a failure to manage the situation. (192)

The statement's trajectory is interesting in that it contains a contradiction. Didion begins by saying that most people in mourning are afraid to look as if they indulged in and 'dwelled on' their misery. The fact that those in mourning "understand" most unaffected people's "aversion" to publicly displayed forms of grief shows that unlike Goldman, she does not draw a clear border between the world of grief and society. Instead, she understands that the same social forces that have reduced mourning to a public minimum have also shaped the mourner's self-dismissive perspective. In the second part of her statement, Didion's focus shifts to the way that society has "construed" death as "unnatural:" as part of this social

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<sup>63</sup> A similar sense of "embarrassment" regarding the display and communicating of grief is described in C.S. Lewis' *A Grief Observed* (1961), wherein the author states: "An odd by-product of my loss is that I'm aware of being an embarrassment to everyone I meet. At work, at the club, in the street, I see people, as they approach me, trying to make up their minds whether they'll say something about 'it' or not. I hate it if they do, and if they don't" (11).

transformation, intense and persistent grief has been redefined as a form of excessive self-indulgence. This remark illuminates the paradoxical situations that individuals immersed in deep mourning are today confronted with: they are affected by the same imperatives of resolution which they resist and seek to renegotiate (193).

Didion addresses this dilemma when arguing that her attempt to refrain from self-pity has the opposite of the intended effect as it only plunges her deeper into her own despair. According to Didion, self-pity is commonly seen as an egotistical and thus negative response to loss. The fact that self-pity is today dismissed as a self-destructive “character defect” instead of being accepted as an integral part of grief reinforces that imperatives of self-control define the mourner’s contradictory position today (193). A lasting preoccupation with one’s own sadness is met with as little understanding as the open display of one’s suffering: while the former is dismissed as egotistical *self-indulgence*, the latter is criticized as *wallowing*. Both conditions are devalued because they are regressive: they inherently prohibit a forward movement to occur and thus stall the individual’s story in a perpetual present. And yet Didion insists on her self-pity and the indulgence that accompanies it: she presents grief as a condition that is not simply directed inward, but is solely undirected and therefore revolves, necessarily, around herself.

O’Rourke, on the other hand, emphasizes the importance of learning how to integrate grief. Despite her difficulty to put her longing into words, she realizes how significant it is to accept grief’s indefinite character. She articulates this attitude when she, in closing, says:

*I will carry this wound forever.* It’s not a question of getting over it or healing. No, it’s a question of learning to live with this transformation. For the loss is transformative, in good ways and bad, a tangle of change that cannot be threaded into the usual narrative spools. It is too central for that. It’s not an emergence from the cocoon, but a tree growing around an obstruction. (218, *emphasis in original*)

Mourning is here defined as change, as a transformation that alters the grieving person irrevocably. Even after the first phase of intense grief gives way to a less acute sense of loss, feelings of longing do not subside and the “wound” does consequently not fully heal. O’Rourke’s analogy to narrative is interesting: because of its lasting effect on the mourner’s identity, grief constitutes more than a painful episode in a person’s life. It interrupts the whole plot of the bereaved person’s story, asking her to in fact  *dwell on* the transformation she undergoes. For grief to be told, it must therefore assume the form of a narrative that evinces a sense of permanent injury. In order to effectively communicate its narrator’s grief, a story must even sustain a sense of incompleteness. Grief’s relation to narrative is interesting because the narrative’s inherent demand for coherence appears to clash with

grief's chaotic and unpredictable character. This raises the question whether grief can, in fact, be told in the form of an immanently self-reflective story? And if so, does the narrative do more than assume the function that public rituals once served, namely that of processing and giving a communicable form to a difficult emotional state?

The selected literary examples are almost univocal in the message that they convey. This, however, does not mean that they do not offer instances of emotional adjustment and reintegration. Interestingly, such moments are by no means achieved through the detachment which Freud suggested as a remedy for grief. It on the contrary appears to be the narcissistic identification with the loved person, which Freud originally understood as a trait of melancholia, that is now presented as a source of comfort. O'Rourke realizes that her mother remains present in her life; she is physically maintained in the features of her children and binds them on an imaginary level through their shared memories, and thus through their strong identification with her. Once again the practice of rituals assumes a crucial function. Finding them lacking on the public level, O'Rourke recreates them within the private space of her family:

And so here I was on Thanksgiving, making the pie. With family around, cooking the same things we always cooked, creating the same smells we'd always created, my mother's death no longer seemed a bleak marker of 'Before' and 'After.' I felt her presence around us but I also saw how, too, she was embedded in us. (237)

By resuming a family ritual and reiterating her mother's habits, she not only blurs the boundaries between her own and her mother's identity. She also diffuses the linear distinction between past and present. While she incorporates her mother, she also 'embeds' herself in a larger American tradition. Practicing this ritual in the company of her family thus allows her to reintegrate herself into a network that satisfies her longing for a sense of continuity. How can this moment of apparent closure be read? Does it not settle the previously voiced uncertainty regarding the possibility of narrating grief? Once again, dynamics of identification play a crucial role. Darian Leader suggests that while the fields of medicine and psychology remain "oblivious" to an "idea of identification with the lost object," his experience as an analyst has shown that it "is a basic human response to loss. Either we take traits from the one we have lost, singular features that remain part of us, or, as in the melancholic case, we take everything" (55). The literary examples prove his point: it is only through the identification with the person who died that grief assumes a bearable, and communicable, form. Only when the lost object is, as Freud and Klein assumed, set up inside the ego can the bereaved person draw her narrative to a close and re-enter the "slipstream of contemporary life" (*The Long Goodbye* 13).

And yet, O'Rourke is far from equating her ability to talk and write about grief with the assumption that she is in control of or even 'over' it. She on the contrary concludes that language may not be the adequate vessel for her sorrow: "I realized that I had been on some level confusing speech—or language—with feeling all year. I had thought, if only I can speak about this, I can understand it, or contain it" (266). Grief's relation to language, and thus to narrative, is complicated at the moment when O'Rourke realizes that her narrative will not help her to generate a 'meaningful' image of grief. Yet if one insists that grief is without meaning, can it even be captured in a coherent story?

Interestingly, O'Rourke did initially attempt to rationalize her own grief by articulating it in and through her narrative. Yet as she began to understand that her story would not succeed in *making sense* of either her mother's death or her own grief, she gradually began to realize the futility of her endeavors. Put differently, the narrative's aspiration to emplot all essential episodes into a coherent plot was undercut by the stubbornly pointless fact of the loved person's death and the unproductive feelings of grief that forced the story into a limbo state of stagnation. O'Rourke writes: "the moment when I flash upon my mother's smile and face and realize she is dead, I experience the same lurch, the same confusion, the same sense of impossibility" (266). This 'sense of impossibility' continues to disrupt the narrative's progression and causes its temporal linearity to collapse into an infinite loop of involuntarily recurring memory images. Does the story of grief thus present a crisis of representation? Or can the articulation of the *impossibility* of signification and emplotment on the contrary be understood as its way of providing closure and consolation?

Despite her ability to incorporate her mother's absence as a presence into her life, O'Rourke insists on her account's incompleteness. Her account ends on a paradoxical note, stating that the "restored calm is itself the delusion" (291). Adding that the "old false sense of the continuity of life has returned," she at once addresses the human need for coherence and defines the mourner as involuntarily aware of the fact that such a 'sense of continuity' is a fiction that caters to the desire for a meaningful life (291). The narrator's statement reiterates key observations made above: it has been observed that contemporary Western cultures tend to produce predominantly 'happy' personal narratives that appear incapable of integrating holes of meaninglessness. The story of grief, however, naturally resists the conventional formulaic structure of such cultural narratives. In doing so, it shows that individual life stories are always contingent upon those of others. As one is not fully in control of the trajectory of one's story, one's personal narrative often unravels in moments when loss cannot be integrated in a meaningful and productive way.

When Didion's *Year of Magical Thinking* draws to a close, its author finds that she has regained the ability to perceive herself as a rational, coherently functioning human being. This, however, does not mean that she presents herself as having overcome her grief. Her account is explicit in its refusal to draw such conclusions. She professes that she feels no "faith in the future" (212), still avoids social encounters, and prefers to be without company. Although the sense of estrangement that initially dominated her to such an extent that she felt like an observer of her own life persists, a certain development can be made out. The book's end coincides with the end of its author's first year of mourning. Despite the fact that feelings of vulnerability and exposure continue to determine her, Didion ends her book on an open-ended note: "I realize as I write this that I do not want to finish this account. Nor did I want to finish the year. The craziness is receding but no clarity is taking its place. I look for resolution and find none" (225). This statement, as minimalist as it is acute, draws a close connection between narrated and lived experience. In fact, both appear to be mutually influential realms of self-expression. This conflation of the narratorial and the experiential sphere shows that both normally aim towards something like 'clarity' or 'resolution.' The narrator's self-declared failure to achieve such closure stalls the narrative in a cul-de-sac of indeterminate signification.

It would be easy to read the observed literary works as critical interventions. In her autobiographically informed book *Death's Door* (2006), Sandra M. Gilbert states that her "need to formulate" her loss must be understood as protesting "a set of social and intellectual commandments 'forbidding mourning'" (xix):

I think I felt driven to *claim* my grief and—almost defiantly—to *name* its particulars because I found myself confronting the shock of bereavement at a historical moment when death was in some sense unspeakable and grief—or anyway the expression of grief—was at best seen as an embarrassment, at worst a social solecism or scandal. (xix)

It is precisely this new *claiming* of grief, its liberation from psychotherapeutic constraints that is articulated in recent autobiographical accounts. These texts do not only attempt a reformulation, they also make a purposefully open-ended, unframed reconceptualization public. Gilbert distinguishes between the condition of grief and its 'expression.' In doing so, she emphasizes that only because the latter has disappeared from the societal surface, the sentiment itself has not been diminished. It appears to have, on the contrary, turned inward and may in fact be experienced more intensely. Gilbert argues that contemporary elegists often write out of the impulse to reject the interdiction imposed on grief (xx). The author presents her own text as proof of the fact that "no matter how we struggle to achieve 'closure,' death's door didn't close, can't and won't close" (462). She refers to the Belgian



surrealist painter René Magritte's (1898–1967) famous painting *Victory* (1939)<sup>64</sup> in order to comment on the difficulty to integrate moments of indeterminacy and meaninglessness into one's life story. Magritte's painting depicts a door that looks out onto a "radiant sea of emptiness that streams into infinite distance" (463). Gilbert uses the enigmatic image to draw attention to the impossibility to focus on a "mysterious blank" without trying to read a particular meaning into it. She concludes that: "perhaps Magritte meant to tell us that looking, just looking, at this perpetually open door is in itself a victory" (463). Her statement is in line with the agenda of recent grief literature. Its call for a social repositioning of grief entails an ethical demand: it asks for a new acceptance of suffering and sadness as essential constituents of modern subjectivity. These texts demand an opening up of the societal landscape, an opening through which an indeterminate sense of vulnerability and open-endedness can be reestablished.

The discussed narrators depict grief as a hermeneutically sealed parallel universe, a world in itself. Their metaphorical effort of world-making reinforces the impression that grief does not possess a designated space within modern societies, but exists in the realm of the intensely private. The sociological critique and the discussed literary narrators emphasize the importance of being granted the right to hold on to, identify with, and publicly display the lasting impairment that defines the experience of loss. And yet the idea of grief as constituting its own world is interesting, as it does not only reinforce the mourner's incompatibility with the referential world's demands and expectations. It may also illustrate the process of identification that Freud introduced and which was then taken up by Klein and others. I would, in conclusion, argue that the observed literary narrators can be read as melancholic mourners, whose stories retrace the process of (narratively) incorporating the lost person. In doing so, they gradually come to terms with the chaos that determines their 'inner world.' It is for this reason that they intuitively reject the notion of detachment and instead insist on the continuity of the love relationship which has come to define them.

### **A Note on Unhappy Endings**

This chapter has moved from the external factors that shaped the transformation of grief to the attitude which the mourner has both at once internalized and struggles against. The historical trajectory illustrated that the societal changes of the twentieth century had a tremendous impact on the emotional sphere: while the public recognition of grief has decreased, its emotional and personal gravity has increased. This double bind has complicated the experiential dimension of mourning, its social positioning and literary

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<sup>64</sup> The Surrealist oil painting that Gilbert described was completed in Brussels, Belgium, in 1939.

expression. Grief memoirs denounce the idea that the individual's value is defined by its ability to work progressively toward its personal story's happy ending. The presented narratives resist the conventional form of the autobiographical story<sup>65</sup> and dominant forms of self-formation by refusing to conform to strive for prescriptive signification.

Having established these central issues, I could move into an analytical direction that focuses on the compensatory function of contemporary grief literature. From this vantage point, I could propose that the texts' main function consists in breaking with the social taboo imposed on grief. I could, however, just as well trace the structural correlation between contemporary experiences of loss and the form and function of narrative texts. Assuming that grief destabilizes the bereaved person's identity, I could argue that processes of narrativization rehabilitate the same. While the first approach would be in line with Weber's critique of the subject's rationalization and self-alienation, the second could be related to the Benjaminian transformation from the communally practiced, orally traded, and universally bound story to the unframed and uncertain novel. Since neither of these two approaches appears fully satisfying, I believe that a third interpretative dimension must be introduced. Priscilla Uppal points out that "the contemporary American elegy may have gone so far as to dispense with consolation altogether" (13). This tendency is in keeping with the cited works' agendas. The narrators here explicitly refuse to 'get over' their grief. Can the literary texts consequently be read as 'works of mourning' that, however, no longer conform to the imperatives of closure and resolution but instead insist on their narrators' injury and persisting sense of vulnerability? And is it, finally, even feasible to align such a reading with the fact that every narrative, by way of its inherently progressive structure, appears to strive towards its own ending, and thus also toward an—however inconclusive—point of closure? Uppal settles on a compromise when suggesting that: "the elegy emerges as a possible public site of mourning when other public spaces might be unavailable" (15). She understands these narrative practices as a "reversal of the traditional work of mourning" (15) because they no longer focus on separation and detachment, but instead insist on the continuing significance of the relationship that has been lost. While these may be valid observations, they do not define *how* narratives of grief redefine the 'work of mourning.' Do they actively seek to transform the image of grief? And if so, would these texts not have to tell a story that refuses to *make sense* of the experience of loss? Would they not have to write grief without emplotting it into its narrator's life story?

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<sup>65</sup> In chapter two of this study, the genre of the autobiography will be discussed in greater detail. It will be embedded in the discourse on narrative concepts of identity formation.

The nostalgic longing for fixed ritualistic practices proves the relevance of a framework through which the individual can conceptualize and express its feelings. It can thus be asserted that a socially sanctioned ‘concept’ of grief is at once dismissed as a confining construct and sought as a supporting structure. When appearing in the form of rituals, protective measures that facilitate recognition tend to be embraced. At the same time, culturally ‘constructed’ restrictions are dismissed as overly determining. It appears as if the individual, while longing to be held by a supportive structure, at the same time refuses to carry out a prescriptive *habitus*. The innovative potential of texts that confront the conundrum that grief is today trapped in may therefore lie in their negotiation of this tension between autonomy and interdependence. It finds expression, above all, in the mourner’s longing to be recognized as an integral part of a larger communal network without, however, consenting to all of its imperatives. That being said, one finds that contemporary grief literature, by rejecting the traditional conceptualization of grief as grief ‘work’, opens up a yet to be determined social space: one that promises to redefine sadness and sorrow as an inalienable aspect of social experientiality. Most important in this attempted reconceptualization is the idea that grief can be an interminable and unpredictable process, and that it should therefore not be reduced to a formulaic structure.

It has already been noted that toward the end of her book, Joan Didion does not only comment on the mourner’s contested social position. She also confronts her reluctance to draw the narrative, which accompanied her through her first year of mourning, to a close because she finds herself unable to end it on a resolved, conclusive note. It seems, therefore, that she here addresses her self-proclaimed failure to ‘get over’ her grief and thus admits to her resistance against prescriptive grief models. The very articulation of this impasse could, of course, be read as a sort of resolution in itself. Following this line of thought, the representation of her incapacities—of her ‘craziness’ and confusion, but also of her inability to fully understand her grief—could be interpreted as a change in registers, and thus as a way toward language, if not signification. Evidently, it is only a short step from such an assumption to the Freudian notion of detachment.

Darian Leader has noted that for a long time the condition of melancholia was associated with “artistic creation and writing” (187). At the same time, this creative potential was most often accompanied by “a reference to some form of impossibility” (187). The fact, however, that this impasse is articulated suggests that the proclamation of its sheer impossibility designates a struggle for a representation in language. Could we therefore conclude that the apparent difficulty to communicate grief has in fact become an integral part of both, the current condition of mourning *and* melancholia? This question appears contradictory only

as long as one perceives Western modernity and psychoanalysis as two separate phenomena. When one, however, thinks of the psychoanalytic discourse as a programmatically modern way of addressing questions of subjectivity, the creative potential of mourning and melancholia reappears in a new light. Authors who write about grief are, on the one hand, acutely aware of the fact that they do not fully understand themselves, their emotional responses, or the relations that constitute them. At the same time, they actualize the creative potential of their own unknowingness by articulating the impossibility of full affective self-expression. Without always being aware of it, these authors thus make use of the irrational—the unknown and unconscious—dimension of their psychic lives. By insisting on the relation that holds them in thrall in a not fully accountable way, they become melancholic figures in the truest sense. While they thus remain bound to the original narrative of psychoanalysis, they do all they can to resist its later interpretations and the implications that have followed from them.

Before drawing this chapter to an end, it is worth noting that Freud's differentiation between mourning and melancholia implies that both conditions derive from "different systems in our minds" (*The New Black*, 189). According to Leader, Freud assumed the existence of "at least two psychical systems, one linked to the perception of things and one linked to words and speech" (189). Mourning, it is argued, becomes possible when a "movement" between these systems takes place and allows for a passage from the 'thing' to the 'word' representation, so that eventually an expression through language becomes possible. In melancholia, however, this passage is blocked and the "unconscious thing representation cannot be accessed through word representation" (189). For Leader, melancholia is therefore intrinsically linked to a problem of communication. While the 'work of mourning' enables a movement towards memorialization, and therefore verbalization, the melancholic person cannot initiate such a process. Leader's argument evidently neglects recent discourses on intersectional or hybrid identities. When integrating concepts that no longer perceive identity as solid and stable but understand it in contrast as a conglomerate of diverse parts, the melancholic's instable perspective no longer appears pathological. It instead expresses the uncertainty that defines modern subjectivity at large. Such a contemporary application of psychoanalytic theory confirms that the observed autobiographical accounts cannot only be read as melancholic accounts. They also stand as paradigmatic testimonies of the (post)modern subject.

Perhaps, the melancholic's fragmented worldview does call for a new 'narrative,' and for a language that captures the disorienting experience of grief. Such narratives would mark a contrast to the Benjaminian 'story' and the wisdom and clarity that it radiates. They would,

after all, have to speak about grief without either giving into the illusion of being in control of it or trying to resolve it by turning it into a significant event. While the literary works that this study discusses can indeed be understood as ritualistic practices, they must also, and importantly so, be read as presenting a previously almost inaccessible experience. They transform an affective condition that had been so thoroughly privatized that its expression appeared almost prohibited into something that can be told without having to be ‘given up.’ What makes this ‘passage’—or ‘impasse’—unique is the fact that it does not try to ‘work through’ and ‘get over’ the loss that it captures. It instead insists on the (melancholic) denunciation of instrumental rationality and its demand for resolution. In doing so, it comes close to realizing Benjamin’s novel. Instead of radiating security, it confronts its readers with feelings and experiences that fail to make sense and do not evolve but rather remain unproductive signs of its own uncertainty. It is, in the end, this utterly unproductive conclusion which may reformulate the cultural narrative of grief in the twenty-first century.

## II.

### “Pretend It’s Fiction”—Dave Eggers’ *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*

“When grieving is something to be feared, our fears can give rise to the impulse to resolve it quickly, to banish it in the name of an action invested with the power to restore the loss or return the world to a former order.”

Judith Butler, *Precarious Life*<sup>1</sup>

Immediately after its publication in 2000, Dave Eggers’ *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*<sup>2</sup> became a tremendous commercial and critical success: not only did it climb to the top of the *New York Times* bestseller list, it was also a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in non-fiction. When reading through the almost unanimously euphoric reviews of the book, I was struck by the recurrence of the same adjectives that are used to characterize Eggers’ style and his book’s tone: reviewers do not tire of describing the book as at once “moving” and “angry,” even “ferocious”.<sup>3</sup> This affective force of the story, it is noted, is accompanied and enhanced by its “restless” narrative energy. As David Sedaris, who contributed a blurb to Eggers’ debut, put it: “the force and energy of this book could power a train.” Eggers’ story, it thus appears, is told with a “frantic, speeding” urgency<sup>4</sup> where a single run-on sentence can take up the better part of a page, where colloquially styled internal monologues ramble without apparent sense of direction, and where realistic descriptions of the narrator’s daily life morph, within a paragraph, into fantastic scenarios that transform the protagonists into cartoon-like superheroes.

Before moving on to the book’s negotiation of its author’s grief, it is worth noting that in addition to its emotional gravity and stylistic complexity, the book’s humor is also regularly noted. Hardly any critic fails to comment on its “hilarious” or “funny” tone.<sup>5</sup> This coexistence of rage and humor already hints at the use of irony. And Eggers’ narrator indeed often assumes an ironic distance to the events that his autobiographical account reconstructs.<sup>6</sup> Reviewers like Kakutani claim, however, that one is here confronted with “an uncommon sort of irony,” one that is not used “as a device to keep us at arm’s length but to involve us” (n.p.). The critic further elaborates that Eggers’ “gimmickry does not undercut

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<sup>1</sup> Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (2004), page 4.

<sup>2</sup> From here on, I will abbreviate the book’s title and will merely refer to *A Heartbreaking Work*.

<sup>3</sup> See f Sarah Mosle’s article “My Brother’s Keeper” in the *The New York Times* (2000).

<sup>4</sup> See for instance Bernice Harrison’s review of the book in *The Irish Times* (2001).

<sup>5</sup> This aspect is mentioned by most reviewers, see for instance Mosle’s *The New York Times* review (2000) or Ron Charles’ review in *The Christian Science Monitor* (2000).

<sup>6</sup> The book’s ironic potential is in fact *the* central aspect that academic assessments of *A Heartbreaking Work* focus on. See for instance Korthals Altes’ essay “Sincerity, Reliability and Other Ironies” (2008) or Miller’s article “The Entangled Self: Genre Bondage in the Age of the Memoir” (2007).

the emotion of his story but somehow heightens it by throwing the passages of earnest sentiment into high relief” (n.p.). Eggers’ apparently rather ‘uncommon’ use of irony may explain why other critics go so far as to fully dismiss the idea of an ironic reading. Lisbeth Korthals Altes observes, for instance, that Eggers’ work “has been understood by many critics (though not all) as belonging to a more general current in American literature that rejects post-modern irony in favor of emotionality, sharing and truthful commitment” (107). These statements could be related to the concept of a ‘new sincerity’ that has been observed in recent literary publication. Most often, this concept is associated with the author David Foster Wallace and his celebrated essay “E Unibus Pluram” (1993). While Wallace’s essay revolves primarily around contemporary T.V. culture and its influence on literature, it also tackles the issue of irony. Wallace initially acknowledges the powerful critical potential that “early postmodern irony” (183) exerted. Yet he also asserts that irony has by now worn itself out: “after thirty long years as the dominant ode of hip expression,” a device that should only be used in small doses, as an intervention or interruption, has become, so Wallace, an unproductive new norm. The author further argues that irony’s “exclusively negative function” renders it ultimately “unuseful when it comes to constructing anything to replace the hypocrisies it debunks” (183). Although irony once served, in other words, as a critically productive tool, it cannot be used to move beyond this criticism in order to create a new kind of literature.

In the essay’s concluding statement, Wallace departs from irony and dares to make a claim for a new, more ‘sincere’ form of literary expression. He believes that:

The next real literary ‘rebels’ in this country might well emerge as some weird bunch of ‘anti-rebels,’ born oglers who dare to back away from ironic watching, who have the childish gall actually to endorse single-entendre values. Who treat old untrendy human troubles in U.S. life with reverence and conviction. Who eschew self-consciousness and fatigue. These anti-rebels would be outdated, of course, before they even started. Too sincere. Clearly repressed. Backward, quaint, naive, anachronistic. Maybe that’ll be the point, why they’ll be the next rebels. Real rebels, as far as I can see, risk things [...] The new rebels might be the ones willing to risk the yawn, the rolled eyes, the cool smile, the nudged ribs, the parody of gifted ironists, the ‘How banal.’ (192-93)

While Wallace’s assertions could certainly be applied to a number of autobiographical texts on grief, I do not believe that they are ideally suited to describe *A Heartbreaking Work*. It is certainly true that Eggers often questions and in fact ironizes irony in order to draw characters and scenes that resonate with a seemingly unfinished rawness and immediacy. And yet his narrator clings, up to the book’s final pages, to his ironically detached perspective. Despite the fact that the narrator’s ironic attitude is ultimately transformed into a devastatingly sincere one, it functions, for the larger part of the

book, as a desperately needed stabilizing measure. Irony does here therefore not work directly toward the implementation of a new sense of authenticity and sincerity. It instead draws attention to the narrator's destabilized and disoriented perspective, and maps out the indeterminate terrain 'between' sincere and ironic storytelling that the narrator defines as the 'terra incognita' of his grief.

It is certainly true that *A Heartbreaking Work's* complex, affectively ambiguous tone has played a major role in creating the book's appeal. Ron Charles went so far as to claim that the book may have built a "bridge from the Age of Irony to Some Other As Yet Unnamed Age that we've been waiting for" (n.p.). While this could certainly be read as a comment on literature's 'new sincerity,' Charles clarifies that for him, *A Heartbreaking Work* signals, in a more general way, the emergence of a new post-post-modern age in which humor assumes a new function and is explicitly used to express affect. Despite its indeterminacy, the cited statement points to the fact that in Eggers' story, the grave topics of death and grief coexist with and are enveloped by a possibly ironic and certainly compulsively self-conscious, thoroughly post-modern narrative façade. In the *Acknowledgments* that precede Eggers' autobiographically informed, yet not strictly non-fictional account, the first-person narrator (or is it the author?) admits that the narrative's self-satirizing surface conceals an undercurrent of deep despair. In an attempt to explain both his own and the book's motifs, he states that he "will preempt your claim of the book's irrelevance," which its "gimmickry" may imply, "by saying that the gimmickry is simply a device, a defense, to obscure the black, blinding, murderous rage and sorrow at the core of this whole story" (*A Heartbreaking Work*, n.p.<sup>7</sup>). Instead of clarifying the function that humor fulfills in his account, Eggers' comment only reinforces the impression that sincere and ironic modes of storytelling intersect and can here never be fully distinguished.

With these first insights into the book's reception in mind, I will in the following dissect the contradictions and tensions that are built into *A Heartbreaking Work*. Above all, I will argue that the oscillation between ironic and sincere modes of narration must be understood as the book's way of testing and questioning the validity of canonical cultural models and normative narrative plots. *A Heartbreaking Work* stages, in other words, an intervention by appropriating such models and plots in an unfitting and therefore highly unsuccessful way. Despite the fact that these appropriations—such as, for instance, the emplotment of ready-made fictional micro-stories into the autobiographical account—severely destabilize the narrator's reliability, they interestingly also become his way of realizing a genuinely

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<sup>7</sup> The elaborate apparatus of *Prefaces* and *Acknowledgments* that precedes the main text of *A Heartbreaking Work* is unnumbered.



affective story. When taking the book's at times humorous tone and its severe subject matter into account, it may appear paradoxical that humor or irony should here bear the trace of affect. And yet one can indeed observe that an ironic inflection is most likely to occur in the first-person narrator's voice at times when it is most vulnerable, or most likely to break apart. This shows that comic relief is here indeed applied to reduce the risk of crafting a conventional "sob story"<sup>8</sup>—or a memoir that would satisfy the book market's expectations. This is why I will in the following read *A Heartbreaking Work's* formal and structural playfulness and indeterminacy as a resistance against cultural narratives and their generic forms of meaning-making.<sup>9</sup> I believe that irony and humor are here used to articulate sincerity without sentimentality: by turning precarious moments into stereotypical scenes, the narrator defies the tragic narrative that should accompany the rather tragic events of his life story. By for instance transforming himself into the powerful hero of his story, he formulates an ironic antidote to the expected plot. The narrative's way of inverting weakness into strength and determination into agency overcompensates the mourning narrator's disoriented, insecure position. In doing so, it not only expresses the unbearability and incomprehensibility of grief, but also articulates the mourner's intuitive desire to recuperate a lost sense of meaning.

In order to understand how the irony and formal playfulness of the text confront the reader with his or her own expectations, it will be crucial to observe how sincerity emerges through the ironic gaze. At first glance, the narration appears caught up in contradictions: narrative puzzle pieces form a bric-a-brac of autobiographical, fictionalized, and even fantastical episodes that remain incompatible and therefore unbound. Because this fragmented story does not converge into one 'bigger picture,' it resonates with internal

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<sup>8</sup> In his memoir *A Million Little Pieces*, James Frey describes the time he spent in a drug rehabilitation clinic. The book, which was initially hailed to great success by Oprah Winfrey, was later discovered to have been greatly exaggerated, dramatized, and fictionalized. When talking about his "fellow inmates," Frey's alter ego narrator says: "they are all the same. Had it all, got fucked up, lost it all. Trying to recover. The Great American Sob Story" (116).

<sup>9</sup> One way of reading the stylistic play is to say that its way of layering of narrative perspectives and its adoption of different subject positions, its reference to cultural sources and its gestures of imitation and playfulness turn *A Heartbreaking Work* into a 'postmodern' text. Wolfgang Kraus investigates narrative identity construction from a postmodern perspective. When identifying symptoms that exemplify postmodern self-narratives, he refers to the co-existence of multiple narrative worlds, which the subject negotiates without necessarily reconciling them. Other aspects that Kraus draws attention to are the postmodern narrator's lack of omnipotent agency as well as his inability to determine his story's outcome or 'happy ending.' Most crucially, Kraus mentions the use of so called 'ready made,' that is to say, conventional narrative plots, which are cited, often in an ironic fashion, to illustrate the multi-faceted, layered, hybrid postmodern self. Eggers' narrative does not only employ a range of the features that Kraus associates with postmodern literature, it is also well aware of the assumptions that accompany them. Eggers' text can thus be read as a meta-comment on ironic postmodern literature. While it appears to meet all the criteria of postmodern literature, its undercurrent of sincere and severe despair would, let such a reading, however, appear short-sighted and reductive. See: Wolfgang Kraus's *Das erzählte Selbst. Die narrative Konstruktion von Identität in der Spätmoderne* (1996).

conflict and resists categorization, if not conclusive meaning. Interestingly, the rather paradoxical narrative structure is presented by a narrator who claims that he is fully dedicated to the construction of an improved reality—or a better world. His forceful attempt to assume an authoritative narrative position and craft a self-determined story thus mirrors his effort to regain control over a life story that was severely disrupted by the experience of death and loss. That this twofold endeavor of regaining authoritative control fails is made evident by the fact that the story's modes of *telling* diverge increasingly from its modes of *showing*. The narrator's dissatisfaction with the often apparently inappropriate, not sufficiently dramatic scenery of his surrounding reality is compensated through the integration of fictional micro-plots that paradoxically translate his precarious affective state far better than a strictly autobiographical rendering of the depressingly banal and utterly exhausting experience of death and grief. Eggers' narrator makes use of the easily recognizable format of the comic strip, the action movie, and the theatrical play: the implementation of these generic literary forms into his compulsively self-reflexive autobiographical work serves a compensatory and thus both at once stabilizing and destabilizing function. They paint over, but at the same time draw attention to that which is not explicitly being addressed, namely the narrator's highly ambivalent and certainly melancholic experience of grief.

While the theme of grief is hardly explicitly discussed in the book, the tensions that structure the book testify to the fact that it is both motivated by and indebted to the experience of loss. Since its structure, style, and syntax imply the disorienting and maddening experience of grief, the account can certainly be read as a work of melancholic mourning. Yet in contrast to works that strive to communicate grief in a more straightforward manner, *A Heartbreaking Work* is structured by its narrator's feelings of loss without explicitly saying so.<sup>10</sup> Because the narrator initially denies the severely destabilizing impact that his parents' deaths had on him, his grief becomes visible at instances where the story is interrupted, where it disintegrates and precludes its narrator's venture of worldmaking. Because of this initial denial, the narrator appears to live in several worlds at once: the suddenly disintegrated 'old' world that he longs to at once preserve and discard. A 'new' world which he wants to create from scratch in order to free himself from

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<sup>10</sup> Joan Didion's account would be a contrary example: *The Year of Magical Thinking* explicitly describes the physical symptoms of grief, such as a feeling of "numbness," a "sense of disbelief," and a loss of "concentration" (46). With time, Didion begins to draw a more precise and personal image of the condition of grief that determines a bereaved person in the direct aftermath of loss: "people who have recently lost someone have a certain look, recognizable maybe only to those who have seen that look on their own faces. I have noticed it on my face and I notice it now on others. The look is one of extreme vulnerability, nakedness, openness" (74).

the dismissed and yet strongly enduring pain of loss, and the world of grief itself, which is initially repressed and nevertheless emerges in the indeterminate realm between these two world versions and thus reinforces their incompatibility.

Because the world of grief is thus not so much explicitly told as structurally shown, this close-reading will focus on the moments of stylistic play through which this 'world' of grief emerges. On the explicit level, the story's fast pace is designed to convince the reader that its narrator is positively (and frantically) engaged in the adventure of building a "new world" (53). At the same time, the preface draws attention to the fact that he is also on the run from "the black, blinding, murderous rage and sorrow," which constitutes "the core of this whole story" (n.p.). The constant, almost compulsive movement does therefore not indicate a progressive forward development: the plot's layout shows that the narrative has a cyclical structure revolving around the death of the narrator's mother, the depiction of which frames the book. It is approached in the beginning and again at various points of the story. Yet the narration always breaks off before reaching the traumatic incident, which is not actually told until the reader reaches the final pages. Eggers' account is thus defined by an affective double bind, where frantic movement clashes with a paralyzing sense of immobility and stagnation. It is this tension, which manifests itself in the mentioned structural inconsistencies that my analysis will focus upon.

Before validating the presented points through a more detailed analysis that will use the concept of narrative identity as a theoretical backdrop, a few words about the plot may be in order: written in the first person perspective, the book tells the story of the narrator Dave, whose identity coincides with that of the author. Dave chronicles the year after both of his parents died of cancer—within the unlikely time span of only 32 days. Throughout the narrative, the details of both parents' deaths remain obscure and are only gradually revealed through disconnected memory sketches that occasionally intrude into the portrayal of the narrator's present life. What is revealed to the reader is the fact that in the wake of his parents' deaths, twenty-one year old Dave drops out of college and moves from a suburb of Chicago to Berkeley and later to San Francisco. Here, he sets out to build a "new world" for himself and eight year-old Toph (short for Christopher), whom he subsequently raises. Assuming the paternal in addition to the fraternal role, he begins his experiment of turning the two of them into a "new model," (57) an innovative familial system whose "exceptional" members are destined to "do extraordinary things" (147). As this brief sketch shows, the narrator's self-portrayal echoes, at least on the denotative level, core American values of freedom, progress, and cathartic healing: the team of brothers moves West. They

shake off their past in order to reinvent themselves. They set out to create a ‘new world’ that is not impaired by their memories of death and loss.

My thinking about the structural and stylistic setup of *A Heartbreaking Work* was triggered by the observation that the narrative does not read as a belated reconstruction of past events. Traditionally, theorists tend to assume that autobiographical writing designates a retrospective construction of lived life. Recently, however, scholars like Smith and Watson have begun to point out that memoirs do not necessarily have to follow such a temporal structure: “time can be scrambled; it can be rendered cyclical or discontinuous, as in postmodern texts. Thus a strict linear organization of narrative can be and often is displaced by achronological modes of emplotment” (*The Rumples Bed of Autobiography* 93). They thus concede that fragmented, associational, or digressive memories can also be translated into narrative form, for instance through flashbacks or repetitions. The latter is certainly the case in *A Heartbreaking Work*, where evasive allusions to the mother’s death create the book’s cyclical structure. What is more, Eggers’s story appears to be constructed simultaneous to the events it depicts. Toph confirms this impression when he, by becoming dissociated from his book’s figure, provides background information on his brother’s story. Breaking out of character, he addresses his brother, the book’s narrator, directly:

So you’re going to stay up tonight, most of the night, like every night, staring at your screen [...] You’ve been determined [...] to get this down, to render this time, to take that terrible winter and write with it what you hope will be some heartbreaking thing. (119)

Interestingly, Toph’s statement does not correlate with the content level of the story, which allegedly focuses on the narrator’s future-oriented project of worldmaking. While the narration appears primarily preoccupied with the temporal present, Toph reveals that it is nevertheless motivated by a desire to grasp the past. What is more, the unusual objectification of the ‘terrible winter’ in which his parents died shows that the narrator seeks to create an illusion of authorial power by claiming that he will ‘take’ that winter and ‘write with it.’ This observation gains particular relevance when taking into account that the larger narrative framework ultimately deconstructs this potent illusion of agency as it articulates its narrator’s essential dilemma of being stalled between the impossible options of either fully dismissing or coherently incorporating his parents’ deaths.

If it was not for the book’s beginning and the end, both of which revisit and thus confront this ‘terrible winter,’ the book would present writing and living as mutually influential processes. At times, it even suggests that the narrative provides a blueprint for the protagonists’ actions. It serves, in other words, as a manual that exists first and must then be

tried and tested by being put into practice. The same dynamics apply to the question of character: instead of retrospectively constructing a stable and coherent self-image, the narrator's unstable identity is constantly improvised in and through the narrative. Admitting that he, in the wake of his parents' death, suddenly found himself "in a world with neither floor nor ceiling" (*Acknowledgments* n.p.), the narrator's story does not follow but often precedes the planned process of building a new world. In doing so, the written account appears as a stabilizing factor in the simultaneously carried out effort of autobiographical and narrative worldmaking. At second glance, this impression can, however, not be maintained: because the narrator excludes the complex and rather ambivalent experience of death and loss from his story, he sets out to build a world that cannot be made, an endeavor that repeats itself in his attempt to write a story that cannot be written. It is for this reason that the project of building a new place of belonging fails together with his attempt of writing a linearly progressive, wholly coherent story.

It is not until the final pages of his story that narrator Dave fully confronts his own grief. When he, however, finally admits to the force of a pain that he does not fully understand, his story takes an unexpected turn: it dismisses its formerly detached perspective and assumes an unprecedented immediacy. In the end, Dave incorporates the blank space that his mother's death opened up. By coming to terms with a formerly denied, almost unspeakable and yet all-determining sense of loss, he becomes a figure deeply immersed in a state of melancholic mourning.

### **Whose Story to Tell? The Question of Genre**

Due to the congruence of the author's and the narrator's persona, *A Heartbreaking Work* is usually classified as a memoir. Because of its fictionalized elements, it is, however, sometimes also defined as a work of 'creative non-fiction' and has even been described as a novel. The indeterminacy of its generic definition appears to be part of the book's appeal—critics never fail to note that the book transgresses formal and generic boundaries. Smith and Watson interpret this ambiguity as the author's intentional play with conventions. They discuss the book as an "experiment" in the contested field of life writing, arguing that its way of "dramatizing and flaunting autobiographical conventions [...] may well be at the outer limits of the practice of memoir" (1) Ben Yagoda follows a similar line of thought:

In 2000, Dave Eggers made an impressive attempt to kill the memoir, or at least to deconstruct it until it was unrecognizable [...] He wrote a sprawling manuscript about what happened, called it *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, and adamantly refused to use the subtitle *A Memoir*, choosing instead *Based on a True Story* (this was dropped for the paperback edition). (237)

Eggers' rejection of the label *memoir* shows that he is well aware of his playful transgression against literary genres and their conventions. The alternatively (and temporarily) selected subtitle "based on a true story" emphasizes this impression, as it both highlights and satirizes the memoir's promise of presenting *the* 'truth.' A mere look at *A Heartbreaking Work's* cover shows that the book questions the genre's truth-claims and receptive expectations that come with it.<sup>11</sup> In doing so, it points to the levels of narrative consciousness that coexist in every autobiographical act: the reader is, in other words, continuously reminded that the autobiographical 'I' is a complicated conglomerate.

Smith and Watson have worked towards an expansion of the binary distinction between a narrating and a narrated 'I' by adding the third category of the author.<sup>12</sup> Yet because this author could never capture the entire complexity of life in the form of the autobiographical account, he or she remains essentially unattainable to the reader. It is instead the narrating 'I' who the reader meets through the figure of the first-person narrator. In addition, the reader is confronted with the narrated 'I' whom he recognizes in the story's protagonist. Since it is, as Smith and Watson note, "an objectified and remembered" entity, this narrated 'I' tends to be the most explicitly visible and most reliable version of these narrative selves

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<sup>11</sup> Eggers' literature plays with the authorial perspective. In two of his books, he appropriates the voice of another to tell its ultimately 'true' story. It is perhaps because Eggers is fully aware of the limitations of the autobiography's truth-value that he emphasizes, even exploits its creative freedom. In the fictionalized memoir *What is the What* (2006), the appropriation of another person's voice and story is anything but a subtle endeavor. While only Eggers' name appears on the book's cover, a portrait of Valentino Achak Deng, who represents both the narrating and the narrated 'I,' complements it. Interestingly, the book's subtitle announces "THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF VALENTINO ACHACK DENG, A NOVEL." This paradoxical combination of categorical characteristics is succeeded by the author's name "DAVE EGGERS" and a "PREFACE" written and signed by Valentino Achack Deng. This preface reverses the historical practice of editors, who used prefatory commentaries to validate an autobiographical account. Such gestures were a common practice in slave narratives, where white editors verified the author's identity and literary capability (see for instance Ben Yagoda's book, *Memoir: A History* 87). In Eggers' book, these dynamics are inverted: the truth-claim is anchored in the figure of the first-person protagonist, whose historical version ascertains the author's credibility. *What is the What* is thus not only a fictionalized memoir, but also an autobiographical novel. In the 2009 book *Zeitoun*, Eggers' is also the only name that appears on the cover. In this case, however, not only the drawing of the protagonist, but also the title of the book identifies the protagonist. The story is preceded by a paragraph, which declares that: "This is a work of nonfiction, based primarily on the accounts of Abdulrahman and Kathy Zeitoun [...] Dates, times, locations, and other facts have been confirmed by independent sources and the historical record" (*Zeitoun*, xv). While this introduction emphasizes the book's documentary character, it clashes with the subsequent story's tone. Particularly the text's beginning, which contains a mythical, fairy-tale-like description of the protagonist's childhood in Syria, reads like a novel. This effect is enhanced by the narrator's restrained third person perspective. Eggers' tendency to play with labels and expectations proves that he is well aware of autobiography's complex, constructed character.

<sup>12</sup> For a more detailed discussion of autobiographical subjectivity, see also: Francoise Lionnet, *Autobiographical Voices: Race, Gender, Self-Portraiture* (1989), p. 193 ff.

(*Reading Autobiography* 78).<sup>13</sup> In *A Heartbreaking Work*, however, the jumpy, jumbled voice of the narrating 'I' produces an equally disoriented and dynamic protagonist.

Focusing on these figurative inconsistencies proves interesting; they highlight the difficulties of accurate and complete autobiographical representation. The text's traumatic temporal structure, its way of circling and evading its subject, must certainly be read as *the* deliberate mode of narrative self-representation. It is precisely through the "digressions, omissions, gaps, and silences" that the narrator articulates the dissolution of his worldview (78). His failure to tell a 'true' story further suggests that he is either unable *or* unwilling to create a more reliable narrative world. Thus, two possible interpretations can be mapped out: when perceiving the narrator as *unable* to tell a more straightforward story because he cannot grasp his own loss, the employment of narrative formulas and cultural sources could be understood as serving a compensatory function. If the narrator's response to loss is further read as a traumatic experience, these micro-plots could be perceived as stand-ins for the unspeakable experience of death and grief. By filling the void that his incomprehension created, they produce the momentary illusion of wholesomeness, authorial power, and the possibility for definitive signification. If, however, one interprets the narrator as *unwilling* to present himself in a more univocal fashion, the formal playfulness can instead be termed a form of resistance. It then becomes the narrator's way of rejecting the expectation that tragic events should translate into an equally tragic story. From this perspective, Eggers' narrator could be read as immersed in a melancholic state of mourning. This would not only explain his unwillingness to apply meaning to his parents' deaths and his own grief, it could also be the reason why he refuses to integrate both into his narrative.

The genre's truth-value is, of course, closely related to the issue of memory, particularly as the latter is both the memoir's main source and an inherently unreliable medium. Numerous recent studies<sup>14</sup> confirm that memories are anything but a trustworthy mechanism. On the contrary, they have been defined as a creative process that, as Smith and Watson note, "represents something very different from a neutral attempt to remember. Beneath the account of every incident, episode, or character is an interpretation of one's life" (*Reading Autobiography* 105). The fact that the memoir is grounded in the highly subjective

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<sup>13</sup> This delineation of narrative perspectives proves helpful when thinking about the paradigm shift in current forms of life writing, which Eggers' text certainly helped to instigate; here, digression and hybridization not only loosen generic borders but also establish a multitude of sub-genres and labels. Interestingly, these new forms of autobiographical storytelling often diverge from traditional formats in their deliberate transgression of the boundary between biographical and fictional modes. This shift can, for instance, also be observed in the growing number of "autographics," such as Alison Bechdel's widely discussed "tragicomic" *Fun Home* (2006).

<sup>14</sup> See for instance: Robyn Fivush and Ulric Neisser's *The Remembering Self: Construction and Accuracy in the Self-narrative* (1994)

‘interpretations’ that memory produces renders the idea of an ‘objective’ truth obsolete. It follows that the recognition of memory’s creative potential thus asks us to rethink the commonly assumed distinction between fiction and fact. When speaking about the memoir, it in fact appears that a universally applicable concept of ‘Truth’ must be replaced by the teller’s quest for a story that best expresses his or her subjectively felt ‘truth.’ The memoir thus remains tied to the rationale of ‘truth’ while at the same time renegotiating the means through which it can be reached. Within this process, it certainly reevaluates ‘subjective’ sources such as memories and feelings.

It is in this context that *A Heartbreaking Work’s* emplotment of fictional or fantastical scenes becomes important: by embedding cultural sources playfully and ironically while at the same time relying on them as stabilizing and compensatory measures, the narrator becomes an increasingly indeterminate entity that cannot be read univocally, but must be seen through the episodic appropriation and dismissal of fleetingly adopted subject positions. The contradictions that follow from this inconsistency point to the more general tension between agency and ideological determination which the text negotiates. And since this tension between individual freedom and cultural constraint appears to in fact drive *A Heartbreaking Work*, it is possible to read the narrator’s play with culturally confirmed narratives as a struggle against subjectification and conventional signification. The question arises, then, whether the emancipation from a more literal representation signals a newly gained form of agency or whether the book on the contrary demonstrates that the individual remains bound to larger cultural narratives and must therefore fail when trying to erect a ‘new’ story world. The tension between power and possibility on the one hand and powerlessness and passivity on the other suggests that the book’s formal play, its inconsistencies and silences, can indeed be read as an intervention into normative processes of signification. While these literary devices are not simply employed to prove that the narrator succumbs to his own inevitable subjection, they certainly allude to his difficulty to tell a concretely meaningful story. And because this story is, essentially, a story of grief, they also draw attention to the fact that the experience of loss highlights the fragility and that fundamentally define personal narratives.

### **Moving in Solipsistic Circles: A Comment on Paratextual Self-Performance**

*A Heartbreaking Work’s* elaborate apparatus of prefatory remarks makes the observed tensions explicit. They are in fact spelled out in such an exhaustingly condensed form that it appears as if the author here presents the foregone conclusion of his book, deflating any sense of suspense before beginning to build it. When trying to summarize the main points of



the preface's overwhelming number of declarative statements and suggestions, three recurring motifs can be identified. The introductory remarks first of all serve as a meta-commentary; they position *A Heartbreaking Work* in a self-conscious relation to the genre of the memoir. By satirizing the genre's self-indulgence, they secondly confirm that the use of irony is here used as a form of literary resistance. And they thirdly ridicule the cultural obsession with 'true stories' by teasing out the blurred line between fiction and fact.

Yagoda notes that "virtually all eighteenth- and nineteenth-century autobiographers began with prefatory remarks that addressed the vanity issue and presented a rationale for their book—usually some variation of the Horatian principles of instruction and amusement" (67). Eggers' admittedly exaggerated comment on this literary tradition calls attention to its generic rules only in order to subvert them. The self-titled "PREFACE TO THIS EDITION"<sup>15</sup> informs the reader that "this is not, actually, a work of pure non-fiction. Many parts have been fictionalized in varying degrees, for various purposes" (n.p.). It thus draws attention to the book's artifice which is then further elaborated upon:

DIALOGUE: This has of course been almost entirely reconstructed. The dialogue, though all essentially true—except that which is obviously not true, as when people break out of their narrative time-space continuum to cloyingly talk about the book itself—has been written from memory, and reflects both the author's memory's limitations and his imagination's nudgings. All the individual words and sentences have been run through a conveyor, manufactured like so: 1) they are remembered; 2) they are written; 3) they are rewritten, to sound more accurate; 4) they are edited to fit the narrative (though keeping with their essential truth); 5) they are rewritten again, to spare the author and other characters the shame of sounding as inarticulate as they invariably do. (*Preface* n.p.)

The mechanical delineation of the manufacturing process, which produces a coherent narrative, does not only illustrate the constructed nature of every autobiographical act, it also preempts the distinction between fiction and fact. The *Acknowledgments* section of the book takes this game another step further: it contains a list with the "major themes of the book," which begin as rather comprehensible, alphabetically ordered statements, but gradually deteriorate into a vortex of self-conscious reflections that accumulate such force that they cease to communicate any effective meaning. Under the sub-section "THE KNOWINGNESS ABOUT THE BOOK'S SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS ASPECT," the narrator for instance explains that "while the author is self-conscious about being self-referential, he is also knowing about that self-conscious self-referentiality [...] He also plans to be clearly, obviously aware of his knowingness about his self-consciousness of self-referentiality" (n.p.). While he continues in this manner to draw self-descriptive circles

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<sup>15</sup> This 'Edition' was, at the time, the first and only edition, a fact that adds to the statement's irony.

around his narrative self, these first statements already shows that he satirizes the idea of the narrative as a coping mechanism. The list of ‘major themes’ ultimately culminates in:

THE SELF-CANONIZATION DISGUISED AS SELF-DESTRUCTION  
MASQUERADING AS SELF-AGGRANDIZEMENT DISGUISED AS SELF-  
FLAGGELATION AS HIGHEST ART FORM OF ALL ASPECT. (n.p.)

By layering self-conscious reflection and bringing its solipsistic stream of consciousness to the forefront of the narrative, the narrator proves that a comprehensible story is based on a process of internal selection and reduction on the one hand and a rationalized form of external mediation on the other. Eggers’ set of paratexts does not only bring the story’s artifice to light. It is also clearly designed to frustrate the readers’ desire for definite signification. Yet the narrator also appears to willfully irritate the reader in order to emphasize his own conflicted position, which oscillates between a genuine desire to tell, share, and fix his story and the “knowingness” about the moral dilemma accompanying this externalization, this ‘selling out’ of its most personal and most painful episodes.

### **Telling the Story of Self: the Concept of Narrative Identity**

The simultaneous desire for and rejection of an autobiographically bound story calls for a reading that employs the concept of narrative identity as a theoretical backdrop. Narratologists like Nicola King claim that “identity, or a sense of self, is constructed by and through narrative: the stories we tell ourselves and each other about our lives” (*Memory, Narrative, Identity* 2). Despite the fact that he questions the idea of narratively defined forms of subject formation, Dan Zahavi points out that it has become a “popular view” to regard subjectivity as a “narrative construction” (*Self and Other* 179). He reflects on the idea that the narrative form satisfies the human need for coherence because it transforms life’s singular experiences into a causally connected and thus meaningful narrative. At the same time, he is convinced that narratives do not so much extend as distort reality by imposing fictional configurations. A slightly varying theoretical approach suggests that the experience of lived time inherently possesses a “quasi-narrative character” (181). Because it consists of beginning, middle and end, it appears to ‘naturally’ lend itself to the narrative form. While the former perspective regards narrative identity as an achievement, this latter approach understands it as an imminent characteristic of human self-understanding. In doing so, it turns the story into a mere extension of the individual’s experiential reality. The analysis of *A Heartbreaking Work* shows that although Eggers plays with, subverts, and even dismisses conventional forms of storytelling, he nevertheless relies on them. This is why I would argue that the deployment of conventional, yet decontextualized and therefore

unfitting narrative elements paradoxically enables the translation of a complex affective condition—and the experiential reality that accompanies it—into a written account.

Within the discourse on narrative identity, Paul Ricoeur introduced the term “emplotment,” which he understands as the “synthesis” of multiple single events into an “intelligible whole” (“Life in Quest of Narrative” 21). What, however, happens if one fails to ‘organize’ these individual ‘sequences’ in a way that produces a meaningful representation? This question has been taken up within the field of trauma theory and its discussion of events that cannot be integrated into a life story. With regard to the crucial function that storytelling assumes in this context, Dori Laub argues that “survivors did not only need to survive so that they could tell their story; they also needed to tell their story in order to survive” (*Testimony* 1). Kali Tal further points out that literature dealing with traumatic experiences must be interpreted on the basis of “an underlying theory that explains the human need to tell stories” (*Worlds of Hurt* 132). Her statement shows how closely entwined—and compatible—discourses on narrative identity and trauma theory are.

It comes as no surprise that according to trauma theorists, an autobiographical account can restructure a story of self that previously lost its coherence because an unbearably painful and therefore inexplicable event was not registered as belonging to one’s own story. Finding words for an unassimilated event can, in other words, initiate a process that carries “the tale of horror back to the halls of ‘normalcy’” (121) and, in so doing, integrates the missing link into the story of self. By retelling the past without evading the traumatic event, one is enabled to reformulate a coherent story—that may include extremely painful and yet essential episodes. If all goes well, the void of the blocked out event is filled through the narrative reconstruction of one’s life. This, however, can only mean that the experience of loss must either be revisited (and reproduced) or replaced by a fictional episode that accounts for the changes in the narrator’s life. The micro-fictions that Eggers’ narrator ‘emplots’ could be read as temporary substitutes for more precarious, painful, even unspeakable experiences. Theorists like Dan Zahavi note that “elaborate storytelling might serve a compensatory function; it might be an attempt to make up for [...] a fragile self-identity” (*Self and Other* 179). He suggests that while one certainly selects episodes to become part of the story one tells about oneself, sequences that have severe consequences must either be included or accounted for. When life-changing events are excluded or remain unexplained, coherence cannot be maintained. While the sense of completeness that is derived from this process of selection thus contains a certain degree of self-interpretative freedom, it also remains bound to the teller’s biographical coordinates.

Despite its link to the experiential realm, the Imaginary also plays a vital role in the construction of narrative identities. Paul Ricoeur argues that fiction plays “a mediating role” because it creatively stabilizes an inherently fragmented identity (“Life in Quest of Narrative” 28). In *A Heartbreaking Work*, the emplotted fictional sequences guide the process of building a world that radiates significance. This can be linked to Ricoeur’s observation that a life story only becomes intelligible at the moment when it appropriates the form of a historical or fictional plot. Individual life stories resemble, in other words, familiar narrative patterns. At the same time, one must creatively adjust such collective patterns to one’s individual story. Because the process of self-interpretation thus produces a plot that is as much entangled in the referential as in the fictional realm, identity is constructed on the basis of various world versions.<sup>16</sup> This argument speaks to the discussed oscillation between individual freedom and cultural constraint. On the one hand, identity construction in and through narrative is a self-determined creative process. On the other, it is informed by narrative models that precede and exceed it. Ricoeur comments on this double bind when discussing the possibility of innovation within narrative plots. While admitting that “a sort of grammar” determines “the composition of new works,” he adds:

Each work is an original production, a new being in the realm of discourse. But the opposite is no less true: innovation remains a rule-governed behavior; the work of imagination does not come out of nowhere. It is tied in one way or another to the models handed down by tradition. But it can enter into a variable relation to these models. (“Life in Quest of Narrative” 25).

While the described dynamics echo an almost Pragmatist rationale, Ricoeur suggests that not only our narratives, but also our imagination is governed by “a sort of grammar” (25). Because innovation nonetheless diverges from mere repetition or imitation, it is often found in the inversion of or deviation from such normative models or plots. At the same time, the relational tie to the known remains the decisive factor in shaping a new narrative. Ricoeur says that if “human experience is already mediated by all sorts of symbolic systems, it is also mediated by all sorts of stories that we have heard” (25). This suggests that identity is formed through an adaptation of already existing stories. Ricoeur further claims that the individual is so deeply entangled in stories that their construction is a continuous and therefore often unconscious endeavor. It is, however, only when the individual story emerges out of the network of this narrative fabric that an individual’s identity takes a

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<sup>16</sup> Hayden White refers to Ricoeur when elaborating on the plot-like nature of time. He explains that in order to gain a “sense of ending,” the “terminus of a process” must be causally linked to its “origin” in order to ascribe “significance” to whatever happened in between beginning and end. He thus argues that imagination is employed in order to make sense of past events (“The Question of Narrative,” 1-33)

distinctive shape. It is for this very reason that imagination—and fiction—presents an “irreducible dimension of *self-understanding*” (30). This implies that narrative self-construction and literary works involve the same mechanisms of interweaving tradition and innovation. Ricoeur notes that although our narrative identity enables us to “become the *narrator* and the hero of *our own story*,” we do not become “the *author of our own life*” (32). The *narrator* of the *story* and the *author of life* exert different degrees of authorial power and control. But this difference is partly abolished by our “power of applying to ourselves the plots that we have received from our culture and of trying on the different roles assumed by the favorite characters of the stories most dear to us” (32). By way of drawing an analogy and identifying with a fictional figure, we can for instance modify our identity through an imaginary investment. In *A Heartbreaking Work*, the entanglement of incompatible plots and overtly stereotypical characters serves the subversive function of highlighting the artifice of autobiographical gestures. Ricoeur concludes that every subject is “instructed by cultural symbols,” above all by “the narratives handed down in our literary tradition” (32). It is through the relation to these narratives that a ‘self’ can be established and communicated. This discursive formulation of identity, which relies on appropriation and imitation on the one hand and digression and innovation on the other, fits the improvised, seemingly contradictory self-presentation of Eggers’ narrator only too well. His non-fiction autobiography indeed brings mostly unconscious processes of narrative identity construction to light by raising them to a level of readerly awareness.

Jerome Bruner elaborates on the life story’s unoriginality by linking the concept of world making to that of narrative identity: “just as art imitates life, [...] life imitates art. Narrative imitates life, life imitates narrative” (692). He claims that no life, other than that which is recounted and interpreted in narrative terms, exists (693). This idea of the self’s imminent reflexivity creates, however, a dilemma: because identity-formation is not only defined by external, but also by internal criteria such as feelings, intentions, or doubts, it is never fully verifiable. This inherent instability may explain narrative identity’s fundamental dependence on cultural sources and narrative models. Bruner goes so far as to argue that a culture can be characterized “by the narrative models it makes available for describing the course of a life” (694). He elaborates that “the culturally shaped cognitive and linguistic processes that guide the self-telling of life narratives achieve the power to structure perceptual experience, to organize memory, to segment and purpose-build the very ‘events’ of a life” (694). His assessments certainly ring true when one considers that we indeed tend to channel our experiences into recognizable and communicable—in short ‘canonical’—formats. This of course also means, as Adriana Cavarero rightly notes, that by modeling our

life stories after already existing texts, we inevitably risk “swallowing the unrepeatable uniqueness of the existent” (*Relating Narrative* 42). With regard to Eggers’ account, this is a valid concern: the narrator shies away from generalizing his parents’ deaths by embedding them into an all too familiar story of loss and grief. The narrator’s reluctance to construct a story that does not adequately translate the uniqueness and severity of the loss that he feels may also account for the fact that he often assumes disjointed subject-positions. The appropriation of personalities and plots does here not work toward but instead resists a more general emplotment. Despite the fact that Eggers at times makes it appear so, the reliance on narrative models should not be understood as mere constraint and determination. Bruner perceives them, rather, as guiding manuals. He states that stories and plots “become recipes for structuring experience itself, for laying down routes into memory, for not only guiding the life narrative up to the present but directing it into the future” (708).

The discourse on narrative identity shows why texts that qualify as ‘life writing’ can be described as its most elaborate implementation. Yet Zahavi reinforces that this does not mean that “selfhood requires the actual composition of an autobiography” (*Self and Other* 179).<sup>17</sup> On a daily basis, we instead tell ourselves a more immediate, less reflexive version of our self-narrative. While immersed in this process, we are at once narrator and protagonist: we experience our story from a first-person perspective, but also reflect on it and thus assume the more detached, third person position. This simultaneous process of telling and listening produces our self-image. It is, in other words, through this dispersion of perspectives—and thus also through the vision of ourselves as ‘other’—that we can perceive ourselves in a unified fashion. It is for this reason that I would argue that the process of narrative self-comprehension does not essentially differ from dialogical concepts of self-understanding. We could in this context certainly apply the logic that structures Hegel’s dialectics of recognition: here, an individual recognizes itself by firstly being confronted with and secondly assuming the gaze of the other in order to gather an image of itself.<sup>18</sup> And yet we must not even go so far as to refer to Hegel. Smith and Watson note that in autobiographical texts, “the teller” becomes “both the observing subject and the object of investigation” (*Reading Autobiography* 1). Autobiographical authors “write simultaneously

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<sup>17</sup> Autobiographical acts can take on various forms of expression. While life writing usually indicates written accounts that can be subsumed under the generic labels of the autobiography or the memoir, scholars have begun to apply the term life narrative to many self-expressive art forms or autobiographical gestures. Smith and Watson consequently understand it as a “general term for acts of self-presentation of all kinds and in diverse media that take the producer’s life as their subject, whether written, performative, visual, filmic, or digital” (*The Rumpled Bed of Autobiography* 5).

<sup>18</sup> See: G.W.F. Hegel’s passage “Independence and Dependence: Lordship and Bondage,” in *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 111 ff.

from externalized and internal points of view, taking themselves as both subject and object, or thematizing that distinction” (5). Self-reflection, and the stories that spring from it, thus work on intersecting levels of consciousness; they negotiate degrees of subjectivity and agency on the one hand and objectification and submission on the other.

While these observations show that we in fact recognize ourselves in and through our own story, this does not mean that we can always control our narrative’s trajectory by assuming the position of an omniscient and omnipotent author. Because the story emerges as a variant of pre-existing narratives, its development always remains bound. In Eggers’ account, the narrator projects himself into predictable narrative plots. In doing so, he can momentarily direct his story’s development. His emancipatory experiment fails, however, as the assumed authorial (and fictional) position clashes with its autobiographical reference points. Since the ‘autobiographical contract’<sup>19</sup> labels episodes that diverge from a shared understanding of ‘reality’ as fictional constructs, the author’s attempt of diverting from the literal by way of the literary must fail because his fictional escape routes are not in line with the ‘grammar’ of their neighboring worlds.

It has already been noted that *A Heartbreaking Work* questions the conventions of the genre of therapeutically oriented life and death writing,<sup>20</sup> which not only tends to echo psychological or psychoanalytical imperatives of healing and self-improvement but also complies with the agenda of trauma studies: readers here often witness a narrator’s attempt to recreate life’s lost coherence in the wake of a deep personal crisis. Conventionally, autobiographical narratives amount to more than mere repetition; they create a story out of ‘factual’ episodes in order to bestow them with believable coherence and a sense of completeness. While Eggers’ narrator appears to take a critical stance towards these dynamics of meaningful emplotment, he does not portray himself in a wholly incoherent way. In fact, his resistance against conventional forms of narrative meaning-making manifests itself not so much in his inability to articulate himself as in the contradictions that he weaves into his story. In *A Heartbreaking Work*, the narrator struggles against the pressures of his own story. His resistance against the mold of the autobiographical narrative is rooted in the experience of the parents’ death and his own loss. Because the experience of death and grief confronted him with his own vulnerability and lack of control, he cannot

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<sup>19</sup> In *On Autobiography*, Philippe Lejeune coined the term “autobiographical contract,” which he defined as a “contract of identity” between the writer and the audience, which is “sealed by the proper name” of the narrator and author (19). According to Lejeune, an autobiographical work registers the “essence” of the person telling her story (21). Lejeune bases the “autobiographical pact” on an essentialist concept of identity, which is grounded in a stable and given core self.

<sup>20</sup> See also Smith and Watson’s chapter “Narratives of Grief, Mourning, and Reparation” in *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (2001), p. 138-140.

write an overly stabilizing story. At the same time, it is interesting to note that his desire for narrative and his impulse to craft a story persists.

It may at this point make sense to turn to Adriana Cavarero, who does not only relate both narration and identity to the fact that we are essentially exposed to each other, but who also links all three of these issues—narrative, identity, and exposure—to our desire for narrative, and thus also to our longing to have our story told. According to Cavarero, it is precisely life's "disjointed and fragmentary" character that makes us long for the unity that the story, however "unstable and insubstantial," promises to provide (xxii). She does not therefore focus so much on the narrative itself, but rather on our desire *for* a narrative through which we can recognize ourselves. It is, in fact, our ability to perceive ourselves as 'narratable' selves that motivates our actions—and may therefore also explain our 'drive' or more general sense of directedness. When viewed from this perspective, it can be assumed that it is our desire for a story that produces the 'self,' which can then retrospectively be recognized in the form of a story. When applied to Eggers' account, one could certainly ask whether it is the 'desire' for a self-explanatory story that drives Eggers' account: does this seemingly built-in 'narrative impulse' win over the narrator's reluctance to 'make sense' of and integrate his parents' deaths into his story? And does this desire persist even when the narrative itself is rendered unproductive, or even deconstructive?

Cavarero relates the desire for narrative directly to our relational disposition, and thus to the fact that we are always exposed to others. This also means, essentially, that a story can never be self-told, but always depends on another who can provide the elements and episodes that escape the self's consciousness (such as, crucially, its own story's beginning and end). According to Caravero, the "desire *for* the unity of the self in the form of a story" can therefore only be fulfilled when it joins forces with another, who can recount it in its entirety and thus present it in a fully recognizable form (40). With these observations in mind, it becomes possible to argue that Eggers' account is motivated by the desire for a story that can never be fully realized and that its narrator nevertheless nostalgically—and melancholically—yearns for. It is, in other words, realized on the basis of a paradoxical, even impossible desire for a narrative that escapes its teller and whose connectedness and comprehensibility he therefore refuses to accept. When further taking Caravero's revaluation of the 'other' into account, it could in addition be argued that Eggers' story illustrates his desire to make himself understood. Since he cannot provide his story with the desired sense of significance, he hands this task over to the reader, who listens to him. By having his story reflected back onto to him in this way, he may hope to gain an insight into his own incomprehensible experience of grief.



### **“It was Kind of Pretty for a Second”—Framing a Family Portrait**

With the tensions between sincere and ironic, autobiographical and fictional modes of *showing* and *telling* in mind, an analysis of *A Heartbreaking Work's* constant de- and reconstruction of co-existing narrative worlds suggests itself. According to Nelson Goodman's *Ways of Worldmaking* (1978), such processes of worldmaking generally work towards a signifying motion. Goodman declares that he does not speak “in terms of multiple possible alternatives to a single actual world but of multiple actual worlds” (2). His pluralist approach is based on the observation that all “contrasting right versions” are not “reducible to one” unifying and objectifying meta-version (5). If it was possible to reduce all versions to one, this would be the “only truth about the only world.” Since, however, “the evidence for such reducibility is negligible” (5), conflicting and contrasting versions proliferate. Following this irritation of an intuitive belief in an unyielding referential world, reality can no longer be perceived as a given, stable and reliable parameter. It must instead be redefined as “a matter of habit” (20) and a cultural practice.

Within this conceptual framework, collectively developed and then individually appropriated “frames of reference” assume a crucial role. Goodman rightly asks: “if I insist that you tell me how it is apart from all frames, what can you say? We are confined to ways of describing whatever is described. Our universe, so to speak, consists of these ways rather than of a world or of worlds” (3). With regard to the interdependent variables of perception and interpretation, both the individual's input and the cultural framework must thus be taken equally serious. The discourse on ‘narrative identity’ has shown that since the subject is always emplotted, its ‘frames of reference’ are established systems of signification that ‘hail’ the subject into being through its emplacement in a specific *world*. If asked to describe such a world without making “use of prior experience” and thus “avoid all conceptualization,” one would be left “speechless; for to talk at all he must use words” (92). Quite clearly, language—and by extension narrative—could be termed the broadest of all systems of symbolization. This means that the notion of ‘truth’ must be reexamined on the grounds of Goodman's argument:

Most of us learned long ago such fundamental principles as that truths never really conflict, that all true versions are true in the only actual world, and that apparent disagreements among truths amount merely to differences in the frameworks of conventions adopted. (110)

This commonly held notion is inverted as soon as one perceives ‘truth’ as the product of an interpretative process, whose outcome depends on the ‘frame of reference’ available in a

particular situation. Depending on one's point of view, what may hold true for one world-version may not at all apply to another. Yet how does one arrive at a 'true' version of *one* world if it does not relate to a verifiable manifestation of *the* world at large? What can be asserted is that "a version is taken to be true when it offends no unyielding beliefs and none of its own precepts" (17). A 'true' version must thus be in keeping with its intersecting worlds and must further be the collective effort of all of its inhabitants. Eggers' narrator, however, draws various not merely co-existing but also incompatible worlds. Because he assumes autobiographical as well as fictional subject-positions, he dismisses, just like Goodman, the notion of one world and instead brings to light the interpretative effort that creates a particular worldview. Clearly, this heterogeneous approach fails to create the illusion that a univocally told story is capable of producing: it does not instill the impression of a 'true' story anchored in the one and only referential reality. The narrator's compulsive efforts of worldmaking instead produce a number of truth claims that cancel each other out and in doing so confront the reader with an utterly unreliable narrator.

Belittling the belief of "fundamentalists" who cling to the idea that "facts are found not made," Goodman elaborates on the "fabrication" of our presumed referential reality (103). He concludes that "our so-called picture of the world" is nothing but "the joint production of description and depiction" (103). From this perspective, the interpretative tools that create it also determine our worldview. The fact that it is possible to specify the "vocabulary" that is employed in the process of "fashioning the facts" deconstructs "any identification of the physical with the real and of the perceptual with the merely apparent" (92-93). This means that the fabricated nature of facts and, by and large, of every reality is established. And yet worldmaking is not to be understood as an unsystematic endeavor that arbitrarily applies symbols. Instead, a new world version can only be perceived as 'true' if it corresponds with the already existing realities that it is surrounded by and emerges out of. New and alternative world versions can thus never be "built from scratch" (97), but must rather be understood—just as in the case of narrative—as variations or modulations of already existing systems. *A Heartbreaking Work* revolves around the dynamics of imitation, deviation, and innovation that Goodman describes. Trying to create a 'new,' improved world "from scratch" (*A Heartbreaking Work* 145), the narrator initially rejects his dependence on and immersion in already existing systems of symbolization—or world versions. Because he can nonetheless not fully rid himself of these past worlds and is haunted by their traces, his story disperses into incompatible strands, some of which are labeled as 'fiction' while others remain stubbornly tied to an autobiographical frame. Only with time does the narrator realize that his escapist attempts remain futile, that he has to

draw on the already existing in order to create something new, and that a ‘true,’ that is believable story depends on the convergence of its manifold parts.

While it may at first glance appear as if such processes of worldmaking rob the subject of the opportunity to bring about changes in its world, Goodman asserts that although one starts out with an “old version or world,” it is indeed possible to alter it: “worldmaking begins with one version and ends with another” (97). It is precisely because one’s reality is constructed through the double bind of perception and interpretation that it is inherently instable and fleeting, given to negotiation, change, and innovation. This observation certainly applies to the making of both autobiographical and fictional narrative worlds, which are drawn from and thus resemble non-literary versions. Interestingly, Goodman does not understand fiction and non-fiction to be of two different registers, as both hold the power to “take and unmake and remake and retake familiar worlds” (105). He thus labels fiction a credible world version, one that holds the potential to have just as much of an impact on its neighboring worlds as a scientific study or a bill of law.

When trying to grasp the dynamics of worldmaking that occur in *A Heartbreaking Work*, it suffices to look at the dozen short sections that constitute its first chapter. When dissecting these episodes, it becomes clear that they are fragments of four longer narrative strands, whose single scenes have been mixed up and reshuffled. The narration jumps, for instance, from the description of his mother to that of his father. A portrayal of the interiors of the family house alternates with the sterile landscape of a hospital room. Despite the impression of chaos that this fragmentation creates, all episodes could be subsumed under a coherent theme: they grant the reader insight into a family on the brink of collapse, a family heading toward its own “disintegration” (*A Heartbreaking Work* 33). And yet the narrator sketches an intimate portrayal of a world that can, despite its apparent fragility and already occurring dispersion, still be contained in a coherent and comprehensible image.

The project of worldmaking that defines the opening of the book can consequently be described as a fairly safe endeavor: one set of episodes depicts the daily, physical details of the narrator’s mother’s final stages of cancer. The description relies neither on a dramatic contemplation of the approaching death nor a sentimental rendering of the dying person’s life. And yet, the scenes depict the familiarity existing between the various family members and in doing so shows how embedded the narrator is in the interiors of his familial world. At the beginning of the book, it is merely mentioned that: “we have a nosebleed” (5). When the story, after having swerved away, returns to this scene, the narrator is still “holding the nose” (20). It is now revealed that, given her precarious condition, the nosebleed in fact poses a threat to the mother’s life. Disregarding the severity of the situation, mother and son

watch a reality TV show which the narrator describes as extremely “exciting” and full of “suspense” (20). He in fact ascribes more drama to the TV show than to the state of emergency that he is embedded in and therefore deeply familiar with. Because he cannot at once hold his mother’s nose and comfortably watch TV, he shifts positions:

I still have to apply pressure to the nose, so with my left hand I apply pressure, and with my right I hold the ice to the bridge of her nose. It’s awkward, and I can’t do both things while sitting on the arm of the couch and still be in a position to see the television. I try kneeling on the floor next to the couch [...] but after a short while my neck gets sore [...] It’s all wrong. I have an inspiration. I climb onto the top of the couch, above the cushions, on top of the back of the couch. I stretch out on the cushions [...] I reach down so my head and arms are both aiming in the same direction, with my arms just reaching her nose and my head resting comfortably on the top of the couch, with a nice view of the set. Perfect. She looks up at me and rolls her eyes. I give her a thumbs up. Then she spits green fluid in the half-moon receptacle. (20)

This tragic-comic image of mother and son exemplifies the paradoxical coexistence of the humorous banality and the grave severity that define the experience of the mother’s yearlong illness. Because the narrator is completely emplotted, he focuses on the interaction with his mother and does not reflect on his own powerless position. The episodes that revolve around the mother alternate with the equally fragmented image of the narrator’s father, who is depicted in the moment of sinking, or falling, to the ground in front of the family house. In contrast to the intimate physicality of the first set of images, this second one is drawn from a detached point of view. The fact that the scene is not directly observed by Dave, but told to him by his sister Beth enhances the distanced perspective which creates the scene’s aesthetic effect. Instead of using the colloquial, conversational language that brought his mother to life, the image of the father radiates with a transcendent, sublime sensibility. The reduced language enhances the scene’s artifice and aesthetic acuity. It reads like a movie scene that is drawn out, stopped short, and replayed in slow motion:

A month ago Beth was awake early; she cannot remember why. She walked down the stairs, shushing the green carpet, down to the foyer’s black slate floor [...] She walked from the kitchen into the family room, where the curtains surrounding the large front window were open, and the light outside was white. The window was a bright silver screen, lit from behind. She squinted until her eyes adjusted. As her eyes focused, in the middle of the screen, at the end of the driveway, was my father, kneeling. (6)

While the “curtains” framing the window evoke either a theatrical stage or a Renaissance portrait painting, the window itself is likened to a blindingly “bright,” apparently empty “silver screen.” The conflation of these mismatched allusions, drawn from temporarily divergent media, frame the figure of the father, who gradually takes center stage as he

emerges in the bright light. As mentioned in chapter one, Darian Leader understands ‘grief work’ as an exercise of framing the image of the deceased person, of creating a certain distance and objectifying the loved person to a degree that allows for its representation. The here performed process of narrative framing could accordingly be understood as a shifting of registers, from the immediate level of affect to that of representation. The staging and framing of the father certainly implies several layers of distance and thus marks a contrast to the mother’s portrayal. When the scene, which abruptly breaks off after the above-cited paragraph, continues six pages later, the sense of detachment is further enhanced by a lack of movement. It appears as if the narrator describes a film still or a photographic snapshot:

Through the family room window, in the middle of the white-silver screen, my father was in his suit, dressed for work. Beth paused in the entrance between kitchen and the family room and watched. The trees in the yard across the street were huge, gray-trunked, high-limbed, the short grass on the lawn yellowed, spotted with fall leaves. He did not move. His suit, even with him kneeling, leaning forward, was loose on his shoulders and back. He had lost so much weight. A car went by, a gray blur. She waited for him to get up. (12)

While most of this scene is told in a voice so restrained that it reduces the image to its physical foundations, the short sentence: “He had lost so much weight” deconstructs the unengaged point of view. The estranged perspective shatters as a memory-thought exceeding the time continuum of the still life emerges and proves both the narrator’s affective involvement and his inability to freeze his story and prevent its inevitable unfolding. That the reader is confronted with consecutive moments of a single scene appears obvious when piecing these glimpses together. Because they are, however, dispersed throughout the book’s first chapter, one is not immediately aware of their intricate relation. In the third episode, stasis ensues as the moment is further drawn out:

My father had not moved. Beth stood in the entranceway to the family room and waited. He was about ten feet from the street. He was kneeling, but with his hands on the ground, fingers extended down, like roots from a riverbed tree. He was not praying. His head tilted back for a moment as he looked up, not in the sky, but to the trees in the neighbor’s yard. He was still on his knees. He had gone to get the newspaper. (20)

While the image becomes increasingly precise as details pertaining to the background and the father’s kneeling position are filled in, it is only when coming across the last episode that one fully realizes that the slides are only beautiful in the abstract, as long as they paint a moment that is fixed in time and therefore devoid of both consequence and meaning:

At the end of the driveway my father knelt. Beth watched and it was kind of pretty for a second, him just kneeling there in the gray winter window. Then she knew. He had been falling. In the kitchen, the shower. She ran and flung open the door, threw the screen wide and ran to him. (29)

At this moment, when the scene is finally interrupted by movement, the reader reaches the same realization as Beth, whom it also took a long second until “she knew” what she was looking at, namely her father, collapsing in the driveway. While Beth crosses the threshold, the scene again breaks off so that the reader is left with the enigmatic, solitary image of the father. When looking at these puzzle pieces, it becomes clear that although the scene is repeatedly revisited and continued, no progressive movement ensues: one is not granted an insight into what lies beyond the surface of the “silver screen.” And yet it is exactly through the absence of sentimental language that affect is here expressed. The indeterminate, detached image does not only avoid the cliché. It also testifies to the narrator’s inability—or refusal—to emplot his father’s death in a reconciliatory way.

This can also be seen in the fact that although the double frame that window and curtain present invites a metaphorical reading, the scene resists such clear allegorization. It is instead the enigma of the father’s death which contains significance. In the course of the book, it is gradually revealed that the narrator did not see his father die, that his death was in fact so sudden that it took the whole family by surprise. In the first chapter, the insecurity regarding the facts of his father’s death is only vaguely indicated: “I did not know that the last time I saw my father would be the last time I would see my father. He was in intensive care [...] He was expected to undergo some tests and treatment, get his strength back, and return home in a few days” (35). Recalling his last visit, the narrator provides details that echo the distance of the fragmented first scene: “The door to my father’s room was closed. We pushed it open, heavy, and inside he was smoking. In intensive care.” After having stayed for “maybe ten minutes”—on the opposite side of the room in order to evade the thick smoke—the family left (35). It is only toward the end of the book that the narrator returns to the same visit and provides additional details without, however, revealing more emotional investment. After recalling that his mother had reassured her children that “he’s not going today,” he merely adds: “In an hour he was gone” (377).

I would argue that the described perspective, particularly its remarkable detachment, results from the narrator’s inability to describe his father’s death in greater detail. Because he was not present, he cannot get closer to an intimate depiction. The son’s distanced perspective is thus an accurate description: it presents his father’s death as a blank screen. Interestingly, this non-experience also instigates a lack of expressive grief. His ignorance regarding the father’s death prohibits a more explicitly affective representation. It is for this reason that

the introductory scene does not articulate the painful response to an immediately processed loss but rather gives words to the seemingly unreal and therefore persistently inexplicable absence of the narrator's father.

In addition, the aesthetized image of the falling man shows that the narrator does not perceive the circumstances of his father's passing as appropriate. When he at a later point visits one of his father's friends in the hospital, he remarks on the man's appearance as well as on the room's lighting before concluding: "this would be the way to die, this is drama, this is appropriate, at night, with the lighting just so. My father's way was all wrong, in the middle of the day" (377). This statement already indicates that the narrator relies on and is conditioned by cultural (and perhaps narrative) images of death and grief which determine what he considers the 'right way.' The 'inappropriate' death of the narrator's father consequently presents a problem, as it does not lend itself to be fit into a narrative format that would appear equally appropriate. The dispersed scene that I described above thus appears to compensate for the "wrong" way in which the father died by producing appropriately dramatic lighting. Does the narrator, by replacing and thus correcting the 'wrong' image of death in and through his narrative, manage to symbolically integrate the father's death into his autobiographical narrative? The father's gradual fall could indeed be read as a stand-in scene for the father's unobserved death. Yet although the narrator, by turning the scene into a beautiful and potentially meaningful moment, appears to work toward signification, he at the same time forecloses the same. Despite the fact that he presents his father's death metaphorically, he never completes the scene. It remains a disconnected sketch that hovers in a perpetual present-time world whose disintegration echoes not so much reconciliation as distance.

And yet this is not to say that the beginning of the book is not motivated by the narrator's desire for signification: it does indeed turn the past into a comprehensible world—and thus attempts to reach a moment of closure. That this endeavor fails becomes obvious whenever the narrator's insecurity regarding his own version of the story is voiced. This is, for instance, the case when he relates a recurring dream. Because his father's "death made so little sense in the first place, was so sudden and illogically timed" and because "none of us where there when he finally died," the narrator is, in his dream, led to believe that "maybe he's alive after all" (227). What emerges here is the failed attempt to incorporate the father's death; because it cannot be turned into a 'realistic' moment, it remains incomprehensible. The detached and almost surreal perspective of the scattered first scene thus presents an essentially 'true' image of the father's enigmatic, elusive, and certainly 'unrealistic' death.

While the first chapter draws a rather positive image of both parents, the siblings' fear of their abusive, alcoholic father and their parents' unpredictable fits of rage emerge only slowly. Over time, the initially unambiguous portrait is not so much contradicted as complemented and thus becomes gradually more ambivalent. As the neat facade crumbles, the narrative structure also becomes more open-ended and loses its linear sense of direction and focus. The increasing indeterminacy opens up a realm of unresolved contradictions, where multiple conflicting world versions are negotiated.

### **“A World with Neither Floor nor Ceiling”—The Disintegration of a Worldview**

That fictional and fantastic episodes play a crucial, ambiguously constructive role in *A Heartbreaking Work* has already been noted. These deviations from the autobiographical story world appear whenever the narrator depicts his narrated 'I' in a precarious, possibly unbearable situation. The family portrait painted in the book's first chapter includes a detailed description of the family house in a suburb of Chicago. In a tragic-comical and yet conventionally 'realistic' way, the narrator describes the "family room" as "the ultimate reflection of our true inclinations. It's always been jumbled, the furniture competing, with clenched teeth and sharp elbows, for the honor of the Most Wrong-looking Object" (6). What is more, the room is "dark and, save for a general sort of decaying of its furniture and walls, has not changed much in the twenty years we've lived here. The furniture is overwhelmingly brown and squat, like the furniture of a family of bears" (6). While the dusty darkness of the family room and the slow decay of the house could be read as foreshadowing the subsequent dissolution of family life, they rather appear to insinuate the sense of privacy and intimacy that a world filled with personal details contains. This impression is heightened by the narrator's humorous inflection that intensifies the feeling of familial belonging. Once again, affect is expressed by way of circumventing the sentimental and replacing it with the humoristic.

Interestingly, the family house in Chicago and the subsequent apartments in California are inverted images of each other. Before moving on to the depiction of the light-flooded sublets in California, the narration performs the material dissolution of the 'old' world. In doing so, it marks the transition from one world to another. At the end of the first chapter, the siblings spend the night in their mother's hospital room. As everyone beside him is asleep, Dave engages in an imaginary dialogue with his dying mother. After lying back down, the walls of the room begin to dissolve: "the ceiling looks like milk. The ceiling is moving slowly. The corners of the ceiling are darker. The ceiling looks like cream [...] The ceiling is fluid" (40). While the image breaks off here, it is taken up again a few pages later:



The ceiling is swimming. It is milky, stuccoed in sweeping half-circles, and the half-circles are moving, turning slowly, the ceiling shifting like water. The ceiling has depth or—the ceiling is moving forward and backward. Or the walls are not solid. The room is maybe not real. I am on a set. There are not enough flowers in this room. The room should be full of flowers. (45)

This internal monologue radiates insecurity: the recurring “or” alone indicates not only that the narrator documents the process of interpreting his experience, but also that he is unsure how to read the image before his eyes. Various improvised narrative world versions seem possible, yet they all lack solidity and do not appear to hold up. From this vulnerable position, which culminates in his observation that the “room is maybe not real,” he moves to a more declarative, and thus self-affirmative perspective when stating that: “I am on a set.” This filmic appropriation, which enables him to regain his footing, is triggered by his desire to will an improved version of the ‘real’ into being and thus create a more appropriate, in this case flower-filled, setting. As can be seen, an already existing idea, or cultural model, of what an appropriate setting should look and feel like clashes with a dissatisfying reality, which is hyperbolically compensated through the integration of fictional elements that correlate with the narrator’s *felt* reality.

It seems here that the mother’s physical disintegration causes the narrative world to lose its contours. And because its solidity is no longer a given, the narrator’s perspective also collapses in a physically and emotionally palpable way. In the *Acknowledgments* section, he describes the ambivalence of the interdependence between the loss he suffered and the liberty he gained by saying that he “suddenly” found himself “in a world with neither floor nor ceiling” (n.p.). The room’s dissolution can therefore be seen as marking the end of the narrator’s familiar universe. At the same time, its only “maybe real” disintegration triggers his—rather literal—flight into a fantastic scenario:

Toph is on his back, his arms splayed [...] His breathing is audible [...] His hand hangs over the foldout bed. As I am looking at him, he wakes up. He gets up and comes to me as I am stirring in the chair and I take his hand and we go through the window and fly up over the quickly sketched trees and then to California. (45)

What does the dissolution of the precarious situation and the hasty escape into an improvised world of “quickly sketched trees” indicate? For a start, a painful event is left untold: the reader does not learn about the details of the mother’s death until the narrator returns to it in the final pages of the book. The brothers’ flight thus foreshadows the book’s evasive and a-chronological trajectory. As the narration approaches the mother’s death, it diverts from the autobiographical pact and morphs into fictional, supernatural visions of the

protagonists' glorious future. The same dynamics can be observed at various other instances: more than once, moments in which the narrator holds no control over the action's outcome are inverted into hyperbolic visions of power and movement.

When describing his mother's memorial service, the confinements of solid space for instance also give way to a more dramatic and, it seems, affectively justified version. As in the more 'appropriate' version of his father's death, the ideal vision of his mother's service also features dramatic, golden lighting. The alternative and rather hyperbolic version resembles memorial services held for celebrities, who are publicly mourned and whose services are broadcast on TV. As the narrator develops the corrected and overtly melodramatic version of his mother's funeral, he depicts himself and his siblings as heroically "soaked in blood" (404). While the scene's beginning already diverts from a 'realistic' depiction, it culminates in a collapse of the literal: "then the ceiling would go. The barrel vaulting would rise, and the entire roof would quietly unhinge itself and lift up, would rise straight up, and disappear" (404). As the scene continues, the vision becomes increasingly 'unhinged:' the church doubles in size to let the crowds in, angels appear together with his mother, whose "wonderfully glowing bright visage" resembles that of an angel (404). While the narrator here no longer uses the format of celebrity funerals as a blueprint, but instead switches to religious imagery, the effect is the same: the event is turned from a disappointingly uneventful experience into a glorifying, meaningful event (404). After the mother has disappeared into the sky, the scene closes with the narrator's declaration that: "we would all collapse right there, in the opened church, and sleep for weeks and weeks, dreaming of her, oh it would be something, something fitting, proportionate, appropriate, gorgeous and lasting" (404). Despite the deployment of formulaic narrative plots and the associated imagery, the narrator describes his vision as the most "fitting, proportionate, appropriate" (404). While the fantastic scenario surely expands the original memory, it articulates the narrator's frustration with the referential memory. By adjusting the script, the narrator voices his dissatisfaction with a seemingly insufficient reality of death and its aftermath, both of which appear to stand in contrast to his feelings of loss and grief.

Underneath the ironically glazed surface, several layers of sincere storytelling can thus be observed at this juncture. The narrator's overtly symbolic depiction of both parents' deaths first of all indicates his inability to render their passing directly, that is, 'realistically.' He instead approaches their deaths by coating them in layers of supplementation and substitution. Fictional elements 'correct' autobiographical episodes. The scene depicted above is, for instance, interrupted as soon as the narrator admits that the

memorial service was in fact not attended by a “crowd,” but was instead “a scattered thing, a few here, a few there” (405). By turning her service into a monumental and joyous event, the narrator voices his desire to give meaning not only to his mother’s life, but also to her struggle against death. And yet he does not manage to conclude the scene triumphantly but instead circles back to the original memory. This shows that he fails to produce a unifying version but instead remains stuck with a collage of contrasting puzzle pieces whose inconsistencies prevent their fusion into one successfully emplotted narrative world.

Both Eggers’ play with ready-made fictional worlds and his refusal to incorporate the biographical world, which his story emerges out of, contribute to confrontation of that which is commonly divided up into fictional construction and referential fact. While the ensuing indeterminacy opens up the possibility for narrative self-reinvention, its dependence on already existing worlds continuously undercuts such endeavors. Because the narrator is engaged in an autobiographical project, he is bound to certain parameters. By dismissing these frames of reference, he loses his credibility and becomes unreliable. At the same time, the occasional adaptation of fictional frameworks allows him to construct miniature world versions that, albeit momentarily, free him from his own objectification and thus reject the sadness and sorrow that his ‘tragic’ story prescribes. As can be seen, the narrative spans a network of intersecting, but also mismatched world versions that negotiate the limits of where a story of self begins and where it ends to be its very own world.

#### **“The Canvas is Blank”—Fantasies of Detachment, Forces of Attachment**

The following section will discuss how the double-bind of attachment and renewal, which determines Eggers’ twofold project of biographical and narrative worldmaking, is related to the narrator’s desire for a personal story that moves progressively and positively into the future. The physical disintegration of the narrative world and its metaphysical revisions indicate that Eggers’ account is engaged in simultaneous processes of worldmaking. This impression is reinforced when one observes the gap that opens up between the end of the first and the beginning of the second chapter. While the former ends with the figurative flight from the hospital room, the latter opens with an image of the brothers after they have moved west. Admitting to have “left Chicago in a blur” in the aftermath of their parents’ deaths, the siblings leave the remains of their old world behind and move to Berkeley (60):

The sky out here is bigger than anything we've ever seen [...] we have a house, a sublet for the summer, that overlooks the world [...] The mornings are filmstrip white and we eat breakfast on the deck, and later we eat lunch there [...] always with the whole thing, the postcard tableau, just there, all those little people, too much view to seem real, but then again, nothing really is all that real anymore, we must remember, of course, of course. (Or is it just the opposite? Is everything *more* real? Aha.) (60, emphasis in original)

The emphasis on their new apartment's light and openness stands in stark contrast to the darkness and decay of their old house. While their Chicago home resembled a closed space, their summer sublet extends into the world that "it overlooks" (60). Yet at the same time, the house's elevated position enables a view that resonates not only with a sense of playfully presented power but also with detachment, and even unreality.

The articulated uncertainty regarding the degree of 'reality' of their new position shows that the protagonists have only just begun to sketch a 'new world' for themselves; they also want to create this world from the "filmstrip white" space that surrounds them. Their aloof position appears to enable the narrator to create the intended effect of falling out of touch with the parameters of the 'real.' Not wanting to be bound to their past life, the narrator is determined to "create domestic life, from scratch, without precedent" (61). In order to evade possible associations with the carpeted, crowded home they grew up in, he evaluates new houses by the amount of light they receive as well as by their potential "quality" of "sock sliding," a game that necessitates not only wooden floors but also as little furniture as possible (62, 78).

As the story develops, the sense of unreality that the narrator created in the beginning of his story—and his first summer in Berkeley—cannot be maintained. As he and his brother grow into their new lives, Dave feels increasingly uncertain about his ability to carve a new world out of the Californian landscape. When he, for instance, straightens the "frayed oriental" rugs they "inherited" and which he observes to be "unraveling, thread by thread," he debates "protecting them, having them restored" (120). At the same time, he knows that he "will not bother" and instead resigns to the "decline" of "all the things we've been given" (120). The contradictory desire for both a detachment from and a persisting attachment to their old world plays a prominent role in *A Heartbreaking Work's* project of worldmaking: the narrator is torn between two contradictory impulses that Gila S. Ashtor defined as the "conflicting compulsions" between "restorative anamnesis and purgative release" (2). On the one hand, he feels the need to let all objects that belong to the past decay and thus become physically liberated from the memories associated with them. In theory, such a process of detachment would enable him to draw a new life from the blank screen of negative space. On the other hand, his urge to preserve and integrate these

memory-objects into his new life impairs the project of original worldmaking. The narrator in short oscillates between his desire to forget and to remember. These paradoxical dynamics crystallize in a scene where the narrator's ambivalence assumes an almost physical quality:

I retreat into the living room [...] the walls are cluttered with ancient pictures of our parents, grandparents, their parents, and their various diplomas, notices, portraits, needlepoints, etchings [...] I need to cut the bushes in front, because they've grown so high that almost no light comes through the front window, even during the day, making it so dim here [...] So much suffered in the moves, from Chicago to the hills, from the hills down here. Picture frames broken, glass rattling in all the boxes. We've lost things [...] I try not to think of the antiques—the mahogany bookshelf, scratched, or the circular end table with the nicks in it, the needlepoint-covered chair with the cracked leg. I want to save everything and preserve all this but also want it all gone—can't decide what's more romantic, preservation or decay. Wouldn't it be something to burn it all? Throw it all in the streets? [...] I know I offered to keep it, insisted on it, wanted Toph to be able to live among it, be reminded—Maybe we could store it until we have a real house. Or sell it and start over. (122)

The image of the cluttered living room replaces that of the sun-flooded, scarcely furnished house: it seems as if the new house gradually loses its brightness and regresses into their former home. Interestingly, the narrator is not pained by the general presence of the memory-objects he describes, but only finds it difficult to think of their slow decline and his inability to “save” and “preserve” them. His impulse to at once “live among” and rid himself of the past finds expression in his simultaneous urge to “burn it all” and to “keep it,” to “store” and to “sell” it. That the urge to relieve himself of these material bonds is tied to his desire to “start over” shows that the decaying memory-objects threaten to turn his project of worldmaking into a reconstructive endeavor leading him back into the past instead of guiding him into the future.

Initially, the “bare, pure landscape” (145), in which the narrator situates himself after having moved to an unfamiliar place, sets the stage for his world-building experiment. When he, in a conversation with a friend, discusses that change should come about in an “easier” and “instantaneous” way, they imagine an ideal scenario where a “world-clearing sort of revolution” (144) would take place every day. After taking “the whole stupid thing apart,” the world would be, within a couple of hours, “flat again, wiped clean of buildings and bridges and towers” (144). Having reached a landscape where “the canvas is blank,” they would “start over.” Instead of this being an exhausting, staggering process, the project would be finished within hours: “we wake up, tear the world down to its foundations, or below that even, and then, by three in the afternoon, we've got a new world [...] every day we create everything from scratch” (144-45). The urge to position himself in a “bare, pure

landscape” can be linked to his impulse to “burn it all” and thus have it “gone:” both visions play with the fantasy of being uprooted, a disposition that would essentially enable a thorough reinvention and a full emancipation from the past.

The desire for detachment is a motif that emerges in increasingly elaborate thought experiments: in a fictionalized audition for the Reality TV show *The Real World*,<sup>21</sup> the narrator develops the idea of self-estrangement even further. He claims that he gives “nothing” away by telling his story. While at the same time claiming that he gives the reader “virtually everything” he has, “all of the best things” such as the “memories that I treasure, good or bad,” he does not “diminish” them by giving them away. To illustrate his point, he elaborates that these “things” and “stories [...] are like the skin shed by snakes” (215). He thus rejects the imperative at work in therapeutic discourses which understand the telling of traumatic experiences as an integrating process of recovery. Instead of identifying with his past, he presents his memories as no longer belonging to him. He claims that they do not form the core of his story, but are instead superfluous material that he can play with and easily share because he no longer owns them. By dismissing the past in this way, the narrator tries to convince his readers that his is indeed a story that does not depend on the dead ‘skin’ that he has shed. Yet his plan “to take away everything there is and replace it with stuff I’ve made,” to perform the clean break and write a fully authorial and thus fictional story, fails as he begins to realize that, despite being “rootless, ripped from my foundations,” he is also “inextricably tied to the past and future” (236-37).

The narrator’s desire to escape the reality of death and grief by writing himself into new, unencumbered scripts explains why his story diverges from its autobiographical course whenever it reaches an episode that threatens to reveal the alternative reality of grief and loss, which the narrator tries to conceal and which nevertheless structures his story. The fact that he is, for instance, vulnerable to the decay of the objects that represent his past life shows that he is not as self-sufficient and detached as he presents himself to be. When he loses his father’s wallet, he connects the smaller, more palpable loss to the larger, enigmatic one: “the wallet is gone, my father has slipped further down the well [...] the rugs are unraveling, the furniture splitting [...] this is not the way things should be” (162-63). That the loss of this object affects the narrator so severely demonstrates why his desire for a daily reconstruction of the world could never be satisfied. The loss of a personal detail here

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<sup>21</sup>*The Real World* is a reality television program on MTV, which was first broadcast in 1992. The cast of each season consists of seven to eight people in their late teens or early twenties representing different genders, ethnic and social backgrounds as well as sexual orientations and religious and political beliefs. For the duration of the season, they move into a house that is fully equipped with cameras, which film the cast members around the clock. The recorded footage is edited into episodes, which are then broadcast.

assumes a metonymic function: while the narrator wishes to be indifferent to the gradual disappearance of this world of original objects, he cannot but feel that he is on the verge of dissolving with them. This observation shows that although the narrator claims that he rejects all identification with the past, the opposite is in fact true: he has incorporated his feelings of grief precisely because they initially proved too enigmatic and overpowering to be told. While he denies the severity of his pain, the fact that he cannot tell it shows that he is wholly determined by his grief's incomprehensibility and incoherence.

Similar dynamics can be observed when the narrator recounts a road-trip to Florida which the siblings embark on right after their mother's service. The presentation of progressive movement that the road-trip evokes is undercut by the apparently haunting thought that he "never gave them a proper burial" and consequently does "not know where they are" (222). Because they left their hometown only weeks after their parents' death, the siblings neither organized a funeral nor chose a gravestone. While immersed in the situation, they convinced themselves that a funeral would resemble nothing but a "ridiculous tradition; rooted in commerce, a Hallmark holiday sort of thing" (224). In retrospect, the narrator feels ambivalent about the omission of gestures symbolizing closure and consolation: "I honestly think that they can't believe we haven't buried them yet, that we don't know where they are" (225). It here seems as if the omission of the dismissed mourning rituals affects his complex relationship to the past, where feelings of denied attachment lead to the continuously failing attempt to detach himself and create a new world. That he thinks of his parents' judgmental behavior in the present tense reinforces the impression that he has by no means processed or 'worked through' his grief, but has instead (subconsciously) incorporated his parents' enigmatic absence without being fully aware of the extent to which their loss continues to hold him in thrall.

In the course of the story's development, the tension between grief's denial (or repression) and its unwilling resurgence becomes increasingly explicit. It expresses itself most conspicuously in the contradictory impulses of forced movement and involuntary stasis that for instance emerge in the narrator's recurrent proclamation that he is "bearing the weight of both Toph and the world" (111). This statement, which translates the narrator's sense of responsibility into a physically anchored metaphor, can be related to several widely dispersed scenes whose interrelation emerges when they are read consecutively. Once one connects the memory images, it also becomes clear that they illustrate the connectedness of past and present, which the narrator denies. In the first of these scenes, he carries his mother out of the house and into her car:

She puts her arm around my neck. Her hand is hot. I remember to use my legs. I keep her nightgown between my hand and the back of her knees. I do not know what her skin there will feel like [...] As I stand up, she reaches her other arm around to meet the one around my neck, and grabs one hand with the other [...]

We pass the doorway. The wood molding cracks.

‘OW!’

‘Sorry.’ (31)

This intimate scene includes a moment of comic relief that lightens its tragic potential and deconstructs the cliché that it could easily attract. The impression that the narrator tries to evade a narrative convention by building an irritating element into it is enhanced when the scene is reiterated for the first time. This time, the narrator carries his sleeping brother from the couch to the bed of their Californian apartment. The words of both scenes do not only echo each other, they also include the same ironic disruption:

‘I’m gonna put you to bed. Put your arm around.’

He puts one arm around my neck and grabs it with the other, pulls his head toward me so I don’t hit it on the door frame.

‘Don’t hit my head.’

‘I won’t.’

The molding cracks.

‘Owww.’

‘Sorry.’

‘Idiot.’ (164)

In both the first scene and in this altered version of the image, the roles that are conventionally ascribed to the different members of a family do no longer apply; they have in fact been reshuffled. Because the son is in these two scenarios the one who cares for (and carries) his parent and his sibling, he indeed carries the “weight” of his microcosmic world. As a consequence, the identities of all three individuals lose their boundaries and can no longer be fully distinguished: the mother reappears in the figure of her younger son while her older son takes over the responsibility that once belong to her. Although the familial roles have therefore clearly become unhinged, they depend on and grow out of their original constellation. That a memory of the past structures the protagonist’s actions in the present proves that the former plays an imperative function in building the latter. Whenever the narrator returns to the seemingly formative first experience, he does so without drawing a connection, such as when he wonders:

When you’re carrying a person, why is it that it is easier to carry them when they hold tight around your neck? Like, you’re supporting their full weight no matter what, correct? But then they grab you around the neck and suddenly it’s easier, like they’re pulling up on you, but either way you’re still carrying them, right? Why should it make a difference that they’re holding you, too. (356)



Clearly, these thoughts express the close physical and affective connection that defines the individual family members. At the same time, the persistence of this memory testifies to the ‘weight’ that it continues to hold for the narrator. When he returns to the scene once more, the narrator reveals that while he carried his mother:

She said that she was proud of me, that she did not think I could do it, that I would be able to lift her, carry her to the car, and from the car into the hospital, those words run through my head every day since, she did not think I could do it but of course I did it. (399-400)

As the book draws to an end, the narrator admits that he no longer perceives the memories of his past from a detached perspective. Instead, they belong to him, against his own will, in a painfully inalienable way. His grief thus expresses itself in the slow unraveling of the narrative of detachment and renewal. The more ambiguous story that emerges no longer suppresses the attachment to and identification with its own past. Its uncertain quality gives words to the narrator’s pervasive sense of absence and thus retraces his experience of loss. Towards the end of his story, Dave finally comes to terms with the melancholic disposition that defines him: while he remains unable to fully account for his parents’ deaths, and does not resolve his ambiguous attitude toward his feelings of loss, he does eventually admit to the severity of a pain that he finds himself unable to leave behind.

### **Resisting the Plot: “You’re Breaking out of Character Again”**

One of the most conspicuous ways in which the tensions that structure the book are played out the characters’ tendency to break out of the story and address the narrator. These disruptions fulfill a similar function as the ironically implemented fictional micro-narratives, as they also complicate the project of storytelling. By reflecting on the roles that they play in the story, the characters destabilize and in fact deconstruct the continuity that preconditions a believable story. Toph, for instance, once notes that the day he is depicted to have lived in the story was so action-packed that it almost felt “as if a number of days had been spliced together to quickly paint a picture of an entire period of time, to create a whole-seeming idea of how we are living...” (114).

The rupture in the narrative façade that is created by a character, who slips out of the story, produces a meta-commentary on the process of storytelling in general and the genre of the memoir in particular. Because *A Heartbreaking Work* classifies as an autobiographical text, it is assumed that the narrated characters do not greatly deviate from their referential counterparts. And Toph’s personality does indeed not undergo a noticeable change when he addresses the narrator. That such a disruption is possible shows, however, that the person

within the text can never be fully congruent with the one that it represents. The tension that Eggers creates by producing overlapping versions of his non-fictional characters has a disconcerting effect: it proves that every autobiographical work is the product of processes of selection, interpretation, and construction that turn single episodes into a significant story. Moments of rupture, even if in the form of formal play, illustrate the dynamics of reflection, mediation, and translation that are at stake when lived experience is transformed into a written account. In responding to Toph's inquiry, the narrator addresses the difficulty of accurate and complete representation:

This is just a caricature, this, the skeleton of experience—I mean, you know this is just one slivery, wafer-thin slice. To adequately relate even five minutes of internal thought-making would take forever—It's maddening, actually, when you sit down, as I will once I put you to bed, to try to render something like this, a time or place, and ending up with only this kind of feebleness—one, two dimensions of twenty. (115)

Dave here suggests that a person's complex internal reality cannot be fully captured by the narrative. It can, he seems to say, never be translated into the linearity that the narrative prescribes. It is at this point that Toph once again interferes: "So, you're reduced to complaining about it. Or worse, doing little tricks, out of frustration" (115). The self-conscious meta-commentary and the fictional elements that I have discussed so far surely classify as such 'tricks.' When in addition taking the 'frustration,' which Dave feels regarding his possibilities to represent reality, into account, it seems that he evades this exact complexity by reverting to familiar plots and narrative models. One could, however, also turn this argument around and say that these 'trick' are explicitly used to emphasize the constructed and culturally determined character of every self-referential account. While most life writing certainly does without such elaborate fictional imagery, it can be assumed that diversions from the historical material occur in every act of narrative reconstruction. They are, one could in fact argue, essential to the project of 'manufacturing' coherence. Eggers' account spells out autobiography's fictional potential; his 'tricks' or deviations fill voids, silence and absences: they occur whenever the story's material does not lend itself to the production of a significant story.

While the figure of Toph can be read as the narrator's voice of conscience, his friend John appears as his more expressively troubled alter ego. Interestingly, it is through these other *versions* of himself that the narrator questions his own motifs. Like Toph, John occasionally becomes detached from his character. This happens, for instance, when he lies in a hospital bed after a suicide attempt. While the narrator sits by his side, John attacks him: "'Screw it, I'm not going to be a fucking anecdote in your stupid book [...] Find someone else to be

symbolic of, you know, youth wasted or whatever” (273). On the plot level, John resists his character’s symbolic potential by refusing to play the role intended for him. On the structural level, the narrative here admits to its own unwillingness to erect clear-cut characters that act according to conventional narrative patterns and can be interpreted accordingly. Calling the narrative a “sort of show,” John pleads: “but see, you cannot move real people around like this, twist their arms and legs, position them, dress them, make them talk—“ (424). John’s resistance against the plot’s consistency thematizes the constructedness of coherent characters. As the narrator realizes that his narrative is defined by ambivalence and contradiction rather than suggestive signification and symbolization, he appears to accept that he cannot draw unambiguously symbolic characters. By unfolding and multiplying his own voice through that of his characters, he thus admits to his lack of authorial control. And by further allowing incompatible world versions to co-exist in the form of these contradictory voices, he discloses an almost schizophrenic worldview. It is, interestingly, through this contradictory constellation of unresolved narrative perspectives that the experience of loss and grief is communicated. This complication of perspectives, in other words, not only problematizes the limits of narrative representation in general, but also points to those of telling affect more specifically. The fact that the presented disruption of narrative coherence is not directly communicated through the narrator, but emerges through ‘his’ characters, reinforces this impression, as it is almost exclusively through these layers of self-conscious reflection that the narrator articulates his feelings. This motion is reiterated by the reader, who is led to become lost in a maze of different perspectives and interpretations and thus retraces the narrator’s destabilizing, contradictory, and unresolved feelings of grief.

The assessment of the discourse on ‘narrative identity’ has shown that while autobiographical accounts may resemble the structure of more immediate stories of self, they tend to be less experimental endeavors. Most often, narrators speak from a point of view that allows them to present themselves and their stories as causally well-connected and coherent. The autobiographical account can thus—even when it emerges out of a deep personal crisis—be read as proof of an already successfully reconstructed identity. I would even go so far as to argue that the memoirist conventionally claims agency and control of her own story in the moment of assuming the authorial narrative position. In Eggers’ account, however, these dynamics are reversed: while the story’s beginning resonates authorial distance, the detached perspective gradually unravels. Particularly the delayed, a-chronological depiction of the mother’s death does not so much create comprehensibility and closure as confusion and uncertainty. Instead of simply retelling past events by

presenting them as links of a temporally and causally inevitable chain, Eggers' narrator jumps between past, present, and even future tense, mixing memories of the past, visions of the future, and detailed descriptions of his every-day life. The process of detachment and reconstruction that is retraced in the narrative does not therefore cater to therapeutic imperatives of cathartic healing. Since the story's entire structure can be termed traumatic, its narrator does not "impose more coherence, integrity, fullness and closure on the life events than they possessed while simply being lived" (*Self and Other* 181). And yet his failure to do so does not signify the failure of his narrative endeavor as such: on the contrary, his failure becomes *the* structuring device of his unstructured narrative. And it further becomes the narrator's way of expressing both his inability *and* his unwillingness to ascribe meaning to the loss he has suffered. In the end, it is through the dissolution of the univocal voice on the one hand and the detachment or deviation from the 'true' story on the other that the maddening experience of grief expresses itself.

#### **"Pretend It's Fiction:" Assuming Authorial Control**

The previous sections have shown that the autobiographical narrative is unsettled through the deconstruction of an authorial perspective. An array of structural inconsistencies questions the possibility of narrative self-presentation. There are, however, also instances in which the narrator comments explicitly on the subject of death and grief, and relates both to his story. In the *Acknowledgments*, he mentions that he is convinced he will die an untimely death. Haunted by his fear of extinction, he is unable to tolerate stasis and silence. It is for this reason that he feels the need for extraordinary things to happen: "I have to get started, have to get started soon because I will die before thirty. It will be random, my death, even more random than theirs" (67). As can be seen here, his compulsive need for action results from his premonition of death, which in turn originates in his personal story. The need for constant movement works, at first glance, against what Freud called the 'death drive.' Yet in order to keep death at bay, the grief associated with the parents' death must also be circumvented. And even beyond that, the constantly created noise and action serve a second, more subtle purpose: they express the narrator's need to live a life that does not end in regret. The former aspect becomes explicit when the narrator says:

It is an unsaid mission of mine [...] to keep things moving, to entertain the boy, to keep him on his toes [...] There is a voice inside me, a very excited, chirpy voice, that urges me to keep things merry, madcap even, the mood buoyant. Because Beth is always pulling out the old photo albums, crying, asking Toph how he feels, I feel I have to overcompensate by keeping us occupied [...] I am making our lives a music video, a game show on Nickelodeon—lots of quick cuts, crazy camera angles, fun, fun, *fun!* It's a campaign of distraction and revisionist history [...] (88)

The narrator here reflects on his own crazed “voice” as well as on his intention to turn his life into a happy, action-filled story. He describes his “mission” as a counter-narrative to the story of grief that his sister Beth has chosen for herself. That he does not merely craft a happy narrative for his brother’s sake, but also in order to evade his own grief, becomes obvious whenever his narrative runs the risk of spinning out of control. When he is, for example, on his way to his suicidal friend John, his anxiety level increases drastically and the narrative’s frenzied pace reaches its climax: “the radio is up. This is purpose, something is happening. The window needs to be opened. The radio needs to be turned up more now that the window is open. Something is happening” (261). Clearly, movement and sound work against the stagnation that he associates with the intolerable idea of death.

The second aspect mentioned above—the need to live a meaningful life—is linked to the particulars of his mother’s death. When he, at the end of his story, finally reveals how his mother died, and that his mother kept on breathing after she lost consciousness, he admits: “I only hope it wasn’t regret, that there wasn’t regret there, in those breaths, though I know there was, I dream there was, when I hear the breaths, I can hear the anger...” (432). Concluding that she had not been “ready,” he becomes determined to lead a life that will reduce the possibility of an end filled with anger and regret. Interestingly, this determination has an immediate impact on his mode of storytelling: the use of hyperbolic run-on sentences and lack of punctuation lends the narrative a rushed, frantic appearance. Its fast pace parallels its narrator’s desire not only to move forward and into the future, but also to transform his life into a fully directed story. The narrator’s fear of death thus triggers his urge to control the course of his life. By crafting a narrative that he is in control of, he creates the illusion of being able to direct his own story and thus outrun his own death.

Dave hopes, in other words, that his story will allow him to redirect the death-drive that he feels and fears. Several stylistic features, such as the account’s tendency to jump from the present to the future tense, cater directly to this intent. In a scene that depicts the mother’s last days, it is rather difficult to define the narrative’s temporal dimension. With the genre’s conventions in mind, one expects the story to be a belated reflection on past events. The narrator should consequently only use the future tense when adopting the position of his former self in order to relate the future as envisioned at an earlier point in time. At first

glance, Eggers' account appears to stick to such a temporal design: while sitting by his mother's hospital bed, the narrator appears to imagine the most likely path into the future. While the description of the mother's physical decline is therefore presented as a prediction, its detailed imagery suggests that the future tense is not employed to invoke a former state of naiveté. On the contrary, it lends the narrator a heightened degree of knowingness. In doing so, it creates the illusion of an omnipotent narrative perspective. Yet this impression of authorial power is not maintained. After having rendered the last days of his mother's life in the future tense, the narration is interrupted before it reaches the moment of death:

The morphine drop will not be enough. We will call again and again for more. Finally we will have enough, and will be allowed to choose the dosage ourselves, and soon will administer it every time she moans, by allowing it to flow through the clear tube and into her, and when we do the moaning stops. (43)

While the narration breaks off here, the subsequent paragraph opens with the depiction of the siblings' flight. As in the closing scene of chapter one, the moment of death is again evaded and only becomes tangible in the gap between the cited paragraph and its sequel:

We will leave while they take her away and when we come back the bed will be gone, too [...] And afterward, a week at most [...] we will sell the house, will sell most of its contents, would have burned the fucker down had we been able, and will move to Berkeley, where Beth will start law school and we'll set up somewhere, a nice big house in Berkeley with all of us, with a view of the Bay, close to a park with a basketball court and enough room to run—She stirs and her eyes open slightly. (43)

While this forecast of future action again produces the illusion of determination and control, it is suddenly interrupted and returns to the present tense. Interestingly, the degree of fictional fabrication remains unclear in both paragraphs. It appears as if the narrator uses the future tense in order to circumvent the acutely uncertain position that he found himself in when experiencing the depicted events. By seemingly looking into the future, he conceals his own vulnerability, his helplessness and lack of control. He makes use of the belatedly installed future tense to recreate himself in an overtly meaningful way, namely as the hero of his own story.

In addition to the future tense, the narrator also uses fictional micro-plots to conceal his own impaired subject position and fear of death. While the first chapter ends with the brothers' flight, the second chapter opens with a fantastical scenario of mobility and boundless freedom. The narrator's breathless, frantic voice matches the scene's momentum, as it depicts the brother speeding along the Californian Highway 1:

Please look. Can you see us? Can you see us, in our red little car? [...] Try to stop us, pussy! [...] We cannot be stopped from looking with pity upon all the world's sorry inhabitants, they unblest by our charms, unchallenged by our trials, unscarred and thus weak, gelatinous [...] It's unfair. The matchups, Us v. Them (or you) are unfair. We are dangerous. We are daring and immortal. (47-50)

Quite obviously, the narrator draws a self-image that turns their tragic story into a tale of extraordinary triumph. Vulnerability, weakness, and stagnancy become immortality, mobility, and strength. Through this inversion of negativity, a more conventional narrative, which would portray the siblings as the sympathetic victims of their tragic circumstances, is rejected. The alternative narrative forecloses such a stigmatization by transforming the protagonists into cartoon-like superheroes. The cited paragraph already indicates the trajectory of the ensuing fictionalization: a precarious moment, in which death is experienced as a tangible possibility, is fictionalized in order to keep death at bay. The narrator thus follows the advice that he provided in the preface: "if you are bothered by the idea of this being real, you are invited to do what the author should have done, and what authors and readers have been doing since the beginning of time: PRETEND IT'S FICTION" (n.p.). This statement explains the transformative function of the fictional episodes. As the following scene illustrates these dynamics, it is worth quoting it at length:

The cars flash around the turns of Highway 1, jump out from cliffs, all glass and light, each one could kill us. All could kill us [...] But, fuck, we'd make it, Toph and I, given our cunning, our agility, our presence of mind. Yes, yes. If we collided with a car at sixty miles per hour on Highway 1, we could jump out in time. Yes, Toph and I could do that. We're quick-thinking, this is known, yes, yes. See, after the collision, as our red Civic arced through the sky, we would quickly plan out—no, no, we would instantly *know the plan* what to do, the plan of course being obvious, so obvious: as the red car arced downward, we would each, simultaneously, open our doors, car still descending, each on one side of the car, and then we would we would we would *stand on the car's frame* for a second, car still descending, each holding on to the open car door or the car roof, and then, ever so briefly, as the car was now only thirty feet or so above the water, seconds until impact, we would look at each other knowingly—'*You know what to do*'; '*Roger that*' (we wouldn't actually say these words, wouldn't need to) – and then we'd both, simultaneously of course, push off the car, so as to allow the appropriate amount of space between our impact and the car's once we all landed, and then, as the Civic crashed into the ocean's mulchy glass, we would, too, though in impeccable diver's form, having changed our trajectory mid-flight, positioning our hands first, forward and cupped properly, our bodies perpendicular to the water, out toes pointed—*perfect!* We'd plunge under, half-circle back to the surface and then break through, into the sun, whip our hands to shake the water from our hair and then swim to each other, as the car with bubbles quickly drowned.

ME: Whew! That was close!

HE: I'll say!

ME: You hungry?

HE: Hey, you read my mind. (emphasis in original)

This scene possesses a performative, improvised quality. The narrator adopts an animated, almost childlike voice in order to describe the hyperbolic scenery of an action movie or a comic strip. Particularly the exclamations “yes, yes” and “no, no” as well as the staggering repetition of “we would we would we would” reinforce the impression of an orally told, decidedly colloquial story—and in doing so counteracts that of a refined literary work. In addition, this imitation of oral storytelling allows the narrator to realize a childish fantasy of omnipotence and strength that marks a contrast to the ambiguous, self-doubting voice, in which the better part of *A Heartbreaking Work* is told. The here appropriated perspective can certainly be related to the narrator’s fear of dying an untimely and regretful death. By turning the team of brothers into the epitome of supernatural agility, he provides them with the power to control their own flight, which in turn enables them to evade and triumph over their own death. The physical superpowers, which the characters are supplied with, do therefore not only contradict the makeshift and apparently unpolished style of the scene, but also mark a contrast to the exhausted body of their dying mother.

When thinking about the various layers of perspectives, styles and storylines, one notes that fictional models at once create and deconstruct the impression of a purposefully directed narrative. On the explicit story level, they allow the narrator to assume an omniscient, even omnipotent position. Yet on the receptive level, the fictional elements clearly violate generic conventions. In doing so, they unsettle the reader’s expectations and pose a threat to both the account’s credibility and its narrator’s reliability. I would therefore argue that it is the narrator’s inability to communicate his precarious affective disposition directly and ‘appropriately,’ which lets him revert to fictional imagery and present an inverted image of his experiential reality to the reader. This means that he indeed uses these fictional sources ironically, as a way to speak the difficulty and even the dilemma of expressing affective states—such as fear—without reverting to worn-out clichés. And yet it is precisely through the cliché that he expresses the inexplicable and therefore unspeakable episodes of his story; instead of embedding these moments, he renders them in a strikingly unfitting form and thus draws attention to the challenging tasks of emplotment and signification.

#### **“There is so much symbolism:” Playing Life**

As *A Heartbreaking Work* unfolds, its constructedness is made increasingly explicit. The story’s artifice emerges, above all, in the protagonists’ tendency to perceive themselves as characters in a fabricated story. At times, this performative stance of role-playing becomes so pervasive that it provides the protagonists with a sense of direction. When the narrator for instance reads a bedtime story to his brother, he mentions that Toph “listens with the



utmost attentiveness because he is perfect—he is just as enthusiastic about our experiment as I am, wants to be the ideal, new-model boy as much as I want to be the ideal, new-model parent” (113). What the narrator calls the “experiment” can be recognized as the project of worldmaking that guides his action and thoughts. The impression that he perceives himself as a character is enhanced by the self-advertising position that the narrator assumes when auditioning for *The Real World*. In his interview for the show, he claims that he can produce various affective dispositions at will, as if they were commodities to be sold:

“I can do last breaths, last words. I have so many things. There is so much symbolism. You should hear the conversations Toph and I have [...] We talk about death and God, and I have no answers for him, nothing to help him sleep, no fairy tales. Let me share this. I can do it any way you want, too—I can do it funny, or maudlin, or just straight, uninflected—anything. You tell me.” (236)

Interestingly, this meta-comment on the practice of storytelling voices excess and lack at once: on the one hand, the narrator offers a multitude of possible story versions, claiming that he has “so many things” that could be read symbolically. On the other hand, he admits that he has no “fairy tales” to offer to his brother. That he can change the story’s inflection according to his audience’s liking confirms that there is one ‘true’ story (or fairy tale) to be told, but that there are only so many ways to tell a story. The story consequently depends on its teller; it is nothing other than a creative performance. At the same time, there always appears to be an element of choice in the telling: since one’s performance shapes one’s narrative and produces one’s character, it also renders the idea of an essentialist core identity untenable. Identity is here instead cast as the product of the staged story of self. The narrator’s decision *not* to tell his story from a unifying, univocal perspective thus becomes his way of resisting this exact process of integration, signification, and recovery.

*A Heartbreaking Work’s* performative potential is fully played out in a scene that shows the brothers attending an event at Toph’s school. Upon entering the building, the narrator is overtly aware that the parents are unsure what to make of them. The scene’s opening focuses on the narrator’s vulnerability regarding his environment’s inability to recognize him. His uncertain reception causes the narrator to lose his footing: unable to identify and anchor himself in his story, he exclaims: “We are pathetic. We are stars. We are either sad and sickly or we are glamorous and new. We walk in and the choices race through my head. Sad and sickly? Or glamorous and new?” (96). The indecisive “or” indicates that alternative, conflicting versions of the story hover within the realm of the possible. Torn between two contrasting “choices,” the narrator is unsure what story to tell, what role to

play, what world to draw. Moments later, however, he chooses the superior over the sad story and regains his ability to perceive his life as a story and himself as its hero:

We are unusual and tragic and alive. We walk into the throng of parents and children. We are disadvantaged but young and virile. We walk the halls and the playground, and we are taller, we radiate. We are orphans [...] We are the bright new stars born of a screaming black hole, the nascent suns burst from the darkness, from the grasping void of space that folds and swallows—a darkness that would devour anyone not as strong as we. (96)

In this scene, an overtly determined voice quickly replaces an insecure one. The first person plural that opens each sentence further shows that the narrator creates a collective identity: the “we” reads as a forceful assertion of who the brothers are. From one short sentence to the next, the statements become more self-assured, until they literally become larger than life. Turning them into “the bright new stars born of a screaming black hole,” their tragic past is used as a backdrop that their present identity is based on but which no longer defines them. Implicitly rejecting the sympathy of others, they are presented as orphans-turned-superheroes. As the self-image is here constructed on the fly, it appears improvised and artificial. It can be concluded that narrative self-construction is here not presented as a naturalized, inalienable habitus, but as a performative achievement.

This impression is confirmed as soon as the brothers enter into dialogue with other parents: they quickly “find” their “places and read the script” (99). Being familiar with the questions that usually await them, they adopt well-rehearsed roles and offer standardized responses. The narrator visualizes these dynamics by turning the narrative into the scene of a theatrical play containing cursively indicated stage directions and starring the protagonist as “BROTHER” and a fellow parent as “MOTHER.” The play reveals that by turning his action into a ‘drama,’ the narrator ensures that he has a script to follow and fall back, which will keep his story from spinning out of control. As it continues, the scene devotes itself increasingly to its theatrical make-up; after the “curtain falls,” the narrator extends the play by saying that “as the crowd stomps the floor for a curtain call, we sneak through the back door and make off like superheroes” (103). It can here be seen that role-play constitutes a central element in Eggers’ account: placing himself in predictable plots is a safety-measure that the narrator takes in order to both conceal and reveal his own precarious position.

As already mentioned, the narrative project mirrors its author’s biographical efforts to build a new and improved world version. Both parallel processes are defined by the attempt to transform tragedy into triumph. In order to realize this alternative personal history, the narrator restricts the outward expression of negative emotions. He appears to believe that because sadness and suffering would satisfy the expectations of a tragic story, their

expression also poses a threat to the desired counter-narrative. As this narrative unfolds, it becomes increasingly obvious that the attempt of excluding its undercurrent of sadness fails. When Toph, for instance, shows Dave his school photographs, Dave is outraged: “This is bad. This is so bad. This is unbelievably bad. This is so so unbelievably bad [...] You look like you’re about to cry” (322). While he explains that his anger was caused by his fear to lose custody of his brother, the sad-looking portraits also clash with the ‘happy’ character that Toph is supposed to play in his brother’s comedy.

In a similar situation, John asks the narrator whether he is “not allowed” to suffer. The narrator confirms: “Right. You’re not,” a statement that he follows up with the exclamation that such ‘suffering’ would turn him into “a fucking cliché!” (266). At a later point, Dave reinforces his agenda when telling his brother that he, too, is “not allowed to look or sound unhappy” (324). In both cases, the emergence of unhappiness is an affront; it poses a threat to the narrator’s self-understanding because it punctures the façade of unconventional happiness that determines their story life. Similar dynamics are at work when the narrator visits a friend, who has fallen into a coma. He brings her a teddy bear that reminds him of his mother. Convinced that the bear will magically save his friend’s life, he is shocked to find that it has simply disappeared by the time he next visits the hospital: “I don’t know what it means that the bear is gone. That bear’s eyes were my mother’s eyes [...] and now the bear is gone and everything is still uncertain” (350). While imbuing the object with magical powers, it remains unclear what the bear symbolizes. The impression that it remains a cipher, an empty signifier lacking a causal relation to its referent is heightened by its failure to lead the action into the intended direction. The narrator’s ‘uncertain’ reading shows that he is highly vulnerable to the plot’s resistance against his efforts of magical thinking. Unable to influence the course of action, he admits that he can also not create definitive meaning and is thus left with nothing but a pervasive sense of uncertainty.

In all the three cited examples, it is through the figure of an ‘other’ that the story questions itself. Yet the narrator does not merely situate these others as figures of resistance. He also constructs them as alter egos, as varying versions of himself. In doing so, he presents himself as a fleeting entity whose diverse, boundless character cannot be captured in a homogenous narrative but must instead be read as continuously searching for and escaping its own understanding. While self-understanding is thus enacted and enabled through the other, this does not mean that a moment of satisfactory self-recognition is reached. Despite the fact that these other-determined layers of reflection and recognition enable the narrator to disclose his affective state sincerely, they in the end do not so much reenact as question processes of a fully coherent narrative self-understanding. Eggers thus uses his narrator’s

uncertain subject position—and his inability to *speak* his grief directly—to *show* the destabilizing effect that it had on him. It is, in the end, through the figure of the ‘other’ that the identification and attachment, which the narrator denies, persists. It not only disables the consistency and coherence that the story was intended to provide, but also proves that he remains unable to fully understand what it is that he has lost and why he relates to it in such an inalienable way.

### “This is Fiction Now”—Dynamics of Reversed Perception

The following section will show how the narrator’s reliance on cultural and narrative models leads, when taken to the extreme, to an implosion of the dynamics that structure the narrative effort of worldmaking. Taking his cues from popular formats of TV shows or film plots, Eggers’ narrator uses these sources as blueprints for his own life. They serve as structuring devices that mold the action without, however, transforming its divergent strands into a ‘unifying whole.’ That the narrator is aware of his orientation on ready-made world versions is insinuated when he, for instance, exclaims: “I am making our lives a music video, a game show on Nickelodeon—lots of quick cuts, crazy camera angles, fun, fun, *fun!*” (88)

Dave claims that his compulsive self-reflection and media affinity results from the fact that he belongs to a generation that grew up with fictional figures as role models and that consequently understands itself “in relation to the political-media-entertainment ephemera” (202). He further argues that its privileged upbringing provided his generation with “the time to think about how we would fit into this or that band or TV show or movie, and how we would look doing it” (202). The narrator thus claims that he has always generated his self-image by identifying with fictional figures. This particular form of narrative identity construction leads back to the idea that the narrator reverts to narrative models whenever he finds himself in a precarious situation. While on his way to visit his suicidal friend John, the narrative he feels immersed in certainly guides his action and thoughts:

I run up the four flights [...] and goddamn it even his door is open and when I burst through and bang the door against the wall for effect, I expect drama or blood or his mouth foaming or his dead cold blue-green body, maybe naked even, why naked? Not naked – but he’s just there, on his futon-couch apparatus, drinking wine. (262)

Quite obviously, the narrator here expects to burst into the scene of an action-movie. His action appears determined by a reflection on his own function in the unfolding story. With certain expectations regarding the details and outcome of the scene in mind, he acts according to the script of a conventional pattern. That he hits the door to increase the

scene's dramatic "effect" reinforces the impression that familiar plots precondition his experience. In becoming the imagined story's 'hero', he also gains the power to anticipate the plot's development. This illusion of control is, however, undone by his environment's failure to act according to the narrator's vision. His flight into a fictional world clashes with its cast's refusal to be subjected to its reductive plot. As the scene at John's apartment continues, experience and narration therefore become increasingly entangled. At one point, the narrator yells: "'You tell me right now what the fuck you took, dickwad, or I'm calling the cops.' *Dickwad?* Where did I get *dickwad*? I haven't said dickwad for years. Need something more forceful—" (263). It remains unclear whether his self-questioning is part of the retrospective narrativization or whether the narrator describes himself as immersed in a situation where he already anticipates the transfer<sup>22</sup> of his experience into a written account. The fact that he previously banged the door to create an "effect" indicates, however, that his behavior is indeed determined by the narrative that he plans to write. His continuous reflection does therefore indeed have an immediate impact on his experience.

This inversion of the transfer from lived life to recorded story is motivated by the same reasons that trigger the autobiographical account's fictionalization. In fact, both processes are so closely entwined that they cannot be fully distinguished. This conflation of stylistic devices can for instance be observed when the narrator searches John's apartment: "I go back to the bathroom, look under the sink. Nothing. I throw the cabinet door closed. I am making as much noise as I can [...] I half expect to find anything now—guns, drugs, gold bullion. This is fiction now, it's fucking fiction" (264). This statement shows that the envisioned (and surely generic) narrative provides the narrator's actions with a sense of structure and purpose. These dynamics become most tangible whenever the story loses its momentum, such as when the narrator spends hours watching TV in the hospital's waiting room: "I start wishing I had a pen, some paper. Details of all this will be good" (269). The planned translation of immediate experience into mediated story stabilizes the narrator's fragile position because it fills him with purpose. Understanding himself as someone who is engaged in the project of writing his own story, he convinces himself that even the most dreadful moments serve the function of providing material for his story.

It is for this reason that the narrator (ironically) draws out "the value in living through these things, as horribly as they are, because they will make great material later, especially if I take notes, either now, on my hand, with a pen borrowed from the ER receptionist, or when

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<sup>22</sup> On the idea of the 'transfer' as part of the process of aesthetic reception and identification, see Fluck's article "The Imaginary and the Second Narrative: Reading as Transfer" in *The Imaginary and Its Worlds: American Studies After the Transnational Turn* (237-64) .

I get home” (270). What emerges here is the compulsive need to think of these “horrible” things in narrative terms. The account does therefore not simply aim to create meaning by emplotting experiences in a causally connected story. Instead, its purpose lies in enabling a transfer to take place: experience is immediately, and not belatedly, framed and understood in terms of its narrative function. The need to constantly narrativize, then, does not become a stabilizing strategy because it creates meaning but because it allows the narrator to escape the stasis of negativity and in so doing reinstalls a lost sense of purpose and direction.

Eggers defines his account, initially, as a “self-conscious memoir” (n.p.). And his narrator’s constant self-reflection indeed creates the impression that he perceives himself in the first and the third person perspective at once. This overtly self-conscious disposition is in line with Dave’s tendency to constantly narrativize his experiences, as it is only a short step from the reflection on self-reflection to the full-fledged narrative position. When Dave decides to visit his hometown Chicago a year after his parents died, he justifies his plans by referring to his narrative project:

The idea, I suppose, is the emotional equivalent of a drug binge, the tossing together of as much disparate and presumably incompatible stimuli as possible [...] together constituting a sort of socio-familial archaeological bender, to see what comes of it, how much can be dredged up, brought back, remembered, exploited, excused, pitied, made known, made permanent. (359)

By linking the reasons for his return to his narrative project, he lends his plans the empiricist approach of a field trip and neglects its potentially painful dimension. He assumes the detached position of an author or a journalist, who sets out to conduct research for a story. This experimental tone is maintained when he speaks about his idea to “be drunk the entire time,” because the “drunkenness” would add “to the whole endeavor a haze of mystery, not to mention a romantic fluidity that I could otherwise not count on” (361). Quite clearly, the narrator creates his own persona and the literary effects that it will create in advance. As before, the imagined story directs the narrator’s actions. Not surprisingly, the trip does not unfold according to the planned version and instead confronts the narrator with his traumatic past. While he repeatedly remarks on the improbability of *finding his parents*, or rather their remains, this is exactly what happens. When his mother’s ashes are handed to him in “a small brown box,” he becomes mired in the solipsistic struggle against the stubborn presence of a barely bearable object:

But then I see her face on the box. My sick head makes me see the face on the box. My sick head wants to make this worse. My head wants this to be scary and unbearable. I try to fight back, to know this is normal [...] My eyes blur. I shake. I want to put the box somewhere else—in the trunk maybe—but know that I can't put the box in the trunk. The box which is not my mother cannot go in to trunk because she would be livid if I put her in the trunk. She would fucking kill me. (382)

While the strong physical reaction suggests a loss of self-control, Dave refuses to accept the pain that the objectified absence of his mother invokes. His refusal to adopt the conventionality of his own grief is mirrored in his refusal to use sentimental language or imagery in a straightforwardly sincere way. Nonetheless, the sudden emergence of the 'horrible' intensifies the narrator's double-consciousness: he in fact begins to draw two contrasting and yet co-existing story worlds. While he continues to mold his action to the story he has in mind, a second narrative world emerges: on the one hand, one can discern the intended story that is supposed to be told from an omnipotent authorial perspective. On the other hand, it is increasingly impaired by a counter-narrative which revolves around the narrator's enigmatic relationship to his parents' deaths. Quite obviously, these two world versions clash; they produce and perform the account's irresolvable tensions between individual agency and cultural determination as well as between irony and sincerity, detachment and identification, imitation and innovation.

After having been handed his mother's ashes, the narrator drives to Lake Michigan to scatter them into the lake. He is equipped with recording utensils and appears determined to follow his envisioned script: "I get out of the car and [...] put the tape recorder in the jacket pocket. In the other pocket, I have a notebook and a pen [...] I will do it now. This makes sense. This is the right thing" (394). The fact that he lists his recording utensils indicates that his narrative project is used to justify the symbolic, even clichéd ritual that he is about to carry out. That is to say, he performs the symbolic burial as a character in a story because doing so allows him to fall back onto his envisioned script. As soon as he begins to perform the symbolic gesture, he becomes, however, unable to carry it out as planned. As a consequence, the at once sincere and ironic use of the overly symbolic image of *scattering the ashes* makes for the scene's highly ambivalent tone, as it both relies on and dismisses its cultural source. The narrator's expectations of what his experience 'should' be like clashes with the scene's inability to meet these standards. When he opens the box containing his mother's "*cremains*,"<sup>23</sup> the narrator is initially relieved: "inside there is gold. A golden canister, the size and shape of a container one would keep on the kitchen counter, for

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<sup>23</sup> 'Cremains' is a term that funeral homes use to describe the ashes of a cremated person. The word is a blend of 'cremated' and 'remains.' See also: Jessica Mitford's *The American Way of Death* (1998)

cookies or sugar. I am overcome with relief. This is better than the cardboard box, more fitting, even if it's only tin" (394). Because the "golden canister" meets the standards of the imagined story, it makes for a "fitting," appropriately dramatic representation.

The reader perceives the story through several layers of self-reflection that often recur to cultural references. These references, in evoking an imagined, intended story, motivate the narrator's action. Yet they also incapacitate it: "But look at what I'm doing, with my tape recorder and notebook, and here at the beach, with the box—calculating, manipulative, cold, exploitive." (395). This paradoxical relation to the narrative project illustrates the layers of contradiction that the narration is entangled in. On the one hand, it still appears tied to the project of appropriate representation which the narrator attempts to reach by reverting back to 'meaningful' narrative models. By following these blueprints, he aims to construct a story resonating symbolic connectedness. The golden canister, however, does not allow for its own integration: "inside is a bag of kitty litter, tied at the top. Fuck. Someone switched the ashes with this fucking kitty litter. This is not it. Where is the ash, the ash like dust?" (395). Once again, the parameters of the 'real' do not match the narrator's expectations. Because the canister's contents are not what he "expected and wanted" (396), his story goes astray. While it consequently no longer allows him to present himself as in control of his narrative, he can nevertheless not completely give it up. He thus enters a limbo state of unsure signification:

How lame is this, how small, terrible. Or maybe it's beautiful. I can't decide if what I am doing is beautiful and noble and right, or small and disgusting. I want to be doing something beautiful, but am afraid that this is too small, that this gesture, this end is too small—[...] Or beautiful and loving and glorious! Yes, beautiful and loving and glorious! [...] I know what I am doing now, that I am doing something both beautiful and gruesome because I am destroying its beauty by knowing it might be beautiful, know that if I know I am doing something beautiful, that it's no longer beautiful. I fear that even if it is beautiful in the abstract, that my doing it knowing that it's beautiful and worse, knowing that I will very soon be documenting it, that in my pocket is a tape recorder brought for just that purpose—that all this makes this act of potential beauty somehow gruesome [...] (399-400)

Several initially co-existing and contrasting interpretations are, as can be seen here, resolved in a declarative "yes." Moving from the dissociating "or" to the unifying "and," the narrator reconciles both versions. And yet these versions do not complement each other in order to form a coherent image. They remain a mosaic of reflections that demonstrates the impossibility of resolving interpretive indeterminacy. The narrator's decision to no longer suppress but to instead include his compulsive reflections and thus present the story as thoroughly mediated articulates the two juxtaposed forces at work here, namely the



desire for signification on the one hand and the impossibility of original storytelling on the other. While he perceives his gesture as “beautiful in the abstract,” its potentially sublime quality is destroyed by the fact that it is consciously produced to create an aesthetic effect. Interestingly, the narrator distances himself from the imagined narrative at precisely the moment when he comes closest to realizing it. Knowing that his experience can only produce a scene that is at once emotionally painful and painfully self-conscious, he comes to accept his ultimately ambivalent position. While he thus reinforces his dependence on narrative models, he no longer insists on the authorial perspective. Curiously, these contemplations are followed by a short sequence whose affective immediacy is rare to come across in Eggers’ account. After having thrown his mother’s ashes into the lake with growing desperation, the narrator rests for a moment:

There is no difference between the sky and the water, and I can feel the water rising around me, and I am already under the water, and all of the water is inside something larger, and I look at my feet to make sure they are secure because I am inside something living. (401)

While the image drawn here could be read as metaphorically depicting the narrator inside his mother’s womb, it also foreshadows the subsequently rendered deathbed scene. While the reader can, when first confronted with the image, not make this connection, its later reiteration clarifies that the narrator here re-experiences his mother’s death. He in fact assumes his mother’s position and identifies with her—or becomes her. This transfer enables him to rid himself, if only momentarily, of his compulsively self-conscious perspective. The cited scene’s immediate sincerity marks a contrast to the failing attempts at meaning making that preceded it. In so doing, it already hints at the book’s final pages, where the narrator, instead of following a script, articulates himself in the form of an internal monologue that expresses the maddening pain of loss that has so far only expressed itself in an inverted form, namely through the inappropriate employment of overly appropriate narrative models or the resistance of the story’s unruly characters.

### **“Blood and Black Space Beyond” – An Unbound Story, Bound to the Body of Death**

Not unlike the book’s first chapter, its last ten pages are a collage of broken-up sequences that recur in irregular intervals. A sequence that depicts the brothers as they play Frisbee is repeatedly interrupted by images of their dying mother. While the layout of the book’s end echoes that of the beginning, it is no longer told in the same restrained voice, but is instead rendered in form of a frantic internal monologue. As almost apocalyptic-seeming dynamics gather momentum, an insight into the narrator’s chaotic, incomprehensible experience of

grief is finally granted. Quick cuts, interruptions, dashes and an apparently improvised, colloquial language bring to life the fast pace of the Frisbee game—almost as if to signal the advancing collapse of the ordered narrative. Throughout the account, the brothers' seemingly supernatural Frisbee skills turn them into embodiments of strength and vitality. When the game is initially mentioned, at an earlier point, it is described as follows:

Oh, we are good. He's only eight but together we are spectacular [...] We take four steps for each throw, and when we throw the world stops and gasps. We throw so far, and with such accuracy, and with such ridiculous beauty. We are perfection, harmony, young and lithe, fast like Indians. (67)

The sequence ends in the narrator's hyperbolic affirmation of their extraordinary agility: they are essentially depicted as awe-inducing superheroes. As the book draws to a close, the brothers once again take up their game. While describing various tricks, the narrator notes: "that's a pretty cool trick when you can get it to work, which is only so often, for me, even though I'm really fucking good—So the point is that Toph does that one now, and he's way more consistently good at it than I am" (431). The description of handing down knowledge to the younger brother invites a reading that focuses on their close bond and interdependency. The narrator validates such a reading when he informs the reader that, while Toph can still not perform his biggest "trick," he is "the only one who can throw it the right way," so that in the end "he's essential to my doing it" (434). The brothers' dynamics indicate that the project of autobiographical worldmaking has, to a certain extent, been successful on an intersubjective level; the brothers have grown into a community of two. That Toph is described as the opposite of death and an epitome of life further illustrates that he signifies both, vitality and survival. And yet the abrupt break in the narration, which disrupts the game in mid-sentence, reinforces that the narrator can still not draft a fully integrated narrative world. Without signaling the transition, he jumps, in media res, to a close-up of his dying mother:

The morphine was taking her under, but her breathing was still strong [...]—when it came, it was strong, forceful, it was a yanking of air ... We stayed up all night because you did not know. We moved chairs close, curled in them and slept, held her hand, and soon the tide came in. It started with a different sound in the snoring. Something rounder, more liquid. Then almost a gurgling [...] Beth and I were there, on either side, and the breaths were pulling, yanking at something like a boat still tied to a dock, the motor revving but something holding, holding. The breaths were pulling more and more. And the gurgling, the bubbles became more prominent in the breathing, she was pulling at a tub of water, or fluid, then a lake, a sea, an ocean, pulling at it – The fluid kept coming, the tide inside her rising, rising, her breaths shorter, like someone being filled as the water climbs and there is no longer anywhere to—But there was intelligence in that breathing, and passion in that breathing, everything there, we could take that breathing and hold its hand, sit on its lap while watching TV, the breaths

quicker and shorter and quicker and shorter and then shallow, shallow and that's when I loved her as much as any other time, when I knew her as I thought I knew her—oh she was out, she was gone, a week into the morphine maybe [...] but she was sucking in that air, she was breathing so erratically, weakly, but she was doing it so desperately, each breath taking all that she had, her small person [...] (432)

With this description, the circumvented reality of the mother's death is finally brought to the story's forefront. Previously, the narrator had turned this experience into an enigmatic blank space and refused to supply it with significance. When reading this evasion as a deliberate decision, it can be understood as a way to defy conventional dynamics of emplotment and thus present the mother's death as essentially devoid of meaning. But this central scene may also have been withheld from the story's main plot because of the narrator's overly self-conscious position: he knows that a representation, which embeds this precarious scene in a meaningful way, runs the risk of reducing his mother's particularity and uniqueness. Because he in the end nevertheless fills the void that defined his narrative, it could be argued that the narrator ultimately completes and restores his story. Yet the depiction of his mother's death remains a fragment that is not causally integrated into the text at large. Her way of drowning in herself echoes his feeling of being submerged by water while sitting at the lake. Does the image therefore bespeak their close and continuing bond and the son's continuing identification with his mother?

I believe that the description of the mother's slowing, halting breath defies such an allegorical reading, primarily because it creates nothing other than the suffocating effect of an imploding system. The details that define the physical process of dying produce an image that—despite its visible, tangible quality—does not lend itself to a reconciliatory interpretation. I would argue that the narrator's decision to focus on his mother's breathing allows him, first of all, to diminish the bothersome presence of the narrating 'I.' And it secondly enables him to keep the scene's symbolic potential at a bare minimum. As a result, the reader is left with the image of a person whose breathing signifies the sole fact of her pointless resistance against death. The image of death is, then, not a metaphor that resolves the story's contradictions. The poignant, physically concrete details confront the reader with both, the narrator's inability and his melancholic refusal to make sense of his mother's death. One can certainly draw a connection from the striking physicality of the deathbed scene to that of the Frisbee game. It is interesting that Eggers epitomizes both life and death by reducing it to bodily movements. David Shield's statement that "the body has no meanings. We bring meanings to it" (75) can be applied here. Eggers constructs a narrator who reconnects with his own story—and his narrative identity—by presenting the most precarious moments of his life in the reduced form of their physical reality. By diminishing

culturally and narratively determined meanings, he finds a way to incorporate the meaninglessness of his parents' death.

Not surprisingly, the narrator here neither escapes into a fictional scenario nor does he borrow a sequence from a filmic plot or a theatrical play. By focusing on her breathing and recognizing her "intelligence" and "passion" in it, he at once personalizes the scene and precludes the possibility of escaping into an ending that resonates consolatory closure. The fact that her death brings out her uniqueness renders a more standardized, generalizing representation impossible. It is for this reason that the narrator gives up his distanced perspective and gives in to the incoherence of a story that is presented from an uncertain position. That affect is here for the first time articulated directly and explicitly shows that the narrator admits to the pain and vulnerability that he has so far neglected and which has nevertheless determined both his story and his narrative voice. And it further shows that the narrative is no longer motivated by the project of original worldmaking that drove its outset. Although the narrator does therefore not integrate the death of his parents so as to produce a sense of coherence and continuity, his collage of past and present, of pain and playfulness, in the end creates a narrative space that no longer bans the past, but allows for an—albeit not fully comprehensive—identification with it. One of the staccato scenes of the closing pages visualizes this evolution in the narrator's perspective:

—And now we keep the gold tin on the kitchen counter, and inside are my father's business cards, and a tiny sweater my mother knitted for a teddy bear, and some change, and some pens, and a cap to something, maybe a camera lens, that we haven't been able to match with its mother and—(435)

Because the 'gold tin' that once held his mother's ashes is the closest thing to a gravestone that they have, the brothers use it as a memorial site. Yet instead of assuming a spatially detached position, it is integrated into their household and filled with objects belonging to both present and past. What appears, at first sight, to be a careless collection can on second glance be recognized as an ensemble that accepts the past's impact on the present. This acceptance confirms that the need to create a "bare, pure landscape" and a "blank canvas" (144-45) onto which a new world can be built has been abandoned. A similar observation can be made with regard to the narrative. In an almost paradoxical way, Eggers' account draws to a close in the precise moment when its narrator lets go of its control. The acceptance of temporal, causal and affective turmoil is thus mirrored in a paradigm shift of the narrative voice. The last three pages of the book consist of an internal monologue that reads as a bursting of repressed emotion. The narrator's breathless voice fits the self-portrait

it sketches. The book's last sequence follows the trajectory of the Frisbee. Pointing out the "long high throws" that the brothers are "best at," the game is called:

A violent act, throwing that white thing, you're first cradling it to your breast and then you whip that fucker as hard as you possibly can [...] you whip that fucker like it had blades on it and you wanted it to cut straight through that paperblue sky, rip through it and have it be blood and black space beyond. (435)

If one reads the game as a metaphor for the act of storytelling, the narrator here comments on the adjusted intention of his narrative experiment: having known all along that the intended story was at best a temporary supportive device, it helped him to at once draft and demolish the illusion of a definite—and thus self-stabilizing—story world. The function of the narrative that was produced in its stead consists, then, in cutting through the "paperblue sky" of the superficial narrative structure in order to reveal the "blood and black space" lying "beyond" it. Within this scenario, the narrator portrays himself as "dripping, with fists, with heaving shoulders—and I will look stupid, I will crawl, drenched in blood and shit..." (435-6). Here, the narrator no longer presents himself ironically, that is to say, as an aloof superhero. Instead, he has become a wounded "monster" that exposes its dependency on its own motives: having ruptured the façade of the "paperblue sky," it no longer maintains the pretense of a progressive story and fully indulges its brutal painfulness.

Interestingly, the image of blood that is evoked here recurs whenever the narrator addresses the destabilizing meaninglessness of his mother's death and consequently also that of his own sense of loss. When he, at an earlier point, speaks about his constant premonition of death and the ensuing need to live intensely, he urges himself to "breath deeply all the time, breathe in all the air full of glass and nails and blood, will breathe it and drink it, so rich..." (433). Although the image of blood emerges at various points of the book, most poignantly in the mother's nosebleed and the narrator's blood-soaked attendance of her memorial service, it is only in the final pages that the narrator begins to portray his memory of the irretrievably lost world of his parental home as violently painful—and even as wounding. It is only here, through the references to his own bloodied body, that his vulnerability assumes a physically anchored certainty. The image of breathing air "full of glass and nails and blood" articulates his ambivalent pain of grief, not least because it visualizes the unbridgeable chasm between those still breathing, albeit painfully, and those who have ceased to do so.

In the book's last paragraph, which covers almost three full pages and whose syntax becomes increasingly unbound, the story returns to the image of the sky-bound Frisbee and follows the narrator as he runs to catch it. Once again, the focus lies on the perfect interplay

between Dave and Toph, emphasizing their ability to control and anticipate the disc's trajectory. That the game does not serve a specific function but is played for its own sake is interesting with regard to the aesthetic image it produces. I think it is safe to say that in the end, the game is all that remains of the "paperblue sky." It paints a picture resonating with strength and joy—were it not for the narrator's accompanying rant, which turns it into a last desperate affirmation of control:

Can you see this? [...] it's up there and rising, Jesus fucking Christ it's small but then it stops up there, it slows and stops all the way up there at the very top, for a second blotting out the sun, and then its heart breaks and it falls—And it's coming down and the sky is all white with the sun and the frisbee's white too but I can see the thing, I can see that fucker I can make it out and I can run under it I know where that fucking thing is, I will run under it I know and outrun that fucker and be under it and will be there to watch it float so slowly down, spinning floating down I beat you motherfucker and I am there as it drifts down and into my hands, my hands spread out, thumbs as wings, because I am there, ready to cradle it as it spins just for a second until it stops. I am there. I was there. (437)

The trajectory of the Frisbee that this speech act captures can be linked to the arch of the narrative. The object's personification, which culminates in the moment when "its heart breaks," indicates that the narrator perceives his story as possessing a life of its own. He throws the Frisbee, and by extension also his life story, as far and high away from him as he possibly can. The climax of its trajectory consists in a moment of 'heartbreaking' stasis, of a darkness that leaves him disoriented and unable to see. The disc's gradual and inevitable fall, however, motivates the narrator to break out of his stillness: struggling to keep up with the Frisbee, to anticipate its trajectory, he runs to "cradle" it, to finally be reconciled with it and hold it in his hands. It is interesting that the narrator here once again expresses affect through the 'other:' by projecting his *Heartbreaking Work* onto the Frisbee, he articulates both his desire and his failure to control his own story. This scene comprises the tension between agency and determination, between the desire for full detachment and the binding forces of attachment and identification, in a both painful and playful way.

The second conclusion that the allusive game points to is that *A Heartbreaking Work* can neither be read as an ultimately ironic nor an entirely sincere story. While the narrator is fully aware of the comic potential that his crazed struggle for control contains, he also admits his full commitment to the project of drawing a world in which he can bear to live. This double-conscious perspective reemerges in the book's last, seemingly endless run-on sentence, which reveals the narrator's uncertain position as well as the anger and despair that have so far been confined to the stylistic and structural level:

Don't you know that I'm trying to pump blood to you, that this is for you, that I hate you people [...] I am somewhere on some stupid rickety scaffolding and I'm trying to get your stupid fucking attention I've been trying to show you this [...] I am willing and I'll stand before you and I'll raise my arms and give you my chest and throat and wait, and I've been so old for so long, for you, for you, I want it fast and right through me— Oh do it, do it, you motherfuckers, do it do it you fuckers finally, finally, finally. (437)

The Whitmanesque tour de force that closes Eggers' account gives words to the narrator's desire to communicate his experiences so comprehensibly that they generate a shared understanding. At the same time, the accusatory tone indicates his ambivalent relation to the story he has told. While indeed motivated by his longing for a 'true' representation, and thus also for the reader's recognition, he in the end remains unable to translate the complexity of his experiences into a linear story and can therefore not fully "show" himself to his readers. By presenting himself as a figure on a stage or, more precisely, "on some stupid rickety scaffolding," he voices his frustration with the immanent artifice and conventionality of the narrative, which cannot forgo the inevitable process of mediation and reflection that produces it.

In the end, the narrator appears exhausted; he expires together with his account and does not exceed its extinction. By exposing himself fully, to the point of offering his body as a sacrifice to an implied firing-squat, he expresses his need for an audience that can supply his story with the significance that de cannot provide. It is, therefore, the narrator's admitted failure of (self-)representation which articulates his refusal to make sense of his parents' death. Because his grief is chiefly portrayed in terms of this refusal or failure, the book's open ending reinforces that its narrator remains unable to fully grasp his own story, or to get a grip on his grief. And yet he, who "pumps blood" to his implied audience, appears to remain dedicated to his (desperate) desire to communicate the pain and woundedness that the resurging image of blood indicated throughout his account.

It is this desire for a story that binds Dave to the nameless other, presumably the reader, whom he here addresses. Despite its violently accusatory tone, the book's ending heightens its narrator's dependence on both his story and its readers. This, however, does not mean that the story's tensions and contradictions are resolved. On the contrary, it appears as if Dave succeeds in stripping himself of his compulsive need for a coherent story and thus surrenders to its inconclusiveness. While this surrender may signal his resignation, it also becomes his way of admitting that he remains dependent on a reflective 'other,' through whom he can recognize himself. This of course also means that he remains indebted to the same past which he so forcefully sought to escape. By finally speaking (about) his grief and by anchoring it not only in the bodily image of his dying mother, but also in the body of the

text and in that of his readers, he in the end creates the effect that his ironic 'tricks' and prefabricated plots failed to achieve: he communicates the incomprehensible pain that both drove and disabled his story.

The dynamics of selection and emplotment that produce narrative identities suggest that a story of self contains, even in the explicit form of an autobiographical account, a certain degree of creative freedom and choice. Yet the analysis of *A Heartbreaking Work* has shown that despite this self-interpretative leeway, a new story always remains bound to the worlds that it emerges out of. It cannot simply evade or replace events that determine its further course of action or outcome, since such omissions or substitutions build insoluble contradictions into a self-reflective narrative world.

Forgoing these narratological conventions, the beginning of *A Heartbreaking Work* is defined by its narrator's desire to build a new world from scratch. This desire finds expression in his urge to fully control the narrative account. In assuming an authorial position, Dave sets out to rewrite his personal history. Whereas his story is thus initially dedicated to the project of (auto)biographical worldmaking, it in the end tears down the façade of the very building that it sought to erect. This development can most clearly be seen in the contrasting attempt of representing the parents' respective deaths. While the death of the father is portrayed in a detached and dispersed, yet highly aestheticized way, the mother's death becomes an enigmatic void. It is only with time that the narrator recognizes this conundrum; he can neither exclude nor appropriately represent his mother's death. As he comes to this gradual realization, his narrative changes in form and function: it ceases to be motivated by the need to create the illusion of power and self-control, and instead allows for a representation of grief that is anchored in the wounded, weakened body of both the mother and the son. The narrator thus eventually comes to terms with the previously not explicitly mentioned pain of loss and grief. In order to be able to reach this point, he must gradually abandon the idea of drafting a story whose form expresses its severe content matter in an appropriately, that is conventionally dramatic fashion.

It is because of this gradual evolution in the narrator's thinking that the process of mourning is presented as intricately linked to the notion of self-consciousness: the narrator initially assumes a detached position that allows him to reflect on the impossibility of an immediate representation of his affective disposition. He appears convinced that because experience is always processed through multiple layers of self-conscious reflection, it also implicitly relies on pre-formatted cultural and narrative models. In order to draw attention to this (often unconscious) process of narrative appropriation, Dave reproduces it on the conscious



plot level of the story. By implementing narrative micro-plots and cultural sources that we conventionally rely on in ironic and inappropriate ways, he shows why he could not present his parents' deaths and his own grief in a more immediately sincere way: since such a representation would have been based on a 'general' and thus reductive image of death and grief, it would not really have been an individualistic representation. By avoiding such a representation, Dave hints at a despair whose severity cannot be processed, emplotted, and thus 'normalized' in a more conventional, seemingly straightforward and sincere way.

I have argued that the narrator's self-conscious play with the conventions of storytelling can be read as an intervention that signals resistance. Despite the fact that the narrator continues to insist that immediate affect cannot be adequately captured in an inherently mediated story, the same narrative does, ironically, enable him to express the fury and frustration that this incapacity entails—and which he initially rejects and later comes to identify with. It can be concluded that the narrator succeeds, at the very end, in articulating his grief by accepting its ultimately melancholic incomprehensibility, and consequently also the permanent impairment of his own (narrative) identity.

*A Heartbreaking Work*, then, is not only a text that stretches the limits of autobiographical telling because it plays with and subverts generic conventions. It also highlights the limits (and shortcomings) of narrative identities, as it renders the idea of the all-encompassing and unifying story reductive. Not even taking into account hybrid or intersectional models of identity solves the problem that the mourner's world is—and may for an indeterminate period of time remain—a place that makes little sense. It is precisely the mourner's inability to ascribe meaning to and emplot all episodes of his life in a coherent way, which disorders and disrupts his narrative *and* his identity. The turmoil that grief can cause reveals, therefore, the (perhaps necessary) art and artifice of the autobiographical speech act. In doing so, it complicates and questions the premise of a happy or at least conclusive ending: by refuting the idea of mourning as a process that enables the bereaved to externalize their grief to extent that enables its comprehensible communication, *A Heartbreaking Work* is in line with other contemporary 'works of mourning,' which also insist on the enigmatic and stubbornly persistent force of melancholic grief.

The observation that "ends" have today become "more difficult to achieve" does not, however, solely apply to literary works concerned with questions of loss and grief (Brooks, 313). With a nod to contemporary literature at large, Brooks argues that the reluctance to bring a narrative to a definitive end has "condemned" many contemporary authors "to playing" (313). Interestingly, 'playing' is precisely what Eggers' narrator does: while he no longer seems to trust the narrative, and can consequently no longer end it on a

conservatively progressive note, he at the same time appears unable to give up on his desire for its reassuring form. While the desire for narrative persists, it can never be satisfied. The story in fact defies its own telling; it can only succeed by declaring itself a failure. And yet one cannot but note that Eggers' story does come to an end: it is almost as if this end happens, against its own will. To Brooks, the "tenuous, fictive, arbitrary status of ends" bespeaks our changed attitude toward the imperative of meaning making (313). If we assume this statement to be true, we can read Eggers' account as proof of the fact that 'meaning' may no longer be narrative's only and ultimate goal; it may in fact have ceased to be its 'drive' and its necessary endpoint. I believe that we can read Eggers' narrator as a figure of melancholic grief, as he can neither fully know nor make sense of his grief. His narrative is not geared towards the restoration of his personal story's lost sense of coherence and consistency, but instead illuminates its persistent precariousness as well as its teller's vulnerability. It is therefore a text that expresses, in a similar way as Walter Benjamin's novel, the incomprehensibility of human experience and in the end exposes our fundamentally relational existence.

### III. Theorizing Grief: Roland Barthes' *Mourning Diary*

This chapter examines Roland Barthes' *Mourning Diary: October 26, 1977—September 15, 1979*,<sup>1</sup> which was published posthumously in 2010. Almost 30 years after its author's death in 1980, the book's contents were derived from hundreds of single note cards which contain Barthes' reflections on the experience of losing his mother. I believe that *Mourning Diary* does not merely grant us an insight into Barthes' insurmountable grief. On closer inspection, it also teaches us how the French critic's thinking was affected and changed by his mother's death. A close-reading of *Mourning Diary*, which will be observed in tandem with the author's late *Camera Lucida*, will show that Barthes insisted on both, the meaninglessness of his mother's death and the intractable uniqueness of her being. While the note cards show that he sought to capture the latter in a literary text, which held the tentative and suggestive title *Vita Nova*, Barthes never realized this plan. Both his attempt and his failure to render his mother's essential being without imbuing her death with conventional meaning had, I suggest, a severe impact on Barthes's worldview: it essentially changed his perspective on the relation between the writing subject and the written text. Since Barthes hoped, at least for a while, to capture (and sustain) the painfully ephemeral, fleeting character of his loving relation in a literary text, the realization that he would remain unable to do so made his suffering all the more unbearable. In order to counter, and perhaps complement, Barthes's eventually devastating perspective, I will draw on Jacques Derrida's essay collection *The Work of Mourning*. This collection does not merely gather commemorative texts that Derrida wrote in the wake of his closest friends' deaths. It also develops Barthes's perspective further: while Barthes's complete identification with his mother turned him into a melancholic mourner who could neither move nor mobilize his incapacitating sense of loss, Derrida replaces identification with incorporation. By insisting on the incorporated person's 'otherness,' or more precisely on his unattainable alterity, he finds a way to keep the dialogic relation that determined his friendships intact. In doing so, Derrida achieves what Barthes's failed to do: he manages to sustain the address to the other, through whom he can therefore continue to recognize himself.

Before moving on to Barthes' text—and his idea of textuality—it is important to know that he not only lived with his mother, Henriette Binger, almost his entire life. He also loved her

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<sup>1</sup> In its original French, the book was entitled: *Roland Barthes, Journal de deuil: 26 octobre 1977–15 septembre 1979*. Edited by Nathalie Léger, it was published in 2009. In the English translation, the book was published as *Mourning Diary: October 26, 1977–September 15, 1979*, also edited by Nathalie Léger and translated by Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 2010). Page references in the text will from here on follow the abbreviations *MD*.

to the point of idealizing her as a being of pure kindness and nobility. When she grew sick, he devoted himself to her care. Binger died on October 24, 1977. Her son began to chart his grief the following day. For the next year and a half, he used regular typing paper, which he cut into quarters, to take note of his despair, his spurs of hope and, eventually, an increasing sense of hopelessness. During the years preceding and following his mother's death, Barthes realized several book projects, which have become known as his influential, though not completely consistent late work. While *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments* (1977) was, for instance, completed and published shortly before his mother's death, it already articulates a distinct sense of loss, not only in discussing the pain that the absence of a loved person invokes, but also in approaching questions of injury and woundedness. In *Mourning Diary*, Barthes speaks of both his desire and his difficulty to realize a project that he alludes to as the "Photo-Maman book" (136). It was, however, not before the summer of 1979, almost two years after his mother passed, that he completed the by now canonical *Camera Lucida* (1980), which is just as much a book about photography as about grief.

While Neil Badmington admits that it may be "reductive to see *Mourning Diary* as merely a set of notes towards *Camera Lucida*, it is above all for the latter that the sighs of the journal reach" ("Punctum Saliens" 305). And it is certainly true that the diary, from its first entries on, demonstrates its author's wish to write a book about his deceased mother. His notes thus grapple, first and foremost, with the fact that his bereavement affects and often disables his writing. While it has, for instance, always been assumed that *Camera Lucida* was written in a very short amount of time—the book itself indicates that it was composed between April and June 1979—the diary's frequent references to the 'Photo-Maman book' reveal that "the grieving Barthes was struggling to create the work for more than a year before April 1979" (305). The information that is revealed through these intertextual references shows why one cannot speak about *Mourning Dairy* without also taking its timelier published counterpart into consideration. While *Camera Lucida* may be one of Barthes' most influential and widely known books, it is in the context of this study also important that it was the last book, whose publication Barthes oversaw. Despite the final authority that *Camera Lucida* seemed to acquire for this very reason, it is interesting that Barthes was simultaneously engaged in a project that appeared not only very unusual, but also did not share *Camera Lucida's* retrospective orientation: while writing *Camera Lucida*, Barthes drafted several outlines of a subsequent work. The author envisioned this so-called *Vita Nova* as a work of fiction that would so fully draw him into its own world that it would enable him to begin a new, literally 'literary' life. While this project never grew into a form more distinct than that of an outline, it became the subject of a series of lectures which—held at the Collège de

France between October 1978 and February 1980—were entitled “The Preparation of the Novel.”<sup>2</sup> Adam Thirlwell notes that because his mother’s death “marked an absolute caesura in his life,” Barthes wanted to “begin a new life, which would be a new way of writing. The master of signs, who had deconstructed the forms of literature so acidly, now wanted to write a novel himself” (28). In *Mourning Diary*, Barthes refers to the project of writing a novel in the blunt style that characterizes most entries: “since *maman*’s death, despite—or because of—it, a strenuous effort to set up a grand project of writing, a gradual alteration of confidence in myself—in what I write” (200).

With these autobiographical coordinates in mind, it becomes evident that *Mourning Diary* must be read in dialogue with his other, simultaneously produced works. When one in addition notes that it was merely two days after having completed his lecture series on said ‘novel’ that Barthes was hit by a van and suffered injuries that led to his death, it appears all the more relevant to relate his late works to his comments on grief. It is, in fact, only when one approaches them from the perspective of *Mourning Diary* that one can grasp the extent to which Barthes’s late work is steeped in a sense of woundedness, a laceration that derives from his grief or, as he preferred to say, from his suffering. It might be all too telling, albeit in a painfully ironic way, that the unfinished work that was found on Barthes’s typewriter upon his death was entitled: “one always fails in Speaking of What One Loves.” Without wanting to make too much of this coincidence, the ‘failure’ that Barthes addresses here indicates that his personal experience of bereavement forced him to rethink the (im)possibility of writing affect. This (im)possibility in turn points to the focal point of the following analysis, which will delineate how the experience of grief changed Barthes’s relation to the realm of language and literature.

The *Diary*’s fragmentary structure can of course at least in part be accredited to its posthumous editing process and to the fact that it was not explicitly intended for publication—although Barthes wonders, merely a few days after his mother’s death, whether there may not be “something valuable in these notes” (7). Despite these two possible explanations, it is interesting that the *Diary*’s fragmented form does not, at first glance, differ vastly from works such as Barthes’s non-autobiography *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* (1975) or his subsequent *A Lover’s Discourse* (1977). Not unlike *Mourning Diary*, both also consist of carefully ordered fragments which read as brief musings on a particular word, a ‘figure,’ an incident, or a thought. Barthes’s preference for the essayistic

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<sup>2</sup> The manuscripts of this lecture course were not published until recently. In the original French, they were for the first time released in 2003: *Roland Barthes, La Préparation du roman* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 2003). In the English translation, they were originally published in 2010: *The Preparation of the Novel, Lecture Courses and Seminars at the Collège de France (1978-1979 and 1979-1980)*.

and the dispersed can in fact even be traced back to early works such as *Mythologies* (1957), which consists of short chapters that disentangle naturalized phenomena of contemporary French culture. Each of these chapters exposes a ‘myth,’ an ideological construct that solidifies and maintains bourgeois values by turning them into aspects of everyday life that are taken for granted and thus go, as Barthes put it, “without saying” (*Mythologies* xx). I would argue that the consistency with which he pursued fragmentation and discontinuation shows that Barthes perceived content and form as interdependent factors that mutually influence each other. His method of interrupting himself by disrupting language, of breaking up the discourse by ridding it of its sense of narrative continuity, became his way of voicing a deep-seated suspicion of processes of meaning-making that appear natural to us simply because they are practiced habitually, and that are for this very reason generalized, normalized, and eventually taken for granted.

In *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, the author explains that: “the fragments are then so many stones on the perimeter of a circle,” whose core is neither visible nor knowable (93). This means that for Barthes, the fragmentary presented itself as the only form that allowed him to maintain the “incoherence,” which he preferred “to a distorting order” (93). When taking into account that Barthes’ rejection of received knowledge, of definitive meaning, and of constructed consistency may be *the* recurring thread running through his wide-ranging oeuvre, one realizes why he also insisted on the fragmentary form: it helped him, at least on a structural level, to escape the essentialism and eventual naturalization that he worked to unmask. Adam Philipps notes that “a terror of getting stuck, of being immobilized” determines all of Barthes’s works (x). And Barthes himself admits that he longs for a condition that would allow to ‘drift’ or ‘cruise,’ and to thus remain untied and critical of the structures that surround him and through which he communicates, it always seemed, almost reluctantly. In his late *Camera Lucida*, Barthes reinforces that the “the only sure thing” that perseveres in him is his “desperate resistance to any reductive system” (8). It is for this reason that Wayne Koestenbaum claims that the critic wanted “to rescue nuance” (ix); to transgress beyond nomination and classification, beyond, even, any form of systematic detection in order to eventually reach, as Barthes himself put it, a “state which is, really, comfort” and “might be called: ease” (*Roland Barthes* 43).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> In his early works, Barthes describes public opinion as the ‘doxa’ and labels forms of knowledge that escape these paradigms the ‘paradoxa.’ He explains that whenever “a *Doxa* (a popular opinion) is posited,” it is for him “intolerable; to free myself of it, I postulate a paradox; then this paradox turns bad, becomes a new concretion, itself becomes a new *Doxa*, and I must seek further for a new paradox.” This problem, that what one posits as an opposition to the norm tends to become, over time, a new norm is a major concern of Barthes’s work. Most of his writing is preoccupied with the desire to find effective ways to counter emerging normative horizons and question accepted truths.

One may ask how these observations relate to Barthes's experience of grief and its articulation. For once, his refusal to rely on public opinion, on 'concepts' and 'values,' necessitates a rethinking and a rewriting of what it feels to lose a loved person. Barthes's programmatic unconventionality—or should we say anti-conventionality?—can certainly be aligned with claims of authors such as Joan Didion. While the sociological critique that I discussed in chapter one exposed that our apparently 'natural' feelings are not only historically constructed, but also fulfill particular social functions, Barthes's work is founded on these premises. *A Lover's Discourse* is, for instance, dedicated to the task of dissecting the myth of love. It does so by dismantling the repertoire of cultural codes that bring the recognizable—and stereotypical—figure of the lover to life. Barthes was, AS Culler points out, always interested in the constructedness and artificiality of "mythical meaning," which perpetuates "bourgeois norms" by presenting them as "self-evident laws of a natural order" (24). With this more general interest in mind, it is interesting to see that Barthes's later works are increasingly drawn to the areas of affect and feeling. Here, he hopes to find niches of self-expression that have not yet fully succumbed to the dominant grasp of the paradigms that structure 'mythical' signification. Barthes's *The Pleasure of the Text*, which he published as early as in 1973, already indicates this thematic shift towards the affective. In his essay, Barthes distinguishes 'bliss' from conventional 'pleasure' and defines the former as a condition that escapes concrete categorization because it exists, as Rylance notes, in an "uncertain, unbalanced dialectic between fulfillment and loss" (84). This form of 'bliss' can for instance be experienced in the moment of writing, in the unpredictable, open, possibly incoherent moment before the text assumes a fixed form. While still emergent, the text is not yet bound to any normative cultural codes or dimensions. In the blissful moment of thinking and writing it, one can at least temporarily escape the realm of the rationally productive—and can thus for a moment 'cruise,' 'drift,' and be 'at ease' in the possibilities that not yet determined signification can open up.<sup>4</sup> Despite the fact that 'bliss' remains an important theme in Barthes's writing, a growing interest in the other end of the affective spectrum, namely in suffering and despair,

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<sup>4</sup> An interesting aspect of the thus defined blissful predisposition is that it acts against the social demand for profitable productivity. Barthes writes: "I delight continuously, endlessly, in writing as in a perpetual production, in an unconditional dispersion, in an energy of seduction [...] But in our mercantile society, one must end up with a work, an 'oeuvre': one must construct, i.e., *complete*, a piece of merchandise" (*Roland Barthes* 136). Again, Barthes is in line with literary authors who have questioned the assumption that the narrative form works 'naturally' toward a conclusive end point. In his lecture on "The Preparation of the Novel," he speaks of a "passage" from writing with a "direct object" to writing without one, noting that because "to *write* is a transitive verb," it does not necessarily need a "complement." Although he concedes that "in reality there always is a complement: one always ends up writing something," (*The Preparation of the Novel* 145) he insists on the possibility of a practice of "absolute *Writing*" (145), which remains devoid of productive purposefulness and exists, essentially, for its own sake.

announces itself by the time that *A Lover's Discourse* and *Camera Lucida* were published. *Camera Lucida* is, as Rylance confirms, often described as a "book about loss" or a "powerful elegy" (128-129). Considering the critic's interest in processes of ideological meaning making and his skepticism regarding the possibility of writing the 'self,' it is interesting that Barthes even engages in the attempt of writing his experience of grief. How, one is inclined to ask, does one transform grief into language without falling back onto that which one knows about 'grief' as a culturally constructed concept? Can one even name one's feelings without reverting to or at least opposing a fixed, formulaic idea? Does not language bind one to a structure that always precedes and thus generalizes the individual? Is not that in fact the foundation of all sociality?

The first chapter of this study has shown that 'grief' is produced within a highly determined and determining discourse that shapes the individual's understanding and experience of the same. If one takes this signifying and securing layer away, can 'grief' nevertheless still be lived, lest communicated? Before trying to answer these questions by engaging in a dialogue with *Mourning Diary* and the works that stand in closest relation to it, let me retreat my steps and explain why I have chosen this work as an example for a contemporary theorization of grief. *Mourning Diary* presents only the pinnacle of its author's growing investment in questions of injury and loss. Despite the fact that the preoccupation with personal suffering only becomes explicit in the *Diary*, where it announces itself on the title page, Koestenbaum claims that: "a key to the mind and body of the great Roland Barthes" is "the word 'laceration,' a melodramatic synonym for 'wound'" (ix). Interestingly, Barthes relates the notion of woundedness and injury directly to that of subjectivity. In *A Lover's Discourse*, he writes: "where there is a wound, there is a subject," suggesting not merely that affect and identity are entangled force fields, but even going so far as to claim that the loving "subject is intimacy" (189). He elaborates on this idea when he declares that "such is love's wound: a radical chasm (at the 'roots' of being), which cannot be closed, and out of which the subject drains, constituting himself as a subject in this very draining" (189). This means that a person who loves becomes, per definition, vulnerable and dependent. He is, in other words, no longer a self-contained or self-sufficient entity. By defining the lover's precariousness as the source of its subjectivity, Barthes highlights the vital role that affect plays in the process of identity formation.

It goes almost without saying that woundedness and laceration also play a crucial role in *Mourning Diary*. In its beginning, the notion of bereavement as a mere "lack" is rejected and replaced by the idea of the "wound, something that has harmed love's very heart" (65). The image of grief as a lacerating wound can certainly be linked to that of the similarly



wounding *punctum*. And yet the *punctum*, which features prominently in *Camera Lucida*, is associated with both, ecstatic bliss and deep despair. While its relation to grief or suffering thus needs to be more closely examined, its omnipresence alone show that a decisive shift toward the affective can be observed in Barthes's late works. It appears quite remarkable that this shift is paired with a new 'essentialism,' which Barthes connects to his idea of the loving relation and its rootedness in ephemeral, unfixed and therefore potentially subversive practices. The loving relation is thus set in opposition to fixed, coded or scripted forms of bourgeois 'love,' and is for this very reason reevaluated. When it is, however, applied to the experience of loss, its reliance on the realm of ephemeral interaction proves fatal: since this interaction ends with the loved person's death, the other's loss assumes an unthinkable totality. Since the loving relation was rooted in interaction and dialogue, the cessation of both also indicates that the loving relation can neither be continued nor preserved. It is for this reason that the desire for a narrative emerges in the moment of severe loss: Barthes appears to hope, at least for a while, that the act of writing (about) the loved person will enable him to resume the dialogue that can no longer be spoken, and whose interruption he defines as the source of his suffering.

Barthes's posthumously published works do not only crystallize his thinking on grief, they also prove that he never wrote about grief without also writing about its relation to language and literature. It will be interesting to see whether the author comes to view suffering in a similar way as the literary authors discussed above, namely as something that one does not merely work through and then discard, but as an affective state that holds a lasting weight in itself. It is anything but difficult to discern that Barthes thinks through and eventually dismisses the psychoanalytical conception of grief. Given his notorious suspicion of socially sanctioned knowledge, it is not surprising to find that he perceives the psychoanalytic idea of grief as a prescriptive, restrictive, almost 'mythical' phenomenon, whose deceptive naturalness he cannot accept. His diary's notes can certainly be read as an attempt to rid himself of what he expects mourning to be—and to replace this preconditioned exterior truth with the strictly subjective 'truth' of his own experience. Although he attempts to write his experience, he initially rejects the idea that his suffering can be generalized, conceptualized, or told in the uniform shape of a conventional story.

While his earlier writings perceive language primarily as a constraining and confining system of signs that seals the individual into repetitive thought patterns and binds it to mechanisms of fixed signification, a reevaluation and even hopefulness defines Barthes's later relation to language and literature, its pleasures as well as its pluralistic possibilities and abundance of meanings. Particularly the 'novelistic' now reappears in a new light. As

already mentioned, Barthes dedicated his last series of lectures to his so-called *Vita Nova*, a literary project whose design differs vastly from his critical works. What this shows is that the attitude towards the once so adamantly criticized system of signs, the language that produces, as he would have it, the fiction of coherence, undergoes crucial changes. It is this chapter's incentive to show that *Mourning Diary* crystallizes a trend that defines Barthes's late works: they mark a turn toward the personal and the fictional, both of which are regarded enclaves that belong neither to the cultural nor the individual, but hover between both. While Barthes's investment in themes of absence, loss, and suffering is already apparent in his earlier works, it is only when one rereads these texts with the recently published *Diary* in mind that a more complex, and more devastating insight into the ways in which Barthes's grief changed his reading and his writing can be won.

### **From *Mythologies* to *Camera Lucida*: The Problem of Meaning**

It appears impossible to write about Barthes without mentioning his perhaps best-known work. In "The Death of the Author"<sup>5</sup> (1967), he proclaims the unoriginality of every 'text,' declaring that neither its meaning nor its message are to be determined by its author, but must instead be read as a "multi-dimensional space in which are married and contested several writings, none of which is original: the text is a fabric of quotations, resulting from a thousand sources of culture" (53). The writer, Barthes claims, can merely "imitate" a "gesture" that is never "original," but that must instead be regarded as an effect of culture and of language, that is to say: of already existing, much larger systems of signification. Because the 'text' therefore never produces its ultimate meaning, it should be received as a collage of culturally determined signs: "it is language which speaks, not the author" (53). While 'The Death of the Author' emphasizes the ways in which language and textuality hail the individual into being, the essay collection *Mythologies* expands on this idea.<sup>6</sup>

By the time that Barthes taught his course on the 'Preparation of the Novel' in 1978, things looked very different. According to Barthes, his course rested on the general "principle" that "the subject is not to be repressed—whatever the risks of subjectivity. I belong to a generation that has suffered too much from the censorship of the subject" (*Preparation of the Novel* 3). While his early works dismissed the idea of authorship and authority, and thus implicitly also that of an essential subjectivity, Barthes now turns against the "impostures of

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<sup>5</sup> Roland Barthes's 'The Death of the Author' was published in a collection of his works called *The Rustle of Language*, translated by Richard Howard (1989). 49-55.

<sup>6</sup> Badmington states: "whenever the dominant values that dwell in the artifacts of a culture are blanched by analysis, [...] whenever innocence is shown to incubate ideology, whenever what Barthes called 'the disease of thinking in essences' is diagnosed, the legacy of *Mythologies* is likely to be at work ..." (xi).

objectivity” (3). As is often the case in his works, the critic lines such claims with literary examples. In this case, he speaks of the opening of Dante’s *Vita Nova*, which not only inspired Barthes to embark on his own literary journey, but also motivated him to call the envisioned project a personal “*declaration of subjecthood*” (3). Dante’s first great work tells the story of its author’s grief. His *Vita Nova* bespeaks a life of suffering, which he hopes to transcend by creating a literary image of his wife Beatrice. In the course of his lecture series, Barthes returns repeatedly to the surprising reevaluation of subjectivity that he derives from Dante’s *Vita Nova*. In a section called “The Individual Against the System,” he states that “it’s necessary to take this old war horse as our starting point: discredited individualism” (42). He then addresses the tension and “the link between the world of ‘systems,’ that is, of reductive discourses [...] and the stifling of the ‘individual’” (42). Although Barthes remains skeptical of systematic structures, he no longer perceives individualism as a myth in and of itself. It appears that he has, late in life, found a niche in which the individual can be expressed without being fully reduced to a typical figure.

When the influential essay collection *Mythologies* was first published in 1957, such a ‘personal’ perspective still appeared unthinkable. In the preface to the book’s first edition, Barthes explains his writerly incentive: “I resented seeing Nature and History confused at every turn, and I wanted to track down, in the decorative display of *what-goes-without-saying*, the ideological abuse which, in my views, is hidden there” (xix). By exposing bourgeois norms as an appropriated ‘nature,’ he sought to deconstruct the system of conventions that enables these phenomena to be perceived as given, unquestioned facts. Barthes’s way of perceiving cultural phenomena as structured by the grammar of a particular system of signification was based on the structuralist assumption that signifying entities have no essentialist, ‘true’ core, but are defined by their relation to the normative system in which they function and from which they emanate. Culler has metaphorically summarized the intent of structural analysis when saying that it regards its object of analysis as a “construction of layers (or levels, or systems), whose body contains, finally, no heart, no kernel, no secret, no irreducible principle, nothing except the infinity of its own envelopes” (69). Barthes’s refusal to ‘think in essences’ and to rid his worldview of ambiguity and complexity drives his analyses. His fundamentally critical views inevitably raise the question of an alternative: how does one avoid categorization, how does one live un-essentially? And, is it even feasible to reject a naturalized ideological framework? These questions recur with personal urgency in Barthes’s late works, where they trace the fine line between possibility and determination.

Barthes uses the example of astrology to dissect the social function that cultural ‘myths’ fulfill in twentieth century France. He notes that in popular magazines and newspapers, “the stars” provide by no means “an invitation to dream” or escape the experience of daily life (*Mythologies* 113). They are, on the contrary, “a pure reflection of daily life, a confirmation of the real world” (113). What is more, they compartmentalize daily life into the “workday,” the “home life,” and the neatly separated and yet fully integrated section for “romance” (113). The horoscope therefore reiterates and perpetuates not only pre-manufactured hopes and expectations; it also serves as a manual for an appropriate and certainly normative social behavior. While “love” is in this context designated a “separate” space, it does not differ from more ‘rational’ sections because it is structured by the same “‘promising beginnings,’ ‘miscalculations,’ and ‘wrong choices’” (114). The bourgeois norm of love that Barthes brings to light through this example can be likened to Illouz’ ‘emotional capitalism’ or Ahmed’s ‘happiness industry.’ Here and there, the narrative of progress and productivity monitors a particular cultural narrative. Barthes notes that astrology is always clad in prototypically progressive language: “if there are problems, they will be short-lived [...] if there are tedious relatives or colleagues to be tolerated, they may prove useful contacts, etc. And if your general situation *does* improve, it will be the result of some course of action you follow” (115). The exhibited rationale is thus governed by the imperative of functionality and success: personal achievement is attributed to individual ‘action’ and ‘choice.’ What Weber took to be a particularly Protestant work ethic can here be rediscovered as a naturalized aspect of astrology’s idea of ‘romance’ and ‘love.’ The “stars” erect a moral “universe of total determinism,” which “can immediately be brought under control by force of character: astrology is above all an education in will power” (115). This means that the emphasis on emotional control exposes the ‘love’ of popular opinion as a myth that regulates and normalizes erotic and familial relationships.

While being well aware of the fact that bourgeois mythology includes a certain “idea of freedom,” Barthes is convinced that every proclamation of ‘freedom’ is already subjugated to a ‘system’ (94). While he concedes that one can neither escape one’s own mind nor invent a new language, one can try to make these premises known and take them into account. By revaluating difference, in complicating culture, and in questioning what appears natural, Barthes traces the historical specificity and cultural genealogy of meanings and rediscovers their original function. For him, the idea of a “‘natural’ death” is, for instance, ludicrous, as there are only culturally accepted, *taken-for-granted* forms of death.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> The same holds true for the legitimization of work. He states that work is placed “among the great universal facts, put on the same plane as birth and death.” Barthes redefines this form of naturalization as

If one dismantles terms like ‘love,’ ‘death,’ and ‘grief’ as cultural myths, one at the same time recovers humankind’s precariousness, its vulnerability. Because a myth entails a “meaning” that is “already *complete*,” it “postulates a kind of knowledge, a past, a memory, a comparative order of facts, ideas, decisions” (141). That is to say, it fixes the individual in the safe haven of self-knowledge.<sup>8</sup> When one speaks of ‘grief’ today, the term surely comes with its full historical—psychoanalytic, psychologized—weight. Whenever it is used uncritically, it reduces the experience of loss to one reductive core, or ‘truth.’ At the same time, one has to bear in mind that because ‘grief’ is a culturally established, recognizable term, it is not easily dismissed. Even if we reject it, we put ourselves into a relation with its established history. Barthes is explicit about the way in which myths work “economically” in reducing “complexity” and condensing it to the “clarity” of a seemingly unquestionable order (170). This motion can be linked to the fact that grief has become a prescribed habitus, a process of clearly delineated stages. Just as psychology reduced Freud’s psychoanalytic grief work to a predictable and knowable process, Barthes accuses bourgeois society of having robbed its own worldview of the complexity, which he understands as a way to circumvent the individual’s complete subjugation.

**Self-Reflections: “freewheeling in language, I have nothing to compare myself to”**

In *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* (1975), the critic resumes *Mythologies*’ incentive to decode the contractual systems that govern language and society. He does so, interestingly, by focusing on the myth of autobiographical self-presentation. The book’s doubly self-referential title alone preempts the possibility of approaching the book as a conventional memoir. By multiplying its referent, it suggests that the writing subject and the written object can never fully coincide. The distinction that the title makes thus creates a disorienting moment, as it questions the authenticity and *taken-for-granted-ness* of an autobiographical gesture that relies on the congruity of author, narrator, and character. It comes, therefore, as no surprise that Barthes declares: “I have no biography [...] Or rather,

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historiography, as a fabrication of facts that fuel a particular cultural narrative’s agenda. In the case of *taken-for-granted* work, its function is “profit.” This statement can be linked to the transformation of ‘grief’ into ‘grief work.’ It shows not only that the former was subjected to a rationale, whose demanded outcome was profit. It also testifies to the fact that the critic perceives both grief and work as effects of modernity’s master narrative.

<sup>8</sup> In *Mythologies*’ chapter on ‘The World of Wrestling,’ Barthes delineates how myths create the illusion of complete comprehension. They do so by elevating the individual to a God-like position of omniscience and thus disguise humankind’s immanent precarity. The fight’s appeal consists in the fact that “each sign” is “endowed with an absolute clarity, since one must always understand everything on the spot” (6). Barthes uses the ‘performance’ of wrestling to exemplify how myths work in society: they create the illusion of clarity by ridding the world of nuance, ambiguity, and therefore of opportunity and creativity. For Barthes such a vision is nightmarish rather than blissful: the sense of an “ideal understanding” indicates nothing but complete immersion in the world of myths.

since the first time I wrote, I no longer see myself" (*The Grain of the Voice* 259). This statement shows that Barthes does not identify writing as a form of self-expression that allows him to 'find' himself, but rather with an experience of loss. This first observation is well worth investigating, especially because the connection between loss and writing will form the core of the *Mourning Diary*.

Barthes dismisses the idea of an authentic, essentialist core identity on the grounds that it would be fully in line with the culturally sanctioned conventions of autobiographical textuality. Interestingly, the critique of seemingly 'non-fictional' life-writing leads to a reevaluation of the fictional character that Barthes ascribes to self-comprehension at large. In the beginning of *Roland Barthes*, the reader is instructed that: "all this should be considered as though it had been said by a character in a novel" (120). The dismissal of generic conventions certainly grows out of an insistence on the plurality of languages and the unoriginality of the text and the self. Barthes proclaims that once you start telling your story, "you constitute yourself, in fantasy, as a 'writer,' or worse still: you constitute yourself" (82). He further explicates that: "you get stuck with the self you have made up; the story becomes compulsory" (82). For Barthes, identity exists solely in the plural, as a conglomerate of often contradictory, dispersed voices and as fragments of already existing, larger structures—or plots. The quest for an identifiable, namable 'self' achieves, according to Barthes, nothing but the creation of an illusory sense of the constancy and coherence, which he equates with immutability, fixation, and death.

Barthes's decision to exclude the 'essential' building blocks of an autobiographical account from *Roland Barthes*—he records neither family history nor childhood memories—works against the assumption that such coordinates self-generate a meaningful life. Barthes once again chooses the fragmented form to draw attention to our '*taken-for-granted*' need for a coherent, consistent, and singular story of self. The conspicuousness of the absences and incongruities that mark his text, such as that of recurring 'characters,' shows not only that conclusive narratives rely heavily on such (normative) constituents. It also proves that such narratives are *normally* brought to life through an ensemble of recognizable subject types that situate the subject socially and sexually, emotionally and economically. It can be concluded that *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* exposes autobiography as a myth that is designed to keep the illusion of complete self-comprehension intact.

While theorists like Margaret Somers argue that recognizable narrative patterns enable self-expression and can even lead to a more thorough self-understanding since these narrative patterns must always be individually appropriated and emplotted, Barthes's earlier works would have perceived these dynamics of appropriation as just another form of subjugation

and submission that would perpetuate the ‘prison house’ of prefabricated meaning. In *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, however, narrative is no longer understood in such a purely structuralist way. Commenting on the poststructuralist emphasis on “the ‘play’ of language which constitutes the world’s reality,” Rylance suggests that Barthes here begins to perceive fiction as way to contest the confinements of ideology (106). And Barthes himself claims that in writing, “counter-ideology creeps in by means of fiction” (*Roland Barthes* 104).<sup>9</sup> How is the apparently subversive potential of fiction to be understood? Barthes statement that: “all this must be considered as if spoken by a character in a novel—or rather by several characters” (120) articulates the renunciation of identity’s singularity *and* the possibilities that a playful negotiation of its plurality opens up. It is interesting that from both of these perspectives, autobiography and subjectivity appear similarly and “totally fictive” (120). Put differently, both terms are “disjointed” (120) from the idea of a stable referent that radiates one concrete meaning. This perspective is paradoxical in that it acknowledges a desire for recognition and belonging that it can at the same time not accept because it perceives it as nothing other than a radical reduction—a death. It is at this precise point that Barthes links self-writing to the experience of loss. While his book’s beginning consists of approximately fifty unnumbered pages of photographs with sparse commentary,<sup>10</sup> which may stand in for otherwise neglected childhood memories, one of the few accompanying comments introduces the theme of loss in an unusually explicit way:

*Once I produce, once I write, it is the Text which (fortunately) dispossesses me of any narrative continuity. The Text can recount nothing; it takes my body elsewhere, far from my imaginary person, toward a kind of meaningless speech which is already the speech of the People. (n.p.)*<sup>11</sup>

What Barthes articulates here, in one of few instances where he uses the intimacy of the first instead of the more impersonal third pronoun, is his idea that a ‘Text’ can never

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<sup>9</sup> For Barthes, critical analysis, or “counter-ideology,” is always endangered of becoming an established ‘fact’ and therefore turning into an “ideological object” (*Roland Barthes* 104). In answering the question “how to escape” such an implosion of a critical point of view, Barthes reverts, as often, to the example of Brecht, whose “ideological critique is not made *directly*” but instead “passes through aesthetic relays,” through a fictional representation that is “not realistic but *accurate*.” Barthes concludes that “this is perhaps the role of the aesthetic in our society: to provide the rules of an *indirect and transitive* discourse” (104). This statement is crucial because it explains the revaluation of the fictional as a loophole and a resistance against ideological interpellation.

<sup>10</sup> The presented images, especially those of family members such as the author’s grandparents, seem to emphasize conventions pertaining to gender and class roles. Yet at the same time, a few of the published photographs appear particularly intimate and personal. They depict, for instance, the author as a child in the company of his mother. It may be that these images were chosen as a way to represent the image repertoire, which cannot directly be captured in language, but which Barthes also detects, at a later point, in the Winter Garden photograph.

<sup>11</sup> This statement accompanies one of the photographs, which comprise the first approximately sixty unnumbered pages of *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*.

express its author. As soon as writing sets in, the author's 'image repertoire'<sup>12</sup> is replaced by "another repertoire," namely "that of writing" (56). The attempt to articulate the inexpressible reservoir of internal (and arguably affective) images thus leads, paradoxically, to its loss. Having clarified the futility of any such attempt at immediate self-expression, Barthes comes to fully dismiss such reconstructive endeavors:

I do not try to *restore* myself (as we say in the monument). I do not say: 'I am going to describe myself' but: 'I am writing a text, and I call it R.B.' I shift from imitation (from description) and entrust myself to nomination. Do I not know that, *in the field of the subject, there is no referent?* [...] I myself am my own symbol. I am the story which happens to me: freewheeling in language, I have nothing to compare myself to; and in this movement [...] the symbolic becomes literally *immediate*: essential danger for the life of the subject: to write oneself may seem a pretentious idea; but it is also a simple idea: simple as the idea of suicide. (*Roland Barthes* 56, emphasis in original)

Why does Barthes go so far as to liken self-writing to suicide? Not unlike Eggers, he reinforces the impossibility of an immediate expression of the self; both authors argue that the translation into the system of language reduces plurality and ambivalence and in so doing 'kills' the 'imaginary person' that cannot be poured into such a 'typical' form. Because there is, however, no other, less reflective way to speak the self, the symbolic becomes perceived as its most '*immediate*' form of presentation: it seems to be naturalized through its translation into language. From Barthes's perspective, this process does not constitute a gain but a loss, since in the process of being written, the 'self' cannot but become defined in terms of recognizable image systems that replace its unique and apparently inexpressible image-repertoire. Barthes thus inverts the idea of the autobiographical text as an extension and elaboration of other, inherently narrative forms of self-understanding: he argues that by giving himself over to language, the writer loses that which escapes signification and would consequently allow him to be at ease in a realm of indeterminate, unfixed openness. And yet, how does this deconstruction, or demythification, of autobiographical writing relate to the fact that Barthes did indeed write self-referential texts like *Roland Barthes* and *Mourning Diary*? In the former, the author clarifies that he does not completely do away with meaning but rather complicated its divided nature: while he alludes to its naturalized and the normative dimension, he also discerns a second sort of meaning, one that:

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<sup>12</sup> Koestenbaum has pointed out that Barthes relates the 'image-repertoire directly to the maternal: "a pet term in his work is 'Imaginaire,' which Richard Howard wisely translates as 'image-repertoire:' and the maternal was the image-repertoire—mind's panoply of *idées fixes*—in which Barthes longed to live happily ever after" (xv).



Does not permit itself to be 'caught'; it remains fluid, shuddering with a faint ebullition. The ideal state of sociality is thereby declared: an enormous and perpetual rustling animates with countless meanings which explode, crepitate, burst out without ever assuming the definitive form of a sign grimly weighted by its signified: a happy and impossible theme, for this ideally thrilling meaning is pitilessly recuperated by a sold meaning (that of the *Doxa*). (Roland Barthes 97-8)

This statement testifies to a gradual shift that gradually emerges in Barthes's writing: in *Roland Barthes*, he no longer regards meaning as mere restraint or ideological reduction. Instead, a second form of 'meaning,' which proves liberating with regard to language, is detected. It is at this point that the idea of the fictional comes into play: because fiction creates its own truth, but never claims an objective or exclusive 'Truth,' it suits Barthes's pluralistic attitude. The critic declares that: "the ideal would be [...] a text with uncertain quotation marks, with floating parentheses (never to close the parenthesis is very specifically: *to drift*)" (106). This statement confirms that Barthes dismisses conventional forms of literary self-reflection because to him, they signify not gain but loss. Looking for an alternative, Barthes moves toward the aesthetic and from there to the literary and the fictional. This allows him to not only liberate himself from the imperatives of (narrative) coherence and consistency, but also to define himself by way of his radically pluralistic, "contradictory" and "dispersed" character (143).

Barthes's drive toward the subjective becomes explicit in his lecture 'Proust et moi,' which he delivered at New York University in November, 1978<sup>13</sup>—only months after his mother's death. In this lecture, Barthes claims that literature works by way of identification: "in figurative language, in the novel, for instance, it seems to me that one more or less identifies oneself with one of the characters represented; this projection, I believe, is the very wellspring of literature" (*The Rustle of Language* 277). Returning to what he once perceived to be the 'problem' of biography, he uses the example of Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* to identify a "disorganization" of biographical writing. Proust's invention of a third literary form, a hybrid of essay and novel, appeals to Barthes because it retains crucial elements of life writing, but shifts and reshuffles them (282). Identifying two characteristics of this new form, he first of all remarks on the dialectic between writer and narrator, who no longer coincide. It is, in other words, no longer assumed that a writing self pours itself into a narrative format without being transformed in the process. And Barthes secondly declares that although this newly defined literary form retains both a self-reflective dimension and a narrative quality, it must no longer be a chronologically coherent story. According to

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<sup>13</sup> A month earlier, he delivered a very similar lecture at the Collège de France entitled 'Longtemps, je me suis couché de bonne heure' ('For a long time, I went to bed early').

Barthes, Proust wrote a 'symbolic biography' that turned his life into literature. He did so after he had realized that the description of his childhood self would create a figure that would differ vastly from both his own adult self and from that of his narrator. As a consequence, he wrote his life as a work of fiction that was based on experiences that he felt to be affectively true. In his lecture, Barthes admits that he, just like Proust, also longs to speak of himself in terms of his loving relations: "it is the *intimate* which seeks utterance in me, seeks to make its cry heard, confronting generality, confronting science" (284). Proust's 'third form' inspired Barthes to create a similar text, one that would be equally anchored in the realm of the subjective and in that of the fictional.

### ***A Lover's Discourse and Camera Lucida***

Roland Barthes's *A Lover's Discourse* (1977) presents an invaluable backdrop to *Mourning Diary*. While Barthes defines himself in terms of his loving relations in this earlier work, the posthumous *Diary* portrays him as a mourner. Thirlwell implicitly comments on the works' shared focus when he says that both are based on the assertion that "nothing was natural, that even desire had its code" (28). This thematic alliance also becomes visible on the structural level of composition: both works are fragmentary, both exhibit a strong interest in the 'novelistic,' and both grapple with the mythological 'nature' of juxtaposed and yet closely related affective states. *A Lover's Discourse* was written in the six months before Henriette Binger died, during a time when she was already sick and in her son's care. Late in his life, Freud admitted that grief might be the only way to continue a loving relationship that was severed by death. In *A Lover's Discourse*, Barthes confirms that every loving relation is rooted in its fragility: its intensity grows out of the loving subject's uncertainty, the perhaps subconscious anticipation of its unavoidable eventual loss.<sup>14</sup>

While *A Lover's Discourse* and *Mourning Diary* are closely related, the fact that they are written before and after the beloved 'maman's' death also turns them into vastly different texts. Although the former resonates with anticipatory and yet still unthinkable, unfathomable grief, it is only in the latter that mourning's full impact becomes tangible. And yet the emphasis on injury, woundedness, and even suffering already increases in *A Lover's Discourse*. Here, two perspectives are offered: on the one hand, the book discusses

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<sup>14</sup> Barthes suggests that mourning is always already embedded in the experience of love. When speaking of the lover's anxiety to lose the loved being, he says: "it is the fear of a mourning which has already occurred, at the very origin of love, from the moment when I was first 'ravished.' Someone would have to be able to tell me: 'Don't be anxious any more—you've already lost him/her'" (*Lover's Discourse* 30). He thus emphasizes that love's agony and suffering stem from an anticipatory experience of mourning. The entanglement of both affective conditions shows not only that both are founded in the subject's potential woundedness. It also presents the lover as an implicit mourner.

the self's 'single-mindedness,' which makes itself felt in its inability to 'feel' the other's pain and assume its perspective. On the other hand, subjectivity is defined as woundedness, and thus as dependent upon its relation to others. When we combine both views, we arrive at the solitary individual's dependence on its fragile, opaque relations. This first realization grants us a first insight into Barthes's experience of bereavement.

In *A Lover's Discourse* and in *Mourning Diary*, the rejection of stereotyped identities and conventional life stories recurs with renewed urgency. The tendency to stall subjectivity by supplying it with descriptive adjectives is applied to the recognizable 'type' of the lover. It could therefore be argued that *A Lover's Discourse* accomplishes a full circle and applies the ideological critique that was introduced in *Mythologies* to the realm of affect and desire. And yet the book does not resonate with the same deconstructive criticism. Instead, it develops a positive attitude toward the possibilities inherent in the abundance of unfixed meanings. It thus seems that Barthes's late work presents the realm of affect as a site of possibility; as a space whose meaning is not already fixed and exhausted, and whose uncertainty and vulnerability consequently creates an existential openness. It therefore comes as no surprise that the amorous subject is portrayed as (admirably) irrational: not only is it given to useless drifting, it is also cut loose from all rationalistic imperatives. Barthes explains that because the lover perceives *all* gestures of the admired object as meaningful and therefore "creates meaning, always and everywhere, out of nothing," conventional systems of rational signification collapse so that abundant, disconnected meanings can blossom incoherently (62). It is for this reason that Koestenbaum defines *A Lover's Discourse* as "an attempt to get rid of 'love'—its roles, its attitudes—in order to find the luster that remains when the stereotypes have been sent packing" (x). This makes it all the more curious to note that Barthes apparently apprehends the culturally determined type of the 'lover' as constructed around an almost unspeakable, and yet intractable referent. This impression is reinforced by his distinction between 'rational sentiment' on the one hand and 'amorous sentiment' on the other (140).

As in the case of meaning, Barthes also distinguishes between two 'places' of love: the ordinary and cultural concept of 'love' is juxtaposed with the drift and ease that comes with amorous cruising. As in *Mythologies*, the rational and bourgeois is dismissed as calculated and restricted while the critic finds hope in the wasteful, blissful, and utterly unproductive. I believe that Barthes returns to these two realms of meaning/affect in *Camera Lucida*, where he defines them more concretely, namely as '*studium*' and '*punctum*.' On the one hand, he describes the '*studium*' as a polite and unconcerned interest, as the rational investment that produces a photograph's intention and situates it meaningfully within society. On the other

hand, a photograph may entail, for a particular viewer, a 'detail' that unintentionally disturbs the *studium's* rationality and pricks its observer. This *punctum*, a detail that Barthes also calls a mark or a wound, echoes the dualistic character that Barthes previously ascribed to both, thrillingly unhinged meaning and amorous sentiment: not only is it derived from a person's imaginary reservoir of memories and associations, it also designates the irrational and intractable dimension of photographic reception. Koestenbaum has drawn attention to the *studium's* proximity to the already discussed notion of ecstatic "bliss" (x). He is convinced that Barthes sought "lacerations" because they disturb "complacent surfaces, and he preferred reality when it was ripped" (x). And it is indeed true that in most of Barthes's writing, woundedness and uncertainty are positively connoted. His last book and the posthumously published writings retract this revaluation, however. This important observation suggests that the wound's subversive potential falters as its pain increases and becomes unbearable. The experience of grief thus introduces a new conundrum: it confronts Barthes with the ultimate impossibility of its representation.<sup>15</sup>

It is important to note that it is not the concept of 'love,' but rather its belated reconstruction as a story and a stereotype that Barthes perceives as harmful. And yet, he does indicate a possible escape route: "when the relation is original, then the stereotype is shaken, transcended, evacuated" (*Lover's Discourse* 36). It is thus not the lover himself who can circumvent the stereotype, but rather his amorous relation: while the lover becomes a classifiable variant of the discourse, its relation can do without language and classification. Barthes's distinction between the cultural concept of 'love' and its unclassifiable, seemingly unspeakable performative dimension affects, I would like to argue, the way in which he approached grief. We can assume that since he distinguished between two forms of love, he also discerned two forms of grief, a prescribed 'story' on the one hand and an ephemeral, relational form of grief on the other. This raises the question whether grief can ever be written without being turned into a stereotype: would not the process of writing it lead to a second loss, namely that of the imaginary reservoir that beholds the other?

Love's relation to the written word becomes crucial at this point. While Barthes claims that affect does not possess a narrative form, it can retrospectively be translated into it. And yet it is in the process of becoming a 'love story' that the feeling of love is "subjugated to the great narrative Other, to that general opinion," which reduces its "great imaginary current"

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<sup>15</sup> In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes nevertheless insists that his phenomenological approach to photography is rooted in affect: "affect was what I didn't want to reduce; being irreducible, it was thereby what I wanted, what I ought to reduce the Photograph to." And he does so, it is reinforced, notwithstanding that "classical phenomenology" has never "spoken of desire or of mourning," has in fact largely neglected the realm of feelings and sentiment (21).

to a “morbid crisis of which he must be cured, which he must ‘get over’” (85). Evidently, Barthes mourns the loss of this ‘great imaginary current.’ The love story transforms amorous into rational sentiment so that definitive signification once again wins the upper hand.<sup>16</sup> As before, the idea of the narrative (or love story) is imbued with a sense of loss. The story, with its built-in drive toward coherence and continuity, exhausts meaning so completely that it is dead to any form of ambivalence. For Barthes, ambivalence is imbued with a possibly liberating potential, since it works against meaning’s all-determining grasp. The critic essentially rejects the notion of narrative as something intrinsically human and instead reinterprets it as a naturalized historical construct—in short a myth. For Barthes, the narrative reduces the imaginary to the concrete, which is why the individual ends up with a story whose structural demands necessitate a detachment from both the image-repertoire and the ‘original’ amorous sentiment that it contains.

When calling the writing ‘I’ a discursive construction and locating the problem of “amorous writing” in “the illusion of expressivity,” Barthes further elaborates on narrative’s inability to express the self (100). He reinforces that writers are all too often unaware of the fact that writing “the word ‘suffering’ expresses no suffering:” felt and written suffering can, he seems to say, never be the same, since every feeling is inevitably transformed by its translation into language (100). The injury that writing performs leads, in other words, to the loss of the individual’s image-repertoire. Interestingly, Barthes claims that recognizing that “writing compensates for nothing” and “sublimates nothing” constitutes the true “beginning of writing” (100). He thus insists that writing affect cannot be equated with a reconstruction of the self. It is in no way conventionally productive in this way, but on the contrary dispossesses the individual of its own amorous subjectivity. And yet, this does not mean that Barthes disconnects affect from subjectivity. While the loving relation’s true irrationality cannot be reconciled with the demands of the ‘love story,’ it is nevertheless through the loving relation, before it is given over to language, that the subject realizes itself. It does so, surprisingly, by identifying its irrational, affective dimension as ‘intractable.’ I would propose that the concept of subjectivity that emerges here could be linked to the psychoanalytic idea of the unconscious. A short example may help to prove this point: when speaking about the amorous expression “*Adorable!*” Barthes explains that “not managing to name the specialty of his desire for the loved being, the amorous subject falls back on this rather stupid word: *adorable!*” (18). For him, affect revolves around an

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<sup>16</sup> Barthes goes so far as to argue that as soon as love touches language, a shift occurs: “from *you* I shift to *he* or *she*. And then, from *he* or *she* to *one*: I elaborate an abstract discourse about love, a philosophy of the thing, which would then in fact be nothing but a generalized suasion” (*Lover’s Discourse* 74). This generalization triggers detachment that accompanies every reflective process.

unnamable, not fully explicable core. Freud believed that an experience of loss that cannot be fully accounted for and therefore leaves the bereaved person unsure as to *what exactly* it is that it has lost produces the pathological condition of melancholia. When we assume that for Barthes, the origin or core of a love relation *must* be devoid of words, it is certainly possible to argue that Barthes here self-identifies as a melancholic lover—and mourner:

At the same time that *adorable* says everything, it also says what is lacking in everything; it seeks to designate that site of the other to which my desire clings *in a special way*, but this site cannot be designated; about it I shall never know anything; my language will always fumble, stammer in order to attempt to express it, but I can never produce anything but a blank word, an empty vocable ... (19)

The declaration that the exact ‘site’ of desire can never be fully known and that language can for this precise reason not claim it as its object reinforces affect’s incongruity with the demands of narrative coherence. Barthes thus portrays desire and its utterance as juxtaposed. For him, the point from which desire or loving affection originates can neither be named nor fully known. Interestingly, the inability to name the referent of one’s desire also plays a crucial role in *Camera Lucida*. A *punctum* can, for instance, not always be traced back to its cause: “what I can name cannot really prick me. The incapacity to name is a good symptom of disturbance” (51). The intractable character of affect is, crucially, linked to its precarious location within consciousness but outside of language. For Barthes, the intractable referent enables affective experiences without necessitating the linguistic expression that would essentially sever the subject from its imaginary reservoir of figures and feelings. This observation brings us back to the question of how to understand the author’s ‘autobiographical’ writings, particularly *Mourning Diary*. Was it anything short of a cruel oversight on the side of the editors to choose such an uncritically ‘autobiographical’ title, consisting of the laden conceptual term ‘mourning’ and the rather conventional and vaguely romantic ‘diary’?<sup>17</sup> Does this title not suggest that Barthes succumbed to narrative’s promise to ‘fix’ things, to hold its subject in place and situate it in the same space of comfort and belonging that Barthes rejected because of its built-in complacency and predetermined meaning?

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<sup>17</sup> Kate Briggs speaks about the ephemeral character of the course on ‘The Preparation of the Novel’ and Barthes’s decision not to publish his lectures because they were not intended “to outlast the moment of their enunciation” (xxviii). Barthes himself spoke about “the decision not [...] to publish the course on the Neutral,” which preceded that on the ‘Novel.’ He said that “part of life’s activity should always be set aside for the Ephemeral: what happens only once and vanishes, it’s the necessary share of the Rejected Monument, and therein lies the Vocation of the Course.” Becoming more specific, he added that a lecture is “something that, *ab ovo*, must, wants to die—to leave no more substantial a memory than of speech” (*Preparation of the Novel* 7).

It could, of course, be argued that the *Diary's* fragmentary form does not essentially differ from that of earlier books and could thus be read as signaling its resistance against coherence and consistency. And at first sight, the *Diary's* structure does in fact reflect mourning's "erratic," "chaotic" (71) and often "discontinuous" character (74). At a closer look, however, this analogy does not hold up. The fragments that constitute *Roland Barthes* or *A Lover's Discourse* are arranged in a purposefully arbitrary way. In the latter, they are for instance ordered alphabetically, and thus purposefully prevent the unfolding of a conclusive narrative. *Mourning Diary's* fragments, however, merely follow a chronological order. Barthes did not retrospectively arrange them into a carefully curated collage. On the contrary, the editor maintained the original structure of the note cards by dedicating one full page to each entry and reproducing them to the smallest detail. At points where Barthes's writing is either illegible or becomes so abstract that it verge on the incomprehensible, footnotes provide contextual knowledge that seek to close these gaps of meaning. The fact that the chronological order of the note cards is maintained does, of course, not mean that they amount to Barthes's 'story' of grief. And yet the temporal linearity proves interesting, as it allows the reader to trace the development of Barthes's grief. In doing so, it inadvertently presents his experience as an evolving process containing a clearly defined beginning, an in itself contradictory middle, and a devastatingly open ending. The increasing hopelessness, which the note cards articulate, turns the *Diary* into an episodic, regressive narrative—yet a narrative nevertheless. Because of its evolving trajectory, the *Diary* marks, despite its fragmentary form, a contrast to the structuring principle of the books that preceded it.

It has already been noted that Barthes moves, and explicitly so, towards the literary, and thus also towards a reevaluation of the narrative. This new affiliation becomes most visible in the 'novelistic' character of his latest works and also shapes his course on the novel: in one of his lectures, Barthes recommends to "think of the Course that's beginning as a film or as a book, basically as a story [...] of which, as a rule, I'll be the narrator" (*Preparation of the Novel* 127). At a later point, this 'narrator' is more concretely defined as someone who is not only "occupied with a story," but also with the "desire" to "realize" his own "internal story" (171). Quite evidently, these statements mark a stark contrast to Barthes's earlier program. It thus seems that the experience of bereavement had a tremendous impact on the writer. His late works take a turn toward the personal and the affective, focusing on the imaginary rather than the political. And yet Barthes continued to be driven by the desire to, as Thirlwell puts it, "discover a form of language that was not a form of power" and that would consequently enable the individual to speak "the full language of his passions" (29).

Interestingly, he gradually singled out the realm of fiction as the place that would allow him to realize these passions without having to succumb to external (ideological) power structures. This does not mean that Barthes ceased to view language critically, namely as an instrument of power. He merely came to believe that this was not its sole function. With time, he began to speak of the dualistic, “ambivalent character of the language of writing,” distinguishing between a common, communal language of the “*outside*” and its individualistically unique “*inside*” (*Preparation of the Novel* 289). It is quite remarkable that Barthes attested this interior language a certain “*essentiality*,” which he apparently believed to be grounded in its intensely subjective nature (289). The new ‘essentialism’ that here emerges in Barthes writing is noteworthy as it clearly goes against the grain of his earlier writings. Can one thus conclude that Barthes, in suffering the painful absence of his mother, sought to capture her essence by writing his memories of her?

In *A Lover’s Discourse*, such attempts still appear unthinkable. Barthes here speaks of the lover’s inability to know the loved object fully: “I am often struck by the obvious fact that the other is impenetrable, intractable, not to be found” (134). Having established the loved object’s unknowability, he continues by saying that the other’s “opacity is not the screen around a secret, but, instead, a kind of evidence in which the game of reality and appearance is done away with. I am then seized with that exaltation of loving someone unknown, someone who will remain so forever” (135). Several things are of interest here: Barthes once again speaks about ‘the action of love.’ In doing so, he first of all emphasizes the performative, practiced dimension of amorous sentiment which marks a contrast to a mediated and therefore rationalized, cultured form of ‘love.’ And he secondly determines that the other’s unknowability is not a ‘screen’ shielding a core that can be uncovered, but must instead be understood as ‘evidence’ of the fact that the other’s essence is and will remain impenetrable. Interestingly, the impossibility of knowing the other leads to the exhilaration that Barthes describes. While the loving relation’s rootedness in action indicates that the loved person’s essence can never be captured, the realization of this essential opacity has a ‘blissfully’ liberating effect.

Although the loving relation’s ephemeral quality is therefore principally embraced and positively connoted, it also possesses a dark flipside that radiates a severe hopelessness. While he insists on the ‘exaltation’ that love’s inessentiality produces, Barthes also speaks about the solitary nature of our ‘narrow-mindedness. He addresses both the lover’s strangeness and his self-contained perspective: “I see that the other perseveres in himself [...] whatever I do, whatever I expend for him, he never renounces his own system” (220). Barthes speaks, essentially, about an “imperfect” identification with the other: “for at the



same time that I ‘sincerely’ identify myself with the other’s misery, what I read in this misery is that it occurs *without me*” (57). While love and compassion are directed at the other, the subject’s inability to know him or her fully prevents it from feeling *as* the other. Suffering consequently always remains a solitary endeavor. It can be written about—and yet its affective force can never be fully felt. In *Mourning Diary*, the issue of this ‘imperfect identification’ resurges. Initially, Barthes merely notes that because he continues his life, his mother could not have been “everything” for him (16). He then figures that the fact “that this death fails to destroy me altogether means that I want to live wildly, madly” (21). At a later point, he asks: “does being able to live without someone you loved mean you loved her less than you thought?” (68). In each of these instances, Barthes appears perplexed by his own resilience. Towards the end of the journal, he concludes: “I was not *like* her, since I did not die with (at the same time as) her” (235). While Barthes is here surprised that he is not more gravely affected by his loss, his own solitariness enhances his pain of separation.

In “Experience,” Emerson states that: “in the death of my son, now more than two years ago, I seem to have lost a beautiful estate,—no more. I cannot get it nearer to me” (200). The fact that he survived his son’s death proves to him that their bond had never been essential. That the death of the person whom he considered a part of himself leaves him ‘unscarred’ lets Emerson conclude that he is inevitably unbound, that all of his “relations” are “casual,” and that he can therefore never be anything other than, in the truest sense of the word, an individual. Barthes both at once grapples with and tries to avoid Emerson’s sense of separateness and subsequent isolation. By leaving their shared apartment unchanged and performing the tasks that his mother once carried out, he assumes her position and becomes her. By writing a novel around her, he not only tries to maintain her, but also temporarily reconstitutes their loving bond. And yet, love’s inessential, ephemeral character does, in the end, have devastating consequences, as he cannot escape the question that his own considerations inevitably raise: if amorous love takes hold solely in and through action, where does that leave grief? And does love’s liberation from any conceptual and communicable bonds not also imply that the loved object’s death designates its complete loss; that a relationship that can no longer be lived does in fact no longer exist? If one takes Barthes earlier considerations seriously, *Mourning Diary* and *Vita Nova* constitute nothing short of a capital paradox: they then stand as attempts to realize an amorous relationship that has already exhausted itself. This paradoxical situation indicates, I believe, that Barthes’ grief turns him into a melancholic mourner. While he fails to grasp the core of the love that continues to hold him in thrall, he nevertheless identifies with and is captivated by it. This raises the question whether Barthes, while insisting on love’s fleetingness, does

not in the end wish to monumentalize and thus solidify his mother's inessential being. Such an interpretation would imply that by removing his mother's image from his 'image repertoire,' he inevitably also sacrifices their 'loving relation.'

In *A Lover's Discourse*, Barthes admits that the other's intractable "thusness" is experienced as "painful" because it separates the lover from the loved (221).<sup>18</sup> At the same time, he appears to willingly let the other's alterity stand: "designating you as *thus*, I enable you to escape the death of classification" (221). If Barthes here sketches a way to love without applying categorical meaning, he does so by linking language and narrative to closure and death while relating the other's unknowability to its immortality. Implicit in this argument is the assumption that love's articulation kills its originality. His relation to language remains, as this shows, highly ambivalent: while narrative patterns are uniform and prescriptive, they are also the individual's only way to leave its internal solipsism.<sup>19</sup> It may be for this reason that Barthes turns to photography. Not only does this medium allow him to further elaborate on the intractable, he even finds a 'truth' here that is both deeply affective and strictly non-narrative. One photographed image of his mother as a little girl becomes the focal point of *Camera Lucida's* investigations. Because he finds that "something like an essence of the Photograph floated in this particular image," he "decided to 'derive' all Photography (its 'nature') from the only photograph which assuredly existed for me, and to take it somehow as a guide for my last investigation" (73). The fatal, fateful tone of this 'last investigation' notwithstanding, Barthes's decision to deploy previously dismissed terms like 'essence' and 'nature' shows how different and how personal this 'last' project is. His confession that a crucial change in his life led him to "interrogate the evidence of Photography, not from the viewpoint of pleasure, but in relation to what we romantically call love and death" (73) explicates that the urge to write *Camera Lucida* was instigated by his mother's death. Yet the 'change' that Barthes mentions also pertains to crucial reconsiderations in his thinking and writing, which he also derives from his experience of loss. At first glance, the revaluation of 'certainty' and even 'truth' appears remarkable. And yet both categories are never imbued with a general, universal validity, but are instead defined as subjectively felt values.

The first half of *Camera Lucida* relates the photograph's evidential character and its

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<sup>18</sup> Barthes' concept of the other's 'thusness' could be compared to what Adriana Cavarero terms the self's "unrepeatable uniqueness" (33). Both theorists propose that both self and other possess an unrepeatable and distinct quality, which the story or the written text seek to capture.

<sup>19</sup> Especially when taking the revaluation of rituals, which recent grief literature postulates as a way to counter the 'silence' around grief into account, the deeply conflicted terrain of cultural signification reveals itself in its full complexity. Where the discussed literary authors longed for a language that announces and recognizes the mourning subject, Barthes remains suspicious of such explicit expressivity.

“*intense immobility*” (49) to the larger “problem of meaning” (133). Not only does the stubborn persistence of the referent render the photographic image meaningless. It also forecloses the possibility of opening it up to an interpretative investigation. Barthes explains that the detail, which becomes a *punctum* when it resonates strongly with the observer, is not rationally produced. As a consequence, it remains wholly “undevelopable, an essence (of a wound)” (60). The *punctum*’s way of defying its own signification (and therefore also its narrative emplotment) can be compared to the dynamics that determines the amorous relation. This, however, does not mean that *Camera Lucida* spells out a solution to the ‘problem of meaning.’ The book’s first half ends with Barthes’s announcement that the second half will be a “recantation,” which Barthes calls his “palinode” (60). And indeed, the book changes its course and begins to question its hopeful vision of photography as a medium that can be expressive without having to be meaningful.<sup>20</sup>

One could read Barthes’s decision to write about love (*A Lover’s Discourse*) and grief (*Camera Lucida*) as a sign of his changed relation to language and narrative: it seems that he no longer perceives meaning as primarily enclosing and fatal, but as possibly also serving a monumentalizing, even consolatory function. Yet I would instead like to argue that Barthes settles on a compromise. Toward the end of *A Lover’s Discourse*, he concedes: “so I accede, fitfully, to a language without adjectives. I love the other, not according to his (accountable) qualities, but according to his existence [...] I love, not what he is, but *that he is*” (222). How does Barthes envision this ‘language without adjectives’? Is it possible that his experience of loss teaches him that he depends on the same language that he so forcefully, and “fitfully,” rejects? *Camera Lucida* and *Mourning Diary* are portrayals of a person who suffers and a writer who writes. They articulate their author’s enigmatic, melancholic grief by trying to speak a both essential and intractable loving relation without telling a conventional story of love.

#### **“The Most Painful Point”—From *Mourning Diary* to Writing *Vita Nova***

The hand-written notes that were published as *Mourning Diary* do not solely meditate on the experience and effect of a significant other’s death. They also relate this experience to the practice of writing and the possibilities of the person who writes. The correlation between the negativity of loss and the productivity of writing creates the paradox that at

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<sup>20</sup> Barthes’s early writing, most notably his 1964 essay „The Rhetoric of the Image,“ already teases out the question of the possible meanings that images can convey. The essay appeared in *Image - Music - Text: Essays* (1978), pages 32-51.

once motivates and disables the *Diary's* progression. As has already been mentioned, the narrative's almost coherent trajectory was surely not so much intended by its author as produced by his inability to systemically disable such a conclusive reading. As a result, two receptive levels can be discerned: on the one hand, *Mourning Diary* articulates grief's "erratic" and "chaotic" (71), often "discontinuous" (74) character as well as the mourner's utterly hopeless perspective. On the other hand, the note cards present the experience of grief as a story that makes sense, despite its inconclusiveness, because it reads as subtly coherent. This tension, between what is told and how it is rendered, formulates the question that Barthes's posthumous work revolves around. While it is in line with his previous works in that it insists on suffering's originality and its impossibility to be expressed in generalizing terms, it also admits that suffering bears the urge to be written. When claiming that he does not "want to talk about it, for fear of making literature out of it," he stops himself short: "although as a matter of fact literature originates within these truths" (23). What can we make of the contradiction embedded in this remark? As in his earlier works, Barthes chooses the literary as an escape route, presenting it as an alternative, almost autonomous space where meaning loses its terror and can be newly reevaluated.

Because most of *Mourning Diary's* entries were made before *Camera Lucida* was written,<sup>21</sup> they repeatedly mention the plan to "write this book around *maman*" (133) that is at times also called the "*Photo-Maman* book"<sup>22</sup> (136). These intertextual references show how closely related both texts are. And reading *Camera Lucida* and *Mourning Diary* in dialogue indeed proves helpful when focusing on certain recurring issues, such as Barthes's evolving perspective on the psychoanalytic theorization of grief. It may come as no surprise that Barthes rejects the psychoanalytic concept of grief. Yet this renunciation alone does not entail an alternative way of living bereavement. He confronts this conundrum, to a certain extent, by delineating his own response to loss, and by replacing the Freudian 'grief' with the Proustian 'suffering.' It is in this context important to note that the *Diary* is not a retrospective reflection that resonates certainty, but is instead inflected with the same shock of ignorance that the discussed literary authors articulated. When adding this forlorn perspective to the chronological order of the entries, it no longer seems surprising that a

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<sup>21</sup> *Camera Lucida* was officially written between April 15 and June 3, 1979, during a time period when the diary entries had become increasingly sparse. The only entry that Barthes made while writing *Camera Lucida* reads as follows: "I was not like her, since I did not die with (at the same time as) her" (235).

<sup>22</sup> Neil Badmington states that: "the publication of the diary raises a major question about the discovery of the Winter Garden photograph. While the journal locates the event in June 1978, *Camera Lucida* refers to the finding of the image 'one November evening shortly after' the death of Henriette Barthes" (309). Badmington argues that by moving the moment of finding the photograph closer to his mother's death, Barthes closed a significant gap between both crucial events.

certain development, though a regressive one, can be made out. Before they begin to reject Freud's theorization, the notes are comprised of tentative observations and questions. While this diffuse approach appears fitting given Barthes's suspicion of conventional conceptualization, it is surprising to find that the diary, from the first entries on, seeks out certainty and even falls back onto 'received knowledge.' Barthes, for instance, records that he looked up the 'normal' or expected time period that mourning a parent should take (19). The fact that he mentions his desire for reassuring certainty shows, however, that he can still not take such received knowledge for granted.

During the recorded phase of bereavement, Barthes repeatedly entitles his note cards with "Mourning" (71) or similarly defining lexical expressions. In some instances, the term is clad in quotation marks or parentheses (137). At other times, it is followed by a colon (80; 81; 95) or a punctuating period (179). For two short stretches, this title becomes a daily recurrence (115-118; 159-168).<sup>23</sup> About nine month after his mother's death, the heading of one single entry reads: "Mourning/Suffering," thus indicating that Barthes begins to think of his bereavement in different terms (156). While he continues to use 'mourning' occasionally, it becomes synonymous with 'suffering,' a term that he links to his idea of the wound. The fact, however, that Barthes sporadically exclaims that "(this is what mourning teaches me)" (129) or even speaks about "the truth about mourning" (130) shows that he does search for a definition, even for a "truth." When bearing in mind that the envisioned novel *Vita Nova* never grew into more than eight single page outlines, it is astounding to note that in almost all of these sketches, the work's "Prologue" appears to know only one topic, namely "bereavement." In almost every outline, this word stands at the top of the page, as if to determine the novel's sole subject (*Preparation of the Novel* 398-402).

During the first weeks of his bereavement, Barthes's lines of self-questioning are still tentative and even contradictory)—both within themselves and in relation to each other. Not even a week after his mother passed away, the author for instance states: "irritation. No, bereavement (depression) is different from sickness. What should I be cured of? To find what condition, what life?" (*Mourning Diary* 8). While he thus likens bereavement to depression, he also renounces grief's pathologization. While this view is in accordance with the psychoanalytic notion of 'normal grief,' Barthes also rejects the coping narrative of detachment and recovery that defines the 'work of mourning.' This having been said, Barthes states, not even two weeks later: "I experience this as *sickness*" (25), thus renouncing his earlier statement. The 'uncertainty' or 'irritation' that his wavering voice

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<sup>23</sup> Four subsequent note cards, written in April 1978, are entitled *Mourning*. Out of a second series of nine note cards, which were written in July of the same year, eight are also preceded by the word Mourning.

reflects can also be observed in the bodily response and physical reality of bereavement that he describes. Not only does he perceive his surrounding world with hypersensitive clarity—with “a strange new acuity” (27)—he also detects an:

Indeterminacy of the senses: one could just as well say that I have no feelings or that I’m given over to a sort of external, feminine (‘superficial’) emotivity, contrary to the serious image of ‘true’ grief—or else that I’m deeply hopeless, struggling to hide it, not to darken everything around me, but at certain moments not able to stand it any longer and ‘collapsing.’ (29)

It is interesting that Barthes describes his immediate response in relation to the common notion—or “serious image”—of psychoanalytic grief. While oscillating between numbness, intense feeling, and severe hopelessness, he does not perceive any of these disparate responses as either sufficient or appropriate. This may be why he does not only orient himself on what he knows about ‘true’ grief, but also tries to “hide” the gravity of his condition and thus implicitly buys into the ‘private’ conception of modern grief. Yet this does not prevent him from experiencing the incoherence and chaos of his experience as a confusing ‘irritation:’ it seems that he in fact no experiences his own *uncertainty* as a possibility or liberation, but instead defines it as a “painful availability” (80).

Barthes’s perspective is further complicated by the fact that while he on the one hand seeks the certainty of a clearly outlined concept, he remains on the other hand unable to accept the psychoanalytic model’s normative implications. It may be for this reason that he describes himself as ‘wavering’ between sporadic, even ‘spastic’ bouts of despair and a deeper and more continuous unhappiness (124). In a similarly indecisive way, he describes his grief as defined by the social “demand” for “total mourning” on the one hand and the feeling that his deceased mother instead offers him “lightness, life” on the other (32). This tension reappears in different guises, yet it always negotiates the “painful wrench” between the continuation of his daily life, his “ease in talking, taking an interest, in observing, in living as before” and, on the other end of the spectrum, “impulses of despair” (60) that overwhelm him from time to time. This shows that Barthes feels guiltily torn between what he calls his “childish desire” for the world and its attractions, and the simultaneous pull of grief “so intense that: I can’t go on, I’ll never get over this, etc.” (136) At one point, he concludes that: “in me, life struggles against death” (150). It is no stretch to argue that Barthes’s existential ambiguity grows out of his longstanding suspicion of culturally predetermined concepts, especially as it once again hovers over the ‘problem of meaning.’ At first glance, it seems that the “painful availability” (80) that grief opens up could be compared to the blissfully uncertain exaltation that amorous sentiment produces. In both cases, an affective

state that is apparently devoid of meaning is described. When Barthes later describes his condition as “pure *suffering*—without substitutes, without symbolization” (144), it again seems that he insists on both, suffering’s originality and its meaninglessness. And yet he does not imbue this meaninglessness with the same sense of enabling openness that he previously linked to the lacerating and yet blissful purposelessness of amorous cruising.

### **Dismantling Psychoanalysis: The Resurrection of the Intractable**

Throughout his oeuvre, Barthes’s preoccupation with psychoanalysis increases gradually. In *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, the narrator describes his “relation to psychoanalysis” as “undecided” (150). In *A Lover’s Discourse*, Barthes comments on Freud’s theorization when he says that: “in real mourning, it is the ‘test of reality’ which shows me that the loved object has ceased to exist. In amorous mourning, the object is neither dead nor remote. It is I who decide that its image must die” (107). Although Barthes here distinguishes between ‘amorous’ and ‘real’ (or ‘rational’) mourning, it is assumed that both necessitate a similar process of detachment. He thus not only accepts the Freudian delineation of grief work, he also applies it: the idea of a ‘reality test’ (which Freud also calls ‘hypercathexis’) that re-activates all images of the loved person is linked to the images that Barthes believes to be contained in a person’s intractable ‘image-repertoire.’ It in fact seems that Barthes’s considerations are based on the Freudian program when he proclaims that “if a day comes when I must bring myself to renounce the other, the violent mourning which then grips me is the mourning of the Image-repertoire itself: it was a beloved structure, and I weep for the loss of love, not of him or her” (31). Knowing that ‘amorous love’ is derived from the image-repertoire and dies as soon as it is given over to a generalizing and rationalizing language, it can be assumed that ‘amorous’ losses are also primarily suffered on an imaginary level. While Barthes is thus more explicit than Freud in locating mourning in the realm of the imaginary, he does not so much contradict as expand Freud’s perspective.

Later on in the book, Barthes however diverges from the founding father of psychoanalysis. He states that for the lover (and, by extension, the mourner), “there is no system of love,” none of the “received languages [...] answers him” (211). Since he views “psychoanalytical discourse” as one of these received languages, he comes to the conclusion that it “commits him to give up his Image-repertoire as lost” (211). This critical turn in his thinking shows that while Barthes was initially interested in the Freudian theory’s negotiation of the imaginary, he comes to reject the psychoanalytical concept precisely for its way of handling the same. While Freud presents grief as a coping mechanism that restores the mourner’s wellbeing, Barthes states that amorous suffering is “an unhappiness which does not wear

itself out in proportion to its acuity” (140). This shows that his perspective on psychoanalysis sharpened with its increasing focus on love and loss.

By the time of writing *Camera Lucida* and *Mourning Diary*, Barthes concedes that he may be “suffering from a preconception” of grief (*Mourning Diary*, 60). As a consequence, a more explicit renunciation of the psychoanalytic ‘conception’ announces itself. Kathleen Woodward has argued that *Camera Lucida* articulates Barthes’s unwillingness to engage in the ‘work of mourning.’ The fact that Barthes discovers his mother’s essential being in the famous Winter Garden Photograph shows, so Woodward, that he reverses the Freudian grief work: instead of realizing his mother’s death in and through her image, the photograph revives her. In doing so, it enables Barthes to hold onto both his loving relation and his grief. It is for this reason that Woodward reads Barthes’s “self-portrait” as a “performance of interminable grief” (97). In doing so, it further “embodies a resistance to mourning, a resistance which entails a kind of willed refusal to relinquish pain” (97). Regardless of whether one agrees with this perspective, the Winter Garden Photograph undoubtedly plays a pivotal role in Barthes’s evolving perspective on psychoanalysis. Not only is its discovery responsible for the ‘palinode,’ which Barthes announces at the end of *Camera Lucida*’s first half. The gradual renunciation of psychoanalysis is also made explicit in its description. And yet Barthes’s critical stance predates the Winter Garden photo, as it is already conceivable in *Mourning Diary*’s assessments:

How my distress is chaotic, erratic, whereby it resists the accepted—and psychoanalytic— notion of a mourning subject to time, becoming dialectical, wearing out, ‘adapting.’ Initially this mourning of mine has taken nothing away—on the other hand, it doesn’t wear out in the slightest. (71)

Barthes describes what he defiantly calls his ‘distress’ as irrational, stubborn, and resilient. He rejects the idea of grief as something that ‘wears out’ over time. In defining his bereavement as ‘erratic’ and therefore both incalculable and resistant to change, he refuses not only compliance to the psychoanalytic narrative, but to any progressive conception. This may explain why he eventually becomes interested in photography: he here recognizes the arrest and immutability that determines his own experience. When going through pictures of his mother after her death, he realizes that one of the most “agonizing features of mourning” lies in the “fatality” (*Camera Lucida* 63) that looking at her photographs does not allow him to recall a complete image of her and instead never amasses to more than a fragmentary recollection. In his *Diary*, he comments on the time period when he started to observe his mother’s photographs. Here, where the experience is rendered more immediately than in the belatedly constructed *Camera Lucida*, he confesses that he “began



the day by looking at her photographs. A cruel mourning begins again [...]" (139). Days later, he records a change in his feelings: "this morning, painfully returning to the photographs, overwhelmed by one in which *maman*, a gentle, discreet little girl beside Philippe Binger (the Winter Garden of Chennevieres, 1898). I weep" (143). The incomplete sentence structure alone suggests the urgency and despair, with which a distressed Roland Barthes takes note of his important discovery.

*Camera Lucida's* retrospective glance reformulates the incident. He here merely describes himself as searching "for the truth of the face I had loved. And I found it" (67). Not only does he render his photographic epiphany in the past sense, he takes a further step into his past's past when speaking of "the face I had loved." The faded picture showing his mother as a five-year-old girl, who is awkwardly "holding one finger in the other hand, as children often do" (69), moves Barthes deeply: "I studied the little girl and at last rediscovered my mother" (65). With time, he explains that what he finds "revealed" in this photo is her "sovereign innocence," her "gentleness" and "the kindness which had formed her being immediately and forever" (70). He insists that these traits "belonged to no system" and instead constituted her "essential identity," even her "truth" (70). How, one may be inclined to ask, is it possible for Barthes to 'adjectivize' his mother in this way? Does he here not naturalize clearly 'mythical' terms? His use of 'identity' and 'truth' categories is, without doubt, unexpected and rather curious. As if to explain himself, Barthes specifies that the photograph's particular truth correlates "with both my mother's being and my grief at her death" (70). While he thus seems to regard both his grief and his mother's being as "essential," the latter becomes tangible in the photograph. The image thus achieves, in a paradoxically essential way, "*the impossible science of the unique being*" (71).

In *Mourning Diary*, Barthes comments on the Winter Garden Photograph's powerful effect: "I try to keep it in front of me, on my work table. But it's too much—intolerable—too painful" (226). Elaborating on the specifics of this pain, he says that it suffices "to apprehend the *suchness* of her being (which I struggle to describe) in order to be reinvested by, immersed in, invaded, inundated by her goodness" (226). It is the mother's "*suchness*" (or 'thusness') that he at once yearns for and dreads because it refuels both his love for her and his grief over her death. He admits to this exact ambivalence when he says that: "of course I was then losing her twice over [...] but it was also in this moment that everything turned around and I discovered her *as into herself*" (*Camera Lucida* 71). The Winter Garden photograph thus stands as proof for both, his mother's essential reality, which appears timeless, and her equally essential death, which its vitality momentarily undoes only in order to repeat it, time and again.

In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes applies this paradoxical observation to photography: for him, the evidential character of the image's referent, its "perverse confusion between two concepts: the Real and the Live," constitutes the very essence of photography (77). It is the photograph's "immobility" that Barthes is interested in (79). While the photograph's 'reality' makes it appear "alive," the fact that "this reality" has been shifted "to the past" suggests "that it is already dead" (79). The photograph's paradoxical temporality thus always presupposes and in fact foreshadows its referent's death. At the same time, it sustains the relation between referent and observer 'across time.' It is for this reason that Barthes insinuates that: "photography has something to do with resurrection" (82). Does Barthes therefore use the photograph as a vessel for a grief that he does not want to relinquish? Does the photograph's way of simultaneously resurrecting his mother's 'being' and declaring it as irrevocably lost encapsulate Barthes's paradoxical experience of grief? Interestingly, the quasi-religious motif of the resurrection occurs in various guises. When the critic, for instance, talks about the fact that caring for his dying mother reversed their roles and turned her into his "little girl" (72), he explains that it is conventionally assumed that "after having been reproduced as other than himself, the individual dies, having thereby denied and transcended himself" (72). Yet he, "who had not procreated," only momentarily "engendered my mother" when assuming her maternal role (72). He does, however, not simply reverse their roles, but also conflates them when defining himself *as* his mother: "henceforth and forever I am my own mother" (*Mourning Diary* 36).<sup>24</sup> This identification with or incorporation of the mother inverts the psychoanalytic ideal of definitive detachment. Barthes holds on to and even reinstates his mother within himself. Yet this peculiar act of procreation is in no way a productive process. It on the contrary intensifies Barthes's awareness of his own mortality to such an extent that he settles into "a definitive solitude, having no other conclusion but my own death" (35).<sup>25</sup> Before this depression sets in, the incorporation enables him, however, to keep his mother alive within him, to reincarnate her as part of himself. It is interesting that Barthes's complete identification with his mother necessitates his equally strong identification with her loss. In *Mourning Diary*, he cites Proust, who elucidated that once "you are used to this horrible thing," namely the loved one's absence:

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<sup>24</sup> In his course on the novel, Barthes extrapolates his thoughts: "reading and writing: they each start each other off; perhaps that's what the Force of all Creation and even of all Procreation amounts to: in the procreated child, I add myself to the person I love." In linking reading to creation and writing to procreation, he portrays both as intricately linked (*Preparation of the Novel* 133).

<sup>25</sup> In addressing this subject, *Camera Lucida* and *Mourning Diary* use strikingly similar, almost identical words. In the former, Barthes says: "from now on I could do no more than await my total, undialectical death" (72). Its successor states, by comparison: "now that *maman* is dead, I am faced with death" (130).

You will gently feel her revive, returning to take her place, her entire place, beside you. At the present time, it is not yet possible. Let yourself be inert, wait till the incomprehensible power [...] that has broken you restores you a little, I say a little, for henceforth you will always keep something broken about you. Tell yourself this, too, for it is a kind of pleasure to know that you will never love less, that you will never be consoled, that you will constantly remember more and more.<sup>26</sup> (170-1)

The ‘gentle revival’ that Proust describes here is, of course, nothing other than a resurrection, although one that not so much possesses a physically tangible as an affective, imaginary quality. Barthes plays with this idea of pleasure derived from grief, reading it as a way to prove his enduring love: “I live in my suffering and that makes me happy” (173). When he adds that “anything that keeps me from living in my suffering is unbearable to me,” it becomes clear that during the year following his mother’s death, it is not yet his suffering, which he finds ‘unbearable,’ but rather the idea of being kept from this love-turned-grief. The resurrection of his mother through a confrontation with his suffering thus initially constitutes the world of grief that Barthes immerses himself in (173).<sup>27</sup>

And yet, as time passes and the *Diary* progresses, the attempt to sustain the lived relation cannot be maintained. It has already been established that Barthes initially insisted on the amorous relation’s rootedness in action. This relational understanding indicates why he rejects Freud’s reliance on the nuclear family and its typology: “and no more than I would reduce my family to the Family, would I reduce my mother to the Mother” (*Camera Lucida* 74). Once this resistance has taken shape, Barthes begins to redefine his affective position. He states that it was through the Winter Garden Photograph that he began to understand his “generality; but having understood it, invincibly I escaped from it” (75):

In the Mother, there was a radiant, irreducible core: my mother. It is always maintained that I should suffer more because I have spent my whole life with her; but my suffering proceeds from *who she was*; and it is because she was who she was that I lived with her [...] I might say, like the Proustian Narrator at his grandmother’s death; ‘I did not insist only upon suffering, but upon respecting the originality of my suffering’; for this originality was the reflection of what was absolutely irreducible in her, and thereby lost forever. (75)

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<sup>26</sup> Barthes here cites a letter written by Proust. See: Henri Bonnet, *Marcel Proust de 1907 à 1914* (1971).

<sup>27</sup> The theme of withdrawal from worldly affairs and desires is a recurring theme in *Mourning Diary*. Barthes writes: “like love, mourning affects the world—and the worldly—with unreality, with importunity. I resist the world, I suffer from what it demands of me, from its demands. The world increases my sadness, my dryness, my confusion, my irritation, etc. The world depresses me” (126). It appears that the ‘world’ increases the pain of grief because it insists on the deceased person’s absence and bans the dead to the realm of the past. It is for this reason that Barthes cannot tolerate “the world” and feels in need of “*a gentle exile*” (164). This desire for an exile from the world may have led to his desire for a fictional work as a possible escape and at the same time as the constitution of an unworldly, alternative realm that would allow for her continuing presence.

Barthes here applies his understanding of amorous love to his experience of grief. He becomes explicit in saying that he mourns exactly that which he loved, namely ‘*who she was*,’ a unique being with an irreplaceable and ‘irreducible core.’ Because his mother cannot be reduced to the ‘Mother,’ his bereavement can also not be defined in terms of a generalizing idea of ‘Grief.’ Barthes’s perspective does therefore not only defy the Freudian scheme of detachment through libidinal replacement. It also exchanges it with a practice of identification that produces flashes of recognition which Barthes experiences as momentary resurrections. Yet the insistence on her ‘thusness’ does not merely enable these revivals. The same insistence on the irreplaceable uniqueness of her ‘being’ turns his grief into an utterly devastating experience. The fact that she *cannot* be replaced leads single-handedly to the conclusion that she is ‘lost forever.’ The sweeping gesture, with which Barthes on the one hand rejects generality and on the other insists on uniqueness leads, in short, to the notion that a person’s death also designates its complete and irrevocable loss.

In addition, it seems that the mother’s originality calls for an equally unique experience of bereavement. When a friend reassures Barthes of the commonality of his bereavement by saying “‘that’s what mourning is,’” Barthes is outraged enough to record the conversation. The friend’s way of conceptualizing his grief “as a subject of Knowledge, of Reduction” disturbs him: “I can’t endure seeing my suffering being *reduced*—being *generalized* [...] it’s as if it were being stolen from me” (*Mourning Diary* 73). At a later point, he reinforces that: “each of us has his own rhythm of suffering” (162). The disdain of received knowledge that defines Barthes’s oeuvre continues to play a central role. Because he understands psychoanalytic discourse as a received language, he begins to renounce and replace its terminology: “Don’t say *Mourning*. It’s too psychoanalytic. I’m not *mourning*. I’m suffering” (73).<sup>28</sup> In *Camera Lucida*, he specifies and explains his resistance:

It is said that mourning, by its gradual labor, slowly erases pain; I could not, I cannot believe this; because for me, Time eliminates the emotion of loss (I do not weep), that is all. For the rest, everything remains motionless. For what I have lost is not a Figure (the Mother), but a being; and not a being, but a *quality* (a soul): not the indispensable, but the irreplaceable. (*Camera Lucida* 75; emphasis in original)

Not only does Barthes dismiss the Freudian grief work and the idea that its “gradual labor” functions as a coping mechanism. As in his discussion of the photograph, he here again focuses on grief’s temporality. While according to common opinion, “Time soothes mourning,” he adamantly objects: “no, Time makes nothing happen; it merely makes the

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<sup>28</sup> A later entry reiterates this statement and reinforces Barthes’s rejection: “Proust speaks of *suffering*, not *mourning* (a new, psychoanalytic word, one that distorts)” (*Mourning Diary* 156).

*emotivity* of mourning pass” (*Mourning Diary* 101). In both *Camera Lucida* and *Mourning Diary*, he distinguishes between passing emotion and enduring pain: “learning the (terrible) separation of emotivity (which diminishes) from mourning, from suffering (which is *present*)” (*Mourning Diary* 104). It is therefore the stasis and immobility of mourning that he experiences as its defining trait. This also explains why Barthes became so invested in photography: it is not merely the photograph’s certainty, but also its stasis that attracts Barthes precisely because it resembles his bereavement. It is in fact the observation of the photograph’s paradoxical relation to time that allows him to articulate his suffering:

Here again is the Winter Garden Photograph. I am alone with it, in front of it. The circle is closed, there is no escape. I suffer, motionless. Cruel, sterile deficiency: I cannot *transform* my grief, I cannot let my gaze drift; no culture will help me to utter my suffering which I experience entirely on the level of the image’s finitude (this is why, despite its codes, I cannot *read* a photograph): the Photograph—my Photograph—is without culture: when it is painful, nothing in it can transform grief into mourning [...] it is a denatured theater where death cannot ‘be contemplated,’ reflected and interiorized; or again: the dead theater of death [...] excludes all purification, all *catharsis*. (90)

In addressing the painful sensation that ‘his’ photograph produced, Barthes alludes to its affective dimension, the *punctum*. The depicted experience converges the photograph’s immobility with its observer’s inability (or unwillingness) to ‘*transform*’ his grief. The stubborn persistence of the photo’s referent, its historical reality, cannot be changed into something else, which is why the image defies any progressive development—any ‘escape’ into either articulation or signification. As a consequence, its viewer surrenders, in the moment of being wounded by the *punctum*, to a feeling that is without the hope of being resolved through a meaningful interpretation. If the photo’s *punctum* has a painful effect, the suffering that it evokes must thus remain as irreducible and unchangeable as the photo’s referent. Barthes’s thus uses the photo’s ‘undialectical’ character to show that he does not experience mourning as ‘cathartic.’ The painful effect of a photographic image that one feels wounded by instead articulates an experience of mourning that is defined by its uninterpretable meaninglessness. The image’s resistance against any signifying motion correlates, in short, with Barthes’s redefinition of grief as possible interminable and definitely meaningless. When he says that the photo does not convert “the negation of death into the power to work,” but instead prohibits the work of mourning from being completed, he shows that the psychoanalytic grief work model promises closure because it clothes grief in a meaningful framework. While Barthes certainly ‘labors’ over the Winter Garden Photo, he does not depict his suffering as a transformation that is geared toward detachment. It is, on the contrary, his suffering that defines and fully contains him.

And yet, even Barthes eventually searches for a way to ‘escape’ the hermeneutically ‘closed circle’ that he has drawn around himself. Toward the somewhat ‘mad’ ending of *Camera Lucida*, the idea of a resurrection is taken up again. Although it is commonly noted that *Camera Lucida* is as much a book about photography as a contemplation on death, academic discussions normally focus on its dialectic of *studium* and *punctum* while neglecting the book’s strangely esoteric ending. Yet it is exactly here that the photograph’s painful effect is most brightly illuminated. Barthes suggests that if the image’s *punctum* is “a beloved person” (107), then the photograph’s “platitude” becomes especially “painful” (107). With regard to the specific example of the Winter Garden Photo, he explains that here he did “much more than recognize her (clumsy word): in which I discover her: a sudden awakening, outside of ‘likeness,’ a *satori* in which words fail” (109). Barthes stresses that this ecstatic, equally bliss- and painful experience escapes language. Once again, the ‘intractable’ dimension of an affective relation stands as proof for its originality and uniqueness, and which therefore establishes its subjective truth.

What Barthes extrapolates from this observation is that the photograph holds the power to express the loved person as no longer temporally divided. He in other words finds a way to resolve this crisis of representation by dissociating the photograph from its premonition of death and connecting it to the almost religious evocation of a person’s persisting ‘air,’ which “accomplishes the unheard of identification of reality (*that-has-been*) with truth (*there-she-is!*)” (109). Barthes admits that the paradoxical combination of historical fact and affective truth tests the limits of sanity. Because the resurrection of his mother’s ‘air’ combines her “absence” with her “evidence” (115), he indeed finds himself at the “crazy point where affect (love, compassion, grief, enthusiasm, desire) is a guarantee of Being. It then approaches, to all intents, madness” (113). The notion of madness is interesting: Barthes speaks of love and grief’s ability to circumvent the evidential and evoke an almost eerie, yet on an emotional level viable, ‘true’ and timeless presence. Once more, it seems that he describes a *punctum*: through its wound, he enters a state of “*ecstasy*” that undoes history, “reverses” time and ignites “the wakening of intractable reality” (119). This ‘wakening’ - or resurrection - does more than counter the Freudian narrative of detachment and recovery. It fully submits to and identifies with the irrationality (or madness) of love and grief, and it further presents the lover/mourner as so thoroughly immersed in his desire to sustain the loving relation that he transcends the certainty of the photograph and enters, ‘crazily,’ into a realm so fully governed by affect that here, the subject’s love and grief “guarantee” the resurrection of the object’s intractable ‘Being.’

When bearing in mind that for Barthes, writing can insinuate blissfully ecstatic states, it comes as no surprise that writing's ecstatic potential is eventually linked to the *punctum*. Barthes moves, more specifically, from the discovery of his mother's 'true' image to the challenge of translating the same into the more permanent form of a literary text. While he initially rejected the idea of grief as a transformative experience and instead saw it as defined by its immutability, he gradually embraces the idea of a transformation—given that it is a transformation *into* literature. Not wanting to relinquish either his love or his pain, this transformation in fact becomes his goal: “not to suppress mourning (suffering) (the stupid notion that time will do away with such a thing) but to change it, transform it, to shift it from a static stage (stasis, obstruction, recurrences of the same thing) to a fluid state” (*Mourning Diary* 142). With time, he begins to replace the psychoanalytic ‘work of mourning’ with his own ‘work of writing.’ While both of these ‘work’ processes appear to resemble each other, Barthes reinforces that their outcome is perpendicularly juxtaposed. When scrutinizing his own response to loss, he finds that there are:

Virtually no signs of an internalized mourning. This is the fulfillment of absolute internalization. All *judicious* societies, however, have prescribed and codified the externalization of mourning. Uneasiness of ours insofar as it denies mourning. (155)

The social demand for grief's externalization has already been duly noted. The explicit social criticism that Barthes voices here proves that he indeed chooses identification over the culturally prescribed and psychoanalytically derived demand for grief's externalization. In addition, the incorporation of the mother and his own identification with his suffering indicate a way out of the author's initially static perspective, as both transformative processes appear to reopen the possibility for writing. Over time, the author becomes increasingly devoted to the project of writing his mother. Yet he does so not in order to externalize, but rather to memorialize her. It is this writing project which in the end determines Barthes's negotiation of the Freudian conception of grief: he inverts—madly and violently—detachment into sustenance and rationality into the pure force of affect. In doing so, he turns himself into a melancholic mourner, who holds on the impenetrable ‘thusness’ of his incomprehensible loss.

### **Spoken Words of Love: “The Most Painful Point”**

Having constituted that Barthes initially associates grief with stasis and dismisses the notion of bereavement as change and transformation, one is inclined to ask whether this attitude does not prohibit all action, all ‘work’ from being done. Above all, how is such thinking to be reconciled with Barthes's ‘grand project,’ his *Vita Nova*? It is, interestingly, through the

“words of love” spoken between mother and son that Barthes eventually begins to perceive grief as something other than static suffering (*Mourning Diary* 39). From the onset, the memory of these words moves him deeply. If we turn this observation on its head, we begin to understand why the absence of “her voice, which [he] knew so well, and which is said to be the very texture of memory” feels to Barthes like “a localized deafness” (14).

It comes as no surprise that he emphasizes practice over conception, relying on spoken words rather than conventionally determined language. We could of course point out that these words of love are linguistically predetermined—and therefore ‘typical.’ Yet Barthes clarifies that when these words are spoken by a loved person, they express the originality and uniqueness of that person’s ‘being.’ They are, in short, severed from their more general meaning and instead elucidate the “loving relation” which they brought to life. Since Barthes claims that affect is grounded in lived relations, it is only consistent that he also locates his bereavement here: “my mourning is that of the loving relation” (39). He specifies that it “occurs in the words (words of love) that come to mind” (39). While it could be assumed that the persistence of these amorous words has a comforting and consolatory effect on the mourner, the fact that they function as gestures anchored in action and are therefore reliant on their practical exchange indicates that their persistence instead intensifies the pain of separation by renewing and realizing it. They thus function as unpredictably intruding, *punctuating* memories that lacerate Barthes’s daily life. Once, while the critic waits to be served at a bakery, the “girl behind the counter says *Voilà*. The expression I used when I brought *maman* something, when I was taking care of her” (37). Stating that the reiteration of his mother’s words brought tears to his eyes and that he kept on crying after returning to his apartment, Barthes notes:

That’s how I can grasp my mourning. Not directly in solitude, empirically, etc. [...] But it comes over me when our love for each other is torn apart once again. The most painful point at the most abstract moment [...] (37)

The ‘abstract’ reemergence of the mother’s loving words confronts Barthes with his suffering in the very concrete form of a lacerating *punctum*. The *punctuating* memories of these words make felt what cannot be told, namely the ‘intractable’ quality of the person loved and lost. In the weeks succeeding his mother’s death, the presence of these words marks “the void of love’s relation,” and thus determines the condition of “pure mourning” (40). That the “most painful point” (37) of grief emanates from the mother’s spoken words emphasizes that the lived relation is defined as the source of both love and grief. And it also reinforces why the conversation, which can no longer be continued, becomes the core of the mourner’s suffering.



In his course on 'The Preparation of the Novel,' Barthes talks about the fact that he considers the weather an "underestimated topic" (37). He elaborates that for him, it is a "false referent that enables people to communicate" (37) or express their mutual love indirectly, by way of exchanging banalities. What may sound almost comical when taken out of context is a matter of serious concern to Barthes, who says that people "who love each other so much" that they fail to speak according to their affective disposition may be inclined to "use the very tactfulness of the trivial expression as a means to express their love; for example, the words exchanged between the members of a family who love each other and meet (in the morning)" (37). Discussing the weather thus becomes a way of expressing an otherwise unspeakable love. Barthes links these observations to mourning when he says that:

Some absolute affections, whose defection through death causes the most terrible pain, can, have been able to move, live, breathe in the gentle triviality of this kind of talk: *so the Weather* expresses a *deficiency* (of discourse) that is precisely what's at stake in love: the pain at no longer being able to talk about the Weather with the loved one. Seeing the first snow and not being able to tell them, having to keep it to yourself. (*Preparation of the Novel* 38)

Affect thus survives—'moves' and 'breathes'—in the 'triviality' of language, in the words that express an intractable love. The fact that the 'loved one' can no longer partake in their exchange turns the 'words of love' into painful reminders of the conversation that once sustained the loving relation. During the recorded time of his bereavement, Barthes dwells in a world imbued with an unforeseeably, lacerating potentiality, where a *punctuating* word may be spoken at any moment. Yet this hovering sense of precariousness and possible injury must not even exclusively provoked by an external incident. Whether engaging in a conversation or watching a film, it always appears within the realm of the possible that "one detail of the décor overwhelmed" Barthes so that the mother's being "leaped before [his] eyes" (125). The potentiality of *punctuating* moments that lacerate *Mourning Diary* can therefore be differentiated from the *punctum* described in *Camera Lucida*, as they are not solely evoked in a contemplative situation. In *Mourning Diary*, it is instead Barthes's entire experiential reality that resonates with wounding possibilities. This is why he defines mourning as the feeling of being exposed and ultimately vulnerable, given to spouts of suffering so severe that they lacerate daily visits to the bakery or the movie theatre.

### **From 'Words of Love' to the 'Work of Writing'**

While the discussed 'words of love' evoke mourning in its purest form, they also enhance the fear of forgetting: "to see with horror as quite simply possible the moment when the

memory of those words she spoke to me would no longer make me cry” (*Mourning Diary* 57).<sup>29</sup> As noted above, Barthes holds on to his grief because diminishing it would designate the ultimate loss of the loving relation. At first, he does so on a quite pragmatic level. By “continuing to ‘speak’ to *maman*,” he turns their “shared language” into “a kind of presence” (190). He further confesses that in continuing to “share the *values* of the silent dailiness,” which used to structure their days, he does all he can to keep their common life intact. In the apartment that he shared with his mother, he does not only leave every detail unchanged. He also notices that only this undisturbed place, unmarked by the incident of her death, allows for a “sort of *extension* of my life with her” (190). These attempts to create stillness, or at least a temporal vacuum that resembles “the void of love’s relation,” are of course provisional at best. The intrusion of language has shown that external reality’s power to puncture life’s façade renders such illusionary attempts futile.

It may be this tension, with the attempt to maintain the mother on the one hand and the despair rising from the failure to do so on the other that triggered Barthes’s desire to create a literary work that honors his mother and ‘writes’ their loving relation. It has already been noted that his relationship to literature, and to narrative, underwent crucial changes in his late works. Thirlwell mentions that in his inaugural lecture at the Collège de France, which he delivered in 1977, he told his students that “his focus” had changed: “he had discovered one place where the ‘fascism’ of meaning could be undone” (28). While *Roland Barthes* by Roland Barthes and *A Lover’s Discourse* already toy with the novelistic and the fictional as forms of resistance, *Mourning Diary* and *Vita Nova* fully bespeak this shift—and further anchor it in their author’s bereavement. While Barthes initially describes his response to loss as dominated by “confusion, defection, apathy,” there gradually appears, “only, in snatches, the image of writing as ‘something desirable,’ haven, ‘salvation,’ hope, in short ‘love,’ joy” (59). It is, however, not the act but rather the vision of writing that instills this sense of love and joy in the critic. How is this to be understood?

One of the *Diary’s* central statements comprises, in rare clarity, the paradox that defines Barthes’s perspective on affect’s relation to literature: “I don’t want to talk about it, for fear of making literature out of it—or without being sure of not doing so—although as a matter of fact literature originates within these truths” (23). While ‘making literature out of it’ is what he eventually chooses to do, it proves enlightening that he initially distinguishes between his grief, which he does not want to exploit as material for a literary project, and

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<sup>29</sup> The fear of forgetting constitutes one of *Mourning Diary’s* recurring themes. When he speaks of the “Monument,” he says: “written to be remembered? Not to remind *myself*, but to oppose the laceration of forgetting *as it reveals its absolute nature*” (113).

his desire to create a literary monument for his mother. While he does not aim to write himself, or even his suffering, he finds it unbearable to think that no monument exists in his mother's honor. His focus is, therefore, an external one; it targets the referent rather than the authorial ego. Barthes's literary project consequently differs vastly from that of many autobiographical authors. In addition, this emphasis on the 'other' also explains why he has such high hopes for the imagined work of fiction: he indeed wishes to draw his mother's unique being from his imaginary reservoir of words and images. The entries' dates show that Barthes articulates the wish to monumentalize his mother immediately before he begins to write *Camera Lucida*. It is therefore possible that his '*Photo-Maman* book' was motivated by his desire to test photography's monumentalizing potential.

Interestingly, Barthes desire for a literary writing project confronts him, once again, with Freud's psychoanalytic program. That he situates himself in relation to its terminology becomes evident when he declares: "I transform 'Work' in its analytic meaning (the Work of Mourning, the Dream-Work) into the real 'Work'—of writing" (Mourning Diary, 132). Does Barthes here retreat his steps to take back his previous renunciation? He does, after all, not only base his own understanding of bereavement on the 'analytical meaning' of grief, but also 'transforms' the former and applies it to the task of writing. As a consequence, the sense of stagnation that determined his entries heretofore gives way to a hopeful productivity: "the 'Work' by which (it is said) we emerge from the great crises (love, grief) cannot be liquidated hastily; for me, it is *accomplished* only in and by writing" (132). This note shows that Barthes indeed hopes, if only for a short spell of time, to channel his grief into his writing. Here, eight months after his mother died and almost a year before he begins to write *Camera Lucida*, he appears confident that writing will help him to 'emerge' from the 'crisis' of grief. Yet this hope will dissolve over time. As a consequence, the "*Photo-Maman* book" renounces the Freudian idea of closure even more forcefully than its predecessors. This does, however, not mean that *Camera Lucida* cannot be read as the mourning son's first (and failed) attempt to write the beloved mother.

Before reaching its inconclusive ending, the *diary's* tone oscillates between complete despair and a guilt-ridden desire for a new life. Only gradually does Barthes integrate these two juxtaposed affective dispositions. As he does, he moves from the passivity of grief to the activity of writing. It sounds as if he commands himself, with almost military briskness, to "liquidate without interruption what prevents me, separates me from writing the text about *maman*: the active departure of Suffering: accession of Suffering to the Active Position" (204). It is crucial that he switches gears by putting himself into the position of a writer, hoping that this change will enable him "to integrate my suffering with my writing"

(105). He reinforces the liberating effect of writing when he adds “that writing transforms for me the various ‘stases’ of affect, dialectizes my ‘crises’” (105). Why, one is inclined to ask, does writing present such relief? Does it indeed integrate and thus internalize suffering or does it express and therefore externalize it? According to Freud, the former would indicate the melancholic identification with his mother while the latter would be fully in line with the dynamics of detachment that the work of mourning performs. Barthes statement that writing is “where I *caught my breath* from suffering” (123) shows that while he hopes to pour his suffering into his writing, this writing also functions as an escape from suffering. Explaining how to reconcile this paradox, with writing being presented as both immersion and escape, he says:

Always (painfully) surprised to be able—finally—to live with my suffering [...] But—no doubt—this is because I can, more or less [...] utter it, put it into words. My culture, my taste for writing gives me this [...] *integrative* power: I *integrate*, by language.

My suffering is *inexpressible* but all the same *utterable*, speakable. The very fact that language affords me the word ‘intolerable’ immediately achieves a certain tolerance. (175)

The note’s emphasis on the ‘integrative power’ of language clarifies what Barthes means when he says that writing ‘dialectizes’ his grief. What emerges here is the realization that language’s uniformity and its determination can function as supportive structures that bind the unique experience to the societal framework of its speaker. In that way, the ‘*inexpressible*’ can be maintained as sacred and can nevertheless be nestled into a signifying system that recognizes it as an extraordinary category.

The issue of recognition is of central importance in this context. Barthes initially states, very generally, that: “each subject (this appears ever more clearly) acts (struggles) to be ‘recognized’” (133). While he once thought that he identified primarily with the public recognition that his books and accomplishments generated, the death of his mother made him realize that the recognition he received from her was at least equally essential to him. It is for this reason that her death insinuates the “obscure feeling” of a loss of self, which expresses itself in his need to “gain recognition all over again” (133). This struggle for recognition is directly related to the attempt of writing a monument that honors the deceased: “before resuming *sagely and stoically* the course [...] it is necessary for me (I feel this strongly) to write this book around *maman*” (133). He explains that he feels “as if I had to *make maman recognized*. This is the theme of the ‘monument’; but: For me, the Monument is not *lasting*, not *eternal*.” He on the contrary determines it to be “an act, an action, an *activity that brings* recognition” (133). The idea of the monument as an act (of

writing) suits the ephemeral, fleeting definition of love as something similarly *active*, namely as the loving relation. While it may seem counter-intuitive to link the ephemeral conception of love as action with the solidity of the written word, both loving and writing share a similar incentive, as they primarily address, engage, and honor the other.

Without a doubt, the *Diary* is not the literary monument that Barthes envisions. And yet, reading through it allows one to grasp the sense of a hope that Barthes drew from planning his *Vita Nova*. Looking at the activities that he pursued in the wake of his mother's death proves similarly enlightening: after Barthes taught his course on "The Neutral" in the spring of 1978, he went to Casablanca for a month. Here, in April 1978, occurred what Barthes called a "literary conversion," which was instigated by his readings of Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* and Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (*Preparation of the Novel* 8). Barthes describes this epiphany as a turning point that allowed him to perceive literature as the solution to his abysmal situation. While immersed in his "*uninterrupted* sadness," he suddenly senses "the beginning of an idea," namely that of entering "into literature, into writing; *to write*, as if I'd never written before" (8). He envisions himself giving up all other obligations and committing himself to one "Grand Project" (8). Upon his return to the Collège de France in October 1978, he dedicated his opening lecture to Proust's work and spoke of his desire to become a writer of fiction. The next course he taught was accordingly called 'The Preparation of the Novel.' Just as *Mourning Diary*, the manuscripts for this course have only recently been translated into English and were for the first time published in 2010. They prove that Barthes identified strongly with Proust,<sup>30</sup> who described the death of his own mother and grandmother as both the crucial trauma of his life and his motivation to write *In Search of Lost Time*. In one of his first 'Novel' lectures, Barthes declares that "for Proust: writing serves as a salvation, as a means to vanquish Death: not his own, but the death of loved ones..." (9). This 'salvation' is, importantly, not achieved by turning the loved person into a fictionalized character. Proust instead expresses his "Mother-Grand-Mother" as an affective figure. For Barthes, this figure "justifies the writing because the writing justifies her" (9).<sup>31</sup> Nathalie Leger writes that: "the novel [...] was for Barthes the

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<sup>30</sup> Apart from their shared desire to erect a literary monument for their respective mothers, another reason why Barthes identifies with Proust can be mapped out. Barthes reiterates Proust's wish to find a new literary form that would transgress the boundaries of fiction and fact and thus undo generic categories. For more detailed insights on Barthes's identification with Proust, see also Adam Watt's article: "Reading Proust in Barthes's *Journal de Deuil*" (2014).

<sup>31</sup> Leger points out that it was in the context of his lectures at the Collège de France that Barthes began to "sketch out the contours of a new life." He here explicitly names "Dante as a guide." Leger also draws attention to the fact that in "*Vita Nova*," Dante "inaugurated a new form—the product of the mutual engenderment of the poem, the narrative, and the commentary. For Dante, that new form was the only one capable of expressing the power of love and the depth of mourning experienced upon Beatrice's

only one capable of expressing what he calls the ‘truth of affect’” (xxii).<sup>32</sup> How is this to be understood?

For Barthes, Proust’s writing revolves around the translation of an affective truth that is validated by the reader’s response. The “overwhelming emotion” that the reader feels produces the “certainty that what we’re reading is the truth” (*Preparation of the Novel* 104). Barthes explains that reading authors like Proust and Tolstoy provided him with such ecstatic “moments of truth” (104). Suddenly, he not only felt a literary text to be true. It also led to “an emotional landslide, a ‘cry’ in the body of the reader who suffers” (104). While Barthes does not directly speak of pathos here, he does describe Proust’s work as the literary form which, “permits saying that affect openly: here *the pathetic* can be said” (*The Rustle of Language* 289). Extrapolating from these observations, Barthes hopes that his envisioned novel will permit him to also “say those I love [...] and not to say to them that I love them.” The idea of the novel offers him, in other words, the chance to represent affect through a fictional figure. This shows that his “Desire to Write” derives from the ‘moments of truth’ that he experiences as a reader—or, more specifically, from the “feeling of joy, of jubilation, of fulfillment that reading certain texts written by others produces in me” (*Preparation of the Novel* 131). The blissful, ecstatic experience of “falling in love with a handful of texts” triggers his for an affective text of his own; one that could potentially produce a similarly emotional response in others (132). With this wish, Barthes’s “Hope of writing” is born (138).

Technically, the affective transfer that creates these ecstatic ‘moments of truth’ is achieved by way of a detail. According to Barthes, Proust “always adds in something concrete, as if he were going to root it in the concrete [...] her hand in front of her mouth; during her illness: it hurting when Françoise combs her hair, etc” (106). He perceives such moments as “*true*” because “the radicality of the concrete designates *what will die*: the more concrete it is, the more it is alive, and the more alive it is, the more it will die” (106). As can here be seen, the concrete detail punctuates the reader. It functions in exactly the same way as the words of love that are at once inevitably tied to the uniqueness of the loved person and yet

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death” (xxi). While Proust is therefore in no way the only or even predominant influence, Barthes became invested in both authors for similar reasons. Both managed, first of all, to break up generic boundaries in their pursuit of a very personal truth. And both secondly wrote, just as Barthes intended to do, about the life-changing experience of love and loss.

<sup>32</sup> Thirlwell notes that “to the avant-gardes of the late ‘70s, of course, this new love of the novel was crazy. The novel, insofar as it was narration, had been dismantled most thoroughly by Barthes himself in his first book, *Writing Degree Zero*, which appeared in 1953.” While Barthes early work likened the function of the novel to that of history, emphasizing its way of solidifying expected ‘facts,’ and in doing so dismantling its cultural, and perhaps mythical constructedness, “twenty years later, Barthes was claiming that the novel wasn’t code: it was in fact precisely the form that could evade power, and endlessly foil and sidestep the machinations of language’s stereotypes” (29).

survive it, remaining in the world as painful reminders of the paradoxical co-existence of “death and love” (106). As a consequence, the literary production of affective truth is a “sudden *bursting forth* of the uninterpretable, of the last degree of meaning, of the *after which there is nothing more to say*” (107). Functioning in a similar way as the *punctum* of the photograph and the words of love, these punctuating ‘moments of truth’ resurrect the loved person’s intractable being. It is for this reason that Barthes defines them as moments “of the *Intractable*: we can neither interpret nor transcend nor regress; Love and Death *are here*, that’s all that can be said” (107). The novel does consequently not merely resurrect the loved person. It also speaks the loving relation’s intractable essence. It is for this reason that these ‘moments’ become the novel’s “absolute justification” (107). They prove that, as much as love is derived from our fictitious imaginary, it also beholds and maintains the essence of the subject. Proust’s novel was a revelation for Barthes because it showed him that by being turned into a fictional figure, a person’s true being could indeed be captured. Barthes wanted to follow Proust and erect a fleeting monument that functions affectively, by way of moving its readers. His envisioned novel was thought to reproduce the amorous sentiment that once existed between its author and its referent, through the reader’s emotional investment. Because Barthes understood the loving relation to be without meaning, it was not so much to be understood as *felt* by a reader, who recognizes his own love (and loss) in the novel’s wounding truth. For Barthes, who believed that the loving relation cannot and should not be grasped rationally, the idea of an affectively true figure spurred a tremendous amount of hope: it showed him a way to both contain and express his grief without having to give it up to the determining grasp of an unambiguous story.

### **Writing *Vita Nova*: A new Life of Writing**

In *Mourning Diary*, Barthes describes his *Vita nova* as a “radical gesture” (74). He orients himself towards Proust, connecting the other’s pursuit of a new form of writing to his own desire to make the rupture, which has already occurred, visible in and through his work. Kate Briggs remembers that “by the end of the 1970s, apparently ‘everyone knew’ that Roland Barthes was writing a novel. It was not until 1995, however, that the facsimiles of Barthes’s eight-page plan entered the public domain” (xxv). The ‘plan’ that is mentioned here consists of not more than eight single page outlines that are both at once variations of each other and variations on a single theme—that of starting anew after suffering a loss.<sup>33</sup> In

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<sup>33</sup> During the period of time in which the outlines were sketched, between August and September 1979, Barthes also kept a second journal, which was published as part of *Incidents* after his death. The segment

his lectures, Barthes remarks on the emergence of a dividing “juncture,” which he links to “an event” that had the power to “mark, cut into, incise, break up” the “all-too-familiar landscape” of his life (*Preparation of the Novel* 4). While spelling out that for Proust, this ‘event’ was “the death of his mother,” Barthes merely insinuates that for him, the same sort of change was brought about by an equally “cruel and seemingly unique bereavement,” which divided his life “irreparably into two halves, *before/after*” (5).

Beginning a new life was, therefore, not merely a choice that Barthes made. He felt that his old life had ended together with that of his mother, so that he involuntarily found himself at a divide—or a point of departure. The question was not whether to start anew, but what ‘form’ this new life should assume. Since he always found joy in the practice of writing, Barthes draws the perhaps most plausible conclusion: “for someone who writes, who has chosen to write, that is to say, for someone who has *experienced the jouissance, the joy of writing*, there can be no other *Vita Nova* [...] than the discovery of a new writing practice” (5). In his lecture series on the ‘Novel,’ Barthes increasingly fashions himself in narrative terms, as if to merge with his literary project. When he proclaims that: “my narrative” is “the story of a man who wants to write,” it becomes clear that his “idea of the Work” already possesses a certain transformative potential. With time, it accumulates force and grows into the more radical “idea of a Complete Break, a Reinvented Way of Life, the Organization of a New Life: *Vita Nova*” (212). It is interesting that although this ‘break’ refers to an event that has already occurred, the ‘idea of the Work’ is oriented toward the future. It appears to reanimate Barthes and entices him to leave grief’s stasis behind. At the same time, it also insinuates a reinvention of subjectivity: “*a Break* means: I shall produce, radically, without concessions, at the cost of total extrication, a different *I*” (212). This shows that Barthes indeed breaks with his old life of academic writing and with his self-understanding as an intellectual critic in order to move toward a work that uses the fictional realm to express, above all, its author’s affective truth.

The thus proclaimed (literary) conversion did never amount to more than eight outlines, which were found among Barthes’s documents after his death. Almost all of these drafts begin with a “Prologue” that consists of the single word “bereavement” (398). In some versions, the term is further delineated, for instance through an added “The Loss of the Guide (the Mother),” (402) or “*Mam. as Guide*” (403). Most outlines are framed by this “Prologue—Bereavement” and an “Epilogue” (398). Within this framework, vague and slightly varying sketches of a chapter structure can be discerned. In one outline, the first

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of *Incidents* that was drawn from this diary was posthumously entitled and published as “Paris Evenings.” Its entries revolve around the possibility of turning a diary into a work.



chapter for instance revolves around “the World as a contradictory object of spectacle and indifference” (398). As if to explain this cryptic statement, Barthes adds that certain “pleasures” may become a way to escape the world’s indifference (398). The second chapter alludes to the literary epiphany—the text’s ‘moments of truth’—that overwhelmed Barthes in Casablanca. This is followed by a single suggestion, namely that “Literature” can serve “as a substitute for love” (398). This statement is in turn superseded by the single word: “Writing.” The third chapter consists, in increasingly minimalist fashion, of the abbreviated: “Imagining a V.N.” Then follows, wholly unannounced, what appears to be a retraction: “Literature as disappointment (it was an Initiation)” (398). In the final chapter, the arch of narrative development implodes and settles on the notion of “Idleness,” a “*philosophical Doing Nothing*” (398). These two terms reintroduce, it seems, the ideas of a drifting, cruising ‘ease,’ which are key to Barthes’s earlier works and describe a mental state that allows the writer to dwell in liberating, unhinged ambivalence. The outlines’ regressive trajectory indicates, I would argue, a passage in Barthes’s thinking: it shows that his desire to write is gradually replaced by an idea of contemplative inaction.

What this shift indicates is that Barthes has in no way overcome his suspicion of language, particularly because he understands idleness as posited outside of language. The unfinished essay “One Always Fails in Speaking of What One Loves,” which was found in Barthes’s typewriter after his death, confirms this observation. Here, he speaks about Stendhal’s love of Italy, which he compares to his own love of music because both are “*outside of language*” and thus inexpressible.<sup>34</sup> It is in fact the passionate intensity of his loving feelings that render Stendhal “*speechless*” (303). Barthes applies his observations on Stendhal when speaking about the “dialectic of extreme love and difficult expression” (303). The fact that Stendhal’s journals imply “a love of Italy but do not communicate it” leads him, finally, to the conclusion “that *one always fails in speaking of what one loves*” (304). Barthes here addresses his own dilemma: he articulates the crisis of representation that he feels to grow out of language’s inadequacy, namely its inability to express and thus to transform, transfer, and possibly elevate his grief.

This essential dilemma notwithstanding, Barthes continues his essay by noting that at a later point in life, Stendhal indeed managed to write “certain triumphant pages about Italy” (304). He eventually discovered a “miraculous harmony” between the description of affect and the effect that such a description can have on the reader (304). Interestingly, this change was brought about by Stendhal’s shift from the “Journal to the Novel” (304). This

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<sup>34</sup> See: “One Always Fails in Speaking of What One Loves,” an unrevised essay that was posthumously published in a collection of Barthes’s works called *The Rustle of Language* (1989), p. 302.

observation allows Barthes to reinforce that the novel can serve as “that great mediating form which is Narrative, or better still Myth” (304). Barthes thus completes a full circle and returns to *Mythologies*—yet only to invert both its premises and its conclusions! He no longer perceives narrative and myth as forms that submit to their own subjugation. Instead, he defines them as the means through which affective truth can be effectively mediated. It is for this reason that the “lie of novels” is finally described as the ultimate remedy: in Stendhal’s case, the “detour” of the fictional enables the “triumphant expression of his Italian passion” (305). With the revaluation of the narrative form, Barthes also changes his attitude toward the heretofore almost sacred ‘image-repertoire.’ He now declares that the act of writing a (fictional) narrative “annuls the sterile immobility of the amorous image-repertoire and gives its adventure a symbolic generality” (305). Although Barthes explains that he dismisses the image-repertoire because it entraps the writer in a solipsistic stasis, it is rather surprising that Barthes here embraces the ‘generality’ of narrative and even mythical meaning. How is this radically reversed aesthetic program to be understood? Barthes clearly hopes that narrative’s ‘symbolic generality’ will help him to monumentalize and write his loving relation. And yet he clarifies in *Mourning Diary* that he does not envision a “lasting” or “eternal” monument, but rather understands it as “an act, an action, an *activity* that *brings* recognition” (133). The monument is thus not made of language; it is not congruent with the text. Quite on the contrary, it emerges in and through the act of writing, is thus performed by the writer who writes. In a second step, the monument can be revived, if only momentarily, by a reader who is so moved by a text that he feels the novelistic figure’s uniqueness, and thus recognizes and identifies with the text’s affective truth. Because Barthes sought to write his loving relation, he aimed to produce this particular effect in the reader. By instigating an affective transfer, he hoped to resurrect and thus memorialize his mother, momentarily and yet fully.

When comparing the final essay on Stendhal to the novel outlines, it becomes evident that Barthes remained caught between two positions: he hoped that in writing his mother, he would build an affective monument that keeps her alive in and through the reader’s emotional investment and identification. For Barthes, this vision was both hope- and painful because it meant that he would have to communicate the affective truth of his suffering. I believe that it is for this reason that the desire to write is accompanied by its exact opposite, namely the desire for an idle pose that would annul this very desire for writing, but would perhaps at the same time function as a refuge from grief. In several of *Vita Nova* outlines, the idea of idleness is supplemented by an image of “*The Moroccan Child*” (401), who for Barthes personifies “Guide-less Idleness” (402). In one outline, the child is perpendicularly

juxtaposed to the idea of writing. In another, which also ends on the note of pure idleness, Barthes adds a reinforcing “No V.N.,” thus relinquishing his *Vita Nova* while concluding a draft of it (401). What does this contradictory structure, this built-in impossibility allude to? A severe sense of disappointment, that much is for sure, prevails across all outlines. And yet the image of the child, who is content in its stillness and who appears in no need of a ‘Guide,’ illustrates the resurgent desire for a condition of comforting ease. While Barthes certainly wanted to hold onto his grief, and to channel it into his writing so as to produce a work that would perpetuate his mother, he at the same time longed for the cessation of his pain and suffering, for a restful pose that would allow him to become fully untied, undirected, and idly adrift.

The outlines correlate with the thematic focus of the lectures series, as both explicate two contradictory forms of desire. Barthes first speaks of a feeling that he describes as a “Wanting-to-Write” (*Preparation of the Novel* 10). He explains that especially in the wake of “certain devastations, the Desire-to-Write (scripturire) can present itself as the obvious Recourse, the Practice whose fantasmatic force would enable a new beginning, a *Vita Nuova*” (10).<sup>35</sup> It thus appears curious that Barthes names a second desire, one that counters the productive fantasy of writing. He circumscribes this fantasy of “Non-Action,” of being at ease in stillness, with help of the Zen word for purposelessness, “*Wou-wei*” (156):

I experienced this state absolutely, not for myself [...] but by proxy, upon seeing, on a day when I was in the car by myself, driving slowly toward Ben Slimane along a very minor road in Morocco, a child sitting on an old wall—and it was spring. (156)

The Moroccan boy, as he is referred to in the novel outlines, embodies the fantasy of “Non-Action.” He stands for a seemingly “unchanging” life that is lived in “humble passivity” and marks a contrast to the life of writing (156). Apparently conscious of this contradiction, Barthes addresses the “Conflict” between “*Writing*” on the one hand and “*Idleness*” on the other (157). And yet, both fantasies become the focal points of the *Vita Nova* outlines. Despite being drawn to the idea of idleness and inaction, or maybe because he knows that he can only experience such a ‘state’ second-handedly, it seems that Barthes cannot surrender his ‘wanting-to-write.’ It is as if his grief holds him in a perpetual state of unrest, one that he hopes to escape by installing himself in a new life, a life that is devoted to the

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<sup>35</sup> While Barthes notes that such fantasies are usually socially coded or “scripted,” thus assuming generic, typical forms such as “*the Poem, the Novel*,” this rather unoriginal fantasy must be the point of departure. The fantasy is, for Barthes, “an energy, a motor that gets things going, but what it *then* goes on to produce *in real terms* no longer has to do with the Code” (*Preparation of the Novel* 11). The desire to write, or the fantasy of writing, thus plays a crucial role in this context because it moves the writer to the active position and enables him to assume a mode of production.

memory of his mother and which at the same time also evokes and revives her. This, however, does not mean that the Moroccan boy does not personify an ideal state of mental rest for him. Interestingly, his liberating independence from the world's demands is linked to his lack of relational ties. He is in no need of a loving mother who guides him—and whose presence he will therefore always painfully miss.

While Barthes initially describes the fantasy of writing as an initiation into its practice, it gradually becomes evident that his fantasy may encapsulate not only a beginning, but also an end. In his lectures, Barthes describes himself as being “at the Fantasy-of-the-Novel stage, but I’ve decided to push that fantasy as far as it will go, to the point where: either the desire will fade away, or it will encounter the reality of writing and what gets written won’t be the Fantasized Novel” (12). He initially seems hopeful that he will indeed settle into a new life of writing. Defining the novel as a “grand Recourse,” he traces his desire for its realization back to “the feeling of not belonging anywhere. Would writing be my only *homeland* then?” (14). This statement comprises the hope that the fantasy of writing evokes: Barthes felt at home with his mother and now feels, as Georg Lukacs<sup>36</sup> would have it, transcendently homeless and unbound. He hopes that the frame of the novel and the possibility of writing a love that can no longer be lived will provide him with a way to continue the loving relation. The idea that it can be maintained in the act of writing is reinforced when Barthes speaks of the novel “as an ‘act of love’” (14). And yet, this does not mean that Barthes was convinced that he could realize his fantasy: “Will I *really* write a Novel? I’ll answer this and only this. I’ll proceed *as if* I were going to write one [...] I’ll install myself within this *as if*...” (20). Barthes thus ‘installs’ himself in a melancholic ambivalence, once more inhabiting the uncertainty that he propagated for most of his life. And yet he knows that it is “possible that the Novel will remain at the level of—or be exhausted and accomplished by—its Preparation” (20). By the time of his final lecture, only weeks before his fatal accident, this uncertainty has lost its aura of possibility:

I’m saying: *to end* and not *to conclude*. Indeed, what would the *conclusion* to this course be?—The Work itself. In a good scenario, the material end of the Course should have coincided with the actual publication of the Work, whose progression we’ve been tracing at the level of its projection, its will. Alas, as far as I’m concerned, there’ll be no question of that: I’m unable to pull any Work out of my hat, and quite obviously certainly not this *Novel*, whose *Preparation* I wanted to analyze. Will I manage it one day? It’s not even clear to me, on the day I write these lines (November 1, 1979) that I’ll write anything else, anything other than those things that are already underway, already known, in the mode of repetition and not of Novelty, Mutation. (Why this doubt? Because the bereavement I evoked two years ago, at the beginning of this Course, has profoundly and obscurely altered my desire for the world.) (298)

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<sup>36</sup> George Lukacs coined the term ‘transcendental homelessness’ in his 1917 book *Theory of the Novel*.

The devastated tone that concludes the course stands in stark contrast to the hopefulness that marked its beginning. Barthes presents himself not only as unable to draw the intended 'product' from its preparation. He also seems utterly resigned to a life that is devoid of the 'novelty,' which the novel was to harbor. While his desire to write grew out of his experience of reading, and of stumbling upon moments of affective truth in the novels written by authors who captured a loved being's 'thusness,' Barthes has apparently given up all hope of being able to render his loving relation in such concretely reminiscent and thus illuminating detail. Knowing that Proust and Dante drew their works from their experience of loss, Barthes initially hoped to transform his suffering in the same way. Towards the end of his life, however, a very different experience of grief manifests itself: while he admits that his 'wanting-to-write' is rooted in his experience of 'bereavement' and that his longing for the loved person is channeled into his desire for writing, he never moves beyond the novel's 'fantasy stage.' Barthes does not specify in what way his bereavement has "profoundly and obscurely altered" his desire "for the world." Yet his resignation suggests that he falls back into the same stasis that he escaped by fantasizing about a novel that would immortalize his beloved mother in and through the engagement of others and would thus also free him from his definitively solitary life.

A year after his mother's death, Barthes notes that: "these journal notes grow rarer. Silting up. So forgetting is inexorable? [...] And yet [...] the high seas of suffering—leave the shores, nothing in sight. Writing is no longer possible" (*Mourning Diary* 213). While this note, written in November 1978, foreshadows the sense of hopelessness that his lecture course will end on more than a year later, it is important that Barthes addressed the 'impossibility' of writing not only while preparing *Camera Lucida* and composing his lectures, but also *before* he began to sketch the outlines for his novel. He thus continually and consistently wavers between the hope to transform his suffering into writing on the one hand and an increasingly stifling sense of despair on the other. The sense of uncertainty that his wavering mood creates in fact dominates his entire *Diary*: yet towards its end, Barthes confesses that he writes his "suffering less and less yet it grows all the stronger, shifting to the realm of the eternal, since I no longer write it" (215). A few days later, he follows up on the (perhaps impossible) idea of writing as a form of relief when adding, in parentheses: "no doubt I will be unwell, until I write something *having to do with her*" (216). And another few weeks later, he reinforces: "gradually the effect of absence grows sharper: having no desire to *construct* anything new (except in writing)" (224).

These notes show that Barthes feels that his pain increases in proportion to his inability to write it, primarily because writing about ‘her’ will recreate the proximity that they once shared and which he is now separated from. At the same time, he finds himself unable to write while immersed in an acute state of suffering. This having been said, he continues to hope that he will at some point be able to realize the envisioned writing project revolving around his mother—and to thus draw her closer once more. Yet when he finally writes *Camera Lucida*, it does not bring the relief he had hoped for. Instead, it is here that he defines “the horror” of death as follows:

Nothing to say about the death of one whom I love most, nothing to say about her photograph, which I contemplate without ever being able to get to the heart of it, to transform it. The only ‘thought’ I can have is that at the end of this first death, my own death is inscribed; between the two, nothing more than waiting; I have no other resource than this *irony*; to speak of the ‘nothing to say.’ (93)

Evidently, Barthes here once more reaches the end of language and its mechanisms of meaning making. Unable to draw his mother’s unique being from his writing, he falls back into the same stasis that marked the onset of his mourning. While he initially defined grief as a devastating immobility, and in doing so formulated an antidote to the Freudian program, he temporarily found hope in the vision of its literary conversion. The experience of writing *Camera Lucida* appears, however, to have disillusioned him. Having realized that he cannot resurrect his mother for more than a punctuating moment, he speaks of his failure to represent her. One of *Mourning Diary’s* last entries, which was written shortly after Barthes finished *Camera Lucida*, addresses his resignation in rare clarity:

All the ‘rescues’ of the Project have failed. I find myself with nothing to do, without any work ahead of me—except for the repeated tasks of routine. Any form of the Project: limp, nonresistant, weak coefficient of energy. ‘What’s the use?’

—It’s as if now occurred quite clearly (previously delayed by successive denials) the solemn impact of mourning on any possibility of creating a work of any kind. A major trial, an adult trial, mourning’s central, decisive trial. (237)

Barthes here admits that he will not be ‘rescued’ by writing (about) his mother. He will also not, as he once thought, be able to transform the ‘work of mourning’ into the ‘Work’ of writing. His ‘Project’ no longer offers itself as a bulwark against despair; it has become ‘nonresistant’ and ‘weak.’ Barthes’s perspective on grief’s relation to writing—and to narrative—has undergone severe changes: while he was once convinced that his bereavement necessitated a new and different kind of ‘work,’ it now appears that it has instead turned this ‘work’ into an unreachable impossibility.

The journal ends around the same time that Barthes charted the *Vita Nova* outlines. Since he died a few months later, there is no way of knowing whether the outlines would have grown into a more elaborate, literary form. Yet Barthes's repeatedly voiced resignation does not let such an evolution seem probable, or even plausible. Although he never wanted to write his grief but rather sought to capture his mother's 'true' being, he seems to gradually realize that he could not fully distinguish both. When speaking of "the mourning that was my identification with her" (228), he in the end reinserts himself in the picture. This, however, poses a severe problem: if he identified so closely with his mother that he never learned to perceive himself as separate from their loving relation, his mourning must determine him in a similarly all-consuming way. Freud found the identification with loss problematic because he was convinced that it prevented the mourner from moving on. While the trajectory of Barthes's bereavement does not prove Freud right, it certainly shows that a certain degree of distance, though maybe not a full detachment, might be necessary when trying to behold—and write—a loved person. The diary, which bespeaks this very identification, ends on a note that is clearly not written by someone immersed in a literary production: "we don't forget, but something *vacant* settles in us" (227).

If identification leads to the here declared *emptiness*, does this mean that grief can never be written immediately? Must we, consequently, assume that the death of a loved person cannot be rendered as long as it is fully integrated into the self-defining structure of the mourning subject? The last dated entry of the diary is the only one that was written after all but one of the *Vita Nova* outlines was sketched. Its final note consists of a single sentence, which reads: "there are mornings so sad..." (244). It is telling that Barthes leaves this sentence unfinished, as if lacking the energy to finish his diary, a 'work' of much smaller scale than a novel. While one could surely read the incomplete, open-ended sentence as its author's conspicuous way of signaling his interminable grief, the depression that determines the entries leading up to this final one indicates, rather, that Barthes resigned himself to his own unhappy ending, and to a sadness that will hold him in thrall without allowing him to change registers. The fact that Barthes fails in his endeavor to write his loving relation and its affective truth means that he must, in the end, submit to "mourning's central, decisive trial," namely that of finally facing the irrevocable and irredeemable loss of the person he held most dear. It can thus be concluded that the power, which he ascribed to language, initially in a dominating, oppressive and later in an enabling, liberating way, fails him as it does not allow him to immortalize his mother in and through its very means.

In the course of his bereavement, Barthes discovered his mother through the punctuating power of a moving detail in a photograph, in the persistence of her loving words, and in the

affective truth that he recognized in the novels of other authors. While all of these *punctums* enabled Barthes to behold and momentarily resurrect the beloved mother, he did not manage to transform these flashes of recognition into a more continuous, constant, comforting form of representation. This is why in the end, they did not amount to more than the other's deeply affecting, yet per definition fleeting and therefore doubly painful presence. Once Barthes gives up on his project of building a literary monument in his mother's name, he is faced with the same wounding reality that he sought to escape. Rediscovering his mother without being able to fixate her proves particularly painful because it reiterates the experience of loss and renews it, time and again. His failure to communicate these lacerating moments crystallizes his suffering because it encapsulates his grief in a solipsistic way and thus sustains it. Koestenbaum's statement that the idea of a wounded, lacerated reality presents a 'key' to Barthes's thinking and writing thus continues to hold true, yet the implications have been inverted: it turns out that while Barthes initially valued lacerations and moments of rupture because they confronted him with his own vulnerability, the knowledge that such ruptures produce, namely that of the loved object's opacity and unknowability, proves devastating in the end. Because Barthes anchors his grief in the intractable and irreplaceable 'thusness' of the loved person, he insists not only on the originality of her being, but also on that of his grief. In doing so, he sustains not only their loving relation, but also continues to refuel the pain over its loss.

### **Putting Barthes into Perspective: Jacques Derrida's *Work of Mourning***

Jacques Derrida, famous critic of structuralism and key thinker of deconstruction, is perhaps best known for having invited his readers to dismantle established belief systems or taken for granted truths. This first observation already indicates why it makes sense to use Derrida's perspective on grief as a way to complement and counter Barthes's point of view. Derrida developed the concept of 'différance' to elaborate on the impossibility or at least indeterminate deferral of signification which he traces back to the ever-changing relation between linguistic signs and their utterance. Not unlike Barthes, his thinking is largely concerned with the 'problem of meaning.'

In a commemorative essay written in the wake of Derrida's death, Judith Butler explains that her colleague's "early work criticized the structuralist presumption that language could be described as a static set of rules" ("Jacques Derrida" n.p.). Not only did Derrida write against "philosophical positions that uncritically subscribed to 'totality' or 'systematicity' as values," he also argued that "signs come to signify in ways that no particular author or speaker can constrain in advance through intention" (n.p.). Butler explains that this does not



have to mean that “language always confounds our intentions, but only that our intentions do not fully govern everything we end up meaning by what we say and write” (n.p.). Beyond this recognition of Derrida’s intellectual achievements, Butler stresses his interest in the ‘other’ as a category of critical investigation. She emphasizes that the theorist “drew on the work of Emmanuel Levinas in order to insist on the Other as one to whom an incalculable responsibility is owed” (n.p.). Her assessments can be related to the way in which Derrida approached loss and grief. Over the course of twenty years, Derrida responded to the deaths of his closest friends. In 2001, Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas gathered fifteen of his commemorative essays, letters of condolence, eulogies, and funeral orations into a book that they entitled *The Work of Mourning*. The monograph includes essays that Derrida wrote on behalf of some of Louis Althusser, Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, and Emmanuel Levinas.

Yet *The Work of Mourning* does not simply include an essay on Roland Barthes. It engages with the other’s perspective on grief. I will use Derrida’s perspective to conclude this chapter because the latent current that structures Barthes’s late texts also determines Derrida’s ‘works of mourning.’ While *Mourning Diary* and *Camera Lucida* grapple with the simultaneous unknowability and uniqueness of the loved person, Derrida elaborates on this unattainability, on the strangeness and ultimate alterity of the other. Just as Barthes, Derrida wants to express the lost ‘other’ without falling back onto fixed images, or a limited repertoire of securely established, significant stories. He appropriates Abraham and Torok’s psychoanalytic concept of incorporation (see also chapter one) in order to develop his own perspective on grief. Speaking from his personal experience, he describes grief as a paradox, as the incorporation of alterity. For him, the mourner keeps the ‘other’ safe inside him, albeit not as part of himself but as something infinitely strange. This paradoxical perspective entices him to speak of mourning as an impossible and yet inevitable task.

Derrida suggests that mourning structures all friendships: it determines the way in which we are structured relationally, or dialogically. When speaking about the French philosopher Louis Marin, Derrida assumes an almost Hegelian position in addressing the friend’s dialectical gaze and the persisting hold that he has on him:

Louis Marin is outside and he is looking at me, he himself, and I am an image for him [...] I know that I am an image for the other and am looked at by the other [...] Louis Marin is looking at me, and it is for this, for him, that I am here this evening. He is my law, the law, and I appear before him, before the work and his gaze. (160)

Derrida was, as this declarative statement illustrates, convinced that the other’s ‘work’ and his ‘gaze’ continue to address and define him. We are, in other words, made through the

other—or rather through the image that we believe the ‘other’ to have of us, and through which we therefore recognize ourselves. Butler emphasizes Derrida’s relational perspective. She argues that he was convinced that we come into being through our exposure to the ‘other,’ who addresses and confronts us. With regard to this address, she explicates that “Derrida relies [...] on a mode of philosophical inquiry that took the question as the most honest and arduous form of thought” (n.p.). It thus seems that Derrida did not only perceive meaning as open-ended and indeterminate. He also sought to maintain the game of reflexivity that dialogic encounters partake in. Butler proposes that, just as Derrida maintained the dialogue with his deceased friends in and through his texts, we must continue to address him. Only if we understand that his gaze has not ceased together with him will we be able to fully grasp our own indebtedness to his words and works.

Interestingly, Derrida’s texts do indicate how deeply indebted he felt to his friends and their works. Yet in his essay on Emmanuel Levinas, he explains that while he certainly feels indebted to his friend, this debt does not so much arise from a sense of guilt as from “an *entrusted responsibility*” for the other. It is this sense of responsibility that urges him to let the other, “whose voice [he] would so much love to hear today,” speak through the words that he dedicated to him (*The Work of Mourning* 204). In order to be able to do just that, he takes up Levinas’s statement that a loved person’s death always feels original and unique, as if it was in fact the very ‘first death’ one experienced. And he not only discusses Levinas’ concept of responsibility; he also appropriates it and bases most of his essays on its crucial assertions. It follows that writing (about) his friends is the ‘debt’ that Derrida lovingly and willingly pays out of a sense of responsibility. And yet he does not pay tribute to them in order to rid himself of his ‘entrusted responsibility’ and indebtedness. By speaking (of) his friends’ work, he does not sever the dialogical relation but instead maintains it. This is why, at the end of his essay for Jean-François Lyotard, he addresses the friend directly: “this is what, I tell myself, I today would have wanted to try and tell you” (241). Butler observes that Derrida’s texts articulate “a longing that cannot reach the one to whom it is addressed, but does not for that reason forfeit itself as longing” (n.p.). Derrida’s memorial essays can thus be read as gestures of mourning that keep the deceased person alive by maintaining the dialogue that once enlivened a loving relation: in his texts, he addresses and engages with the other. In doing so, he transforms the dialogical relation into an intertextual engagement with the other’s words and works.

In his 1994 book *The Politics of Friendship*,<sup>37</sup> Derrida reduces the ‘law of friendship’ to the observation that one party will outlive the other. For him, the potential for mourning is embedded in and a precondition of every friendship. In his essay on French philosopher Sarah Kofman, Derrida reinforces that from “the first moment, friends become, as a result of their situation, virtual survivors” (*The Work of Mourning* 171). It is for this reason that Derrida comes to define grief as an interiorization, or rather as the realization of an “interiority (of the other in me, in you, in us)” that had “already begun” in the very manifestation of the friendship now mourned (46). Even long before the other’s death announces itself, we know that “the day will come when one of the two of us will see himself no longer seeing the other and so will carry the other within him a while longer, his eyes following without seeing, the world suspended by some unique tear” (106). The notion of a changed world, of a worldview modified by loss, is interesting. Why does Derrida choose this particular image? He explicates that grief entices change, and that this change indeed affects how one views and related to the ‘whole world:’

The whole world, the world itself, for death takes from us not only some particular life within the world, some moment that belongs to us, but, each time, without limit, someone through whom the world, and first of all our own world, will have opened up in a both finite and infinite [...] way. (106)

Since we experience the world through the other, and know ourselves through the other’s (imagined) gaze, his or her death also designates the end of our world. Derrida explains that even if we previously imagined a world in which the friend was missing, we can neither anticipate his or her death, nor can we know how we will be changed by it—each and every time, our grief will be unique, which is why every loss is experienced as unexpected, unprecedented, and indeed ‘original.’ It is, as Barthes also suggested, the shared world of a relation that is coming to an end when a friend or lover, parent or partner dies. When Derrida tries to get at the essence of *what* his friend Louis Althusser “is taking away with him,” he concludes that he has indeed lost a ‘whole world,’ a world that emerged with the “unique story” that their friendship and dialogues had built over time (115).

This shows that just as in Barthes’ late works, the other’s uniqueness also plays a central role in Derrida’s writing, particularly as both thinkers relate the question of the other’s ‘originality’ to that of the narrative. Barthes’s insists on the unique being of his mother, on her intractable self. It seems that in the end, he failed to render her precisely because of his insistence on her singular ‘thusness.’ As Derrida agrees that mourning is an ‘original’

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<sup>37</sup> The translated English version (by George Collins) appeared in 1997. In the original French, the book was entitled *Politiques de L'amitié; Suivi de L'oreille de Heidegger*.

experience, he also insists that its “incisive, singular, and unappeasable suffering” should not be transferred onto “some conceptual generality” (172). While he thus on the one hand declares mourning’s singularity and the friend’s uniqueness, he on the other relates several experiences of death and bereavement to one another. It may be for this reason that Derrida’s point of view is, in comparison to Barthes’s, more open to the possibilities of language. Not only does Derrida speak of the ‘unique story’ that binds the bereaved to the deceased, he also admits that language connects us, and that it is precisely through the other’s words that we can maintain a connection. The notion of language, and narrative, thus becomes the nodal point of Derrida’s careful re-conceptualization of mourning: negotiating the tension between the friend’s singularity on the one hand and his own ability to reiterate her words and elaborate on her thoughts on the other leads him toward the idea of the other’s incorporation. In his text on Barthes, which opens the collection because it was the first eulogy that Derrida wrote,<sup>38</sup> he wonders: “to keep alive, within oneself: is this the best sign of fidelity?” (36). Shortly later, he returns to the ghostly idea of “the complete other, dead, living in me” (41-42). In a later text, he complicates this concept of internalized alterity: while acknowledging the other’s irretrievable absence, he nevertheless concedes that “he hears me only inside me, inside us” (117). This statement shows that Derrida constructs the incorporated other as at once dead and alive. He reaches this paradoxical position by claiming that the other is not integrated into the self, but remains an incorporated counterpoint through which the self continues to recognize its own image. While this dialectical image is crucial to Derrida’s conception of grief, it raises the question why he suggests that this incorporation can never be complete; why does the other refuse to be integrated into the mourner’s ‘ego,’ to use the psychoanalytic term? Just as Barthes, Derrida emphasizes the loved person’s alterity. He declares that his friends will not only remain “forever unknown and infinitely secret” (225) to him, their works will also continue to pose open questions. And since it is as much through images and shared memories as through words and texts that the other is incorporated, these questions will keep the other alive and assure his future within the mourner’s self.

It thus seems that the ‘responsibility,’ which Derrida borrows from Levinas, demands the mourner to listen and answer to the questions that the friend’s work addresses. With this hypothesis in mind, it ceases to be surprising that grief is portrayed as an interminably open and even impossible process. For Derrida, the observation that the other is “both only ‘in

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<sup>38</sup> The editors chose to present the texts in the chronological order in which they were written. The essay on Roland Barthes, who died in 1980, opens the monograph while Derrida’s text on Jean-François, who died in 1998, stands at its very end.

us' and already beyond us, in us but totally other" produces the almost unbearable "paradox of fidelity" (159-60). The pain of grief arises, then, from the fact that the other can no longer be reached through language. While the friend had, even in life, been at a remove, he had been approachable. His death, however, "has more than ever entrusted him, given him over, distanced him, in this infinite alterity" (161). Two things are emphasized here: Derrida firstly asserts that the other's alterity is usually compensated through language, dialogue, that is to say, through the loving relation. And because the possibility to address the other, and breach the distance that defines every relation, is stopped short by the other's death, our bereavement actualizes this latent alterity and thus requires us to move from the address to the written word, and thus to narrative.

This, however, does not mean that Derrida solves the problem of mourning's impossible task: he on the contrary insists that any form of grief that could be handled and completed would inherently negate the friend's alterity, and her uniqueness. The lost person could, in other words, only be integrated into the mourner's self if its 'otherness' was previously resolved. As long as this essential alterity is maintained, mourning must, however, remain an impossible "aporia" (144). It consequently comes as no surprise that for Derrida, the "law of mourning" is that it must "fail in order to succeed" (144). If it does not fail, it is likely to become saturated with meaning so that instead of continuing to pose questions, it will be resolved. And once it is resolved, it can also easily be overcome. We can therefore conclude that only a *failed* mourning can truly honor the other's uniqueness and pay tribute to its intractable 'thusness.'

Derrida reinforces that even his closest friendships offer him nothing more than the "glimpse of a secret" (116). Once again emphasizing the other's alterity, he clarifies that for him, "the 'unknown' is not the negative limit of knowledge" (205). Despite this revaluation of the unknown, Derrida wonders how to cope with the fact that the "infinite separation" that already defines the lived relation is doubled and enhanced through the other's death. He speaks in this context of an "interruption at the heart of interruption itself" (206), indicating that grief grants us an insight into the essence of friendship, and thus also into our own relational design. The realization of the other's unknowability thus affects both the relation to the other and the experience of his or her loss. This explains why 'true' mourning must always revolve around an unnamable lacuna: when we mourn a close friend, a parent, partner, or child, the pain of loss emanates as much from that which we know as from that which we do not know, and which is doubly lost to death since it can no longer be retrieved in the form of the answer that addressing the other may have produced. Were we able to fully know the other, and could thus recreate him in our memories or imagination, death

would not leave us at such a loss. It is only because the referent remains, as Barthes would have said, 'intractable' that our identification with it can never be complete.

In his essay on Barthes, Derrida explains that despite the fact that "the other looks at us" from within us, "we do not do as we please with this look [...] It is within us but it is not ours; we do not have it available to us like a moment or part of our interiority" (44). This description of the other as an alien object that resides in the mourner is reminiscent of the way in which Abraham and Torok delineate the fantasy of incorporation. The impression that Derrida draws on the perspective of these two analysts is confirmed when he speaks about the deaths that must have "inhibited" Barthes, "situating places and solemn moments, orienting tombs in his inner space" (52).

It soon becomes clear, however, that this idea of an inhibiting 'tomb' complicates the role of language, and of narrative. Derrida begins several of his texts by asserting his difficulty to speak about his losses. The thinker is torn between two impossible choices, as both speaking and remaining silent appear unfeasible: "speaking is impossible, but so too would be silence or absence or a refusal to share one's sadness" (72). Gradually, he comes to the conclusion that "this being at a loss also has to do with a duty: to let the friend speak, to turn speech over to him, his speech, and especially not to take it from him, not to take it in his place" (95). By letting the other speak through him, or from within himself, he circumvents the difficulty that an appropriation of and identification with the other would produce. This decision shows that Derrida is aware of the tension between his responsibility for the other and the danger of exploiting the other's work for his own purposes. He confronts the risk of narcissistically talking about his own sorrow while trying to commemorate the other by addressing the friend directly: in doing so, he keeps the separation that defined their lived relationship intact. By resisting the urge to transform the distinction between 'you' and 'I' into a unifying 'we,' he reenacts the relation's dialectical structure. This reenactment does not only allow him to maintain the dialogue that enabled their mutual recognition. It also becomes his way of keeping the other distinct in order to honor his or her difference—or 'différance.'

And yet Derrida does not merely want to address the other. He declares that he would also like "to speak *for* the other whom one loves and admires, before speaking *of* him" (201). At the same time, he knows that "from now on we are destined to speak *of* Paul de Man, instead of speaking *to* and *with* him" (72). It is from the realization that direct communication has ceased to be a possibility that the "wound" of mourning arises (72). Derrida uses decidedly Barthesian language in this context: he describes grief as a wound and defines the mourner as someone who carries this wound within him. Yet Derrida does not

enter into the stagnation that befell the friend. While Barthes held onto the laceration of grief because it allowed him to continually identify with the loving relation, Derrida finds a way to surmount the stasis that this identification produced: his way of (linguistically) incorporating the other allows him to let this other speak—and to thus maintain the loving relation without becoming fully subsumed and in fact fatally injured by its absence. The difference between Barthes's identification and Derrida's incorporation may appear insignificant at first glance. Both thinkers certainly present themselves as melancholic mourners who insist on their woundedness and the continuing sense of injury that the loss of a loving relation that they identify with caused. While it, however, seems that Barthes becomes oppressed by his melancholic condition, Derrida uses the same to articulate his own impressionability. By using the other's words without trying to make them his own, he achieves what Barthes failed to do: insisting on the other's alterity, he finds a way to revive the friend whom he loves without, however, transforming the other into himself.

It is, therefore, interesting that Derrida feels torn between two impossible choices when addressing a deceased friend: he knows that he could reduce his efforts to quoting the other in order to assure friend's integrity and his own innocence. Knowing, however, that such a gesture would achieve nothing beyond the confirmation of the other's death, he also considers the opposite option, namely to speak solely from his own perspective. Yet this second choice would run the same risk of enhancing the friend irrevocable absence. In the end, Derrida combines both choices and decides that citing his friends allows him to let them have "the last word" (100). Yet he also reverts to the practice of citing the other because, as he says: "I like, in transcribing, to underwrite and listen to his voice" (100). By listening to the other's voice and retracing and reiterating his thoughts, Derrida performs an incorporation of the friend without fully identifying with him. The incorporation that the citation achieves does therefore not only recreate the dialogic relation, it also revives the other as a distinct and irreducible counterpart that is located within the speaker. It could thus be argued that he borrows the others' words (interestingly often choosing passages that pertain to issues of loss and grief) in order to circumvent his own authority and speak *of* rather than *to* or *for* them. Derrida's essay about Barthes elucidates the great care with which he carries out these gestures of citation. Not only does Derrida adopt Barthes's terminology, he also honors the friend's focus on fragmentation and his almost obsessive fear of killing a thought by translating it into an established concept. When he states that he "must leave these thoughts for Roland Barthes fragmentary" in order to honor them as a "punctuated yet open interruption" (35), we can indeed hear Barthes's voice emerge in that of the friend who commemorates him.

While Derrida reinforces that he writes ‘for’ the friend and even speaks ‘from’ his perspective, he also acknowledges that the friend remains out of reach. This realization renews the question of the address: can he really speak to someone so utterly unattainable? Or must he instead direct his words at the other *in* himself? Derrida describes grief as an incorporation of alterity. Yet this does not mean that the other remains unchanged in and through this incorporation. Only when keeping in mind that our limited knowledge of the other will always prevent a full incorporation do we understand how Derrida arrives at his idea of mourning as an impossible task. At the same time, he appears deeply interested in following the strange trace of the other within him. With reference to Barthes, he defines the incorporated other as a punctum, a wound, and a lacerating interruption. Following in his friend’s footsteps, he not only speaks out against a “return to the coded,” but instead seeks to prevent “the singular and flawless wound” of mourning “from neatly and cleverly sealing up” (44). He thus joins Barthes in speaking out against an all too definitive conceptualization of mourning. For both thinkers, aiming toward closure and consolation runs the risk of negating the other’s singularity and uniqueness. Derrida does therefore not deploy the idea of incorporation in order to divert from Barthes, but uses it to elaborate on the other’s idea of mourning as an experience of lasting laceration.

In *The Work of Mourning’s* final text, Derrida returns to the idea of grief as both inconceivable and endless. He mourns Lyotard by reiterating the other’s statement that “there shall be no mourning” (218). Derrida interprets this as a statement against grief’s institutionalization, which he believes to “run the risk of securing the forgetting” and “protecting against memory instead of keeping it” (218). As with regard to Barthes, Derrida here cites a passage from Lyotard’s work that emphasizes resistance against an organized form of mourning. By rejecting the psychoanalytical categorization of grief as ‘grief work’ and insisting on “the perpetual impossibility of mourning,” he opens the door for “an inconsolability or irreparability” that not only describes the incorporation of an impossibility, but that also suggests that mourning is, in fact, endless (218).

Since mourning is deeply embedded in all of our relations and thus pertains directly to the way in which we communicate with each other, it should thus not be set apart—or given its own language. In one of the rare instances where Derrida explicitly confronts psychoanalytic theory, he points out that melancholia is often presented as a case of failed mourning: “in the era of psychoanalysis, we all of course speak [...] about the ‘successful’ work of mourning—or, inversely, as if it were precisely the contrary, about a ‘melancholia’ that would signal the failure of such work” (144). Evidently, Derrida invites his readers to question this premise. He does not only suggest that mourning is, essentially, “interminable.



Inconsolable. Irreconcilable” (142). He also links Freud’s ‘work of mourning’ to a ‘force’ or ‘drive’ that he downrightly rejects. When speaking about Marin’s writing, he states that he has here detected “a work without force, a work that would have to work at renouncing force, its own force, a work that would have to work at failure, and thus at mourning and getting over force” (144). The ‘work’ that Derrida has in mind, and which he replaces the psychoanalytical ‘work of mourning’ with, is unproductive; it *works* at nothing but its own resistance against a force that would propel it toward a simplifying resolution. While fully renouncing this force appears impossible, it is exactly this impossibility that strikes at the heart of Derrida’s reconsideration of what it means to mourn: in the end, he offers us a way to remain at a loss, to let mourning fail and thus pay tribute to our own indebtedness.

In concluding this chapter, I would like to return to Barthes and his distinction between the passing emotion of grief on the one hand and its enduring pain on the other. Barthes argues that although the emotional distress and sadness caused by the loss of a loved person may subside, the pain of separation is sustained. It remains as uncontrollable, unpredictable, and unknowable as the loving relation, from which it emanated. Wounding moments, caused by a *punctuating* detail in visual images, spoken words, or written texts that evoke the other, may certainly occur more sporadically over time. Yet when they recur, they reconstitute the loved person imaginarily and thus fully, so that the pain of separation is as lacerating as in the immediate wake of the loved person’s death. This is what the distinction between passing emotion and enduring pain amounts to in the end: it proves, paradoxically, that while grief’s appearance may change, the loss that it designates remains as immutable and meaningless as, to use Barthes’s words, “a stone” (*Mourning Diary* 111). Barthes knew, from the onset, that he could not write a ‘story’ of loss. And yet he hoped, at least for a while, to elevate his grief by immortalizing his mother. His failure to represent her in such a melancholic way leaves him wholly dependent on unpredictably recurring moments of recognition which he experiences as equally bliss- and painful because they not only revive his beloved ‘maman’ but also reinforce the reality of her death and thus refuel his grief.

#### IV. Traumatic Grief and Melancholic Mourning in Siri Hustvedt's (Non)Fiction

The work of American author and essayist Siri Hustvedt, whose 2003 novel *What I Loved* earned her international recognition and critical praise, is deeply invested in processes of relational identity formation. In Hustvedt's books, identity is cast as a product of the dynamic interaction *between* people. While its full formulation depends on linguistic patterns, it grows out of emotional bonds, particularly a person's earliest attachments. It follows that Hustvedt draws characters not as singular units, but as permeable and impressionable entities. Her notion of identity as always in flux, and as dependent upon interpersonal relations, consequently motivates and disables her characters; it makes and undoes them. In *What I Loved*, one of the characters summarizes the author's agenda when she declares that: "It isn't: I think, therefore I am. It's: I am because you are" (91).

According to Christine Marks, whose 2014 monograph explores the theme of relationality in Hustvedt's writings, the author's works imply that "happiness is generally a product of fulfilled relationships" (32). Yet this rationale is also often inverted so that "the reader becomes aware of that happiness most keenly through the aftermath of its loss" (32). And indeed, Hustvedt often uses themes of loss and grief to showcase her characters' mutual interdependence: since relationships are portrayed as constitutive to a person's identity, their loss can have a severely destabilizing effect on the bereaved person's sense of self. While it seems that the withdrawal or sudden absence of a loved person's recognition has a particularly harmful effect on the psyche of young children, adults are also portrayed as dependent on their dialogical ties. It is for this reason that I will, in the following, argue that the permeability and fragility that characterizes Hustvedt's relational identity model manifests itself in and through her characters' experience of grief and the deep impact that mourning has on their inherently instable sense of selves.

In order to do just that, the following chapter will illustrate that Hustvedt develops, if perhaps inadvertently, figures who are steeped in melancholic grief. Since the author's intricate knowledge of psychoanalytic discourses leaves its imprint on the psychological design of her characters, her mourning figures are either defined by their strong identification with or a felt ambivalence toward the deceased person. Knowing that Freud used these two traits—identification and ambivalence—to define the melancholic condition, it makes sense to describe the author's fictional figures as melancholics. This observation is further validated by the fact that although Hustvedt's work is rooted in psychoanalytical theory, her characters do not process grief by moving through Freud's prescriptive 'grief work.' It appears, quite on the contrary, as if their ambivalent

relationship to the loved person results, quite simply, in an equally complex, ambiguous and certainly melancholic mourning process. Yet Freud does not merely claim that the pathological condition of melancholia results from the mourner's ambivalent relationship to the lost object. In *Mourning and Melancholia*, he also suggests that the bereaved person does not know what precisely it is that she has lost in the other. This makes it all the more interesting that the unknown—and unknowable—dimension of the 'other' plays a crucial role in Hustvedt's works. Her interest in the hidden caches of the psyche clearly derives from her interest in the unconscious and the impact that a person's earliest emotional bonds have on her psychological development. This shows that although Hustvedt's characters are certainly based on psychoanalytic assumptions, they do not act according to the original grief work model, but rather renegotiate and even reverse the Freudian program. Hustvedt's mourners deeply identify with and thus internalize their not fully comprehensible losses, which is precisely why they become melancholic mourners.

Yet Hustvedt's fiction and nonfiction is not solely rooted in psychoanalytic theory; it references a range of theoretical and philosophical schools. While psychoanalysis certainly lays the author's theoretical foundation, she thus also departs from it to engage in Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology or Martin Buber's dialogism. In addition, Hustvedt is deeply interested in neuroscientific discourses and discusses research that was recently conducted in the emerging fields of biopsychology and neuropsychology.<sup>1</sup> While the theoretical sources that inspire her characters are thus quite diverse, they all emphasize the author's overarching insistence on relationality and connectedness. Her characters do therefore not only showcase that body and mind can never be fully distinguished, they are also not cast as self-reliant, solipsistic individuals.

With these considerations in mind, it comes as no surprise that Hustvedt's respective books bear a close thematic resemblance to each other. While their storylines are quite distinct, their narrative perspectives all resonate with the same sense of dialogism and connectedness. And since they in addition openly display and integrate the discourses that motivate them, it is easy to trace the evolution of Hustvedt's theoretical affiliations. While she, for instances, branches out from psychoanalysis and moves to other fields, such as

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<sup>1</sup> The field of neuropsychology combines neuroscience and psychoanalysis to reach a better understanding of that which is commonly referred to as the 'mind.' Neuropsychology, which is sometimes also called neuropsychology, relates the workings of the biological brain to psychological functions and behavioral patterns. The International Neuropsychology Society was founded by Mark Solms in 2000. It is affiliated with the New York Psychoanalytic Institute. Solms has written and published widely on the subject of neuropsychology. See for instance: *The Brain and the Inner World: An Introduction to the Neuroscience of Subjective Experience* (2002) or an essay, co-written with Jaak Panksepp: "What is neuropsychology? Clinically relevant studies of the minded brain. *Trends in Cognitive Science*" (2012).

phenomenology or neuroscience, she always eventually returns to Freud's most essential assumptions. This dynamic approach explains why each of Hustvedt's grieving characters processes loss differently—and why they nevertheless all come to the conclusion that their wounds of mourning can only heal when they are exposed to those of others, who have faced similarly existential losses. The following analysis will demonstrate that Hustvedt uses the example of grief to make a point of the frightening sense of openness and vulnerability that determines the mourner's world-view, but that in fact also lies at the heart of every individual's relationally bound identity.

It is interesting to note that in Hustvedt's early works, grief plays a minor and yet already distinct role. In her second book, the 1996 novella *The Enchantment of Lili Dahl*, the notion of 'ordinary' grief emerges for the first time. When an elderly woman called Mabel talks about her deceased husband, who died as a young man, she states:

The grief was terrible, but it was ordinary, if I can use that word. It wasn't anybody's fault that Evan died. People die. They die suddenly like Evan or slowly like my father, and I wasn't so stupid as to ask, 'Why Evan? Why the person I loved most in the world?' Why not, after all? It's when you've made your own grief, when you're guilty, that it can't be borne. (175)

Despite the fact that Mabel calls her grief 'ordinary' and even bearable, the secluded, solitary life that she has led tells a different story. It proves that her loss did indeed deeply rupture her life: despite the fact that she has accepted it, she never fully recovered from her early bereavement. And yet the theme of grief is, at this point of Hustvedt's career, not investigated more thoroughly. Yet her more recent works, all of which were written after September 2001, are increasingly tinged with an atmosphere of traumatic grief. While not all of the three novels that she published since 9/11 make this incision into the United States' political and cultural landscape explicit, they are all clearly affected by it. *What I Loved* (2003) revolves around the deaths of two of its main characters, the eleven-year old son and the best friend of the book's narrator, Leo Hertzberg. In the subsequently published novel *The Sorrows of an American* (2008), all main figures are impaired by the loss of a parent or a partner. The continuing presence of the dead in the form of ghostly (and often welcomed) apparitions is, in fact, experienced by the entire cast of characters. In Hustvedt's most recent novel, *The Blazing World* (2014), the protagonist Harriet Burden begins to tell her story in the immediate aftermath of her husband's sudden death. Her ambivalent relationship to him determines her grief, which oscillates between deep despair and a strong sense of liberation and self-reinvention.

While *What I Loved* does not explicitly reference the terrorist attacks, the two subsequent novels do. The fact that grief comes to increasingly determine Hustvedt's works can therefore at least in part be linked to the fact that the New York-based author, who was a first-hand witness to the attacks, felt the need to process the intersecting realities of national and individual grief in and through her narratives. In her essay collection *A Plea for Eros* (2006), she describes the incident as "a story of collective trauma and ongoing grief" (120) and speaks about her need to integrate it into her fiction worlds:

It seems to me that like other crimes committed against human beings around the world in the name of varying ideologies and religions, the attacks on the World Trade Center can only be understood through individual people, because if we lose sight of the particular—of one man's or one woman's or one child's suffering and loss—we risk losing sight of our common humanity, and that is a form of blindness, not only to others but to ourselves. (130)

By transforming the political event into the 'particular' narrative of a person whom the reader can personally identify with, Hustvedt draws attention to the fragility that determines all of our social relations, from our closest bonds to our embeddedness in a political system. For Judith Butler, it is the recognition of this common vulnerability, of the fact that we are exposed to and at the mercy of each other's goodwill, which entices her call for a new ethics of responsibility. In her book *Precarious Life: The Power of Mourning and Violence* (2004), Butler states that "loss and vulnerability seem to follow from our being socially constituted bodies," from our meaningful attachments, but also from our precarious relation to anonymous others (20). Because grief's severely destabilizing impact on the mourner's identity exposes our relational makeup, and further proves our fundamental interdependency, it can, as both Butler and Hustvedt seem to suggest, indeed make us aware of the need to recognize 'our common humanity.' While Hustvedt's recent fiction thus makes a critical, politically motivated argument, it wants to make the public catastrophe understood by translating it into personal stories of traumatic grief. While the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center thus function as the background against which Hustvedt's recent writings are set, the death of the author's father also plays an important role. In her memoir *The Shaking Woman, Or a History of My Nerves* (2010), she not only addresses her experience of loss, she also relates it to the seizure that overtook her while presenting a commemorative speech in honor of her father. And in *Sorrows of an American*, excerpts from a diary that her father kept while serving as a soldier in World War II are woven into the plot, so that in the end the author's biographical and the narrator's fictional father can no longer be fully distinguished.

### **“Nature and Nurture”— The Intersubjective Self and the Mirroring Other**

Before moving on to take a closer look at Hustvedt’s memoir and the three mentioned novels, I would like to present a brief overview of the themes that recur throughout the author’s oeuvre, but that also shape the way in which love and loss are conceptualized here. Hustvedt understands identity as produced by the self’s identification with a formative other. In her essay collection *Living, Thinking, Looking* (2012), she states that “we become ourselves through others, and the self is a porous thing, not a sealed container” (70). Drawing the perhaps only logical conclusion, she rejects the American tendency to believe in a self-contained and self-reliant, in short a strong ‘I.’ She claims that:

Americans cling desperately to their myths of self-creation, to rugged individualism, now more free-market than pioneer, and to self-help, that strange twist on do it yourself, which turns a human being into an object that can be repaired with a toolbox and some instructions. (*Living, Thinking, Looking* 70)

Hustvedt here questions the assumption that the individual generates its story, and its persona, by relying on its inner strength rather than its external relations. For her, the ‘myth’ of self-determination undermines the crucial role that the other plays. Marks observes that Hustvedt dismantles “the privilege of individual power that has been so foundational to the construction of American identity” (1). She continues, more adventurously, by saying that the author diagnoses a more general “disillusionment with the failure” of “free-market individualism” (1) and, in emphasizing relationality over autonomy, questions prevalent notions of subjectivity. Hustvedt thus rejects the Cartesian conception of identity that defines the self by way of its boundaries and perceives it as a detached and singular entity. In her fiction, the self is instead defined by its impressionability and interdependence, which is why it indeed appears accurate to say that her characters challenge “Western conceptions of an autonomous subject” (3).<sup>2</sup>

While Hustvedt thus emphasizes the vital role that others play in the formation of the individual’s self-image, her characters’ psyche is also shaped by her thorough knowledge of psychoanalytic theory. Despite the fact that the other is presented as an essential part of the self, Hustvedt does not dismiss the notion of alterity. Instead, she presents both self and other as ultimately unknowable, and as driven by emotions and implicit memories that they can neither fully grasp or rationally explain. The paradoxical tension between the self’s dependence on and its inability to ever fully know the other leads, according to Marks, to an “irresolvable struggle between distance and proximity, autonomy and fusion” (22). Yet it

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<sup>2</sup> The reformative discourses on the question of self-formation, which Marks mentions, can be linked to approaches in the field of relational psychoanalysis, which were discussed in chapter one and whose emphasis on the ‘other’ resonates with the concepts of identity-formation that Hustvedt engages.

also results—and here we return to Butler’s argument—in the self’s fragility and its continuous dependence on the other’s recognition.

Hubert Zapf has pointed out that Hustvedt’s rejection of “the ideology of individualism” is “by no means a naïve position” (184). He draws attention to the fact that the author also addresses the hazards that accompany a relational self-conception, above all “the danger of losing oneself in the other” (184). It seems that it is precisely because of the other’s immense power that the self needs to prevent itself from being fully consumed by its demands and desire. Hustvedt’s works are populated with patients who suffer from psychiatric disorders such as schizophrenia, people who tend to confuse themselves and others because they lack any sense of distance or detachment and can consequently no longer distinguish between an ‘I’ and a ‘you.’ While I insist that Hustvedt does indeed advocate a dialectically constituted identity model, it is important to note that she also points out that the full fusion of self and other can turn into a pathological condition.

The vital importance of a young child’s early emotional attachments is a recurrent theme in Hustvedt’s works. She repeatedly refers to studies that have shown that “newborn babies, only hours old, copy the expressions of adults”<sup>3</sup> (*Living, Thinking, Looking* 228). She uses these studies to claim that although “newborns do not have reflective self-consciousness,” they do act on a primordial and unconscious “form of intersubjectivity” (338). The author uses these findings to claim that even before conscious self-reflection sets in, “we are inherently social beings and our brains and bodies grow through others in the early dynamics between a child and his parents, but also within a given language and culture as a whole” (338). Interestingly, Hustvedt here combines a phenomenological with a psychoanalytical approach: she argues that the infant does not perceive itself as separate from its surrounding world. It exists solely in and through its relational bonds and thus experiences itself as fully embodied in and not apart from its nourishing environment.<sup>4</sup> In its state of full immersion, the infant’s tendency to mirror itself in the face of its caretaker<sup>5</sup> is carried out subconsciously, which leads Hustvedt to conclude that intersubjectivity precedes consciousness. She goes so far as to say that “the neonate craves recognition, the eyes of the other on her, through which she finds her own eyes and mouth and tongue, arms

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<sup>3</sup> This is also discussed in her memoir *The Shaking Woman*, where Hustvedt writes: “It is now known that infants as young as a few hours old will actively imitate the expressions of an adult looking at them. This appears to be an inborn trait” (90).

<sup>4</sup> Hustvedt borrows the idea of a “primordial state of relational existence” from Maurice Merleau-Ponty. In essays such as “The Child’s Relations with Others,” Merleau-Ponty develops a phenomenological conception of child development based on an embodied, intersubjective conception of the self. Through this phenomenological lens, Merleau-Ponty contests canonical dualistic theories. He argues that knowledge of ourselves and of others is based on our relational and embodied predisposition.

<sup>5</sup> Hustvedt speaks exclusively of the mother without mentioning the possibility of a different caretaker.

and legs and torso, long before she can identify those various body parts in the mirror as herself” (210). This means, in short, that the desire for the other’s recognition precedes our sense of self: we in fact become self-aware by mirroring ourselves in the other.

Yet this view alone does not yet explain why our first attachments—which Hustvedt calls our “first great passions”—should be so crucially formative (69). It is only when we take psychoanalytic theory into account as an additional factor that we can understand why Hustvedt insists on the importance of the baby’s first and arguably pre-conscious relations. It is from a psychoanalytic point of view that she argues that “our deepest adult attachments are all colored by our first loves,” that is to say: by attachments we do not consciously recall (69). This statement explains why self-knowledge must be regarded as inherently limited. Although our most formative influences escape us, we nonetheless become ourselves through them. It only stands to reason, then, that it is essentially impossible to distinguish between “nature and nurture” (*Shaking Woman* 92). While a person’s first intersubjective gestures are performed in a pre-reflective, not yet conscious state, its later personhood is nevertheless formed through these primary “mirrorings and mutual recognitions” (93).

When thinking about the child’s tendency to recognize itself through the mirror that the (m)other presents, several highly influential texts come to mind. Hustvedt does indeed base her elaborations on Hegel’s dialectical concept of self-consciousness which he develops in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Here, he uses the unequal relationship between master and slave to explicate the self’s formative struggle for recognition, and to further remark on its desire for domination.<sup>6</sup> It has been argued that Hegel introduced the ‘other’ as a crucial category in the philosophical debate on self-formation. Yet it is important to recognize that for him, desire plays an equally decisive role, as it motivates the self to act toward an ‘other,’ through whom it can then both recognize itself and situate itself socially. What the Hegelian dialectic shows—and what Hustvedt draws from it—is that dialogical or relational conceptions of the self do not only presuppose the existence of an ‘other,’ but are also based on the self’s desire for its recognition. This is essentially why Marks argues that desire can be understood as the “foundation of relational identity concepts” (26).

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<sup>6</sup> The Hegelian dialectics, which are developed in a passage of his *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807) whose full title reads “Independence and Dependence: Lordship and Bondage,” describes two levels of procedural recognition. In a first process one self-consciousness finds itself before another. Both mutually recognize each other and themselves as equal and yet individual and distinct subjects. This first model is succeeded by a second, in which the subject positions itself socially in the external world. Hegel develops his dialectic on the basis of an authentic self-consciousness that exists for itself, but is in need of gaining recognition from another subject in order to establish a stable identity and position itself socially. The other becomes not only the means through which the self knows itself as true, but also assumes a mediating role between self and world. Identity is in this rationale fundamentally dependent on the existence of another, on whom the self’s recognition depends.



From Hegel, one is inclined to move on to Jacques Lacan, whose psychoanalytic conception of the ‘mirror stage’ was influenced by his reading of Hegel. The mirror stage marks the moment in which the child, through the observation of its own reflection in the mirror, recognizes itself as a separate entity, and yet, simultaneously, as both self and other. While the image in the mirror initially suggests—to use a Freudian term—an *Ideal I*, the totality of the fully formed person that the baby sees clashes with the child’s experience of its own seemingly fragmented body. Because of this tension between the child’s fragmented self-experience and its unified mirror image, its initial identification with the image gives way to a sense of estrangement. As a consequence, the baby realizes that it is not the same as its mirror-image. Hustvedt is, according to Marks, interested in the mirror stage model because it points to the important role that “boundaries” (132) play in the process of self-formation. It is, after all, only in the moment of realizing the separateness of its body, in short its own borders, that the child forms a distinct sense of an ‘I.’ In her essay collection *A Plea for Eros*, Hustvedt states that Lacan’s model speaks to “the fact that we as human beings are born without an awareness of our corporeal boundaries” (164). While infants arrive in the world as fragmented beings, they gradually gather a unified image of themselves. Eventually, they form, according to Hustvedt, “a *body image* or a *body identity*” that not only allows them to think of themselves as corporeal beings with clear-cut borders, but that also obliterates the relational constitution through which they came into being (*Living, Thinking, Looking* 53).

A third theorist that Hustvedt regularly draws on is the British psychoanalyst and pediatrician Donald Winnicott. After having read Lacan, he wrote that “in emotional development, the precursor of the mirror is the mother’s face” (*Playing and Reality* 111). For Hustvedt, who uses Winnicott’s perspective to draw a connection between the mirror image and the mother’s face, this proves that we are indeed socially generated: she claims that “the outside” in fact “becomes us” (*A Plea for Eros* 178). Interestingly, Hustvedt links these processes to our linguistic capabilities, and by extension also to our desire for narrative: “the beginnings of language are in imitation. We are mirrors of one another”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Next to Hegel, Lacan, and Winnicott, Hustvedt repeatedly refers to a fourth source when speaking about the way in which self and other function as formative mirrors of each other. In several of her works, she notes that so called ‘mirror neurons’ were discovered by a team of Italian neurophysiologists led by Vittorio Gallese in 1995. While these discoveries remain a disputed issue in scientific circles, Hustvedt uses them to strengthen her claims. In *The Shaking Woman*, she writes: “These neurons, located in the animal’s premotor cortex, fire when the monkey does something, grasps a banana, for examples, but they also fire when the monkey watches the same action but does nothing. Not surprisingly, scientists have identified a mirror system in human beings [...] mirror neurons appear to be part of the dialectical back-and-forth inherent in human relations, a biological root for the reflexivity of ‘I’ and ‘you,’ an idea that can

(*Shaking Woman*, 91). At one point, she emphasizes that “mirroring makes speech possible; language relies on the reflective quality of *I* and *you* through which verbal interaction becomes possible” (179).

With these first observations in mind, it is anything but surprising to find that Hustvedt’s characters are based on the assumption that people are inherently social beings, whose sense of self is shaped by their specific experiences. It is for this reason that those of Hustvedt’s characters who show symptoms of pathological psychiatric pathologies, particularly personality disorders, have most often suffered a lack of loving care and recognition in their early childhood. While these characters do not explicitly remember their withdrawn mothers or unstable, to use Winnicott’s terminology, ‘holding environment,’ their lack of a responsive mirror image prevented them from forming a stable and solid self-image.

### **Freud’s Unconscious: “Making Fictions is Something like Dreaming While Awake”**

Evidently, Hustvedt derives the idea of a formative unconscious from psychoanalytic theory. She often refers to Freud, for instance when saying that “most of what our brains do is unconscious, beneath or beyond our understanding” (*Living, Thinking, Looking* 30). This shows the extent to which her writing is indebted to the psychoanalytic concept of the ‘unconscious:’ her characters are driven by motives—dreams, fears, and wishes—that exceed their conscious reflection and rational thought. While Hustvedt takes a critical stand towards contemporary society’s tendency to regard psychotherapy as a panacea, her intricate knowledge of Freud’s theories clearly shapes her characters’ personalities. This, however, does not mean that she uses psychoanalysis merely to emphasize that our first experiences determine our later emotional structures. She also extends this thought to argue that since much of that which motivates our actions and feelings “is hidden from us,” we are essentially “strangers to ourselves” (37).

It is precisely because a person does not and cannot fully know itself that emotions become a crucial factor in Hustvedt’s works. She argues, once again drawing on psychoanalysis, that a person’s earliest form of subjectivity is not only pre-reflexive, but also emotionally determined: while it is impossible to recall our earliest experiences in the form of explicit memories, they can become implicit memories that return to us in the form of feelings. Hustvedt assumes, in other words, that our first emotional interactions shape our later emotional responses. She argues that consciousness is always accompanied by an undercurrent of feeling that helps us to act in an emotionally responsive way. Hustvedt

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be traced at least back to Hegel and resonates strongly with his understanding that our self-consciousness is rooted in relations between the self and other” (93).

refers to *The Interpretation of Dreams* in this context; she restates the Freudian assumption that although the content of dreams tends to be “irrational or bizarre,” the emotions that we feel in them are most often “not fictional” (*Living, Thinking, Looking* 186). She concludes that the affective truth that she has detected in her own dreams has often pointed her to “recesses” in her “muddled psyche” (186). This is why she is, for instance, convinced that her “dreams of manliness” bespeak an unconscious ambivalence toward her gender and may thus articulate her repressed sexual desires (*A Plea for Eros* 95). Hustvedt concludes that her dreams have taught her that identity is always plural and cannot be reduced to a singular, fully reflective image of the self. Her dream images have, for instance, taught her “that there is a man in me as well as a woman” (96). This emphasis on an often hidden emotional truth that implies an ambiguity, a sense of lack or a loss, helps to explain why the author’s works continue to return to the experience of grief. For her, the mourner must not only rearrange the relational setup through which she understands herself. The losses she suffers in adult life also reactivate, in an almost Kleinian way, her earliest, most formative and often ambiguous feelings of love and hate.

In all of Siri Hustvedt’s works, the visual arts play a central role. Very often, her characters are painters, writers, or critics. Fictional artworks are described in minute detail, as is the act of looking at art, which tends to be described as a gesture of interactive mirroring. Dynamics of meaning-making that shape the production and perception of art are often linked (and likened) to Freud’s ‘dream work.’ Hustvedt implies that creative endeavors unearth unconscious wishes, dreams, and fears and bring them to the forefront of the artist’s or viewer’s consciousness: “making fictions is something like dreaming while awake.” (*Living, Thinking, Looking* 218). She proposes that, just as in dreams, works of art can express aspects of their maker’s, viewer’s, or reader’s self which they had previously not known: “certain novels and poems have had a power to unearth raw and unknown parts of myself, have been like mirrors I never knew existed” (*A Plea for Eros* 171). Both the artwork and the dream are thus understood as manifestations of the unconscious.

With Hustvedt’s thoughts on the power of the unconscious (and the constraints on self-knowledge) in mind, the urge to make art (she uses the German word *Trieb* in this context)<sup>8</sup> could be linked to the desire to express implicit, submerged memories. When saying that “fiction is like the ghost twin of memory” (43), Hustvedt goes so far as to liken fiction to an unconscious memory that manifests itself in the form of a story. It would, therefore, be

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<sup>8</sup> Hustvedt writes: “I think the German word *Trieb*, or drive [...] describes this push best.” (*Living, Thinking, Looking*, 341).

feasible to argue that art is here portrayed as a remedy, as a way to confront and understand the injuries, wounds, and traumas that one experienced in early childhood. While this appears to hold true, the author is also mindful of the risks inherent in the attempt to unearth unknown and unstructured parts of the psyche. She addresses this ambiguity when she says:

I am afraid of writing, too, because when I write I am always moving toward the unarticulated, the dangerous, the place where the walls don't hold. I don't know what's there, but I'm pulled toward it. Is the wounded self the writing self? Is the writing self an answer to the wounded self? Perhaps that is more accurate. The wound is static, a given. The writing is multiple and elastic, and it circles the wound. Over time, I have become more aware of the fact that I must try not to cover that speechless, hurt core, that I must fight my dread of the mess and violence that are also there. I have to write the fear. (*A Plea for Eros* 228)

Hustvedt reinforces here that although we develop a coherent and comprehensible identity, the fragmented state that originally defined us leaves “traces” in us that “return to haunt us” in the form of “fears, anxieties, longings, sex, sleep, and nameless sorrows” (191). While we construct a unifying story to cover our original dispersion and conceal the wound that lies at the core of our distinct self-image, our first injuries continue to determine our emotional responses. It can be concluded that in the universe that Hustvedt's characters populate, the desire for stability and reassurance motivates them to tell their stories in a coherent and consistent fashion. Yet at the same time, their stories also derive from their urge to excavate unknown aspects of their psyche and, by externalizing them, become able to understand them more fully. From this perspective, the desire to make art is indeed “sparked by a need to fill in the holes” that lie at the heart of individual identity (192).

These considerations inevitably lead to the question of the narrative's function, its purpose and its power. Given that Hustvedt's fiction advocates not only a relational, but also an intersectional identity model, this question appears to be of particular relevance. For the author, clear-cut distinctions and binary categories are culturally inherited constraints that often serve the purpose of securing patriarchic power relations by reducing a person to a singular role or type. In order to break with these limiting structures, Hustvedt's (female) characters play with their assigned gender roles; by temporarily adapting new ones, they for instance give in to their desire to express hidden aspects of themselves. It is interesting that, as an author, Hustvedt engages in similar experiments. When she assumed the first person perspective of Erik Davidsen in *Sorrows of an American*, she thought of her male narrator as an “imaginary brother” (*Living, Thinking, Looking* 163). This emotional alliance becomes all the more prevalent when one takes into account that Erik's story emanates from his experience of losing his father, who closely resembles the author's father. Hustvedt

remarks on the way in which biography and novel intersect here: “And because I was writing the novel after my father’s death or rather *out* of his death, a character like my father and grief like my grief, but also not like it, became part of the narrative” (163). Erik is thus both an invented figure, a figment of her imagination, and her male alter ego, a persona that allowed her to explore and express her masculine self.

When remembering her father, and thinking about the stories she was told about him, Hustvedt feels that “all this is true, and yet it has taken on the quality of fiction” (*A Plea for Eros* 20). While her own memories and those of others converge to form her father’s life story, Hustvedt remains skeptical of the thus created coherence: “narrative is a chain of links, and I link furiously, merrily hurdling over holes, gaps, and secrets. Nevertheless, I try to remind myself that the holes are there. They are always there, not only in the lives of others but in my own life as well” (20). While the author is fascinated by narrative’s built-in drive towards coherence, she is equally interested in the ‘holes, gaps, and secrets’ that the narrative either avoids or seeks to bridge. When bearing in mind that the experience of (traumatic) loss often becomes such a void, a blank space that is not easily integrated into the life story, it seems that Hustvedt alerts her readers to the question of how to handle experiences that do not generate meaning but instead remain ‘holes’ or ‘gaps.’

Evidently, Hustvedt links memory to the realm of the imaginary and the system of language, suggesting that all three constitute our personal narratives. She argues that we continuously use our imagination to make sense of our inherently “fragmentary memories” (189). In order to emplot these memories in an autobiographical story, we must, however, also heed “the conventions of language” (189). With the help of both our imagination and the stabilizing system of language, we create “the appearance of something far more whole” than the collection of fragmented memories (189). Hustvedt implies that our memories are originally “interrupted by lapses and silences,” so that “our wholeness and continuity aren’t givens but made in us and by us” (189). The unified autobiographical self is, in other words, a construction—a (necessary) fiction that allows us to perceive ourselves as whole. As in the Lacanian model, the fabricated story presents the individual with the reassuring totality of a complete self-image. While autobiographical coherence is thus a fictional construct, its reliance on linguistic conventions serves the purpose of ensuring its teller’s recognizability. While our “internal narrative” (181) is thus based on fragmented memories, our imagination further helps us to link these memories and bestow them with unifying meaning. It is on the grounds of the interplay between memory, imagination, and language that Hustvedt claims that “we all invent our personal pasts” (*Shaking Woman* 112).

Hustvedt's tendency to frame the personal narrative as a fictional story returns us to the discourse on narrative identity that was discussed in chapter two. And Hustvedt indeed refers to thinkers such as Paul Ricoeur and Dan Zahavi when speaking about the transformation of single episodes into a unifying story. It is with this theoretical background in mind that she argues that "it makes sense" that narrative, with its close relation to memory, would "focus on the meaningful and leave out the meaningless" (*Living, Thinking, Looking* 181). Although she therefore perceives narrative as an essential constituent of a person's sense of self, she at the same time proposes that the essence of a person can never be fully grasped in narrative form. A story is, in other words, never just a product of that which it includes, the explicit memories it reiterates, but is just as much "made of absences—all the material that is left out" (181). She assumes Zahavi's critical stance, reinforcing his idea that selfhood should not be reduced to that which can be narrated in a rational and orderly fashion.<sup>9</sup> Unsurprisingly, Hustvedt here returns to the impact that a person's first, pre-reflective and emotional relations have on her psychological development. She first of all agrees with Jaak Panksepp, who proposes that feeling precedes conscious reflection, and therefore also narrative.<sup>10</sup> She furthermore addresses what Antonio Damasio has termed "primordial feelings"<sup>11</sup> in order to reinforce the formative effect that our first unconscious feelings have on our identities. Yet this does not mean that Hustvedt calls the need for a coherent personal story into question. We symbolize and apply meaning in order to gain power over our otherwise all too precarious lives. The act of organizing our fragmented selves into an legible narrative proves reassuring, not least because it allows us to perceive ourselves as more than a product of irretrievable first feelings and impressions. Hustvedt, as has been shown, does not question the importance and necessity of narrative self-construction. She merely suggests that this process is preceded by and based on a pre-reflective form of identity which the infant gains through its first emotional bonds or, more precisely, through the act of recognizing itself in the mirror that its caregivers present.

Although Hustvedt thus questions the prevalence of narrative, she regards the drive toward meaning as a given. Despite the fact that she criticizes the tendencies to think in fixed, most

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<sup>9</sup> In *Living, Thinking, Looking*, she cites from Zahavi's book *Subjectivity and Selfhood*. Zahavi here asks: "is it legitimate to reduce our selfhood to that which can be narrated?" He answers his own question by suggesting that "the Storyteller will inevitably impose an order on the life events that they did not possess while they were lived" (*Subjectivity and Selfhood* 112.)

<sup>10</sup> Hustvedt cites from Jaak Panksepp's essay "Neural Nature of the Core SELF: Implications for Understanding Schizophrenia" (2003). He here argues that "the ability to experience raw effect [...] may be an essential antecedent to foresight, planning," intentionality, and also narrative thinking (204).

<sup>11</sup> For further information, see Antonio Damasio's 2010 book *Self Comes to Mind*, particularly page 21ff.

often binary categories, she describes the urge for definitive signification as built into the human psyche: “The mind is a glutton for meaning, for making sense of things that may escape it, for resisting ambiguity, for naming” (*Living, Thinking, Looking* 284). She explains that our “desire” for certainty and fixity in fact springs from the chaos and fragmentation that precedes and necessitates the unifying narrative. The author goes into more detail when saying that “for better or worse, we bring meaning to it [...] Meaning itself may be the ultimate human seduction” (10). Driven by our own unconscious uncertainty and yearning for the security of a linear narrative, we fall back upon familiar patterns and plots. In doing so, we deny the ambiguity and plurality that shaped us from the onset, from the moment when we looked at the other and saw ourselves, but also realized that in looking at ourselves, we always see not one but many others.

What, one may be inclined to ask, do these considerations tell us about the way in which Hustvedt conceptualizes grief? First of all, it is interesting that Hustvedt appears to regard feeling as a predecessor of rational reflection. She states that “violence, loss, grief, madness, and dreams” are not “characteristic of any particular age” (335). As timeless, almost essentialist categories, she regards them as neither made of nor affected by their cultural context. When discussing Goya’s paintings, Hustvedt interprets their lasting power to move their viewer by arguing that they convey “the anarchic, unspeakable, depths we carry within us,” in other words the unchangeable, intrinsic quality of our emotions (335). This view marks, quite obviously, a stark contrast to recent sociological perspectives that understand emotions as dependent upon their cultural context—and thus as prone to change and modulation. Hustvedt, however, regards joy and grief as immutable categories that are not only instinctive and inherent but also precede both rational reflection and narratively termed forms of self-formation. It may be for this reason that she connects grief to desire, and even defines it as a form of desire. For her, grief “is desire for the dead or for what’s been lost and can never come again. Grief is longing” (13). This also means that for her, grief is motivated, it actively moves toward “the thing that we are missing” (3). Yet the fact that this “thing,” the person that has passed away, can no longer be reached turns grief into a longing that can never be fulfilled. It is an impossible form of desire, a desire that turns inward and returns us to the original experience of realizing that we are distinct from and yet forever bound to the other, whom we love and identify with, but who will always remain at a remove.

### *The Shaking Woman Or a History of My Nerves*

Hustvedt's memoir *The Shaking Woman* (2010) grapples with both, the death of the author's father and the seizure that overtook her when she delivered a commemorative speech in his honor. The book is motivated by the attempt to explain the uncontrollable shaking fit, to find its cause and supply it with meaning. The notion of Freud's unconscious is of central concern to the text's trajectory; it resurfaces whenever Hustvedt reaches the limits of the knowable. As neither her exploration of neuroscientist studies nor her doctor's expertise succeed in pinning down a cause for her seizures, Hustvedt begins to wonder whether the physical tremor may have expressed otherwise repressed feelings of grief. Since her language capacities remained unaffected during the seizure, Hustvedt diagnoses an apparent split between her conscious and rational response to loss on the one hand and her unconscious, emotional reaction on the other. While she remained fully in control of the former, the latter acted out in such a powerful way that she felt estranged from her own body. Because this strong physical reaction can, however, neither be traced back to a single traumatic event nor to a clearly detectable lesion in the brain, the book questions the supposed dualism between the workings of the body and that of the brain. Over time, it becomes clear that Hustvedt advocates an intersectional approach that combines psychoanalytic theory and neurological research. She argues, essentially, for a holistic, all-encompassing view of what she calls the 'self.'<sup>12</sup> The following close reading will touch upon the findings that the 'neuropsychanalytic' approach that Hustvedt favors has recently brought about.<sup>13</sup> And yet it will predominantly revolve around a question that Hustvedt also raises in her book, namely whether her shaking fits can be read as a symptom of grief. I will

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<sup>12</sup> A large part of Hustvedt's book is concerned with the supposed dualism between 'body' and 'mind.' The author points out that "even the current *DSM* acknowledges [...] that the difference between mental and physical is 'a reductionist anachronism of mind/body dualism'" (14). And yet, medical practice relies on this split, which also designates the split between "psychiatry and neurology" as well as "sick minds versus sick brains" (79). Once an 'organic cause' for a disease or disorder can be detected, the condition is dissociated from the psyche and therefore also from the patient's story—and is most often treated medically. Hustvedt argues, however, that the mere evidence of holes or lesions in the brain does not allude to much. Popular literature often creates the impression that new medical technologies such as brain scans can confirm the validity of a medical condition: "the unarticulated argument is that if a hysterical paralysis or seizure shows up on a brain scan, an illness once thought to be 'all in your head' is actually in your body, and if it's in your body, its 'reality' is confirmed" (33). Yet Hustvedt objects, arguing that in spite of their undeniable value, "brain scans can't *explain* conversion" (34). She argues that we depend on words and stories when trying to 'explain' an illness. For her, story and sickness are interwoven factors of the self and cannot be fully differentiated.

<sup>13</sup> Critics never fail to mention Hustvedt's interdisciplinary approach. Reviewers often remark of the fact that she takes the fields of neurology, psychiatry, and psychoanalysis into account and weighs them against each other. In addition, Hustvedt is interested in neuropsychology or neuropsychanalysis. She mentions that she served as a lecturer in a reading series called the "Columbia University's Program in Narrative Medicine," which was held by the New York Presbyterian Hospital.



argue that we can indeed understand them as signs of a melancholic response to the death of a father, whom his daughter both strongly identified with and always felt mystified by.

While the book soon moves away from its initial focus on grief, its beginning recounts the author's experience of loss. The opening sentence reads as follows: "When my father died, I was at home in Brooklyn, but only days before I had been sitting beside his bed in a nursery home in Northfield, Minnesota" (1). The physical distance to her father as well as his vitality when she last saw him increase the daughter's difficulty to process his death. In the beginning, his absence is consequently marked by an almost unreal quality. This impression is reinforced when Hustvedt states that, after having dreamt of her father, she received a call from her sister, who informs her about his death:

Immediately after that conversation, I stood up from the chair where I had been sitting, climbed the stairs to my study, and sat down to write his eulogy. My father had asked me to do it [...] When the time came, I didn't weep. I wrote. At the funeral I delivered my speech in a strong voice, without tears. (2)

Writing of and for her father here appears to precede or replace the process of mourning. Or must the act of writing instead be considered an early, intuitive expression of grief? The author's first response could be read as both an attempt to process her father's death and an impulsive denial that urges her to quickly externalize her grief by moving into the active, productive mode of writing. The latter appears as the more convincing reading when taking into account that while Hustvedt delivered the eulogy which she began to write so swiftly after her father's death, in a very composed manner, she experienced her first shaking fit more than two years later, during a second speech that she held in honor of her father. This second incident took place in the author's Midwestern hometown, on the campus where her father had been a college professor. It was, as Hustvedt emphasizes, completely unforeseeable and unexpected:

Confident and armed with index cards, I looked out at the fifty or so friends and colleagues of my father's who had gathered around the memorial Norway spruce, launched into my first sentence, and began to shudder violently from the neck down. My arms flapped. My knees knocked. I shook as if I were having a seizure. Weirdly, my voice wasn't affected. It didn't change at all [...] When the speech ended, the shaking stopped. (3)

Puzzled by this inexplicable experience, Hustvedt begins her investigations. Her account is motivated by her desire to deconstruct the strangeness that emanated from her body: "it appeared that some unknown force had suddenly taken over my body and decided I needed a good, sustained jolting" (4). She admits, from the onset, that her excursions into the fields of psychoanalysis and neuroscience are driven by her desire to regain both self-control and

comprehension: “intellectual curiosity about one’s own illness is certainly born of a desire for mastery. If I couldn’t cure myself, perhaps I could at least begin to understand myself” (6). In her attempt to explain her seizure, she considers its potential relation to various mental disorders, ranging from psychological conditions like Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (P.T.S.D.) to neurological ones such as epilepsy or hysteria. In addition, she considers several forms of psychiatric dissociation, trying to understand her own experience through the case stories she reads. In all of her endeavors, Hustvedt does not, however, become fixated upon one of the conditions whose history and character she explores. Based on her belief that the dualism between body and mind is a limiting—and artificial—constraint, she searches for points where these physical and mental disorders intersect and overlap.

Before branching out into these various directions, Hustvedt explores the question of trauma, and thus also that of traumatic grief. She refers to cases of psychiatric patients who relived the traumatic experience of a loved person’s death in a trance, and could therefore later not consciously remember that they in fact showed a powerful reaction to the loss they suffered. Unable to recall their emotional outbursts, these patients were astonished at their own indifference, their apparent inability to adequately mourn the dead. Hustvedt debates whether she, too, may have failed to process her father’s death, and whether her seizure could therefore be read as a similarly subconscious expression of grief: “I wondered if there was a similar blankness in myself. Should I have grieved more for someone I loved so much? For many months after he died, I dreamed that my father was still alive” (25). This statement is interesting for two reasons: it first of all shows that she holds her personal experience against her expectations of what grief *should* look and feel like. And the fact that she resurrects her father in her dreams makes her, secondly, wonder whether she has not perhaps denied or repressed her grief:

Why, loving him as I did, do I feel not more sorrow? Janet would have said that the grief had gone into a hidden part of me. Freud would have understood my problem as an efficient way to protect myself from what I couldn’t acknowledge. The hysterical shaking served a concealing, useful purpose. (26)

This psychoanalytic reading focuses on grief, or at least takes it into account as a possible explanation: from this perspective, the seizures would have to be read as a physical expression of a repressed form of grief that has, perhaps due to its ambivalence, not yet reached the mourner’s conscious mind. Interestingly, Hustvedt does not further elaborate on this explanatory option. Although she initially opens up the possibility for such an interpretation, she soon moves away from it. This observation alludes to a blind spot that is built into the book: despite her self-involvement, the author does not ‘see’ herself clearly,

which ironically confirms her theory that we can never gather a full image of ourselves. Because Hustvedt remains stuck on the question of meaning, pondering how her shaking self correlates with or contradicts a more comprehensive version of who she is, she does not pause to contemplate the possibility that grief may perhaps be devoid of meaning, and that her seizures may therefore express its very incomprehensibility.

And yet Hustvedt does connect her uncertain condition to the unconscious. At one point, she turns her seizures into a “blasting alarm coming from down under” (115). This shows that she does not only take the psychoanalytical concept seriously, she also regards the unconscious as the source of most psychiatric and many physical disorders. Her interest in the space where the physical and the mental intersect derive from her experience of excruciating migraines which overwhelm her regularly. The fact that nothing can the general term ‘migraine’ can be applied to these headaches, and that they could therefore also not be treated in a more nuanced manner, taught Hustvedt how obscure and in fact unknowable many so called ‘disorders’ or ‘diseases’ are. And yet she does not easily upend her quest for an explanation of her seizures. After having ruled out epilepsy as an option, she debates whether she could perhaps be a hysteric. She elaborates on the history and current conceptualizations of this “purely female problem” (10), relating that “from ancient times through the eighteenth century, hysteria was regarded a convulsive illness that originated somewhere in the body” (11). Since physicians and, later, neurologists were, however, unable to locate a physical cause, it was gradually moved to the realm of the ‘mind’ and became framed as a psychiatric, ‘dissociative’ disorder. This having been said, it is interesting to note that Hustvedt links hysteria to the notion of trauma, which enables her psychoanalytic reading of the condition. She claims that: “most cases of hysteria don’t present themselves as madness” (80). Instead, “their symptoms are a metaphorical expression for what they can’t say: *It’s too much. I can’t bear up. If I really pour out my grief and sadness, I’ll fall apart*” (80). Her way of presenting a condition like hysteria as a vessel or a placeholder for an unbearable emotional state shows that Hustvedt debates whether her shaking fits could also be a ‘symptom’ of traumatic grief, and thus as her body’s way of processing the loss that her rational mind has yet to come to terms with.

### **Incorporating an Absence: “I was my Father”**

While Hustvedt takes the possibility of epilepsy and hysteria seriously, her considerations emanate from and soon return to her affiliation with psychoanalysis. In order to solve the “mystery” of her tremors, she thus envisions telling her story to an “imaginary analyst,” whom she pictures to resemble her father because he “is the ghost somehow involved in my

shaking” (20). In addition, she is convinced that this envisioned analyst would “surely want to find out about my father’s death and my relationship to him” (20). When adding that her mother, sisters, and immediate family would certainly also play important roles in the analysis, she once again reinforces her belief in the self’s relational setup. At the same time, she uses the imaginary analyst to highlight the importance of storytelling: “we would talk, and through the exchange the two of us would hope to discover why a speech I delivered in front of a pine tree turned me into a shivering wreck” (20). It can here be seen that Hustvedt is not merely looking for the cause of her trembling. She also seeks to attribute meaning to it, meaning that she believes to lie buried in her unconscious, but which she hopes to excavate in the process of retelling her personal story. She repeatedly uses the metaphorical image of an inaccessible current that runs “beneath or to the side” of her rational self (20). Becoming more explicit, she says that: “the psychoanalytic word for my difficulty might be *repression*. I had repressed something, which had then burst out of my unconscious as a hysterical symptom” (20). In the imagined scenario, Hustvedt finds the solution to her problem in the narrative form that the Freudian analysis offers.

The author’s first shaking fit is followed by others which occur at times when Hustvedt speaks either about her father or the novel that she wrote while he was dying and which features parts of his memoir. While on a book tour to promote this book, *The Sorrows of an American*, she takes a drug that helps her to suppress her shudders. Although the drug does diminish her symptoms, it does not “solve the mystery” that holds her in thrall (40). This is why the author continues to feel at a loss: she essentially fails to make sense of the aporia that her uncontrollable fits created, to apply meaning to and integrate the strangeness that her seizures confronted her with. Despite the fact that the larger part of the book is not explicitly concerned with the question of grief, Hustvedt returns repeatedly to the connection between her father’s death and the emergence of her seizures. She remarks on the fact that during the commemorative speech for her father, she “was standing on home ground” (98). Not only had her father worked on the campus where the event was conducted, she had also lived there as a child, during an early and formative phase of her life. Because she had been in New York when her father died, and had been living there for a long time, she was accustomed to his temporary absence. It may thus have been the familiar ground on which she was standing that suddenly led to her full realization of his irrevocable and permanent absence. This belated recognition may have sent her into a shock that expressed itself not through numbness or estrangement, but instead took the form of her uncontrollable shaking.

While the seizures could, from a psychoanalytical perspective, thus be read as the externalized expression of an unbearable emotion, one could also move into the opposite interpretative direction and connect them to Hustvedt's strong identification with her father. When she last visited him, during a time when he was already in hospice care, she stayed with her mother in the family home they once shared:

On one of those last nights, I crawled into the narrow, too short bed I had slept in as a child and pulled the covers over me. As I lay there, thinking of my father, I felt the oxygen line in my nostrils and its discomfort, the heaviness of my lame leg, from which a tumor had been removed years before, the pressure in my tightened lungs, and a sudden panicked helplessness that I could not move from the bed on my own but would have to call for help. For however long it lasted, only minutes, *I was my father*. (125)

Here, she does not only re-experience her father's physical reality. She also *feels* his 'helplessness' in her own body. Both observations evoke a strong sense of identification with the father, whom she here appears incorporate. The theme of identification resurfaces throughout the book, for instance when Hustvedt remarks upon the fact that when her father died, she was writing a book that featured his memoir and was, therefore, also an "imaginative version of his life" (125). Not only had she "read and reread his memoir" (125). She also "read the letters he had written to his parents when he was a soldier during the Second World War in the Pacific and, as an exercise, had typed those letters in order to feel them" (125). Here, in another instance of embodying the father, it becomes clear that Hustvedt seeks out situations where their stories and words merge. Yet in both cases, these symbiotic moments precede her father's death; they happen while he is still alive.

When talking about her first seizure, she wonders whether her identification with him was intensified by the words she addressed to him. Although she does not reiterate his words, but chooses her own, "the words of the text I had written fell somewhere between us—not his, not quite mine—somewhere in the middle" (126). While she here refers to her speech, the same applies to the novel she was writing at the time. Here, she also "borrowed" her father's voice—and his words—to retell a traumatic story from the Second World War that later returned to him in flashbacks and which he therefore recorded in his diary. When we connect Hustvedt's novel to her trembling fits, the theme of identification becomes increasingly pronounced. And sure enough, when mentioning Freud's "Mourning and Melancholia," it is not the mourner, but the melancholic that Hustvedt focuses on. She is particularly interested in the distinction between the conscious loss that the mourner experiences and the partly unconscious, ambivalent source of loss that a melancholic person's sorrow derives from. Extrapolating from Freud, she claims that the melancholic "has powerful conflicted identifications with the dead person, some of which are

unconscious” (126). In melancholia, the experience of loss is thus not externalized, as it is in mourning, but is internalized: the incorporation of such a ‘conflicted identification’ becomes, in Hustvedt’s words, “a psychic wound” (126). While she does not show all of the symptoms Freud ascribes to melancholia, she is convinced that her “mourning” shows a “blur of betweenness or a partial possession by a beloved other that is ambivalent, complex, and heavily weighted with emotions I can’t really articulate” (126). What does she mean? Does she here address the fact that she cannot place her grief, and cannot say *what* it is or *how* it manifests itself? Does she speak about her relationship to a father whom she deeply identified with, but whom she also always felt distanced to? And, most importantly, does the articulation of grief’s proclaimed ambivalence and incomprehensibility not already deconstruct her very claims?

It is only when we relate melancholia’s ambivalent and unknowable character to Hustvedt’s general emphasis on the unconscious that we can fully understand her interest in it. As already noted, the author often draws on Freud’s idea of the unconscious; her characters’ actions and thoughts are determined by fears, wishes, and desires that do not have an easily locatable source. This is also why self-knowledge is always presented as limited: we are, in other words, strangers to ourselves and to one another. It thus comes as no surprise that Hustvedt rejects the Freudian ‘work of mourning’ and its drive toward externalization and detachment, and instead casts both herself and her characters as melancholic mourners, who identify with losses that they ‘can’t really articulate.’

### **Becoming a Melancholic Mourner: “I am the Shaking Woman”**

As *The Shaking Woman* unfolds, Hustvedt becomes increasingly invested in the issue of identification. When interpreting a dream she had, she claims that although she was terminally ill in the dream and had been given merely a few weeks to live, the dream was not in fact “about my own death but about my relation to another death—one I seem to be carrying around with me every day like a disease” (137). Without saying so, Hustvedt here returns to the image of the ‘psychic wound.’ As a melancholic mourner, grief is something that she owns and inhabits, but that she can nevertheless neither control nor fully know. The injury that she suffered is hers and it is not hers: she identifies with it without being able to integrate it. It remains, just like a wound that does not heal, a painfully alien part of herself. She connects this dream image to her seizures, arguing that she has “never been as close to the shaking woman as in this dream” (137). This statement marks the first instance in the book where Hustvedt explicitly comes to terms with the possibility that knowing, explaining, and assigning meaning to her seizures may be out of bounds.

Over time, she realizes that her seizures confront her with an unknown part of herself: “the shaking woman felt like me and not like me at the same time. From the chin up, I was my familiar self. From the neck down, I was a shuddering stranger” (7). It is interesting that Hustvedt assigns a name to this strange part of herself and that she further appears quite detached from this ‘shaking woman.’ When she speaks of “a duality” in herself, of “an ‘I’ and an uncontrollable other,” her statements resonate with everything but identification and connectedness (47). She appears, in other words, far from identifying with or integrating the ‘shaking woman.’ The recognition of the mysterious double that appears in the form of the ‘shaking woman’ leads Hustvedt to the larger question of what, in fact, comprises her sense of self: “I am the one who hears. It is I who feels and thinks and sees and speaks [...] This is my narrating self, my conscious, telling self. But it is *not* the shaking self, nor the flashback self” (53). During her seizures, her conscious ‘narrating’ self and her unconscious ‘shaking’ self coexist, yet they do not correspond. In the course of her book, Hustvedt gradually moves closer to the “wordless” part of herself, allowing for “the unsymbolized, unsystemized, uncontained—that which escapes us” to become a part of her. She realizes that no signifying system, not even that of language, “can hold ambiguities that are inherent in being a person in the world” (143). In the end, Hustvedt does not only argue for a plural conception of the self, she also reinforces that “secrecy is part of it” (193). While we may most strongly identify ourselves with our conscious “internal narrator,” this “self-conscious storyteller” is surely surrounded by “a vast sea of unconsciousness, of what we don’t know, will never know, or have forgotten” (198). While this statement appears, at first glance, to question the prevalence and probability of narrative coherence, the opposite is in fact the case: it is precisely the dispersed, plural character of the self that makes narrative self-conception necessary. The process of presenting ourselves (to ourselves) in narrative form allows for a certain degree of stabilization and abstraction. Hustvedt writes that “we order our memories and link them together, and those disparate fragments gain an owner” (184). When turned on its head, this statement indicates that our story is always inherently incomplete; it can never represent us fully: “there will always be holes in it, the unarticulated breaches in our understanding, which we leap over with an ‘and’ or a ‘then’ or a ‘later.’ But that is the route to coherence” (198). A life story is consequently always an abstraction that is constructed around that which language cannot capture. And yet there is no way to evade this fictional conceptualization: it is a precondition for sociality because it allows us present ourselves in a recognizable and comprehensible fashion. The fiction of autobiographical self-conception is, in other words, essential to us as it enables us to perceive ourselves as coherent and in control.

Where does this leave the ambiguity that Hustvedt previously insisted upon? She admits that: “coherence cannot eliminate ambiguity” (198). It seems, on the contrary, that ambiguity impedes coherence because it “won’t fit into the pigeonhole, the neat box, the window frame, the encyclopedia” (198). Just as her seizures, ambiguity thus defies rational explanation and causal connection. As a consequence, it is not easily integrated into a linear story. While Freud proposed that a melancholic person identifies with and thus internalizes a loss that is tinted with ambivalence (or ambiguity), he also turned melancholia into a pathological condition, an unhealthy mental state. Hustvedt finds a way out of this dilemma by returning to her emphasis on identity’s reliance on narrative patterns. She uses psychotherapeutic discourses, most evidently the idea of the ‘talking cure,’ to claim that the retelling of previously unassimilated events can lead to the individual’s narrative “reinvention” (198). Not only is she, therefore, in line with a trauma-theoretical perspective, she also finds a way to explain how an ambivalent or even traumatic experience of loss can retrospectively leave the realm of the unknown and become part of a person’s conscious narrative self. Does Hustvedt therefore portray her own grief as traumatic and thus as initially inaccessible? When speaking of a case where a patient reacted with apparent indifference to her mother’s death, she indeed connects the other’s story to her own:

Irene was so traumatized by her mother’s death that some fragment of her self repeated the circumstances of that demise over and over again, while another part felt nothing. Did I, too, have a kind of double consciousness—a shuddering person and a cool one? (32)

The author implies that she may have at once repressed and expressed her grief through different, disconnected parts of herself: while her ‘mind’ remained in denial of the impact that her father’s loss had on her, her shaking body bespoke the sense of vulnerability and uncertainty that it caused. One could, in this context, surely allude to the complex social situation of grief: as it has become uncommon, and almost indecent, to express grief in an emotionally uncontrolled way, the shaking fits could be read as physically transmitted emotional outbursts—or as a suppressed form of wailing. In the beginning of her book, Hustvedt observes that she does not know what her seizures *mean*: “the only certainty was that it wasn’t available to my consciousness; I am not able to put it into words” (32). Towards the end of her account, Hustvedt once again remarks on her migraines, claiming that she has gradually learned to accept them: “the headache is me, and understanding this has been my salvation. Perhaps the trick will now be to integrate the shaking woman as well, to acknowledge that she, too, is part of myself” (174). Whereas she initially perceived



this unknown, shuddering part as an ‘other’ that she felt inhibited by but did not identify with, her book concludes on an accepting, integrating note:

In May of 2006, I stood outside under a cloudless blue sky and started to speak about my father, who had been dead for over two years. As soon as I opened my mouth, I began to shake violently. I shook that day and then I shook again on other days. I am the shaking woman. (199)

Hustvedt does not find out what caused her seizures, and remains unable to fill them with meaning. Yet the book’s final sentences demonstrate that she finds a way to come to terms with this unknown, illogical part of herself. While she does not resolve the seizures’ ambiguity by retelling them, she succeeds to integrate the persistent ambiguity into her story. She thus strikes a compromise, allowing for ambiguity and coherence to coexist. Yet I would instead propose that she here portrays herself, if perhaps inadvertently, as a melancholic mourner, as a person who has internalized a loss that she does not fully comprehend. In accepting the seizures, which she feels to be connected to her grief but which at the same time remain a mystery to her, she acknowledges that she is more than her narrative, conscious, singular self. In the end, she dares to integrate the strangeness, whose source she cannot locate, into her story—despite the fact that she remains unable to explain it in the rational way that would ensure full coherence. Although she does not let go of her narrative and brings it to a comprehensive end, she continues to circle the unspeakable ‘wound’ that lies at the heart of her story of love and loss.

### ***The Sorrows of an American***

In Siri Hustvedt’s novel *The Sorrows of an American* (2008), the narrator and all main characters grapple with the loss of a parent or a partner. While narrator Erik Davidsen mourns his father, his sister Inga lost her husband Max to cancer. And Inga’s daughter Sonia did not only lose her father, she was also a first-hand witness of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Throughout the narrative, the terrorist attacks present the backdrop against which numerous personal stories of traumatic loss are set. Both Sonia and the narrator’s deceased father, Second World War veteran Lars Davidsen, suffer from Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (P.T.S.D): they fail to cope with the “unspeakable” dimension of the horrors that they have seen (52). While traumatic memories that often recur in the form of timeless, wordless flashbacks, thus feature prominently in the book, they are often linked to the experience of severe personal loss. This is why not only traumatic memories return involuntarily and compulsively throughout the book: the dead also return in the form of ghostly apparitions. Interestingly, these apparitions are not feared

but rather welcomed, as they prove the continuing bond between the living and the dead. In her essay collection *Living, Thinking, Looking*, Hustvedt confirms that in her novel, “the dead return to the living” (39). She explains her decision to include parts of her father’s memoir in the book by alluding to her desire to revive her father in and through her fictional text: “I now know I used those passages as a way to revive him, if only as a ghost” (39). In the same collection, Hustvedt also elaborates more explicitly on her grief, and on the ghostly reappearance of the dead. She says that ever since her father died, she has felt the need to look at photographs of him. With a nod to Roland Barthes, she adds:

Before his death, I did not feel much need to look at these images, but now I do. I look at the photographs of my father because I have assigned them a meaning that is part of my story of him, but the pictures are distinct from my recollections. They are mechanical ghosts, a series of empty phantoms that nevertheless serve as traces of him, the man. (*Living, Thinking, Looking* 256)

This statement shows that she perceives her deceased father as ‘part’ of her story, and thus also as a part of herself. Yet at the same time, she cannot fully make him her own. Especially photographic images that she cannot reconcile with her personal memories testify to the fact that her father will always remain a person whom she cannot fully know. And just as the photographs, the ghostly recurrences also prove that although a strong identification with a deceased person may lead to their incorporation, it will always, as Derrida suggested, entail the incorporation of something essentially strange—an almost unnamable alterity.<sup>14</sup>

In Hustvedt’s works, relationships are always a conglomerate of intimacy and distance. They resonate with a certain mystery, primarily because the loved person always possesses aspects that remain unknowable and incomprehensible to its lover. The author often links the loved person’s mysteriousness to the lover’s desire which she understands to be a desire for something that is missing, or that cannot be known.<sup>15</sup> These observations apply, for instance, to the narrator’s relationship to his parents. And since Erik’s relation to his parents is mirrored in the way that Sonia relates to her parents, Hustvedt’s novel appears to present a more generally applicable relational pattern. While the relationship to the mother is in both cases imagined as one of attachment and recognition, implying a strong intergenerational bond, the relation to the father highlights the other’s alterity, as it is defined by distance and withdrawal. Hustvedt admits that *The Sorrows of an American* were

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<sup>14</sup> Christine Marks draws attention to the fact that Hustvedt repeatedly remarks on Emmanuel Levinas’s concept of alterity. Levinas argues that due to this “radical exteriority,” the other can never be reduced to pure sameness. He always remains unknowable and mysterious (60).

<sup>15</sup> In erotic relationships, sexual desire is in addition often depicted as a Hegelian struggle for power, which most often takes the form of a desire to either dominate the other or to surrender to him or her.

motivated by her wish to come to terms with father's death. This is why the intimacy and distance (or of identification and alterity) that determined her relationship to her father resurfaces in the way that her characters love and mourn one another.

### **Haunted by Ghosts: Erik**

In the book's opening paragraph, Erik speaks of the year following his father's death: "it was a time not of what was there, but of what wasn't" (1). He elaborates on this sense of absent presence by speaking about his father's ghost, whom he has apparently incorporated: "I think we all have ghosts inside us, and it's better when they speak than when they don't. After my father died, I couldn't talk to him in person anymore, but I didn't stop having conversations with him in my head. I didn't stop seeing him in my dreams or stop hearing his words" (1). Yet it is not his father's sheer presence that haunts Erik. It is, rather, that which he "hadn't said that took over my life for a while" (1). Erik here refers to a letter that he and his sister found among their father's papers, and which addresses a mysterious incident that took place when his father was a young man. While the story that the letter alludes to does not, in the end, prove elucidating, the trace of an unknown part of his father's life confronts Erik with the fact that he never really knew his father.

When wondering why the book's characters have "ongoing connections to the people they lost," Marks refers to Hustvedt's interest in and use of relational psychoanalysis, asserting that because "the identities of loved others are formative to the self," they "cannot simply be erased from memory" (204). That is to say, the formative impact of the loved one outlasts his or her death. This may explain why grief plays such a crucial role in Hustvedt's works in general, and in this novel more specifically: on the one hand, the mourner's identity was shaped in dialogue with the loved one so that the deceased person's identity has had a deep impact on the bereaved person. On the other hand, the mourner, who relied on the other's recognition, must rearrange her worldview: since she can no longer see herself through the other's eyes, she feels that she has lost part of herself together with the other. This is, in a nutshell, the tension that Hustvedt's characters grapple with: they oscillate between identification with the lost loved one and their need to emancipate themselves from their persisting grasp.

In *Living, Thinking, Looking*, Hustvedt describes her novel's "storyteller" as a "lonely, grieving psychiatrist/psychoanalyst" (39). And sure enough, Erik is initially fully immersed in the world of memory and mourning. After his father's death, he begins to read the other's memoir. Parts of this memoir, which his father kept while stationed in the Pacific during the Second World War, are in fact integrated into the book. And yet these entries remain

relatively disconnected from the novel's plot; their disconnection from the rest of the text is enhanced by the fact that they are marked in italics. What purpose, one may ask, does the emplotted diary fulfill? It first of all shows that the father's death and his son's grief loom over the narrative like a shadow. And it secondly reflects the traumatic, somewhat inaccessible quality of the experiences that Lars Davidsen made as a soldier in World War II. It is especially the image of a Japanese officer, who got shot while kneeling in a praying position that haunts Lars after he returns from the war.

Erik becomes invested in his father's trauma. From his perspective as a psychoanalyst, he speaks of "intrusive memories. Fragments." (85). When elaborating on his impression that traumatic flashbacks are wordless and timeless images that can neither be placed nor processed, he also addresses trauma's relation to narrative: "trauma isn't part of a story; it is outside story. It is what we refuse to make part of our story" (52). Erik is primarily concerned with these traumatic "openings" (85), the holes that define his father's story. He tries, in other words, to understand his father through the trauma that he did not speak of but that nevertheless shaped the relation to his children. While the father's traumatic memories are clearly linked to his diary entries, Erik's trauma is not embedded in his personal story, but instead emanates from those of his patients. One former patient in particular returns to him in traumatic flashbacks. While the reader never learns the details of her story, it is revealed that Erik could not prevent the young woman from committing suicide.

As in *The Shaking Woman*, where Hustvedt performs the identification with her father by reiterating his and addressing him in her own words, Erik also reconnects with his father through the act of writing. After his death, he, too, begins to keep a diary: "I know that my father's absence had prompted this need to document myself, but as my pen moved over the pages, I understood something else: I wanted to answer the words he had written with my own. I was talking to a dead man" (23). The diary becomes a way to resume the conversation that was cut short by death. In 'answering' the other's diary with his own, he prolongs his father's presence, lingering over their elusive relationship.

While Erik is, therefore, on the one hand fully consumed by a loss that he fails to fully grasp, he on the other hand feels that he mourns his father "insufficiently" (22). Again, this echoes *The Shaking Woman*, where Hustvedt does not grieve according to her own expectations and scrutinizes herself, for instance when asking: "should I have grieved more for someone I loved so much?" (25). Erik follows a similar train of thought, as he also fails to place his grief. It remains as diffuse as the relationship to his father had been: "my scrutiny of his memoir and my daily jottings about the man were clearly forms of grief, but there was something missing in me, too, and that absence had turned into agitation" (122).

Because Erik is an analyst, a professional ‘reader’ of people’s thoughts and feelings, he is increasingly unnerved by his own dismal condition. When he turns to his mentor and colleague Magda, telling her that he feels “as if” he were “looking for something” that will “release him,” she answers that he does not only want to be released from his “depression,” but also from his “father who refuses to die” (296). Magda thus confronts Erik with his grief. She recognizes that while he feels troubled by its ‘absence,’ this very absence, the lacuna created by the father’s lingering presence, is in fact the form that his grief takes. Throughout the book, Erik observes how his mother, sister, and niece come to terms with the losses they have suffered. While he watches them mourn, he also sees them take comfort in each other. Over time, they accept that they will always remain impaired, and yet they continue to live their lives, and love again. Erik, however, remains defined by his loss. Unable to let go of his father’s haunting presence, he becomes a melancholic mourner.

### **Mirror Images: Inga and Sonia**

While Hustvedt once described Erik as an “imaginary brother,” whose grief was “like” her “grief, but also not like it” (*Living, Thinking, Looking* 163), it is interesting to note that his sister Inga also shares features with the author. Not only is she a writer and a lecturer, she also is, as Hustvedt herself, hypersensitive to her surroundings. She often feels the physical pain of others in her own body and finds herself disturbed by their dark moods. In addition, Inga suffered from seizures as a child, which she holds responsible for both her fragile adult personality and the migraines she developed later on in life. These observations reinforce, first of all, that Hustvedt does not draw a clear line between herself and her characters. Based on her understanding of the autobiographical narrative as a fictional construct whose coherent structure is produced by our efforts of emplotment, she does not hesitate to weave traits of her own persona into those of her fictional characters. These blurred lines demonstrate the extent to which Hustvedt thinks in relational terms. The characters of her stories are most often not distinct entities, but are drawn into each other. Especially the female members of a family tend to span a cross-generational relational network, through which they define themselves. Erik remarks on the close bond between Inga and her daughter Sonia, which in turn reminds him “of the connection between Inga and her mother, an unarticulated corporeal closeness that I call an overlap” (*Sorrows of an American* 18). This ‘connection’ or ‘overlap’ thus defines the relationship between mother and daughter. Although grief initially disables both so thoroughly that they drift apart, they eventually become able to gather new strength through the other’s renewed recognition. In the beginning of the book, however, the narrator worries about his teenaged niece, whose father

died five years earlier. He remarks on the fact that despite their close emotional bond, Sonia and Inga are unable to share their grief. In the face of loss, both intuitively apply masks of self-control:

I remembered her standing in the hallway outside his hospital room, her face strangely impassive, her body stiffened against the wall, and her skin so white it made me think of bones. I know that Inga tried to hide her grief from Sonia, that when her daughter was at school my sister would turn on the music, lie down on the floor, and wail, but I had never seen Sonia give in to sobs, and neither had her mother. (3)

Both Sonia and her mother Inga initially live their grief in a strictly solitary way. In doing so, they act in accordance with the social norms of emotional self-control. Yet their way of ‘hiding’ their sorrows even from their closest kin implies that more than decency is at stake here: mother and daughter protect each other from the sight of their own ‘psychic wounds,’ assuming maybe that adding the other’s grief to their own would lead to the complete collapse of their shared world. This shows, once again, that in Hustvedt’s works, relationships are always defined by opposing poles: intimacy and distance are necessary components of a close emotional bond. And yet Sonia’s withdrawal is not presented as part of the Freudian ‘grief work,’ and thus as an integral part of the ‘normal’ mourning process. Erik concedes that: “Max’s death wrenched Inga and Sonia off course” (18). He elaborates that maybe because his niece was at the time at the “a precarious age” of twelve,

She retreated for a while into compulsive orderliness. While my sister sank, shuffled, and wept, Sonia cleaned and straightened and studied far into the night [...] Sonia’s perfectly folded sweaters organized by color, her radiant report cards, and sometimes brittle response to her mother’s grief were pillars of an architecture of need, structures built to fend off the ugly truths of chaos, death, and decay. (18)

Sonia’s actions stand diametrically opposed to her experiences: her inability to control the events that most poignantly shaped her life up to this point, namely her father’s death and the terrorist attacks that she witnessed at close range, create her desire to control her daily life in a meticulous, ‘compulsive’ way. Yet this urge is not merely an attempt to compensate for the ‘chaos’ and ‘decay’ that she experienced. She also ‘fends’ off the chaos and pain of grief. By emphasizing her own functionality and her power to control her surroundings, she keeps the gaping abyss of meaningless loss at a distance. Throughout the book, the story of Sonia’s and Inga’s personal loss is, interestingly, intertwined with the narrative of 9/11. On the second anniversary of the terrorist attacks which is recounted toward the end of the book, Sonia finally lowers her protective shields. She begins to cry and talk about the things she had kept at bay:

The second anniversary opened an internal crack in Sonia, a fissure through which she released the explosive feeling that had horrified her for two years. The conflagration that had burned so many, that had pushed people into the open air, on the ledges from which they jumped, some of them on fire, had left its unspeakable images inside my niece. (230)

Hustvedt's choice of words proves that she here alludes to the traumatic effect that the 'unspeakable images' of 9/11 have had on Sonia, who has internalized and carefully hidden them. As a psychoanalyst, Erik is well aware of the fact that the urge to shut oneself off from overwhelming experiences can serve a self-protective end: "It happens that we all need to hold ourselves together, to shore up the walls of our houses, to patch and to paint, to erect a silent fortress where no one leaves and no one enters" (250). When Sonia finally confronts her trauma, she also begins to come to terms with both her father's death and her own grief. At seventeen, her fears and horrors no longer dominate her. She gradually learns to live with her own injuries and begins to admit that the relationship to her father (whom she had once accidentally observed kissing a woman whom she did not know) had already become distanced—and ambivalent—well before his death.

This, however, does not mean that Hustvedt's narrator downplays the lasting effect that the traumatic experience of death has had on his niece. Erik is certain that: "Sonia's memories wouldn't leave her" (230). While he presents her as permanently injured, she manages to accept both this new, 'chaotic' reality and her own ambiguous relation to it: "if anything had changed, it was that Sonia knew she could survive the power of her own emotion. And so could her mother" (230). Here, as the book draws to a close, grief is no longer lived in isolation. As mother and daughter learn to share their emotional instability, they also learn that they no longer need to protect each other from their own sorrow. Over time, Sonia abandons her compulsive need to control both her inner and outer selves. On a habitual level, the "relaxation of her standards" expresses itself in her ability to accept a world that is messy and unpredictable. Her mother notes that "when [Sonia] comes home, she throws her clothes on the floor and leaves her bed unmade. I find ashes and makeup on the floor. It's wonderful" (267). On a psychological level, Sonia accepts that she never fully knew her father, that he eludes her and that despite his death, her feelings towards him will remain complicated and ambivalent. While she had previously never read the books that her father, a celebrated author, had written because she was afraid that they would expose his strangeness, she in the end tells her uncle that she "finally started reading him" (280). The experience of loss and death changes Sonia and Inga: although they therefore remain vulnerable to the world's potential injury, they also begin to heal together. Once they open

up and expose themselves, they realize that seeing their own pain mirrored in the other does not intensify their suffering but instead makes it bearable.

### **Elusive Fathers, Mourning Sons: Lars**

While the plot of Hustvedt's novel revolves around various of the narrator's relationships, it is motivated by his father's death. Lars Davidsen's life story, particularly the years of his formative youth and his time as a soldier, are recounted in bits and pieces. The reader gradually learns that Lars grew up in poverty after his Norwegian immigrant parents had lost all of their land during the Great Depression. As Lars's son, Erik knows that this early loss had a severe impact on his father. The humiliation and deprivation that came with losing the land that his family had inhabited and owned shaped Lars. Although he stayed loyal to the place where he grew up and worked hard to make a better life for himself, Lars never stopped mourning his childhood home and the siblings who died during the family's years of hardship. It is for this reason that Erik describes the farm that eventually replaced the one that Lars had lost as a child as "a scar formed over an old wound" (11).

Erik's sister Inga remarks on their father's withdrawn personality, comparing it to that of her deceased husband Max: "They had a quality in common, something obtuse and unknowing. I think that's what drew me to Max—that hidden and obtuse shadow I recognized without ever knowing what it was" (32). Her statement shows that Inga is, just as Erik, drawn to that which she does not know and cannot explain. Interestingly, this sensation does not decrease but rather intensifies with their father's death. Ever since he was a young adult, Erik had felt that there was "something forbidding in that closed face, like a door that's better left shut" (89). It comes, therefore, as no surprise that when Erik and Inga find a mysterious letter that swears their father to secrecy, they hope that the letter will provide them with a chance to learn more about the secrets that his 'closed face' alluded to. Their quest to trace the letter which was sent to his father when he was a young man, back to its author, is therefore clearly triggered by their wish to understand him through the secrets that defined him.

In a similar way, Erik also tries to understand his own losses through those that his father suffered. In doing so, he aligns his own experience with that of his father, not least because Lars, too, was gravely impaired by his father's grief. Realizing that his "father's early life had overwhelmed him" (175), he tries to explain the other man's motives:



By becoming a historian of his own immigrant past, he had found a way to return home again and again. Like countless neurologists, psychiatrists, and analysts I know who suffer from the very ailments they hope to cure in others, my father had relieved the raw sore inside him through the work he had chosen. (175)

Once again, Hustvedt uses the metaphorical image of the wound or 'sore' to address the enduring pain caused by the experience of traumatic loss. For the better part of his life, Lars tried to mend the irreparable damage that had impaired his parent's lives. Just as Erik, he closely identified with their grief and in fact made it his own. When trying to recall early memories of his father, Erik tells Magda that "there's a haze over things" (295). And yet one distinct image from his childhood returns to him in rare clarity:

My father is in the garden, the garden that was far too big and bore many times what the family could eat. I heard my mother say, 'I don't know what to do with all these beans.' 'They'll go to the neighbors,' my father always answered, as if we were back on the prairie where there was rarely enough [...] I watched him weed with a fast hand around the cornstalks, saw the fields and the horizon behind him. 'The garden was the farm,' I said to Magda. 'He was doing it again, and doing it right.' I saw him stop weeding and stand up, saw him turn toward the woods, his hands deep in his pockets, and I saw a look of grief cross his face. He didn't know that I was watching him from the garage, and I couldn't go to him. We didn't intrude. Intrusion would mean that I knew, and I couldn't know that he suffered. 'He never left the farm,' I said. 'He was always trying to repair and restore and redo.' (295)

Through this single scene, the reader is given an insight into the emotional dynamics between father and son. While the relationship between Inga and Sonia is only temporarily marked by their inability to partake in each other's suffering, the same inability is a characteristic trait of the men's relationship. Although Erik is as pained by his father's grief as Lars continued to be by that of his own father, both fail to bridge this cross-generational sense of loss. Each man thus remains isolated in his grief, which is also why it cannot be given up or eased. While Sonia and Inga eventually take comfort in the mutual recognition of their likeness in suffering, the men of the family remain burdened by the losses that their fathers suffered. They remain, in other words, caught up in a cyclical structure of loss, continuously trying to understand the other's grief from afar, through the looks on their faces, the words of their diaries, and the letters hidden in their studies. While the strong emotional bond between the women of the family allows for an acceptance and an integration of loss and suffering, the men, who also identify with their fathers' elusive, unspoken grief, become the novel's melancholic mourners.

In the final pages of the book, Erik recalls a memory of misrecognition: "I see my father walking across campus with long strides, and he doesn't recognize me. He passes his son, but he's not looking for me at that moment. He's too sad to see me, absorbed in old sorrows

that return again and again” (303). Here, the father is portrayed as caught up in the traumatic memories of his youth. He has internalized the past so fully that it continues to dominate his present life. At times, these memories even preoccupy him to such an extent that his surrounding reality appears to vanish. As a consequence, he often withdraws from his immediate surroundings and becomes a distant, inaccessible father. It here appears that Hustvedt uses the figure of the distant father to make a general and perhaps even political statement. This impression is confirmed when Erik’s friend and colleague Burton, who mourns the death of his own immigrant mother, admit that he wrestles, “metaphorically of course, with the Beast Melancholia” (234). Erik immediately takes up this melancholic train of thought, confirming that: “they’re all dying now, our fathers and our mothers—the immigrants and the exiles, the soldiers and the refugees, the boys and the girls, of ‘yore”” (234). Trying to hold on to his heritage but failing to fully grasp his parents’ inexplicable experience of immigration, exile, and loss, Erik tries to recover and incorporate that which he has never known and which is now forever lost.

The mysterious letter that Erik and Inga find in their father’s study was sent to him when Lars was fifteen years old. It refers to a shared secret and includes an allusion to a recent death. While Inga sets out on a quest, trying to find the letter’s author, Erik is more hesitant. As an analyst, he knows that “every memoir is full of holes” (8). Especially if a life story includes episodes that “can’t be told without pain to others or to oneself,” an autobiographical account tends to be exclusive and highly selective. With these considerations in mind, Erik is not “surprised to see that the mysterious Lisa, who had sworn my father to secrecy, was missing from my father’s memoir” (8). Quite clearly, Erik’s perspective is shaped by his professional experience: “when I listen to a patient, I am not reconstructing the ‘facts’ of a case history but listening for patterns, strains of feeling, and associations that may move us out of painful repetitions and into an articulated understanding” (86). Erik thus listens as much for what is said as for that which remains unsaid, for episodes that are left out of the stories that his patients construct around themselves. While he thus appears doubtful that identity can be captured in narrative form, he seems convinced that a person’s personal story always carries an elucidating undercurrent of hidden emotions with it.

### **Incorporating the Unspeakable: From Traumatic Grief to Melancholic Mourning**

*The Sorrows of an American* makes a strong argument for the creative construction of life stories. Inga at one point declares that “we make our narratives” (86). And yet experiences of trauma, loss, and grief hold the power to disrupt and deconstruct narrative coherence.

Because the lacuna of grief often remains untold, it becomes the story's blind spot. It is for this reason that Erik's mentor Magda tells him that: "grief makes you more fragile" (139). Magda further clarifies that she regards "wholeness and integration as necessary myths. We're fragmented beings who cement ourselves together, but there are always cracks" (139). She thus insists on narrative coherence as a 'necessary myth,' suggesting that a person must present herself in a recognizable, coherent form in order to receive the other's recognition, through which she can then mirror and understand herself. This, however, does not mean that Magda reduces identity to narrative. Feelings, especially painful feelings, often remain untold, and thus do not present a visible, or conscious, part of a life story. They can, on the contrary, become the 'cracks' that make us vulnerable because they constantly threaten the coherent story that we identify with.

The rules that regulate the dynamics of recognition and ensure a person's recognizability are discussed throughout the book, for instance when the narrator mentions a condition called 'capgras syndrome.' Here, a patient no longer recognizes a loved person. While this example is only briefly discussed, it bespeaks the book's general preoccupation with the unknown and the unknowable, with the strangeness that lurks within the familiar and even within the dearly loved. Hustvedt's characters often glance at one another and either momentarily do not recognize the other person so that they have the impression of looking at a stranger, or they feel as if seeing the other for the first time, of recognizing something in him or her that they had not previously known. When taken together, these instances create a destabilizing sensation: once the ability to know the other is questioned, self-knowledge is also no longer guaranteed. It is at this point that the narrative's crucial function emerges: it provides us with the opportunity to perceive ourselves as a (Lacanian) 'totality,' and thus as more integrated and complete than we really are. Erik confirms that: "telling always binds one thing to another" (276). Because "we want a coherent world, not one in bits and pieces," we hurdle over the holes or 'cracks' in our story and reach for the 'necessary myth' of coherence that the autobiographical narrative offers us (276).

It has already been noted that the dead play a vital role in Hustvedt's novel. They are kept alive in the mourners' memories, but also in their desire for a continuation of the dialogue, that defined their lives up to the moment of the loved person's death. The narrator's mother speaks about the way in which her husband continues to be her implied, imagined respondent. Her thoughts and actions are still, out of habit, directed toward him: "If I'm out and have a conversation with someone, I still think, Oh, I have to run back and tell Lars, or Lars will love hearing this, and then I remember he isn't there to tell" (86). The old woman continues to rely on the interaction and conversation with her husband. Because the

intended action of sharing her experiences with him can, however, not be carried out, she is forced to relive the realization of his irrevocable absence each time her impulses are stopped short. At the moment when she remembers that 'he isn't there to tell,' she is, time and again, confronted with the lack that defines her grief.

Yet Erik's mother is not the only character whose life is permanently clouded with incapacitating grief. Leo Hertzberg, the main protagonist of Hustvedt's novel *What I Loved*, reemerges in one scene of *The Sorrows of an American*. As in Hustvedt's earlier novel, he is introduced as a professor of art history who used to teach at Columbia University, but is impaired by his increasingly poor eyesight. At the end of *What I Loved*, Leo's dwindling ability to see already interferes with his ability to partake in social activities. He hires a friend, who helps him with his work and reads to him at night. In *The Sorrows of an American*, it is Erik's sister Inga who reads to Leo: "I've been reading Pascal to him every week for an hour or so, and then we have tea" (96). She adds, as if to explain, that: "his great sadness is that his only child, a boy, died when he was eleven. Matthew's drawings are all over his apartment" (96). If one reads *The Sorrows of an American* as a sequel to the earlier book (both are set in similar neighborhoods of New York City), Inga's statement confirms that Leo continues to be the mourning figure that he was at the end of *What I Loved*. The impression that he leads a solitary, secluded life is reinforced when he enters Inga's apartment for a dinner party and asks her: "Can you look me over to make sure nothing's out of place?" (98). At the dinner party, the conversation soon turns to the meaning of dreams. Leo, who had to flee Nazi Germany as a child, admits that in his dreams, his "vision is just as faded as when I'm awake. I dream in a blur with sounds and words and touch, and I run, too, from Nazi soldiers who have found their way to Green Street and are banging on the door" (104). While this early traumatic memory haunts the old man, it is displaced and transported to his current environment. Thus shows that Leo's relation to the outside world is diffuse; he has lived in the past for so long that its memories invade and dominate his present reality. It comes as no surprise, then, that he wonders why "we bring back dead people we've known and loved in our dreams. Surely that's a form of wishing" (106). It seems that Leo chooses to live in and surrounded by his memories. Because the people whom he identified most strongly with, his son and his deceased friend Bill, continue to occupy such a central place within him, he does not perceive their recurrence as frightening, but rather as a comforting reminder of his persisting love for them. Leo's words imply that he does not only still dream of his loved ones, but that he also continues, in a wholly irrational way, to long for their return.

As in Hustvedt's other works, the notion of mirroring also plays a central role in *The Sorrows of an American*. Erik at one point addresses the 'transference'<sup>16</sup> between analyst and patient. He admits that his response to his patient's stories, fears, and obsessions is sometimes quite unforeseeable. At times, their unconscious motives resonate with and draw out aspects of himself that he had previously not been aware of. Hustvedt uses the example of psychoanalytical 'transference' to stress that the border between self and other is permeable and highly dynamic. And she secondly uses this example to reinforce that self-understanding can only be reached through the mirror that the other presents.

In the stream-of-consciousness passage that marks the end of the book, all characters' stories of loss merge: they become inseparable instances of isolation and absence, of silences that have been buried together with the dead. The traumatic memories that were rendered in the course of the book are here taken up again to create a series of interrelated images: "My father cuts down trees. His fist slams into the low ceiling above his narrow bed. My grandfather cries out in his sleep and his small son shakes him awake [...] Sarah jumps, falls. Eggy falls. Sonia watches from the window. People are jumping, falling. They're on fire. The buildings fall..." (303). The series starts with Lars's violent (though subconscious) response to his traumatic war experiences. They move on to the suicide of Erik's patient Sarah and then address the accident of his neighbor's child Eggy, who fell from a window. Within a sentence, these images turn to well-known scenes from the Twin Towers on September 11, 2001. This sequence reinforces vividly that Hustvedt does not draw a clear line between the individual story and the political event. In fact, one here reverberates through the other. A similar form of mirroring can be detected in the stories of the individual characters. While Inga and Sonia initially shy away from finding their own grief in the other's resemblance, they gradually come to terms with their losses by sharing it. While it could therefore be argued that they go through the motions of the Freudian grief work and become, in the end, able to externalize their grief, it is important to note that while both women appear to 'move on,' they do so by accepting and integrating the enigmatic

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<sup>16</sup> In *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, Laplanche and Pontalis write that transference has taken on a quite general meaning, designating "all the phenomena which constitute the patient's relationship with the psycho-analyst" (456). The authors note that when Freud first connected transference to dreams, it referred "to a mode of *displacement* in which the unconscious wish is expressed in masked form through the material furnished by the preconscious residues of the day before" (456-457). Similar dynamics are at play in the analytic situation, where "the patient transfers unconscious ideas on to the person of the physician" (457). In both cases, affect is being displaced from one object to another. According to Laplanche and Pontalis, Freud came to the conclusion that "the subject's relationship to parental figures" can, for instance, be relived "in the transference—a relationship still characterised, notably, by instinctual ambivalence" (458). And yet Freud differentiated between "two kinds of transference, one positive and one negative: a transference of affectionate feelings and a transference of hostile ones" (458). In the portrayed cases of melancholic grief, which is inherently defined by the mourner's ambivalence, both 'kinds' of transference appear to be at play.

aspects of their relationship to the deceased. Erik's grief, on the other hand, mirrors that of his father: while Lars's story was already shaped by the traumatic losses that his father had to endure, Erik also becomes preoccupied with the 'unspeakable' in his father's life. Both men are presented as melancholic mourners who, unable to share their grief, remain defined by their identification with their fathers—and their fathers' enigmatic losses.

Erik and Sonia eventually uncover the story behind the mysterious letter that was sent to their father. Its author Lisa, who was a young woman at the time, gave birth to a stillborn, illegitimate child in a field where Lars worked at the time. Lars was a witness to the scene and helped Lisa to bury the infant's corpse. In the letter, Lisa asks Lars to remain silent about what he saw, since no one knew about Lisa's illicit pregnancy. When Sonia and Erik track down Lisa, who has led a withdrawn life, they learn that Lisa is a doll-maker. Her dolls are unique in that each one of them is visibly scarred by a story of trauma or grief. They are either injured or disabled, marked by sadness or illness. After Erik and Sonia return from their visit to Lisa, Erik discovers that Inga bought one of Lisa's 'damaged' dolls. When taking a closer look, Erik realizes that it is the figure of a mourning child:

I leaned forward to look more closely at the boy doll, dressed up in a dark suit and sitting on a wooden chair. His blond head drooped forward and his small embroidered face seemed pensive. We stood for a moment looking at the figure, and then Inga said, "She said his father was struck by lightning. It's before the funeral." (231)

Erik finds the doll sitting on Inga's bookshelf, amidst the literature that she studies. Initially, he is bewildered by his sister's open display of a child's grief. Over time, however, Erik seems to realize that the psychic wound that the experience of loss opens up can never fully heal. At the end of the book, his point of view changes and he reassesses his own situation as well as that of others. When his neighbor's child, who was in critical condition after an accident, wakes up from the trauma that she had been in, Erik insists that: "even if she recovered fully, Eggy would live with the story of the fall inside her. She would be changed by it" (301). His statement shows that Erik has accepted that his father's death has changed him, and that he will remain vulnerable or wounded. Particularly because he strongly identified with his father, whose secrets were anything but solved by the story behind the letter, Erik realizes that while he will never fully grasp the core of other's suffering, he has nevertheless incorporated it and made it his own.

### *The Blazing World*

Siri Hustvedt's most recent novel *The Blazing World* (2014) is her most intellectually challenging book to date. Not only does it make extensive use of footnotes that explain the vast theoretical sources that the text alludes to: it also presents a multitude of narrative voices which often contradict each other. While the novel centers on its main protagonist Harriet Burden, she is not only portrayed through excerpts from her own diaries, but also through the perspective of others, who introduce their relationship to her.

As in the already discussed works, the experience of grief also determines the experiential reality of *The Blazing World's* protagonist. While Harriet Burden can surely be termed a melancholic mourner, whose ambivalent relationship to her deceased husband leads to her rather complex negotiation of his loss, the book adds several new aspects to Hustvedt's perspective on mourning: it first of all presents grief not only as an endpoint, but also as a beginning. In so doing, Burden's grief proves, while initially experienced as absolutely crushing, liberating at second glance. It provides her with the chance to break out of her role, reassess her perspective, and readjust her life and her identity. Burden further manages to draw a revived creative energy from her loss; she transforms mental pain into physical productivity, and thus performs her losses by pouring them into her artworks. A year after her husband's sudden death, Burden for instance begins to make life-sized sculptures which she calls 'Metamorphs.' She describes them as "totems, fetishes, signs, creatures like him and not so like him" (13). She explains that her adult children "suspected a version of grief-gone-off-the-rails, especially after I decided that some of my carcasses had to be warm, so that when you put your arms around them you could feel the heat" (13). Burden does nothing to rebut her children's suspicion. Instead, she implies that her artworks and her grief are in fact related. In her essays, Hustvedt often refers to D.W. Winnicott's *transitional objects*,<sup>17</sup> a concept that surely applies here. A transitional object, such as a pacifier or a blanket, helps a baby to 'transition' from the (internal) world that it identifies with the mother or caregiver to an (external) world where she is absent and where the baby must thus eventually recognize itself as separate and distinct from her. In *The Blazing*

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<sup>17</sup> Winnicott uses the concept of the 'transitional object' to point to a phase in child development where it moves from a psychic to an external conception of reality. While infants perceive themselves and their mothers, according to Winnicott, as one entity, the child gradually learns to distinguish between itself and the (m)other, thus moving from complete dependence to relative independence. It is in this phase that the child comes to rely on 'transitional objects' that can assume the form of a blanket or a pacifier, but can also merely be a word or a lullaby. These objects present the young child's first 'not me' possessions. While they are conceived as separate from the mother, they serve a similar, comforting purpose. Through the 'transitional object,' the child realizes that it can have a persisting imaginary bond with the mother despite the fact that she is not continuously present. See also: Winnicott's *Playing and Reality*.

*World*, Harriet Burden's art objects mediate, in a similar way, between the world she shared with her husband and the newly formed, still unfamiliar world in which he is missing.

### **Feminism and the Male Gaze: The Framed Self**

*The Blazing World* opens with the "Editor's Introduction" which immediately blurs the line between an autobiographical and a fictional mode of storytelling. It quotes from an article written by Richard Brickman, who is later revealed to be one of Burden's pseudonyms. In his article, Brickman cites from a letter that Burden allegedly sent to him before her death: "All intellectual and artistic endeavors, even jokes, ironies, and parodies, fare better in the mind of the crowd when the crowd knows that somewhere behind the great work or the great spoof it can locate a cock and a pair of balls" (1). Although an invented, meta-fictional critic makes this statement, it can be traced back to the novel's protagonist Harriet Burden. The thus created layered perspective already alludes to the book's focus on narrative's constructedness. Functioning almost as a warning sign against the taken-for-grantedness of the story's authenticity, the introduction draws attentions to the inherently artificial nature of the faux autobiographical novel. In addition, the interlacing, entangled perspectives allude to the fact that subjectivity is here not cast as singular and fixed, but rather as pluralistic and mutable. As the book's opening mounts several layers of fictional perspectives, it also entails the book's incentive: much of it revolves around an art project that Burden realizes in the course of the book and which addresses the (unconscious) prejudice inherent in personal perspectives. Burden, who exhibited her art in the 1970s, withdrew from the art world in the 1980s. After her art collector husband Felix Lord dies in the 1990s, she however decides to hire "three men to act as fronts for her own creative work" (1). Brickman writes that this series, which Burden called *Maskings*, "was meant not only to expose the antifemale bias of the art world, but to uncover the complex workings of human perception and how unconscious ideas about gender, race, and celebrity influence a viewer's understanding of a given work of art" (1). This interpretation alone turns *The Blazing World* into Hustvedt's most overtly feminist work.

The twenty-four alphabetically ordered journals that Burden, according to the book's ominous editor I.V. Hess,<sup>18</sup> left behind stand as proof for her sprawling intellectual curiosity; they illustrate her vast knowledge of diverse philosophical and art-historical

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<sup>18</sup> While the book makes no explicit reference to her, the editor's name could be read as a reference (or an homage) to Eva Hess, the Jewish-American avant-garde artist (1937-1970), who is often associated with the post-minimal art movement and who belonged to the first artists who made use of at the time unusual materials such as fiberglass and plastics. While Hess never declared her own work to have a feminist agenda, it has often been associated with women's issues in the twentieth century.



contexts. Hess notes that the notebooks are almost impossible to “decode” as their “system of cross-referencing” is “sometimes straightforward but at other times appeared Byzantine in its complexity or nonsensical” (4). While Burden is thus not easily ‘read,’ her illegibility points to the novel’s main claims: it suggests, in short, that identity must be considered a mutable and deeply impressionable construct. The ambivalence that therefore surrounds Burden’s conglomerate persona is, for instance, captured in the recognition that she receives posthumously. Although her reputation as an artist grows after her death, her *Maskings* remain surrounded by controversy. Especially her collaboration with the last of the three artists, who later claimed the artwork as his own, remains a disputed subject. Burden, who had planned her triumphant unveiling after the final artworks of her series were exhibited, felt betrayed and humiliated by her last collaborator, Rune.<sup>19</sup> Arguably because of her grand claims and her tendency toward an eccentric, contradictory self-presentation, some art critics portray Burden as instable and unreliable. One male journalist writes that after her husband’s death, “*she suffered a complete mental breakdown and was treated by a psychiatrist. She remained in his care for the rest of her life. By all accounts, Burden was eccentric, paranoid, belligerent, hysterical, and even violent*” (9). The way in which this critic frames her as a hysterical, affluent woman clashes with her self-portrayal: in Burden’s own version, her therapist helped her to discover a new version of herself, one that was less inhibited and more daring than the placid self that she had previously identified with. Since neither of these versions is fully dismissed, objectivity is ultimately portrayed as a myth. Personality is thus also cast as the product of both the self’s reflection on itself and the others’ glance at it.

Burden’s interest in Margaret Cavendish, a seventeenth century duchess, proves this point most poignantly. Cavendish was an artist, an author and an intellectual whose work only became recognized after her death. According to Burden, she lived an extraordinarily emancipated life. Her only work of prose, a utopian romance called *The Blazing World* is today categorized as an early example of science fiction literature. I.V. Hess explains why Burden identified so closely with Cavendish: “the duchess felt brutally constricted by her sex and repeatedly articulated the hope that she would find readers and acclaim posterity. Snubbed by many with whom she would have liked to engage in dialogue, Cavendish created a world of interlocutors in her writing” (6). Hess explicates that Burden’s diaries

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<sup>19</sup> Harriet’s late companion Bruno, a failed poet who loves her dearly, admits that Harriet’s plan to combine her creative ideas with another person’s name and face had been “fraught with risk from the beginning” (307). That her plan to confront the art world with its own bias failed so thoroughly that Rune in the end gained the power to belittle her by calling her his muse and a “*kind,*” yet slightly confused “*lady,*” was crushing to Harriet because it confirmed that her attempt to draw attention to prevailing power relations by inverting them led to the opposite of the intended effect (308).

could be read as similar “forms of dialogue,” particularly as they often include “arguments between two versions of herself” (7). This shows that Burden walks a thin line: while her notebooks resonate with an almost schizophrenic multiplicity, they also show that the construction of (gendered) identities obliges to rules and regulations that serve the purpose of creating normatively defined, unified subjects.

A similar point can be made when aligning the contrasting depictions of Harriet Oswald Case, an art critic who sides with Rune’s version of the story, claims that Rune’s “genius as an artist far outstripped her fussy, pretentious work” (46). He describes Burden as ‘manly’ in a rather demeaning way, as “a galumphing jump-shot-sized broad with long, muscular arms and giant hands” (46). While Harriet’s best friend Rachel Briefman<sup>20</sup> concedes that due to her size, Harriet’s “appearance was the arena where the more pernicious aspects of America touched her,” she insists that “Harriet was striking. She had a beautiful, strong, voluptuous body” (49). Although she often remained quiet, “she was so forceful and intelligent, she frightened people” (53). These two contrasting versions of Harriet converge in the self-portrayal that emanates from her notebooks. As a child, Harriet often found that her appearance and demeanor was socially unacceptable. She thinks back to “a litany of crimes—my clothes, my hair. I use too many big words. I am always answering in class, brown-nosing Harriet” (148). Eventually, however, she obliged: she became a wife and mother who worked on her art privately but hardly showed it in public: “my work had never sold much and was little discussed, but for thirty years I served as hostess to the lot of them” (14). Yet she not only threw dinner parties, she also endured her husband’s secretive, withdrawn life, his temporary absences and sexual promiscuity. Only after his death does she return to the maladjusted version of herself. And once her grief unleashes this formerly repressed version, her opposition to normative constraints mounts, turns into rage, and is then channeled into her art projects.

As *The Blazing World* draws to a close, Harriet is diagnosed with terminable cancer. And yet she fights death with the same rage that defined her attitude toward art. The portrayal of her reluctant death bears resemblance to Eggers’ depiction of his mother’s death. Both scenes defy the idea of a peaceful death in the midst of loved ones. Dying is instead portrayed as unwilling and brutally painful. Feeling robbed of the chance to make up for many missed years, Harriet does not accept the ending of her own story. Instead of coming to terms with her own ending, she fights this last determination as long as she can.

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<sup>20</sup> Her full name, Rachel Briefman, bears a close resemblance to Harriet Burden’s pseudonym Richard Brickman. A possible connection remains, however, wholly unexplained.

### **Identity and Identification: The Ambivalence of Relational Alliances**

As in Judith Butler's influential early work, most prominently in her 1990 book *Gender Trouble*, Hustvedt's protagonist discusses the performative dimension of gender roles and, as a result, speaks of the limiting effects that the cultural construction of identities has had particularly on women. It is interesting to note that Hustvedt makes a rather categorical difference between the concepts of 'motherhood' and 'fatherhood,' arguing that paternal relations are, perhaps because they can be aligned with patriarchic traditions, more withdrawn and distant than maternal lineages. It has already been noted that in Hustvedt's works, the identification of female family members reaches across generations. The author speaks from personal perspective when talking about her relation to her sisters, her daughter and her mother: "three generations mingle and time collapses in *likeness*. I am you" (*Living, Thinking, Looking* 71). This image of complete identification is inverted when she proposes that the same does not apply to paternal relations. She claims that it is impossible to say that: "when the father dies, the daughter becomes her own father and then her own son. The daughter never becomes the father" (71). For Hustvedt, identification is thus complicated by gender roles and the affiliation with a particular sex which is often associated with sexual desire for its opposite. Even when considering that her statements bear the trace of her psychoanalytical background, she appears trapped in the same categorical thinking that she criticizes. And yet, she does not present the identification with the maternal and the alienation from the paternal as intrinsic, 'naturally' given relational patterns. When taking a closer look at Harriet Burden and her artworks, which often negotiate the artist's relation to her own body<sup>21</sup> and in doing so address the expectations that come with the construction of

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<sup>21</sup> One of the art critics who share their opinion on the controversy surrounding Harriet Burden and her collaboration with three male artists is a man named Burrige. Like Oswald Case, he speaks about her in a paternalistic, patriarchic tone, especially when addressing Burden's collaboration with Rune and their work *Beneath*: "Harriet just never struck me as someone who could pull off a work like that solo [...] her art runs in a tradition—Louise Bourgeois, Kiki Smith, Annette Messager: round feminine shapes, mutant bodies, that kind of thing. *Beneath* is hard, geometrical, a real engineering feat. It's just not her style, but it made sense for Rune" (277). While Burrige's argument categorizes Burden's work as typically 'feminine' and Rune's as prototypically 'male,' the women artists he mentions are of importance to Hustvedt precisely because their work is preoccupied with categories that have defined the idea of femininity culturally and historically. Hustvedt's essay collection *Living, Thinking, Looking* features essays on all three of these artists. In these essays, she describes Louise Bourgeois's artworks as "organic forms that summon genitalia, internal organs, stones, fossils, caves, primitive huts" (249). When she adds that "the weight of the theory brought to bear on the work can quickly obfuscate rather than reveal what's in front of us," (250) she could be addressing Burden's artworks. The impression of an alliance is reinforced when Hustvedt describes Bourgeois's pieces as "injured" sculptures, as "dolls of loss and mortality" (250). Again, it sounds as if Hustvedt describes Burden's artworks, since they, too, often feature oversized dolls and scarred sculptures. In her essay on Kiki Smith, Hustvedt stresses that the artist's sculptures address the menstruating, bleeding bodies of women. Just as Burden, Smith is interested in the "borderland where the articulated lines between inside and outside, whole and part, waking and sleeping, human and animal, 'I' and 'not I' are often in abeyance" (250). Both artists, the historical and the fictional one, create artworks that play with these borders in order to point to their mutability.

female identities, it becomes clear that Hustvedt draws attention to the fact that the idea of what gender is and how it works has such an immediate impact that it effectively determines the alleged 'nature' of our closest relations.

This may be why for Burden, gender has never felt 'natural.' Burden's daughter Maisie, a documentary filmmaker, realizes only after her mother's death that her mother's appearance must have sparked her urge to create male 'masks.' Maisie is convinced that they were not merely fictional constructs but instead expressed a hidden, invisible, and masculine part of her mother. And indeed, Burden's experience of being reduced to her conspicuous appearance created her desire to assume a different shape, and thus escape the boundaries of her normatively defined gender identity. She argues that the prejudice against her, while often unconscious, is so deeply embedded in the mechanics of perception that she had, from the onset, been at a disadvantaged position as an artist (32). When working with the first of her three masks, a young and rather naïve artist named Anton Tish, she tells him that they are a "a twosome deep in research on the nature of perception: Why do people see what they see? There must be conventions. We see nothing otherwise; all would be chaos. Types, codes, categories, concepts" (59). Clearly, Burden is acutely aware of the fact that both of them figure as such concepts: while Tish falls into the category of the aspiring young artist, Burden classifies as an aging woman, and a famous man's widow.

This is why she wants to destabilize the relation between artist and artwork in order to create a room where the latter becomes unhinged and stands for itself. Not only does she draw attention to the fact that perception is 'conventional' and depends upon categories of classification, she also insists that it is possible to become aware of the prejudices that shape perception, and thus to question their apparent fixity. At the same time, Maisie argues that her mother was convinced that "looking at any person or object carefully" will let it appear "increasingly strange" (92). With this nod to the strange within the familiar, the narration returns to Hustvedt's overarching emphasis on the unconscious. While the ability to classify the world relies on the received knowledge that a person accumulates over time, it is impossible to fully disentangle the influences that have shaped our perception. Hustvedt uses Burden's alter ego Brickman to argue that: "*more often than not, we do not know why we feel what we feel when we look at an art object*" (268). The trajectory of the presented argument is interesting: while Hustvedt initially encourages a more self-reflective practice of looking (at art), this new way of seeing would not increase but rather diminish the viewer's ability to understand what she sees. Hustvedt thus concludes that becoming aware of the ambiguity that lurks beneath our seemingly solid reality is a first step toward acknowledging the motives that drive our evaluations.

As in *The Sorrows of an American*, the theme of the unknown or unknowable is related to the characters' experience of loss and grief. Since Burden's relationship to the men whose deaths she mourns throughout the book (her father and her husband) was defined by their absences and silences, the feeling of having been rejected also haunts her grief. Hustvedt here returns to her assumption that unresponsive parents can have a deeply traumatizing effect on their child's psyche. In Burden's case, the lack of paternal recognition did not only shape her development as a girl and a woman. It also explains the ambivalence that defines her grief and turns her into a melancholic mourner. And because the relationship to her husband echoed that to her father, one loss becomes entwined with the other. While Burden is initially crushed and completely paralyzed by her husband's sudden death, her therapist helps her to readjust her self-image. She gradually realizes that from her childhood on, men exerted a dominating influence on her. With this realization, Burden uncovers a fury and rage that she had repressed as long as her relationships held her in thrall. The recovery of this hidden part of herself leads to Burden's assertion that "we know so little about ourselves it's shocking. We tell ourselves a story and we go along believing it, and then, it's the wrong story, which means we've lived the wrong life" (17). It here seems that she regrets the life she has led up to this point. Only after her husband's death does she begin to look for the "hidden story somewhere inside her" (117). She does so by accessing her repressed feelings of sadness and rage. While she knows that she cannot access her first formative feelings and trace the effects that they have had on her adult self, she nevertheless searches for patterns that explain her own relational behavior.

This is why she, for instance, engages in an experimental game with Rune when working on their art installation. As they apply masks of the opposite sex, Rune and Burden assume fictional personas. From behind her mask, Burden not only becomes a commanding man, she also feels the desire to exert her domination and hit the girl that Rune has become behind his mask. Although she initially feels agitated by the fact that the staged power play arouses her, she soon realizes that the inversion of gender roles enabled her to express her rage toward her secretive, elusive husband and her withdrawn, distant father. Because of their mutual affective exposure to each other, Burden is all the more hurt by the fact that Rune in the end chooses to exert his power over her by insinuating that she is mentally unstable. When she visits him in his studio and he humiliates her by slapping her, she sits as if "frozen" into a "child who had been punished for speaking out of turn" (301). Evidently, the (gendered) relational pattern that Rune takes advantage of resonates with Burden's upbringing: she is returned to the helplessness that her childhood self experienced in the face of her father's neglect. The recurrence of this pattern produces the atmosphere of

failure and regret that determines the book's ending. Rune here assumes a metaphorical position, representing both the father and the husband, whom Burden loves and hates.

### **“I am Multitudes”—Experimenting with Plurality**

Throughout the book, Harriet Burden is read from various subject positions. She is described in letters, interviews, and personal essays that her friends, critics, and even her ‘masks’ have written. In addition, the reader is presented with excerpts from her diaries and an article written by Burden’s alter ego Richard Brickman. The narrative structure that frames the book’s protagonist is, therefore, as multi-faceted and contradictory as the person that it attempts to capture. The idea of the unified self gives way to a plurality of selves inhabited by each character. Hustvedt suggests, for instance, that each individual contains male and female aspects. Whether these aspects can be expressed or must remain hidden depends on the responsiveness or inhibitions of the individual’s social context.

It has already been noted that Hustvedt understands the arts as an expressive vessel for the unconscious. In *Living, Thinking, Looking*, she claims that her writing helps her to explore her “plurality” and express her unseen or unknown selves (86). Similar dynamics apply to Harriet Burden: her friend Rachel claims that “psychotherapy unleashed a Harriet Burden none of us had even seen before, as well as a number of other characters or personas she had been sitting on for quite some time” (25). Just as the author, Burden channels and expresses these ‘characters or personas’ in her art. Agreeing with Rachel, she confirms that psychotherapy indeed helped her to “become less inhibited” (32). Once she became “Harriet Unbound,” she however also began to wonder about “the other Harry Burden who might have, could have, should have unleashed herself earlier” (32). She not only wonders what her life would have been like had she been born a boy. She also debates whether she could not have drawn more productively on her masculine self. And yet the novel also presents the difficulties and dangers that accompany a pluralistic self-perspective: Burden’s companion Bruno, who writes and rewrites the same poem for decades without ever reaching a point of closure or completion, declares—with a nod to Walt Whitman: “I am multitudes” (361). And yet his multiplicity has led to a life marked by dispersion. His inability to choose one of these possible versions has prevented him from recognizing himself in a coherent and productively meaningful way.

While *The Blazing World* thus casts the self’s plurality as a given, it does not deny the dangers of mixing identity categories that are conventionally thought of as incompatible and mutually exclusive. Burden, who shares her vast art-historical knowledge with her first ‘mask’ Anton Tish, notices that the young man adopts aspects of her persona. Not only does

she realize that “her answers and comments became his,” he also “began to remember insights as his that weren’t his” (111-12). While Tish thus mirrors herself in his mentor, he does not do so in order to recognize her strangeness and alterity, but instead comes to fully identify with her image—and consequently begins to regard himself *as* her. Their ‘overlap’ proves dangerous at the moment when he realizes that he has become unable to move away from their shared project and continue his own artistic pursuits: “he couldn’t do it because she had gotten in the way; her ideas has intruded upon his. He didn’t recognize himself anymore” (114). Tish’s attempt to create his own identity as an artist through hers fails as it does not allow for the dialectic movement that would enable him to recognize himself as ‘other’—and therefore as himself. This shows that although Hustvedt insists on a pluralistic and relational concept of the self, she also believes in a quintessential core identity. Only if the adult’s self-image corresponds with the emotional reality that it formed early on can it play with its own plurality without losing sight of its essential ‘thusness’—to speak in Barthian terms. If a person is in denial of its relational set-up and adopts the identity of others without, however, linking it to its own conscious self, its plurality can take a pathological turn and develop into conditions such as multiple personality disorder.

These observations show that Hustvedt’s novel revolves around the tension between the self’s pluralistic makeup and its desire for recognition. Maisie reflects on this tension when recalling that her mother once told her: “we live inside our categories, Maisie, and we believe in them, but they often get scrambled. The scrambling is what interests me. The mess” (209). While recognizable ‘categories’ thus create necessary distinctions between self and other, these borders always remain permeable and must be renegotiated. Maisie agrees with her mother’s insistence on “ambiguity as a philosophical position,” which already implies her disavowal of “hard binary oppositions” (271). Despite this insistence on ambiguity and plurality, Burden’s experimentation with it proves risky: after realizing her aesthetic agenda in her artworks, she becomes lost in its very plurality.

In *Living, Thinking, Looking*, Hustvedt states that “ambiguity does not obey logic” (23). It does not classify something as right or wrong, but instead situates it in an uncertain, intermediate position. Sure enough, the term is often applied when one addresses an object, a dream or a relationship, whose meaning is obscured and not easily grasped. In *The Blazing World*, Burden’s father is presented as a logician, who prefers closed systems to open, uncertain, in short ambivalent structures. Unsurprisingly, the father is also portrayed as overly rational, a “physically awkward” man lacking an emotionally expressive self (51). When Burden addresses her deceased father in an imagined dialogue, she says: “Your logic, Father, was about the consistency of relations, not the murk of so-called real life. It was

bounded logic. That was its problem” (233). From Burden’s perspective, her father could not endure the uncertainty inherent in ambiguous meaning. In contrast to him, she does not identify with the “conventional way of dividing up the world” (130). Because she regards binaries as reductive, ideological systems, she does not believe that they can capture the chaos that defines human experience.

Burden’s second ‘mask,’ a trans-gender, light-skinned black man named Phineas estimates that Burden’s father “had a problem with both who Harry was and with what she did” precisely because both her appearance and her artworks embodied ambiguity (129). His experience as a privileged, heterosexual, white male never forced him, it is here suggested, to question the comfort and security that binary structures provide. Yet Burden and Phineas, who in contrast often felt positioned between the binary positions that others bask in, experienced the same as hurtful constraints. Interestingly, the ambiguity that both Phineas and Burden associate with themselves is echoed in their relationships to their fathers. While both distance themselves from the way in which they were treated, they do not deny their father’s tremendous influence. Phineas concedes that he spent his “whole goddamned life” at once “loving and hating” his father (129). The same emotional ambivalence determines Burden’s emotional bond to her father. In the end, it comes to define her melancholic grief.

### **Incorporating a Contradiction: Love and Hate**

In *The Blazing World*, grief is the desire for a lack that cannot be named, articulated, or even known. The reader is given an insight into a melancholic form of grief that springs from an ambivalent relationship to the deceased. As already noted, Burden mourns for two powerful, but also powerfully elusive male figures who defined themselves by way of their wounding and yet seductive inaccessibility. In the beginning of the book, Burden reflects on this tension when asking: “And hadn’t I also loved his illegibility? Hadn’t it drawn me in and seduced me the way he seduced the others, not with what was there but with what was missing?” (17). At a later point, she describes how Felix had ruled the family universe that they shared: “Felix goes to work. Felix comes home. Felix gets on a plane and flies away. Felix sells and Felix buys, but you should have told me about your secret life, Felix, your secret lives, on the chase. It did have something to do with me” (155). She completes the scene with an image of Maisie as a young child, “rushing to the door, bouncing up and down in her pajamas, panting with excitement. He’s here. He’s here. Daddy! Daddy! Elusive fathers. How we love them” (155). Burden thus likens her daughter’s relation to Felix to her own relationship to her father. And she portrays the figure of the ‘elusive father’ as a type—as a subtle version of the powerful patriarch.



Burden's son Ethan, a writer who tries to come to terms with his grief in a fictional story that features a protagonist named 'E,' writes: "E's father wore a suit and tie to work every day. He had rows of suits in his closet, where E used to hide under the leather belts because they smelled good. E's father was often away. E hid in his father's closet and inhaled its father smell..." (286). Again, the desire for an absent, elusive, almost unreachable father prevails. As before, this longing for the untenable leads to an equally elusive, rather ambivalent form of grief. Ethan's protagonist "did not cry after his father died. He has wondered many times why he did not cry" (288). The fact that Ethan transports his grief to a fictional story, and to a dream within that story, shows that he feels far removed from both his deceased father and his own grief. And yet the book does not dismiss ambivalence. It on the contrary defines it as a chance to escape binary categories and avoid the full subjugation to systems of received knowledge. Burden's experience has taught her that ambivalence poses a threat to male power because it can potentially unsettle expectations about how girls and boys should behave, dress, speak, and think. Interestingly, the book plays with the idea of grief as a liberating experience for this exact reason. The loss of a loved person always inherently unsettles a binary relation such as, in Burden's case, that between husband and wife. After her husband died and once she confronts her solitariness, Burden begins to claim a new space for herself. In the process of doing so, she recognizes aspects of herself that she had previously not known. Her loss thus leads to the discovery of formerly suppressed versions of herself.

This, however, does not mean that her father's and her husband's influence diminishes with their deaths: Burden's identity is so thoroughly caught up in theirs that she continues to direct her movements, her actions and thoughts, as counter-movements to theirs. At one point, she declares: "even after they die, they are still there. I am made of the dead" (117). At another point, she reinforces: "the past is not dead. Its phantoms own us. They own me" (162). The dialectical relation to both men did, as this shows, not merely shape Burden's development as a girl and woman; it determined her through its unequal distribution of power. This is why *The Blazing World* portrays Burden's grief as both an end and a beginning. Her husband's death, which marks the book's beginning, ignites a change in Burden. Yet her emancipation from the bonds of marriage also 'unleashes' a version of Burden that tests the limits of what is conventionally perceived as mentally stable. In addition, her desire to *unburden* herself from the expectations that accompanied the role she had played does not fully succeed. Her failure to use her 'masks' to gain recognition shows that she remains trapped in the same power structures she worked to expose.

Is it, with these considerations in mind, nevertheless possible to argue that Burden experiences her grief as liberating? In the beginning of the book, this is definitely the case. She insists that “there are multiple moments in life [...] that might be called originating; we just have to recognize them for what they are” (14). Without the slightest indication of a pause, she moves from this observation to a description of her husband’s death. As they were eating breakfast, Felix’s movements were suddenly stopped in their tracks:

I was looking at him because he appeared to be on the brink of speaking to me. He looked surprised for just an instant, the spoon fell to the table, then to the floor, and he slumped over, his forehead landing on a piece of buttered toast. (14)

While the narrator’s ironic, almost comical tone already implies a sense of disbelief and thus distance, the subsequent scene only increases this sensation. Burden recalls the sensation of sitting in “the back of the ambulance,” following her husband to the hospital:

By then I had become a stone woman, an observer who was also an actor, in the scene. I remember it all vividly, and yet a part of me is still sitting there at the small table in the long, narrow kitchen near the window, looking at Felix. It is the fragment of Harriet Burden that never stood up and went on. (14)

The narrator here claims that a part of her died together with her husband. While the severity of her loss is therefore neither dismissed nor downplayed, it is interesting to note that only a ‘fragment’ of her never leaves the life that she shared with Felix Lord. On the one hand, she never fully recovers from her loss because it severed the relational bond that defined her for so long. Initially, she struggles “to comprehend the void,” which feels like “a lacuna, a hole in my mind” (29). Yet this void cannot be reduced to the absence or negative image of her husband. Instead, it is the lost relation, the cessation of their dialogically constructed reality that Burden mourns (29). On the other hand, the larger part of her does move on. It is for this reason that the experience of loss is retrospectively turned into an ‘originating’ incident.

While Burden eventually moves from the initial shock of bereavement to an active, and artistically productive position, she does not simply ‘get over’ her grief. It would be more accurate to say that she confronts the “conundrum of hatred and love,” which she feels for the deceased (17). One reason for this confrontation may be found in her mother’s way of disintegrating after her own husband’s death. Burden describes that her “once noisy, bustling mother became quieter and slower” (17). She “watched her dwindle” and die within a year of her husband’s death (17). It appears that Burden’s decision to drastically change her life derives from her urge to prevent her system from imploding like that of her mother. Yet Burden’s grief also becomes the vantage point of a new life—a *Vita Nova*—

because it allows her to explore her ambiguous relationship to the men she mourns. Burden not only describes herself as “an agitated mourner” and “restless, pacing animal” (17). In her first year of mourning, before she moves from her Manhattan apartment to an industrial loft in Brooklyn and starts to filter her losses into her art, she is also “furious, vengeful” and in “misery about all I had done wrong and all I had wasted” (17). This shows, very clearly, that she does not merely mourn the dead, but also the ‘wasted’ lives that did not live. She mourns, in short, not only the other but also herself. The sensation of mourning an unknown, un-lived version of herself and her life culminates at a later point in the book, after Burden has moved to Brooklyn:

But tonight, as I sit at my desk and look at the water—at winter, at the night, at the shining city—I feel a grief that has no object I can name, not Felix or my father or my mother. Just now, it came hard upon me, the grievous ache, but for what? [...] Is it for the child called Harriet who walked with her head down? (163)

Burden here grieves for versions of herself that were repressed and thus never made themselves known. In Hustvedt’s debut novel *The Blindfold* from 1994, the protagonist Iris Vegan expresses a similarly melancholic sentiment: “The misery I felt then was grief. I wanted her back, my old self, the girl who had watched him go, and she was dead” (184). In *The Blindfold*, the protagonist mourns the person she was prior to the death of her lover. Because his death changed her irrevocably, she lost not only her companion but also her former identity. While the same certainly applies to *The Blazing World*, another aspect is added here. Burden speaks of a ‘grievous ache’ that cannot be directed or even named; it remains obscure and mysterious to her. The unknowable dimension of grief can certainly be linked to the unconscious, and to Hustvedt’s conviction that our earliest attachments form us and are responsible for our emotional and psychological development. In Burden’s case, this suggests that the conscious grief for her husband and father becomes entangled with and reactivates, as Melanie Klein would have it, subconsciously stored, implicit memories of feeling rejected and unloved. This may explain why Burden’s grief expresses itself as rage. While she knows that “all thoughts of revenge are born of the pain of helplessness,” she also accepts that “vengeance is invigorating. It focuses and enlivens us, and it squashes our grief because it turns the emotion outward. In grief we go to pieces. In revenge we come together as a single pointed weapon aimed at a target” (119). The rage that she feels toward her father and husband—and their way of belittling and rejecting her—becomes Burden’s motor for action. Her grief turns into revenge because she feels the need to counteract the helplessness that she feels when confronted with the persistent hold that both men have on

her. In her *Maskings*, she metonymically enlarges the ‘target’ of her fury and directs it at society (or the art world) at large.

And yet her ‘metamorph’ sculptures are more than manifestations of grief. While Burden reflects on the fact that resurrecting her husband was somewhat “preposterous” as it turned her into her husband’s creator, it is interesting that her sculptures did undoubtedly invert previously lived power relations: Burden here becomes, quite literally, a maker of men. Aesthetically, the ‘metamorphs’ both at once resemble and mark a contrast the first piece of her series of *Maskings*, a “gigantic sculpture of a woman spread out in the gallery” (44). The sculpture is described as “an overblown, three-dimensional allusion to Giorgione’s painting of Venus, finished by Titian” (44). Her “creamy body was covered with hundreds of minute reproductions, photographs and texts,” which either stood as proof or commented on the disadvantaged role of women in art history and the neglect that women artists continue, according to Burden, to experience today (44). While the sculptures’ ‘overblown’ size alone implies the artwork’s self-referential dimension, it also incorporates the repression that the female body has historically been exposed to.

This first sculpture is closely related to Burden’s last artwork, which she conceptualizes but fails to complete before her death. She writes that she wanted to “build a house-woman” with “characters inside her head, little men and women up to various pursuits” (220). The gigantic sculpture pays homage to Margaret Cavendish, “the seventeenth-century monstrosity: female intellectual” (220). Yet Cavendish also embodied the paradoxical tensions that define Burden’s life: she wanted both at once “to be inside and outside, to ponder and to leap. She was painfully shy and suffered from melancholia, a drag on her gait. She bragged. She adored her husband. A few sages called her a genius” (221). Quite clearly, Burden does here not only describe her artwork, but also herself, feeling that she incorporates the same tensions and is made of the same fears, wishes, and desires.

One of Burden’s last visitors, a young woman and spiritual healer called Sweet Autumn Pinkey, provides the reader with an outsider’s perspective on the statue of the duchess:

I saw a woman squatting on the floor, not a real person, but a great big statue with no hair. And she had lots of people inside her head, but also numbers and letters, and she was raining numbers and letters and little people from her private parts, her vagina, anyway, and I felt this big grin come over my face... (378)

The fact that the sculpture is bald implies that Burden’s cancer-ridden body and that of the duchess converge in the artwork. In addition, the sculpture illustrates Hustvedt’s relational thinking, as it is populated by and procreative of people, numbers, and letters: while the ‘house-woman’ is the product of the many influences that these sources present, she also

(re)produces them. Upon a closer look, Sweet Autumn Pinkey also discovers a miniature version of Burden walking inside the giantess's body. Burden's choice to include her own body in an artwork that expresses her on a metaphorical level shows that she eventually chooses to inhabit the contradictions that define her. By incorporating herself, she demonstrates that she identifies with these contradictions and no longer seeks to resolve them. In the same way that her closest relationships were defined by ambivalence, by a paradoxical (and melancholic) combination of love and hate, her grief expresses itself in contradictory terms, ranging from incapacitating sorrow and furious rage to a liberating sense freedom and productive energy. In the end, Burden chooses to present her visible, easily recognizable self as only one of her many versions. This shows that she insists on and has incorporated the plurality that she began to explore in the wake of her husband's and her father's death. The fact that she lets multiple personas coexist—and thus also acknowledges the relationships that defined them—indicates, however, that she in the end chooses to hold on to the love that she has long liberated herself from. This also shows that Hustvedt's novel does in fact politicize the experience of grief and uses its portrayal to crystallize and dramatize the conflicts and confrontations that Burden experiences as a woman in an overly determined, male-dominated art world.

### ***What I loved***

In her 2003 novel *What I Loved*, the theme of grief is more pronounced than in any other of Hustvedt's works. It takes center stage in the second half of the book and has a dilapidating effect on all main characters, yet particularly on the novel's narrator Leo Hertzberg, who never recovers from his son's death. The novel's title alone could be read as a melancholic statement: *What I Loved* implies that the narrative centers on the subject of love, and on a lost object of love, yet it also suggests that 'what' it is that we love or loved can never fully be name—or told. Leo certainly qualifies as a melancholic mourner, as he is not only defined by his grief, but also strongly identifies with the losses he has suffered.<sup>22</sup>

*What I Loved* introduces two families, the Wechslers and the Hertzbergs, who reside in the same building in Manhattan's art district SoHo. While Leo Hertzberg is a professor of art history who teaches at Columbia University, Bill Wechsler is an experimental artist. Both men bond over their shared dedication to the visual arts and develop a close friendship. Leo and his wife Erica, a professor of English literature, have a son, Matthew, who is born within days of Bill and Lucille Wechsler's son Mark. Bill and Lucille's marriage soon

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<sup>22</sup> Several paragraphs of this section are adapted from my Masters' thesis, which dedicates one chapter to Siri Hustvedt's *What I Loved*.

unravels and Bill eventually leaves Lucille for his lover Violet. His parents' divorce utterly unsettles Mark's life, as he moves back and forth between his mother's and his father's homes. The book is divided into three main parts: the first third of the book describes the gradual development of an intimate network of relational bonds between the members of both families. The second part explores Leo's experience of grief. It opens with Leo's announcement that his eleven-year old son has died in a canoeing accident and closes with the sudden death of Leo's best friend Bill Wechsler. While the last part of the book further elaborates previously developed foci, it also traces Mark Wechsler's development. The boy grows up to become a pathological liar, who lacks, as Marks points out, a "core identity" and changes his appearance and demeanor in accordance with the requirements of his social surroundings (188). Marks further describes the boy is "the living outcome" of paternal "separation and rejection—a person damaged beyond repair" (184). She adds that he may also be "the most powerful expression of mourning turned into pathological melancholia as a result of being repeatedly abandoned by his parents" (184). While the first observation appears well founded, the second statement proves less convincing: instead of developing a 'true self' through his relation to and self-recognition through others, Mark adopts various 'false selves' that are, however, not firmly anchored in his relational bonds and can therefore be exchanged at will. While the relationship to his parents can certainly be called ambivalent, it lacks the identification that defines the melancholic.

These preliminary observations show that Hustvedt's book highlights the importance, but also the precariousness of close filial and familial relations. As in her other works, characters are here often set up in mirroring pairs. The two boys, Mark and Matthew, are for instance both at once similar and contrasting figures: while they initially resemble each other, the differences in their emotional upbringing lead to their vastly distinct development. Only one of the main characters proves an exception to the thus presented dynamics of dialogical subject-formation: Bill's first wife Lucille lacks the "quality of ordinary connectedness to other human beings" (*What I Loved* 41). Bill's second wife Violet, who could be described as Lucille's counterpart, describes her as: "all boarded up and shut down like a condemned house" (353). Bill and Violet, on the contrary, are connected through "an invisible wire" (52). According to Violet, they are inscribed, "written and drawn" into each other (58).

In the course of the book, Violet introduces the "idea of mixing." She explains that "the world passes through us—food, books, pictures, other people" (89). With reference to Hegel's dialectics, she rejects a self-referential model of subjectivity: "Descartes was wrong. It isn't: I think, therefore I am. It's: I am because you are. That's Hegel—well, the

short version” (91). Violet believes that the individual’s thoughts and actions do not signal its agency, but are instead a response to gestures made by others. Violet’s ‘mixing’ theory explains that relationships have a lasting impact on us because they leave permanent traces and thus alter us irrevocably. As productive as Violet’s theory is, as destructive does it become when applied to the case of loss: if we are indeed written into each other, the death of a loved person must imply a partial death of its lover. Ironically, Violet’s thesis appears to be confirmed by the fact that she, too, becomes a melancholic mourner after her husband’s death. According to Freud, the (pathological) condition of melancholia translates the loss of the other into a partial loss of the self. Because the self identified so strongly with the other, it makes the other’s loss its own. Violet undoubtedly lives this identification. Although she did not adopt her husband’s name when they got married, she enjoys being called Mrs. Wechsler after his death: “I’ve always been Violet Blom, but now his name is something I want to hear over and over again, and I like answering to it. I want to cover myself in what’s left of him, even if it’s only his name” (331).

In a similar way, Leo’s thoughts and actions also confirm Violet’s theory, as they bespeak the same identification. After their son dies, Leo and Erica withdraw from each other. They cannot bear the other’s suffering as it confronts them with their own unbound despair. Unlike Inga and Sonia in *The Sorrows of an American*, they are unable to find comfort in the recognition of the other’s sorrow. Eventually, Erica moves to California, where she lives “a posthumous life” (200). And yet, as Leo draws his narrative to a close, he realizes that they will “never be free of each other [...] We had been pulled apart by absence, but that same absence had shackled us together for life” (303). The death of their only child had a tremendous effect on both parents’ personalities and lives. Because Matthew had been the mirror through which they recognized themselves, they lose sight of themselves and of each other. As a consequence, they not only become incomplete and dispossessed, they also define themselves through the ‘hole’ that the other’s absence opened up in them.

His best friend’s death has almost as severe an impact on Leo. With him, he loses another thread that binds him to the external reality from which he had already become increasingly detached after his son’s death. Leo writes that “during the year that followed Bill’s death, I continually found myself at a loss—I didn’t know what I was seeing or I didn’t know how to read what I saw” (254). This shows that Leo relied on the friend’s perspective to make sense of his own world. It was the other who put things into a perspective from which he could locate himself socially and emotionally. It is for this reason that both instances of loss affect the way in which Leo relates to the world. After Bill’s death, he says that “he meant the world to me” (268). While he knows the phrase to be rather conventional and

commonplace, it appears, in the moment of being spoken, “invigorated by a truth I had been keeping to myself for some time” (268). Leo here confronts the fact that his world collapsed when its pivotal representative disappeared. This observation interestingly confirms that because he identifies with the other, he feels his absence in and as part of himself.

While the preceding close-readings moved from rather general observations to a more particular analysis, and thus pursued an increasingly concrete exploration of the theme of grief in Hustvedt’s writing, this final section continues in the same trajectory by focusing on two main aspects that determine Leo’s experience of loss. It will first of all observe the strong sense of ‘unreality’ that the narrator experiences in the aftermath of a loved person’s death. And it will secondly look into the hypersensitive sensations that Leo consecutively observes in himself. And since this section does not only conclude the chapter, but also brings this study to a close, it will also return to instances in which authors and theorists that have been discussed in my study voice similar observations.

#### **“A Lid of Disreality Falls over Me:” The Lacuna of Grief**

Darian Leader, a practicing psychoanalyst, explains that to a melancholic person, the world appears hollow and even unreal. Because melancholics “retain their loyalty to the dead,” they continue to inhabit “the world” that they shared with the dead person (174). The mourner’s tendency to dwell in the past leads to his reluctance to engage in the social reality of the present, which is thus perceived as if from afar. In Melanie Klein’s influential essay “Mourning and Its Relation to Manic-Depressive States,” the author cites the case story of a woman who went for a walk through her neighborhood a few weeks after her husband died: “she suddenly realized that the number of people in the street seemed overwhelming, the houses strange and the sunshine artificial and unreal” (112). Here, the mourner perceives the world not only as ‘artificial and unreal,’ but also as “vague” and even “blurred” (112). The strangeness of her surroundings frightens her, so that she has to retreat into the privacy of her own home. Klein argues that the “frightening indifference,” which the woman experiences, is caused by her “internal objects, who in her mind had turned into a multitude of ‘bad’ persecuting objects” (112). She must therefore reiterate the baby’s motion of establishing “real trust” in her internal objects. We can therefore conclude that the rupture caused by her husband’s death is reflected in the woman’s destabilized relation to the external world, which she perceives as “artificial and unreal” (112).

According to Klein, “many mourners can only make slow steps in re-establishing the bonds with the external world because they are struggling against the chaos inside” (112). In the first chapter of my study, I already elaborated on Klein’s claim that the baby’s “trust in the



object-world” is first and foremost developed through its relation to “a few loved people,” who initially represent the external object world at large (112). Although the woman in Klein’s story lost one of these ‘loved people’ not in infancy but in adult life, the same dynamics are at play: the husband’s death unsettles his wife’s relation to the external world because to her, he had been its primary reference point. Klein argues that in every process of mourning, the bereaved person must reinstate “the lost loved object inside himself” (112). Yet the mourner does not simply incorporate the lost person. She also reiterates the development that she underwent as a young child: only once she reestablishes all of her ‘good’ internal objects, can she also learn to trust the external world again.

How does this relate to Hustvedt’s writing? While Hustvedt does not explicitly refer to Klein, she often associates grief with a strong sense of unreality and dissociation. In *Living, Thinking, Looking*, she explains such dissociated behavior by linking it to the notion of trauma: “terrifying violence often creates dissociated responses in people, an eerie sense of detachment from the horror, as if they are not participants but observers” (260). It has already been noted that Hustvedt tends to frame the sudden loss of a loved person as a traumatic event that can neither be processed nor immediately integrated. She not only assumes that such experiences are not registered as “autobiographical, episodic memories,” she also proposes that their failure to be integrated “results in numbing, or the feeling that you and/or your surroundings are unreal” (260). The impression that Hustvedt does not draw a clear line between trauma and grief is reinforced when taking a closer look at her conceptualization of recently bereaved characters. Quite often, the world no longer appears real to them. In *The Blazing World*, Harriet Burden for instance speaks of a “sense of unreality” that she feels while wandering “among the rooms I knew so well” after her husband’s death (17). Yet Hustvedt is in no way the only author who observes this ‘sense of unreality.’ While Leo’s experiences will be discussed in the following, it is interesting to note that almost all of the already discussed authors comment on similar sentiments. In his autobiographical book *A Grief Observed* (1960), C.S. Lewis for instance writes: “There is a sort of invisible blanket between the world and me. I find it hard to take in what anyone says” (5). He later reinforces: “there is spread over the whole thing a vague sense of wrongness, of something amiss [...] I hear a clock strike and some quality it always had before has gone out of the sound. What’s wrong with the world to make it so flat, shabby, worn-out looking?” (31-32). At a later point, Lewis articulates the same sense of numbness with renewed urgency, speaking of the “nightmare unreality” that surrounds him (49).

In *A Lover’s Discourse*, Roland Barthes states that when immersed in a state of intense suffering, “a lid of disreality falls over me from the lamps, the mirrored ceilings” (87).

Reinforcing the sense of isolation and estrangement that he feels, he adds that “the world plays at living behind a glass partition; the world is an aquarium; I see everything close up and yet cut off, made of some other substance” (89). While Barthes asserts that language – the act of speaking and writing—keeps him “on the brink of reality,” he generally feels as if this same reality “withdraws” from him and “gradually freezes over” (89). And in *Mourning Diary*, the same mood prevails: “mourning affects the world—and the worldly—with unreality, with importunity” (126). On the one hand, he thus indicates that his sorrows let the world appear banal, and rather superficial. On the other hand, he suggests that it has become cold, distant, and inaccessible.

In Dave Eggers’ *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, the uncertain, broken relation to an external reality is hyperbolically inverted and ironically portrayed as a liberating, potentially creative and yet somehow *heartbreaking* distance. Not unlike Emerson, Eggers’ narrator appears to question the solidity of reality at large when he describes the Californian sublet that he has moved to after his parents’ death:

We have a house, a sublet for the summer, that overlooks the world [...] The mornings are filmstrip white and we eat breakfast on the deck, and later we eat lunch there [...] always with the whole thing, the postcard tableau, just there, all those little people, too much view to seem real, but then again, nothing really is all that real anymore, we must remember, of course, of course. (Or is it just the opposite? Is everything *more* real? Aha). (51-52, emphasis in original).

This scene shows that while Eggers’s narrator declares his distanced, aloof position to be both liberating and empowering, he is unsure of the degree of reality that this newly created perspective possesses. While Dave does not explicitly address his motifs, the trajectory of his story shows that the sense of unreality that he feels is both a product of his grief and results from his attempt to escape the same.

With these insights into already analyzed works in mind, let us return to Leo Hertzberg’s story. The centerpiece of *What I Loved* begins with his son’s and ends with his best friend’s death. While Matthew’s death leads Leo into a state of incapacity and stagnation, Bill’s death further enhances Leo’s distance to the social sphere and increases his sense of estrangement from it. The novel’s first part closes with an image of Matthew waving his parents good-bye after having been dropped of at summer camp. The opening of the second part announces Matthew’s death. The incident of death that takes place between the first part’s happy ending and the second part’s horrible beginning remains untold. It is merely recorded from the second-hand perspective of the bereaved father, who states:

Eight days later Matt died. On July fifth at about three o'clock in the afternoon, he went canoeing on the Delaware River with three counselors and six other boys. His canoe hit a rock and capsized. Matt was hurled out, hit his head on another boulder, and was knocked unconscious. He drowned in the shallow water before anybody could get to him. (135)

Not unlike Didion, Leo states the circumstances of his son's death in a matter-of-fact, detached tone. His account is reduced to the recollection of facts and does not betray his emotional state. A sense of disbelief and denial that closely resembles Didion's initially 'cool' response can be detected. As the narration continues, Leo admits, however, that he started to sweat and feel a rush of adrenaline when hearing his wife, who answered the phone call from the hospital, utter the word accident. He watches as Erica starts to shake and gulp for air before telling him: "Leo, that man on the telephone. That man said that Matthew is dead" (135). In these first moments, Leo reduces both his own and Erica's response to its physical symptoms, describing his difficulties to breathe and his failure to understand the words he had been told: "I said No. Nausea welled up in my mouth. My knees buckled, and I grabbed the table to steady myself [...] Erica had gripped the other side of the table. I looked at her white knuckles, then up at her contorted face" (136). In this initial scene, the estrangement that Leo feels when faced with the despair reflected in his wife's face is already made evident. She appears changed and unfamiliar to him; he "hardly recognized" her "pale, motionless, dumb" features (136).

Leo's account of the trip to the hospital intensifies this sense of unreality and applies it to the world at large. The estrangement that Leo feels with regard to both himself and his surroundings creates the impression that he tells not his own, but someone else's story. His tendency to move from a personal first-person to a more detached third-person perspective begins in the direct aftermath of Matthew's death and increases as his narrative unfolds. Yet even when he speaks from a personal point of view, he appears unsure of his own account: "I know that Erica and I saw him in the hospital and that he looked thin [...] His lips were blue and his cheeks were gray. He was Matthew and he wasn't" (136). The sense of disbelief that Leo here voices with regard to his child's reality swiftly spreads and is metonymically enlarged: "the world didn't seem to be the world anymore" (136). In the week following his son's death, "there is a shallowness to all of it, as though my vision had changed and everything I saw had been robbed of its thickness" (136).

Leo ascertains that the "loss of depth came from disbelief." Although he knew "the truth," he did not register the event as real—or as belonging to the story of his life (137). Leo's reaction confirms that Hustvedt portrays the unexpected loss of a loved person as traumatic. This impression is reinforced when Leo says that his "whole being refuted Matt's death"

(137). Just like Emerson, he continues to hear his son move around his room and expects him to step through the door at any given moment. It here appears as if Leo tries to protect himself from the pain of his own loss by denying its very reality. Because he nevertheless continues to live in the present and must face its demands, denial and disbelief cannot become his permanent reality: “belief would come very slowly, and it would come sparingly, in moments that bored holes into the curious stage set that had replaced the world around me” (137). Yet even when Leo begins to comprehend his loss, he continues to feel disconnected and out of touch with the world and himself. Erica soon begins to express her grief openly, wailing and crying vigorously for her child. She walks in her sleep and searches for something she cannot name upon waking. Leo, however, does not leave his self-imposed isolation and remains numb to the world. When listening to Erica’s outbursts, he feels “afraid, not of her grief but of my own. I let her noises tear and scrape through me. Yes, I said to myself. This is true” (137). While he realizes that Erica’s grief may not in fact differ from his, he is afraid to access his own sorrow, and can therefore also not express or share his grief: “I felt dry. That was the problem. I was dry as an old bone” (137).

Their contrasting response to the same incident of loss alienates Erica and Leo from each other. Leo, especially, withdraws into himself and makes no attempt to resume his former life. He spends his days sitting in a chair looking out the window. Occasionally, he wanders into Matthew’s room and touches his things, careful not to change anything. Leo reflects on the stagnation that marked this period of time: “we didn’t know how to give him up, how to be. We couldn’t find the rhythms of ordinary life. The simple business of waking [...] and sitting down to eat breakfast became a cruel pantomime of the everyday enacted in the gaping absence of our son” (139). This statement shows more acutely than any other that the parents’ life revolves around the lacuna of grief, around the ‘gaping absence’ that hovers between them. The fact that they no longer know ‘how to be’ further indicates that their identity is utterly shaken and destabilized. Because so many of their daily tasks and habits were directed at and thus relied on the interaction with Matthew, their actions and thoughts are continuously stopped short.

Although Leo and Erica return to work and try to maintain certain routines to steady themselves, Leo soon realizes that “the sameness and familiarity of our duties felt more like a reenactment than a continuation of our old lives” (143). He succeeds to “impersonate” his old self, (143) feeling the need to present himself to his students as the responsible and confident person he used to be and not as the fragile and disoriented man he has become. Both Leo and Erica perform their public roles with diligence. Whereas Erica’s posture, however, collapses daily upon her return home, Leo upholds his ‘reenactment’ even in front

of his wife and, most importantly, in front of himself. He is afraid that if he only slightly loosens the grip on himself, he will become completely undone: “I was like a man encased in a heavy suit of armor, and inside that corporeal fortress I lived with a single-minded wish: *I will not be comforted*” (144). His grief thus resembles that of Sonia in *The Sorrows of an American*: both characters feel the need to protect themselves from their own sorrow and therefore shut themselves off from their own feelings. As a result, they can neither express nor share their sorrow, and thus remain fully defined and immersed in them. Leo’s determination ‘not to be comforted’ further suggests that he has incorporated and come to identify with his grief.

Erica chooses a different route. For her, it becomes impossible to live in the continuous presence of her son’s absence that their apartment resonates with. Just like Harriet Burden in *The Blazing World*, she leaves the familiar scenery behind. When moving to California, she also leaves Leo and the self-imposed emotional exile that he has chosen for himself. Before her departure, she accuses him of having gone “dead” just like his father who, after having found out that his family was murdered in Auschwitz, “went still” and never recovered from this loss (145). Leo does not object to his abandonment. He on the contrary reflects on the fact that he had by then become “a churning repetitious engine of mourning,” a person, one could also say, fully ‘encased’ in his grief (146).

### **Experiences of Essential Estrangement: “My Months of Hypersensitivity”**

As time moves him along, Leo’s ‘fortress’ does not bear up. A year after his son’s death, he teaches an art history class on still life painting. While describing the objects in Jean Siméon Chardin’s ‘Glass of Water and Coffee Pot’ to his students, the painted glass catches his attention and Leo is suddenly overcome with emotion. The painting moves Leo so violently because it triggers an unexpected memory that Leo did not shield himself against. The image in the painting brings back a glass of water that Leo once put on Matthew’s night table before they began a conversation which he remembers vividly. It might seem paradoxical that Leo appears unmoved by his wife’s suffering, but suddenly breaks down in front of a work of art. He explains, however, that he always knew that his “entombment” would be temporary and an eventual “crack” in its protective structure “inevitable” (148). The painting became “the instrument of the break,” because it surprised him: “I hadn’t girded myself for its attack on my senses, and I went to pieces” (148). After this first ‘crack,’ Leo’s relation to his son’s absence changes. Whereas he had previously “avoided” his imaginary “resurrection” through the recollection of his memories, knowing that they would be “excruciating,” he now no longer avoids it. Once Leo allows his mind to wander

and memories return to him, he feels the overpowering presence of his son: “Matt was suddenly everywhere. The loft reverberated with his voice. The furniture seemed to hold the imprint of his body” (164-65).

The narrator describes the period of time, during which his son began to return to him, as his “months of hypersensitivity” (246). The constant confrontation leaves him not only unprotected and exposed, he also experiences his revived emotional vulnerability as extremely painful.<sup>23</sup> This shows that the discussed ‘sense of unreality’ is closely related to the mourner’s ‘hypersensitivity.’ It in fact appears as if the latter grows out of the former:

I saw the familiar streets and signs and crowds [...] while I saw everything with uncommon clarity, I felt that these sights didn’t belong to me anymore, that they weren’t tangible and that if the car stopped and I stepped out, I wouldn’t be able to grasp any of it. (246)

Leo’s statement echoes Klein’s case story. Here, too, the internal rupture caused by the death of the loved person leads to a destabilized relation to and perhaps even a loss of ‘trust’ in the external world. At first glance, it reads almost paradoxical that the world’s felt artificiality, or strangeness, emanates from its observer’s hypersensitive awareness of his surroundings. Once we, however, understand the ‘uncommon clarity’ of the world as a product of the mourner’s estranged perspective, we must also acknowledge that he perceives the world as if seeing it for the first time, as both at once foreign and very immediate. The mourner’s perspective is thus that of an outsider, or of someone who returns to a once familiar place and feels that it has changed. The lost connection and the lack of a sense of belonging reinforce that Leo’s loss has a tremendous effect on his relation to reality. Because the world now lacks its anchor point and main representative, he feels as if his surroundings no longer belong to him.

In *Mourning Diary*, Roland Barthes speaks of a similar experience. After his mother’s death, he perceives his surroundings with “a strange new acuity, seeing (in the street) people’s ugliness or their beauty” (27). The same holds true for Joan Didion. She compares

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<sup>23</sup> The sensation of pain is, however, not solely the product of Matthew’s sudden reemergence, it also stems from his momentary absences. Because Leo is, in this hypersensitive phase, occasionally overwhelmed by the immediacy of his surroundings, he at times forgets his son: “Minutes would pass when I didn’t think of him” (149). He explains that after his son died, he had felt the obligation to constantly keep him in mind: “I had turned my body into a memorial—an inert gravestone for him” (149). At the time when the external world began to speak to him again, “moments of amnesia” became, however, inevitable (149). As a result, Leo is overcome with a sense of betrayal, as he is convinced that he has to keep his son alive in and through his memory: “when I forgot, Matthew was nowhere—not in the world or in my mind” (149). When Erica and Leo start to give away most of Matthews’s things, Leo keeps a few of his son’s belongings in order to fill his momentary mental “blanks.” His gesture shows that although Leo gradually leaves the isolation of acute grief and becomes more receptive to his environment again, he nevertheless remains dedicated to the memory of his child.

a grieving person to someone exiting a dark house and suddenly being blinded by the sunlight outside (74): “light, noise, color, smells, the slightest motion of the air rubbed me raw with the stimuli. I wore sunglasses all the time. Every shift in brightness hurt me” (148). She abstracts a more general assessment from this particular self-observation: “People who have recently lost someone have a certain look [...] I have noticed it on my face and I notice it now on others. The look is one of extreme vulnerability, nakedness, openness” (74). Didion thus presents the mourner as vulnerable and disoriented. Drawing on her own experience, she explicates that recently bereaved people often feel “fragile” and even “unstable” (169). Her remarks confirm that the mourner’s perspective originates in a sense of abandonment or painful independence. Having lost the person through whom she recognized both herself and the world, she becomes wholly undirected. Because thoughts lose their focus and actions are no longer interactions, Didion for instance feels disoriented and estranged from both herself and the world. The severed relation to the deceased person takes on a metonymic relation and is applied to the world at large, which is not only experienced as empty, but also as a foreign place.

In Hustvedt’s case, her interest in a hypersensitive awareness can be traced back to her earliest works.<sup>24</sup> In the author’s debut novel *The Blindfold* from 1994, the narrator suffers from excruciating headaches that not only render her completely paralyzed, but also land her in the psychiatric ward of a hospital:

My senses were oddly acute during that time. I wasn’t always able to open my eyes to the room’s fluorescent glare, but when I could, I saw its contents with remarkable clarity. Every sound on the ward vibrated through me; my nerves were as resonant as a tuning fork [...] It was never clear to me if what I saw, heard, smelled, and felt was distorted or if I was merely hypersensitive. At any rate, things were not the same. I can’t say what was behind it [...] but while I was there, lying in that bed, the world changed (95).

While the narrator’s self-observation bears a striking resemblance to that of Hustvedt’s mourning characters, her hypersensitivity is here not associated with an experience of loss. Since Iris Vegan here addresses her own unknowingness, both mental states can nevertheless be compared. The preceding analyses have shown that for Hustvedt, both love and loss possess an unknowable, intractable dimension. I would therefore argue that the impression of a ‘changed’ and thus unfamiliar world externalizes an internally felt

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<sup>24</sup> Interestingly, the theme of hypersensitivity, which resurfaces in all of Hustvedt’s works and is often, though not always linked to the notion of grief, also possesses a biographical component. In *The Shaking Woman*, Hustvedt describes herself as prone to a hypersensitive resonance with her surroundings: “For as long as I can remember, I have felt the taps, knocks, and bumps, as well as the moods, of other people, almost as if they were mine” (118).

uncertainty that demonstrates the impossibility to fully know oneself. In addition, the narrator's serious medical condition suggests that her hypersensitivity is related to the same sense of vulnerability and precariousness that the mourner also experiences.

This impression is confirmed when one takes into account how Harriet Burden feels after learning that she is terminally ill: "when I stood in the street with my hand in the air to hail a cab, I was still frozen, terror high in my throat as I looked around me amazed at what I was losing, city and sky and pavement, the swift and slow-moving pedestrians, and the color of things..." (352). On the one hand, Burden here alludes to the "incalculable losses" that she will suffer (352). On the other hand, she remarks on her peers' "complete indifference to the fact that they are alive" (353). Both statements' immediacy could be likened to the mourner's hypersensitive perspective. What is more, Burden could here be read as a mourner of sorts: while she does not grieve for another, she mourns both the world and herself in an anticipatory gesture of farewell.

While this brief excursion has shown that the theme of hypersensitivity is not only integral to Hustvedt's writing, but also reemerges in several other of the presented works, it emerges with unprecedented urgency in the figure of Leo. Once he leaves the solitary world of grief, he perceives his friends with enhanced clarity: "I found myself looking at them all over again. Like a man who had crawled out of a dungeon after years in murk and shadow, I was a little shocked by their vividness" (152). That Leo regains his social 'vision' does, however, not mean that he resumes his old life or recovers his former confident self. His loss continues to determine Leo. Once he accesses and accepts his grief, he remains overly sensitive and vulnerable to the emotional potentiality of his environment. These dynamics are highlighted in a scene that depicts a birthday party of Bill's son Mark. Although he "had planned to do well," Leo finds himself overwhelmed by memories of his own son: "I took several trips to the bathroom, not to relieve myself but to grab the sink and hyperventilate for a couple of minutes before returning to the crowd" (154). In the end, it is Bill's schizophrenic younger brother Dan, who rescues Leo. Dan's "madness" suddenly "felt curiously comforting and familiar" (155) to Leo.<sup>25</sup> Hustvedt's novel thus presents mourning as a maddening and destabilizing experience; its characters are permanently defined by their losses. Erica for instance reflects on her feeling that they are "broken" and beyond repair (166). Despite their desire to bridge the gap that opened up between them, they cannot

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<sup>25</sup> At several instances in the book, grief is related to madness. Before Erica moves to California, she describes herself as having been "crazy" after Matthew's death (145). At a later point, Leo is haunted by a fear whose source he cannot name. He realizes that "to be frightened of something so opaque makes me sound mad, as unbalanced as Dan" (344). The experience of grief has, however, taught Leo to accept that it is impossible for him to fully understand and control the feelings that overwhelm him.



resume their narrative: “when Matt died it was like our story stopped” (166). For Erica, Leo is inevitably bound to her dead son. And Leo also realizes that they no longer recognize each other because they have both been so thoroughly transformed by grief. While they continue to long for the past version of the other, their lost connection illustrates how much grief has changed them and how severely it has affected their relation to each other.

### **Defining Absence: Missing the Other, Losing Sight of Oneself**

Throughout the novel, Leo gradually turns into a figure of interminable grief. He mourns both his child and his best friend. When Bill dies, Leo does not only depict his own, but also closely observes Violet’s suffering. Through Bill’s death and Violet’s powerful response to it, grief is thus approached a second time. Similar to Leo, Violet initially withdraws into her grief and gives in to her longing to dedicate herself solely to the memory of her husband. As in Leo’s case, a first phase of complete withdrawal, during which the loved person’s life is imaginarily prolonged, is followed by a sense of numbness that expresses itself in the mourner’s overly composed posture. While in the company of others, Violet does not express her sorrow. And yet she spends most of her time in Bill’s studio, wearing his worn work clothes, smoking his cigarettes, and reading his books. She even finds it increasingly difficult to leave her dead husband’s company: “I just want to stay here and be with him” (262). As in Leo’s case, Violet’s eventual confrontation with the reality of her husband’s permanent and irrevocable absence leads to her collapse. Eventually, she however chooses Erica’s way and flees the place that she associates with the memories of the past. Before she moves away, Leo detects the signs of permanent grief in Violet’s outward appearance: he notices her “transparent” skin, “a rash on her neck” and “purple shadows” under her eyes. He describes these details as symptoms of “grief grown old and familiar,” suggesting that, just as the relation to a loved person, grief also becomes inscribed into the body (339). This proves that Leo portrays grief as an integral element of both his and Violet’s life. Both of them identify with and incorporate the absence of someone who is, for them, no longer ‘knowable’ because he can no longer function as the person through whom they mirror and recognize themselves.

As an art historian, Leo is a professional “seer” and interpreter of the visual world and its artistic representations. Yet toward the end of his narrative, Leo’s eyesight begins to fail him. When he is told that his eye condition is incurable, he is, however, neither shocked nor saddened. This response is not surprising when bearing in mind that even before he lost his vision, Leo gradually withdraws from the world and adopted the perspective of an outsider. It follows that Leo’s grief at once paralyzes his life and enables his story. Because he often

perceives himself as a third-person character in his own memories, he experiences his life in narrative form even before he sets out to write his memoir.

Interestingly, Leo emphasizes that he is not going blind: while his “peripheral vision” remains largely intact, there is “always a ragged gray spot” in the center of his vision (19). His inability to see what is directly in front of him becomes a metaphor for his lost connection to reality: while his “pictures of the past” are still vivid, it is “the present that’s been affected” (19). The questioning of his own perspective returns Leo to a conversation with his son that he remembers in great detail. Matthew once wondered “how many people there are in the world” (128). He elaborates that he finds it strange to think “about how all those different people see what they see just a little different from everybody else” (128). These considerations lead father and son to the more general problem of perception. Matthew notes that it is impossible to see oneself directly. And Leo confirms that: “the place where I am is missing from my view. It’s like that for everybody. We don’t see ourselves in the picture, do we? It’s a kind of hole” (129). His statement suggests that this “hole” in our vision is normally filled by another person, whom the viewer identifies with, and who therefore functions as the invisible self’s extension or mirror. It is for this reason that the “world is never naked” (12): if it were devoid of a reference point, we would lose our orientation. Because we cannot see ourselves directly, we include ourselves in the picture by way of those, whom we identify with. The cited conversation foreshadows and at the same time explains the rupture in Leo’s perspective; with the death of his son, his perspective and his worldview disintegrate.

In the first part of the book, the concept of an other-dependent perspective remains unproblematic. With the emergence of grief, however, the observation that we are “only whole” to ourselves “in mirrors and photographs” becomes excruciatingly painful as it is made evident that the deceased person indeed used to function as the mourner’s mirror (255). It is for this reason that Leo longs to “escape” his own perspective, which inevitably confronts him with the ‘holes’ that the absence of both his son and his best friend bore into his worldview (255). He wishes to “take a far view” of himself and turn his reflective ‘I’ into “a small ‘he’” (225). Leo relates his difficulty to see clearly to the loss of his friend because “over the years, Bill had become a moving reference for me, a person I had always kept in view” (255). At the moment when their interaction and communication stopped, he lost his ability to recognize and position himself through his friend’s image. After his closest connections to external reality dissolve, he begins, therefore, to describe himself “from a third point of view” (172). What is more, Leo’s narrative is punctuated with instances where he, in the moment of telling his story, suddenly feels “as though another

person were speaking.” This sensation proves that Leo’s estrangement from both himself and the world is induced by his grief. He does not only experience himself as a character, but also perceives the world as unfamiliar. Not only does he perceive “the familiar streets and signs and crowds with “uncommon clarity,” he also feels as if “these sights didn’t belong to me anymore” (246). The sense of disconnectedness and unreality reaches a pivotal point in the moment when Leo watches Violet lie down next to Bill’s corpse. What he sees will be transformed into a memory that returns to him compulsively:

While I was looking at the two of them lying on the floor together, the truth of my own solitary life closed over me like a large glass cage. I was the man in the hallway, the one who looked on at a final scene being played out inside a room where I had spent countless hours, but I wouldn’t allow myself to step across the threshold. (249)

Here, the already discussed sense of unreality and detachment reemerges with unprecedented urgency. With this second essential loss, Leo loses another link to the social realm and withdraws further into the position of an observer. He gradually adopts, in other words, the distanced position of a narrator. In doing so, he also disengages himself from all participation and assumes the belated perspective of the biographer.

I would therefore, in conclusion, argue that Hustvedt illustrates the fragility inherent in identity’s relational design through the mourner’s precariousness and instability. At once point, Leo turns a story that his father used to tell about his childhood, into an illustration of the estrangement and lack of self-recognition that he experiences. In this story, the father’s childhood self gets lost while wandering in the woods. All of a sudden, everything around him looks unfamiliar. After finally making his way out of the forest, he finds “himself on a hill looking down at a house and a meadow,” which appears unfamiliar to him: “several seconds passed before he understood that the view was of his own house and garden and his family’s dark blue automobile” (254). Leo recounts several of such moments of estrangement “when the familiar turns into the radically foreign” (254). He describes these moments as instances when the “external signposts” that usually structure our vision disappear. He is convinced that his father’s inability to recognize his own house was caused by his previous loss of orientation. For someone who loses a loved person with whom he identified and through whom he consequently recognized himself, such a momentary disorientation can become a permanent reality.

Leo, who becomes a melancholic mourner because he identifies closely with his losses, withdraws from his present reality because he gets lost in its nakedness and cannot bear its perforated quality. He is not only physically limited to his peripheral vision, he has also lost his ability to anchor himself in the world. It is only in instances when he detaches himself

from his own perspective and leaves his personal point of view that he is able to see clearly again. His distanced perspective allows him to include himself in the picture, which is why it becomes possible for him to tell his story, and continue to live his solitary life. The fact that Leo continues to recognize himself through the people he loved and lost confines him, however, to a life of memory and of memorialization.

When taking a retrospective glance at the four books that this chapter discussed, it is striking to note that those of Hustvedt's characters who mourn melancholically are also her most tragic characters. While they are not portrayed as mentally ill, and thus defy Freud's pathological framing of the concept, the condition of melancholia is nevertheless problematized. Hustvedt's melancholic mourners, most notably Erik Davidsen in *The Sorrows of an American* and Leo Hertzberg in *What I Loved*, are lonely figures whose persistent identification with the past and the people they lost prevents them from expressing their grief openly and sharing it with others. They remain caught up in their investment in and exploration of the relation to the person they lost and yet continue to love. Interestingly, Hustvedt tends to present particularly her male characters as prone to a melancholic response to loss while her female figures are more likely to lighten their grief by expressing it outwardly or by sharing it with one another and thus recognizing their own pain in the likeness of similarly bereaved family members. When bearing in mind that relationality is key in Hustvedt's works, this observation suggests that the author portrays women as more accepting of their own vulnerability. While her male and her female figures are certainly equally impressionable, Hustvedt appears sensitive to the fact that men continue to depend on a self-image that resonates strength and autonomy while women have, for better or worse, a closer connection to the potential injury that they are exposed to. When we apply these observations to the theme of grief, the characters' different negotiation of loss shows that while identity's relational design can come to their rescue, it can also signal their gradual and yet irrevocable emotional demise.

## **In Lieu of a Conclusion**

This study observes how three triangulated concepts—grief, narrative, and identity—are renegotiated in contemporary literary and theoretical texts: it examines how the experience of severe loss influences a bereaved person's identity and illustrates, in a second step, how grief's impact on the mourner's identity expresses itself in the form of autobiographical narratives, works of fiction, and recent theoretical assertions.

This dissertation thus raises the question of the functions that literary and critical 'works of mourning' can assume today. I argue that writing (about) grief can become a way of breaking with the social taboo that the twentieth century has imposed on severe and lasting responses to loss. It can furthermore serve a compensatory function, as it reinstates mourning in the public space that is created between the authors, narrators, and readers of grief narratives. It is for this reason that I suggest that these texts can be read as ritualistic gestures that help mourning narrators to process, confront, and eventually accept the pain of loss and separation. And yet my observations center on the observation that although grief narratives certainly help to rehabilitate utterly ruptured—and disrupted—life stories, they nevertheless question the imperatives of coherence, comprehensibility, and closure that conventionally accompany successful personal (hi)stories.

What is more, the narratives in question univocally reject the traditional, certainly psychoanalytic notion of grief. Their narrators refuse to be consoled: they do not 'get over' their grief and 'move on' with their lives or return to their former selves. It on the contrary appears that they not only insist on the changes that grief brings about, but also identify with their lasting despair. Yet where does such a notion of permanent impairment leave us, as readers and as scholars? Is it not necessary to formulate a more targeted argument in order to bring this dissertation to an effective end? Would not ending on a note of pure negativity render the discussed texts dysfunctional, or even obsolete?

I believe that the analyses and close-readings have shown that these narratives are in no way redundant. One can certainly frame them as 'works of mourning,' albeit not in the traditional sense of the word. Priscilla Uppal has pointed out that contemporary texts about grief perform a "reversal of the traditional work of mourning" (15). And it indeed seems that all of the discussed narrators and critics identify with and incorporate a loss that they do not fully comprehend and therefore feel at a loss to adequately articulate. It may be for this reason that all of them also do away with the notion of detachment and externalization that defines Freud's early theorization of grief. The texts can therefore not be likened to written versions of a therapeutic 'talking cure.' Their narrators in contrast insist on the enigma of

grief: failing to fully articulate the person they loved, they find themselves quite literally at a loss. Their felt and articulated inability to find the right words entices them to hold on to the, as Barthes put it, ‘intractable’ and unknowable ‘thusness’ of the deceased person. It is for this reason that they not only articulate, but also perform a reconceptualization of grief that remains deliberately open-ended and per definition *almost* impossible to either grasp or write.

And yet these literary and theoretical reconceptualizations nevertheless move toward a new ‘understanding’ of grief: they first of all portray the experience as something potentially interminable. And they secondly emphasize that because grief can have a severely destabilizing effect on the mourner, it confronts the bereaved person with the vulnerability that lies at the heart of his or her personal identity. The recognition and acknowledgment of this vulnerability holds the potential of being translated, as Judith Butler points out, into the emotional, social, and even political reevaluation of our mutual interdependence and relational constitution. In the ‘works of mourning’ that I have discussed, it is this very recognition that motivates authors and critics, narrators and protagonists to call the quintessential American concept of self-contained individualism into question, and replace it with an interdependent and deeply impressionable image of the self.

These concluding remarks ascertain that the mourning figures whose stories we have read are melancholic ones. While these melancholic mourners declare their inability to rationally comprehend their grief, they do consciously reflect on the fact that they identify with the loved person and thus also with the pain of being irrevocably separated from him or her. According to the Freudian notion of melancholia, the identification with such an enigmatic loss leads to the problematic incorporation of something that cannot be fully named, or of someone who cannot be fully known. Interestingly, the same motion can be observed in recent literary and theoretical accounts: here, the narrators are acutely aware that the person, whom they continue to love and have yet irrevocably lost, remains ultimately unknowable. They thus incorporate her—to speak in Barthesian terms—‘intractable’ alterity, her wholly unique ‘thusness.’ And yet the notion of melancholia applies here for a second reason as well: in the Freudian conception, the melancholic condition results from the mourner’s ambivalent relationship to the deceased. When taking into account that the portrayed narrators dismiss the consolation and closure that could bring their stories to a univocal and unambiguous end, it becomes evident that they do not only grapple with the difficult task of expressing and communicating their grief; they also rage against the other’s permanent absence and their own sense of loneliness, abandonment, and permanent injury.

These observations culminate in a rather fundamental problem of representation, and thus allude to the larger ‘problem of meaning’ that these texts negotiate. Because the ‘works of mourning’ that I have taken into account insist on the meaninglessness of the loved person’s death, they also refuse to ascribe meaning to their narrators’ feelings of desolation and despair. This conundrum creates a dilemma: if the mourner’s story does indeed include episodes that remain devoid of meaning and can thus not be significantly emplotted, the story can also not be continued in a fully coherent way. It is for this reason that the selected texts reach the limits of language, as they stumble over their own failure to represent the loss that both escapes and defines them. And yet, it seems to be exactly this failure which reflects the severity as well as the incomprehensibility of loss back onto the mourner and therefore enables, rather ironically, his or her melancholic identification with it.

I would like to draw this dissertation to a close by returning to Peter Brooks’ argument: the author proposes that personal narratives are motivated by desire, or more precisely by our desire for a conclusive ending that will provide the maze of events that we ‘work through’ in the course of our lives with meaning. He claims that these loosely bound events would remain largely illegible to us if we did not believe them to be directed towards a unifying ending. Were it not for “the anticipated structuring force of the ending,” our narratives would remain essentially meaningless (93). From this perspective, it only makes sense to assume that the “lack” of an ending would also “jeopardize the beginning,” would further disable the narrative trajectory and thus stall us in the stasis of an utterly chaotic middle (94). Although these observations certainly ring true, it is important to note that we always speak while immersed in the muddled ‘middle pages’ of our stories. While we may anticipate and long for the “knowledge of origin or endpoint” that will help us to fully understand ourselves, we have no immediate access to it (95). Theorists like Butler and Cavarero have convincingly argued that we can never tell our own beginnings or know our own endings. They have done so in order to illustrate that self-knowledge is always limited, and that we therefore depend on the perspective of others who can complement and complete our stories. This implies that the presence of an ‘other,’ who provides our stories’ with a beginning and an ending, plays an essential part in the constitution of our self-image. When we relate these observations to the literature discussed in this study, we realize why the loss of an intimate ‘other’ proves so devastating: we are here confronted with narrators who can no longer understand themselves through the mirror that the loved person provided. This is, essentially, why they speak from an essentially uncertain perspective and tell stories that have lost their sense of purpose and direction.

This raises the question of what happens to the ending of a story that begins with the death of a significant other. In the texts that I have observed, the narrative's beginning coincides with the narrator's experience of an endpoint. The beginning is, therefore, already marked as an ending, which is why the story's own end becomes all the more uncertain. While these narratives may initially nevertheless be motivated by the desire for closure and a unifying ending, the experience of grief appears to render the same untenable. What the melancholic mourners realize in the process of telling their stories is that a form of full closure, one that is produced in dialogue with the other, will remain out of reach. Interestingly, many narrators thus gradually dismiss the idea of a conclusive conclusion, having realized that it would ultimately eliminate the void that the loved other has left behind. By consequently insisting on their stories' open-endedness, and thus also on their own inability to conclude them, they illustrate the other's persistent and defining absence.

This having been said, one cannot but note that their stories do, of course, come to an end. Yet it almost appears as if their endings write themselves; they happen, apparently almost against their own will, and thus often remain fragmented and fuzzy, tinged with a sense of reluctance and uncertainty. This, however, does not mean that they are either incoherent or even dissatisfying. Is the story's ending therefore as unavoidable as death itself? With regard to our life stories, death certainly always marks the inevitable endpoint. But does this mean that these 'works of mourning' must automatically submit to a call for closure? Or is it also possible to think of them as having an 'open ending,' an ending that allows them to frame grief as potentially interminable and yet grasp it in narrative form?

I have argued that the observed texts endure the ambivalence or even absence of meaning that presupposes the possibility for such an 'open ending.' They do not give in to the urge for resolution which a fully conclusive narrative demands. Instead, they withstand openness, and propagate it even, instead of following the—perhaps in fact human—desire not only for meaning itself, but also for the sense of purpose and direction and that comes with a plot that is geared toward an ending that will retrospectively bestow it with a sense of completion, comprehension, and control. The melancholic mourners that have been observed in this study insist on keeping, as Sandra Gilbert suggested, the door open—on enduring uncertainty, openness, and even a painfully vulnerable disposition. While it could of course be argued that the mere act of telling a story that we can understand implies that they do in the end submit to narrative's pull and give in to its demands, I instead suggest that these texts redefine grief by insisting on its irrationality and incomprehensibility, and by further integrating the intractable and inaccessible, loved and lost 'other' as a stubborn and persistent counterpoint into their own narrative selves.



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## Zusammenfassung

In der vorliegenden Dissertation, die den Titel *Mourning as Melancholia—Works of Grief in Contemporary Literature and Theory* trägt, wird untersucht, wie autobiographische, autofiktionale und theoretische Texte des späten 20. und beginnenden 21. Jahrhunderts mit Erfahrungen von Verlust und Trauer umgehen und durch diese geprägt werden.

Es wird argumentiert, dass AutorInnen und TheoretikerInnen Trauer heute nicht mehr im psychoanalytischen Sinne als ‚Trauerarbeit‘ begreifen, sondern vielmehr die von Sigmund Freud für problematisch und sogar pathologisch befundene Figur des Melancholikers aufgreifen. Indem die trauernden ErzählerInnen eine ‚Verarbeitung‘ und Veräußerung der Trauer verweigern und sich im Gegensatz dazu stark mit dem erlittenen Verlust identifizieren, stellen sie das Bild der Trauer als einem lediglich zeitweiligen Zustand, den es zu überwinden gilt, in Frage. Die Figur des Melancholikers erscheint also passend: Freud war überzeugt, dass diese sich mit ihrem Verlust, und somit auch mit ihrer Liebe zu der verstorbenen Person, identifiziert und diese nicht veräußert und abstößt, sondern verinnerlicht und letztes Endes verkörpert. Sie tut dies jedoch, ohne genau ergründen zu können, was es ist, das sie an der geliebten Person festhalten lässt. Die Irrationalität, auf die sich der melancholische Zustand begründet, ist ein wiederkehrendes Merkmal in den Texten, welche diese Arbeit untersucht. Die hier zur Sprache kommenden ErzählerInnen insistieren, dass ihr Verlust kaum fassbar und deshalb auch schwer ergründ- und erzählbar ist. Sie bestehen darauf, dass die Trauer eine Leerstelle in der Lebenserzählung bleibt, die weder mit Bedeutung gefüllt noch als solche integriert werden kann.

Das erste Kapitel widmet sich der Trauer als kulturgeschichtlichem Phänomen und analysiert dessen Entwicklung im 20. Jahrhundert. Einen besonderen Schwerpunkt bildet hierbei Freuds psychoanalytische Trauertheorie, die in Bezug zur Modernisierung und Rationalisierung der westlichen Welt gesetzt wird. Vor diesem Hintergrund werden vor allem die Idee der ‚Trauerarbeit‘ und der ihr innewohnende Imperativ der Produktivität und Funktionalität hinterfragt. Ich vertrete die Meinung, dass die Trauer in zeitgenössischen Texten nicht länger veräußert und abgeschlossen werden muss. Anstatt sich durch eine Verlusterfahrung zu ‚arbeiten,‘ um diese erfolgreich zu bewältigen, identifizieren sich melancholisch Trauernde mit der eigenen Verwundbarkeit, obgleich sie diese nicht voll zu ergründen wissen. Dieser Paradigmenwechsel hin zu einer Akzeptanz der eigenen Verwundbarkeit und anhaltenden Versehrung macht deutlich, dass die Trauer nicht nur neu definiert, sondern dass sie auch in engen Bezug zu Identitätsfragen gesetzt wird. Ausgehend von der Annahme, dass individuelle Identitäten heute relational, also primär durch

emotionale Beziehungen und familiäre Bande geprägt sind, untersuche ich, wie sich Verlusterfahrungen heute auf diese auswirken und sie verändern. In diesem Zusammenhang gehe ich der Frage nach, welche stabilisierende und intervenierende Funktion autobiographischen und (auto)fiktionalen Ich-Erzählungen heute zukommt.

Nachdem im ersten Kapitel Joan Didions autobiographische Erzählung *The Year of Magical Thinking* (2005) und Meghan O'Rourke's Memoiren *The Long Goodbye* (2011) als exemplarische Beispiele für eine Vielzahl von ‚Trauermemoiren‘ diskutiert werden, widmet sich die Arbeit im zweiten Kapitel Dave Eggers *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* (2000). In Eggers Buch wird die traumatische Erfahrung des elterlichen Todes vielmehr umwunden als erzählt. Die scheinbare Unfähigkeit des jungen Erzählers, den Tod und die Trauer in Worte zu fassen, wirft die komplizierte und unlösbare Frage auf, wie ein Verlust, den man nicht sinnstiftend in die eigene Lebensgeschichte integrieren möchte oder vermag, dennoch erzählbar gemacht werden kann.

Im dritten Kapitel werden Roland Barthes kürzlich erstmal veröffentlichtes *Mourning Diary* (2010) sowie sein spätes *Camera Lucida* (1980) hingehend auf die Frage untersucht, auf welche Weise der Tod seiner Mutter Barthes Einstellung zu den Sprache und Erzählung innewohnenden Möglichkeiten verändert hat. Indem Jacques Derridas *The Work of Mourning* (2001) vergleichend herangezogen wird, kann die Arbeit deutlich machen, dass beide Autoren sich stark mit den von ihnen betrauerten Menschen identifiziert haben und diese gerade trotz ihrer Unergründbarkeit quasi kontrapunktisch als Spiegelbild und fortwährendes Gegenüber in ihrer eigenen Identität zu verankern suchten.

Das die Arbeit abschließende vierte Kapitel widmet sich den Werken von Siri Hustvedt, in welchen die Trauer ein wiederkehrendes Motiv ist. Ausgehend von der Beobachtung, dass die Autorin Identität grundsätzlich als dialogisches und relationales Konstrukt begreift, wird argumentiert, dass der Trauer in Hustvedts Texten die Funktion zukommt, zu verdeutlichen, wie stark das eigene Selbstbild aus den Beziehungen zu Anderen hervorgeht. Im Umkehrschluss macht der Verlust solch essentieller Beziehungen deutlich, wie stark miteinander verflochten und somit auch verwundbar persönliche Identitäten heute sind. Es werden sowohl Hustvedts autobiographische Selbsterzählung *The Shaking Woman* als auch die melancholischen Figuren in den drei Romanen *The Sorrows of an American* (2008), *What I Loved* (2003) und *The Blazing World* (2014) näher untersucht.



## Abstract

*Mourning as Melancholia—Works of Grief in Contemporary Literature and Theory* is a study that observes how experiences of loss and bereavement are portrayed in contemporary texts. My dissertation's argument is based on the assumption that the portrayal of mourning does no longer comply with Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytical agenda. It does, to be more precise, no longer follow the assumption that the mourner has to 'work' through loss in order to overcome it and achieve a former state of wellbeing and functionality. Recently published autobiographical, fictional, and theoretical accounts of mourning thus challenge established assumptions about what grief is and how it affects us.

This is why this study reassesses the notion of the 'grief work' ('Trauerarbeit') that Freud developed in his canonical "Mourning and Melancholia." In Freud's essay, mourning is cast as a necessary process that enables the mourner to externalize his or her grief. Melancholia is on the contrary framed as a pathological condition because here, the melancholic identifies with its enigmatic sense of loss and thus holds onto and incorporates the lost object. My study proposes that the narrators and protagonists, whom I observe, can be described as melancholic mourners, who continue to identify with their relation to the loved person without, however, being able to fully comprehend or explain it. As a consequence, they remain inconsolable, vulnerable, and impaired. The essentially bereaved melancholic figures that populate contemporary texts do therefore not only present grief as incomprehensible and potentially interminable, they also strongly identify with the vulnerability that the experience of loss has exposed them to. In doing so, they refuse to tell stories that coherently incorporate all of their essential episodes, but instead insist on the meaninglessness of loss. This is why this study has made it its task to ask how a life story that no longer 'makes sense' because it revolves around the stubbornly enigmatic void of loss can be written, read, and understood today.

The first chapter retraces the social history of the conceptualization of grief. It demonstrates that the experience of grief is dependent upon the cultural context from which it emanates. The fact that grief was once clad in public rituals but is today perceived as a private feeling already indicates how impressionable the concept of grief is. In order to highlight the dynamics that shaped our idea of what it means to mourn, Freud's psychoanalytical theorization of the 'work of mourning' will be reassessed and aligned with Max Weber's critique of a paradigmatically American 'work ethic.' Recent sociological approaches that address the social construction and determination of emotions will factor into a discussion that focuses on the interceding functions that texts about mourning can assume today.

After chapter one discusses Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking* (2005) and Meghan O'Rourke's *The Long Goodbye* (2011) as paradigmatic examples for the growing genre of the 'grief memoir,' chapter two focuses on Dave Eggers' *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* (2000). In Eggers' book, the traumatic experience of parental death is circumvented rather than rendered. Yet it is precisely the young narrator's inability to articulate his grief and inexplicable sense of loss that both motivates and disables his story. This raises the complex question of how to tell an experience that one cannot and does not want to integrate into one's life story, for fear of 'making sense' of the essential meaninglessness that melancholic mourning incorporates.

Chapter three retraces Roland Barthes's concern with the lacerating pain of emotional suffering. It observes how the critic's perspective changes after his mother's death. A close-reading of Barthes's posthumously published *Mourning Diary* (2010) and late *Camera Lucida* (1980) highlight that Barthes insisted as much on the meaninglessness of his mother's death as on the intractable uniqueness of her being, the latter of which he intended to capture in an envisioned, but never realized literary text called *Vita Nova*. His failure to render his mother's essential being without imbuing her death with conventional meaning had a grave impact on Barthes's worldview: it essentially changed his perspective on the relation between the writing subject and the written text.

Siri Hustvedt's works are the focal point of the fourth chapter. Her narratives exhibit characters that are defined by their affective ties and unconscious desires. It is through the experience of grief that the design of their relationally constituted identities is brought to light. Despite the fact that Hustvedt's stories are deeply steeped in psychoanalytic theory and rely heavily on Freud's assertions, they are told from the point of view of narrators, who grapple with a melancholic form of grief that arises from their complex, often ambivalent and always persistently captivating relationship to the deceased.

## **Eidesstattliche Erklärung**

Ich erkläre hiermit ehrenwörtlich, dass ich die vorliegende Dissertation selbständig und ohne fremde Hilfe verfasst habe. Ich bestätige, dass ich keine unerlaubten und keine anderen als die angegebenen Quellen und Hilfsmittel benutzt habe und die den verwendeten Quellen wörtlich und inhaltlich entnommenen Stellen als solche kenntlich gemacht habe.

Ich habe bisher weder diese noch eine andere Arbeit als Dissertation vorgelegt.

Berlin, im April 2016

(Mareike Woelky)