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Mourning, Melancholia, and the Coronavirus: Teaching Freud During the Shutdown

What do we lose when we can't meet face-to-face on our beautiful, energetic campus? That's a question that my students and I tripped over this semester—with an emphasis on the concept of loss.

I teach a writing-intensive, English-language seminar called German 397: Marx, Nietzsche, Freud. In that course, students and I usually talk a lot about interpretation. We explore the hermeneutic gambles that Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud took. Indeed, we struggle with the ways in which those three thinkers show us that, as Foucault put it, “everything is already interpretation, each sign is in itself not the thing that offers itself to interpretation but an interpretation of other signs” (275). That is, Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud offer us interpretations of interpretations. Students and I talk about how the three of them provide the bedrock for much of what became twentieth-century literary theory. We discuss how Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud are themselves interesting writers, who used many of same the moves that writing instructors often talk about, including exploratory writing, They Say/I Say moves, metacommentary, naysayers, quotation sandwiches, and recursive writing. We use writing ourselves to struggle with coming to terms with their difficult texts, reverse engineering the concept of They Say/I Say, for example, to make sense of their arguments. And we talk frequently about the ways in which Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud are relevant in the twenty-first century.

Our seminar was interrupted because of COVID-19, but in the process the course material became relevant in new ways. In particular, Freud's essay “Mourning and Melancholia” took on increased value for us in Spring 2020. The shutdown happened around the time we were finishing up with Nietzsche. When we resumed classes online, we tied up some loose ends with Nietzsche and then moved on to Freud. So, for better or for worse, our thinking about the Coronavirus got refracted through the writings of the father of psychoanalysis. And “Mourning and Melancholia” whacked us over the heads. I assign that essay normally because it allows us to see—in the space of an already short text, made even shorter with the excerpt in our reader—a good iteration of why the concept of the unconscious is so important for Freud. The essay also provides a good opportunity for us to work backwards to see how Freud's terminology works. Processing Freud's vocabulary is an important step in reading Freud in English translation, because those translations make him sound much more specialized and confusing in English than in the original; Freud's German, in many cases, is refreshingly clear. English-language readers of Freud are left to wonder, for example, what the hell cathexis is. “Mourning and Melancholia” offers a good case study for unpacking the problems of translation and getting students in touch with Freud's approachable German. But that essay hit closer to home in Spring 2020.

Freud's argument in that text is basically this: mourning is a normal grieving process, in which one knows what it is that has been lost and can consciously work through it to come to terms with the loss, painful though it may be; melancholia on the other hand (one is tempted today to use the word “depression”) involves loss in which the person doesn't consciously know what's

been lost and/or experiences the loss as losing part of themselves, and for that reason the person isn't able to grieve productively. When we read and discussed the text in Spring 2020, it felt as though he was talking straight to us. We had lost something, but we struggled to articulate what we had lost.

One student, an athlete who had been groomed most of her life to play a particular sport and had chosen to attend our university to play that sport, struggled mightily with the fact that she now couldn't play the sport, would miss out on a season, and not only felt the missing activity but also experienced it as a missing part of her identity, a hole in her own self. "Mourning and Melancholia" gave her a framework for understanding her experience of the loss.

Another student used the opportunity to explore the loss of an amorous relationship. The termination of that relationship on the surface had nothing to do with the Coronavirus. But it seems as though the normal university experience, including both curricular and extracurricular face-to-face meetings had functioned as a patch over the hole left behind by the amorous relationship. (I write "it seems as though" because this is speculation. I'm not a therapist, and I didn't intend to pry into the student's personal affairs. But he chose to write to me about it at length.) In any case, Freud's essay resonated with this student to a remarkable degree.

Others have experienced loss in many ways because of the pandemic. So have I. I missed out on an invited talk on a campus in a different state and a conference presentation on my own campus. My summer plans for scholarly-oriented travel have been canceled. Most of the books I own are in my campus office, and I'm not supposed to go there now, at least not without first completing an online symptom checker and writing an email to administrators who will convey the information to the campus police, assuming the request is accepted. I don't have access to the library. Stuck in a small, urban apartment, I taught classes in my bedroom, while my wife, an elementary school teacher, was trying to teach first-graders online in the other room, and our five-year-old son has been bored out of his mind, with two teacher-parents telling him to be quiet all the time. My scholarship has slowed down considerably. My routine of reading on the bus during my commute is gone. Meetings with colleagues over coffee are no more. Most of all, I miss interacting with my students on campus. This is, I must admit to myself, quite a change to the way I experience and perceive my own self.

However, I must also admit that my problems are relatively minor compared to those of many of our students. Many of them are facing unemployment. Some are housing insecure. One outstanding student lost her job and had to move, with a teenage child, across the country to stay with her parents in a different state. Her frantic move took place when she otherwise would have been writing her final paper. Instead, she took an Incomplete. A list of the kinds of loss students are dealing with would be very long indeed.

And I haven't even mentioned the most literal and obvious kind of loss associated with COVID-19: death.

Coincidentally, the Austrian show *Freud* appeared on Netflix on March 23rd, three days after the release of *Tiger King* and the day before classes at CSULB were to resume online following the short cancellation period. While others were binging on the tension between Joe Exotic and

Carole Baskin—a matter that I caught up on a few weeks later—I was watching the zany, supernatural representation of the young Freud and convincing students to check it out too. Although it has received almost universally negative reviews, I find the Austrian show is entirely worth watching, as long as viewers are aware upfront that this is not a historically accurate biopic and does not provide an overview of Freudian psychoanalysis. It involves a bunch of weird supernatural stuff: séances and ghosts and werewolves and whatnot. It also includes a bizarre murder mystery. It's kind of bonkers, but it's also a lot of fun. The negative reviews in the English-speaking world tend to emphasize that it's not historically accurate. The things that aren't accurate are mostly obvious. But there are also some details that *are* historical, for example: the Ringtheater Fire and the Austrian invasion of Bosnia. There are also many characters who really existed, although the representations of them in the show aren't necessarily accurate, for example: Breuer, Charcot, Meynert, Schnitzler, Martha Bernays. It seems to me that the director of the film—an Austrian with a history of making weird horror films—knows the history of Freud very well but is playing with it and wants to mess with us. Another thing that some of the negative reviews say is that the show doesn't portray Freud's mature ideas. But, well, of course it doesn't, because the show takes place in 1886, when Freud was only 30 years old and was still messing around with hypnosis and hadn't published anything yet. The show is only eight episodes, each one an hour long. I watched the whole thing within about six days after it was released on Netflix. As such, it offered me another way into the course material, albeit an admittedly bizarre one. I talked about it briefly in class. I had email exchanges about it with several students and with some colleagues at other institutions. And, in figuring out how to use virtual backgrounds in Zoom, to cover up the fact that I was actually teaching in my bedroom, I once used a frame from the show that has the character of Freud sitting in a bathtub, positioned so that it looked like I was in the tub with him—fully clothed, unlike the shirtless Freud.

The bizarre detective storyline in *Freud*, combined with its twisted representations of the young Freud's own soul-searching, highlights—albeit in rather silly fashion—the value of reading Freud: making sense of our life stories, connecting the dots (plotting, as Peter Brooks articulates it), taking hermeneutic plunges into the bizarre twists and turns of our lives. That is, “Mourning and Melancholia,” in particular, allowed us to ask the question of what happened when our campus shut down in March, not the historical facts or the epidemiological explanation of the virus, but rather what happened in relation to our subjective understanding of ourselves. To be clear, I'm *not* arguing that Freud offers any clinically appropriate cure for depression. Such medical concerns, serious and important as they are, lie far outside the scope of my course. I'm neither a psychologist, nor a clinician of any kind; my concerns relate to language and literature and storytelling. Rather, Freud's essay prompted us to ask what else we've lost and how is that loss connected to our sense of self and how might we productively narrate the story of the loss.

For better or for worse, Freud is what my students and I were talking about as we attempted to resume classes online and tried to figure out what had happened. I imagine that when I think about the shutdown in the future, I'll think about Freud.

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