WORKING THROUGH VS. ACTING OUT

Dominick LaCapra
(vs. Cathy Caruth)

Domenico Feti - Melancholy (1622)
OUTLINE

- Review (1) General Issues
- Review (2) – Freud’s “Mourning and Melancholia”
- Dominick LaCapra Acting out and working through
- Works Cited
- Next Week
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Can you describe clearly the following terms and offer examples?
  - acting out; working through, and their interrelations
  - empathy and empathic unsettlement

- How and why is LaCapra opposed to postructuralist views of trauma? Which do you agree with more?
DISCUSSION REVIEW

- Trauma—initial responses of shock, forgetting and dissociation [to sexual harassment, war, or collective guilt] → repetition compulsion
- Issues in representation (lack of referentiality, im/possibility of witness, “mass media representation”).
- Issues in reader responses
- Representation: postmodern vs. postcolonial
  -- Atonement: telling lies
  -- Hiroshima, mon amour—forgetting
Trauma Defined…

by Freud -- A breach in a protective shield that mental apparatus sets up to ward against overviolent stimuli. → repetition compulsion

By Caruth – dissociation; a delayed response.

Other critics such as Showalter and Radstone are against the “unspeakability” in Caruth’s theory (Kaplan 37)

Melancholia, Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528)
INITIAL TRAUMATIC RESPONSES

three possible kinds of brain function in firsthand trauma:

1) first, the dissociation function (which so attracted humanists) in which the trauma is not accessible to cognition or memories, and where the event is understood to come from outside, not mediated by the unconscious

2) Secondly, the circuitry ... involves both dissociation and cognition, thus allowing for the trauma to be in conscious memory; and finally,

3) .... the victim of trauma involving perpetrators and their victims partly identifies with the aggressor.

(Kaplan 38)
“M & M”: CAUSES

- Causes for mourning are:
  - loss of love object by death
- Causes for melancholia are
  - “loss by death,…[or] all those situations of being slighted, neglected or disappointed, which can import opposed feelings of love and hate into the relationship or reinforce an already existing ambivalence” (251)
The distinguishing mental features of melancholia are

“a profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of capacity to love, inhibition of all activity, a lowering of the self-regarding feelings to a degree that finds utterance in self-reproaches and self-revilings, and culminates in a delusional expectation of punishment.” (224)
FREUD’S MELANCHOLIA COMPARED WITH MOURNING

- differences— the disturbance of self-regard in melancholia does not happen in mourning.

- Melancholia – unknown loss (245); regression to narcissism

- “In mourning, it is the world that is impoverished; in melancholia, it is the ego itself. The patients presents his ego to us as worthless, incapable of any achievement and morally despicable...This picture of a delusion of (mainly moral) inferiority is completed by sleeplessness and refusal to take nourishment, and—what is psychologically very remarkable—by an overcoming of [the life instinct]” (246).
MELANCHOLY: NARCISSISTIC OBJECT CHOICE

“Regression from object-cathexis to the still narcissistic oral phase of the libido” (250).

Different from mourning, melancholia is marked by self-reproach. (251)
NARCISSISM -- EXPLAINED

- Love for the object—a love which cannot be given up though the object is given up—takes refuge in narcissistic identification, then the hate comes into operation on this substitutive object, abusing it, debasing it… The self-tormenting [sadism] in melancholia, …

- Normal mourning: overcomes the loss of the object.

- Three preconditions of melancholia – loss of the object, ambivalence, and withdrawal of libido into the ego (258)
MOURNING

- Mourning impels the ego to give up the object by declaring the object to be dead and offering the ego the inducement of continuing to live,

- each single struggle of ambivalence loosens the fixation of the libido to the object by disparaging it... (257)
CONTRADICTIONS IN MELANCHOLIA

- loss of self-regard combined with narcissism
- the self-reproach can be transposed to reproaches against a loved object (248)
- Regressing from object-loss to ego-loss
- In between sadism and identification/love, in between love and suicide (treating itself as an object), the ego is overwhelmed by the object (252)
2. CAN THE WORK OF MOURNING BE COMPLETED?

Yes, for the bereaved to survive—but there can be another kind of mourning.
FREUD’S LATER THEORY OF ELEGIAC EGO

“Remembering, Repetition and Working Through” (1915), Mourning and Melancholia” (1917), “Beyond the Pleasure Principle” (1920)

Freud revised his mourning theory in writings concerned with the Great War and in The Ego and the Id (1923), where he redefined the identification process previously associated with melancholia as an integral component of mourning. (Clewell)
REPETITION AND WORKING THROUGH

Repetition: three related concepts–

- "the compulsion to repeat," Repetition -- "transference of the forgotten past" not only onto the analyst but also "onto "all the other aspects of the current situation" (p. 151).

- Transference

  -- "transference of the forgotten past" onto the analyst

  -- the main instrument for curbing compulsion to repeat and starting the memory process.

“Remembering, Repetition and Working Through” (1915) original text (151)
ELEGIAC EGO— IN FACE OF LOSS

“... his account of the elegiac ego is shown here to ultimately undermine the wish for an identity unencumbered by the claims of the lost other and the past, and to suggest the affirmative and ethical aspects of mourning.

-- “mourning as an affirmative and loving internalization of the lost other” (Clewell 64)
Judith Butler: loss, or the melancholic withdrawal to the self and simultaneous rejection and incorporation of the lost other, is constitutive of one’s ego.

A culturally prevalent form of melancholia: “the internalization of the ungrieved and ungrievable homosexual cathexis” (1997: 139) and argues that, under the ritualized prohibition of homosexuality, subjectivity is the effect of melancholic internalization of the loss and “masculinity and femininity emerge as the traces of an ungrieved and ungrievable love” (1997: 140).
Cheng, by extension, sees American (white) racial identification as also a melancholic act involving “exclusion-yet-retention of racialized others” (2001: 10). Correlatively, under the so-called “inferiority complex” of racialized others, there “lies a nexus of intertwining affects and libidinal dynamics—a web of self-affirmation, self-denigration, projection, desire, identification, and hostility” (Cheng, 2001: 17).
DOMINICK LACAPRA
“acting-out” -- in the form of denial, confusion and emotional outbursts

“working through” -- to tentatively produce some “judgment that is not apodictic [明白的; capable of demonstration; 絕對真理的] or ad hominem ["to the man" or "to the person” 從個人偏好出發] but argumentative [or dialogic], self-questioning, and related in mediated ways to action” (LaCapra, 1994: 210).
it's via the working-through that one acquires the possibility of being an ethical agent. (1998 interview 3)
Acting-out and working-through, therefore, should not been seen in terms of “either-or” binary opposites (with one superseding the other); rather, in the minds of the traumatized, they are “countervailing forces” functioning simultaneously against, and even overlapping with, each other (Interview by Goldberg, 1998: 6)
“TRAUMA, ABSENCE, LOSS” (1999)
MAIN ARGUMENT

I would like to argue that the perhaps necessary acting-out of trauma in victims and the empathic unsettlement (at times even inducing more or less muted trauma) in secondary witnesses should not be seen as foreclosing attempts to work through the past and its losses, both in victims or other agents and in secondary witnesses, and that the very ability to make the distinction between absence and loss (as well as to recognize its problematic nature) is one aspect of a complex process of working-through
ABSENCE TO LOSS

Absence
- Phallic mother
- unified community/consensus
- oceanic feeling
- \( \rightarrow \) regeneration thru’ violence

Loss
- An event

Return to totality
ABSENCE VS. LOSS

When absence is converted into loss, one increases the likelihood of misplaced nostalgia or utopian politics in quest of a new totality or fully unified community.

When loss is converted into (or encrypted in an indiscriminately generalized rhetoric of) absence, one faces the impasse of endless melancholy, impossible mourning, and interminable aporia in which any process of working through the past and its historical losses is foreclosed or prematurely aborted.” (698)
ABSENCE AS ABSENCE

- ambivalent: both anxiety-producing and liberating
- consensus replaced by dialogic relations
Mourning and melancholia: mourning might be seen as a form of working-through, and melancholia as a form of acting-out (713)
The approximation or even conflation of absence and loss induces a melancholic or impossibly mournful response to the closure of metaphysics, a generalized "hauntology," and even a dubious assimilation (or at least an insufficiently differentiated treatment) of other problems (notably a limit-event such as the Holocaust and its effects on victims) with respect to a metaphysical or meta-metaphysical frame of reference. (715)
I find persuasive her account of the formation of (rigid) heterosexual identity on the basis of a "melancholic" repudiation of homosexual desire that involves an inability to mourn abjected losses (such as victims of AIDS) (PL, p. 136).

But I would question the tendency, especially in her final chapter, to generalize an account of the formation of subjectivity on the basis of a constitutive or originary melancholy. Moreover, for Butler melancholia itself is the disguised precipitate of social power as a lost object.41
OUTLINE

1. Critique of Trauma Studies (e.g. postmemory; *Fragments: Memories of a Wartime Childhood*)
   -- History (with reliable documents) and Memory (as unreliable)
   -- LaCapra: Distinction between Event & Experience
2. Vicarious Experience (Identification) vs. Empathy
EXPERIENCE AS ERLEBNIS & ERFahrung

- experience (erlebnis) of trauma
- different from the historical event of trauma

- Its elusiveness—or what Cathy Caruth terms its unclaimed quality—makes the historical experience of trauma distinguishable only with difficulty from structural or transhistorical trauma, hence facilitating in certain cases the confusion of the imaginary or vicarious experiential identification with certain events and the belief that one actually lived through them (so-called recovered memory). (118)
WORKING THROUGH

- Working-through means working on traumatic symptoms in order to mitigate the effects of trauma by generating counterforces to compulsive repetition (or acting-out), thereby enabling a more viable articulation of affect and cognition or representation, as well as ethical and sociopolitical agency in the present and future. Hence, at least as I am using the term, working-through does not mean total redemption of the past or healing its traumatic wounds. (119)
Whether or not the past is reenacted in its literality (which figures such as Cathy Caruth and Bessel van der Kolk at times maintain but that I doubt), one experientially feels as if one were back there reliving the event, and distance between here and there, then and now, collapses. One may, as at times in Caruth, closely approximate or even conflate the event and the experience of trauma for a distinctive reason: a belief that traumatic recall or the posttraumatic symptom, for example the nightmare or flashback, is literal in the dual sense of being, or at least deriving from, a precise replication or repetition of the event and constituting something incomprehensible, nonsymbolizable, or unreadable.
DIFFERENT TRUTH CLAIMS OF

- Testimony
- fiction
- history (131)
EMPATHY

- Different from project (the opposite of numbing)
- Empathic response requires the recognition of others as other than mere objects of research unable to question one or place one in question. And it does not substitute for, but on the contrary, must be articulated with normative judgment and sociopolitical response. Desirable empathy, I would suggest, involves not self-sufficient, projective or incorporative identification but what might be termed empathic unsettlement in the face of traumatic limit event their perpetrators, and their victims. It might also be understood in terms of the oxymoronic notion of heteropathic identification. And it involves virtual not vicarious experience (135)
I would in general argue that in history there is a crucial role for empathic unsettlement as an aspect of understanding that stylistic upsets the narrative voice and counteracts harmonizing narration or unqualified objectification yet allows for a tense interplay between critical, necessarily objectifying (even self-protectingly “numbing”) reconstruction and affective response to certain problems, people, and texts. (140)

E.g. free indirect discourse (different from sing-along)
REFERENCES


REFERENCES


NEXT WEEK


- e.g.

- **Maus (1)** – My Father Bleeds History – last two chapters

- **Maus (II): And Here My Troubles Began Chap 1**