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# LACANIAN REVIEW ONLINE

We shall build up again...

In the summer of 1913, during his vacation in northern Italy, Sigmund Freud went walking with two friends, one of whom, the poet, complained that he could not enjoy the scenery because the idea that all this beauty would vanish did not cease to assail him. Freud tried to convince him otherwise:

*I did dispute the pessimistic poet's view that the transience of what is beautiful involves any loss in its worth (...) It was incomprehensible, I declared, that the thought of the transience of beauty should interfere with our joy of it (...) transience value is scarcity value in time. As the conversation went on, Freud realized that he was not going to persuade his friends: ...My failure led me to infer that some powerful emotional factor was at work which was disturbing their judgement (...) it must have been a revolt in their minds against mourning[1]<sup>i</sup>.*

This was still two years before Freud published “Thoughts for the times on War and Death” (1915)<sup>ii</sup> and four years before “Mourning and Melancholia” (1917)<sup>iii</sup>, but it is clear that the short essay “On Transience” that Freud presented at the Goethe Society in Berlin, where he takes up the anecdote we have just mentioned, already has the germ of those central texts of his works that resonate with Lacan’s words in his lecture in Louvain: “Death belongs to the domain of faith: you are right to believe you’ll die, it sustains you”[2]<sup>iv</sup>.

It is appropriate to recall that the texts of Freud that we have mentioned are marked by the devastating event of the First World War (1914 – 1918). It is in this context that Freud develops his ideas about the denial of death as a fundamental defensive mechanism in the face of horror, the absence of meaning and the impossible to name, in other words: the real.

In a context of urgency that requires extreme health measures, psychoanalysis can be a device to subjectify the effects these measures have on each single individual. It is a way to

contribute to public health, and to put the analyst's desire also at the service of the circumstances in a time of crisis and rupture of the symbolic order.

When Lacan encouraged analysts to unite their horizon of practice with the subjectivity of their time, he did not mean that we, as intellectuals, should study the course of history from our offices, but rather that we are part of history. The pandemic that is currently hitting the world is history demanding us to assume our primary role in the social fabric: to be those who allow "this thing" to be articulated.

Therefore, locating what "pandemic" means for each single individual, what "quarantine" means for this or that particular subject, or "social isolation" for that one, and "respirator" for this other person, is a possibility that psychoanalysis can offer to the world. Because each one of those words repeated non-stop on TV today strikes every subject's body in a different way. These are words that should be used in the singular so that denial and fear do not end up undermining life.

Of course, once the Pandemic is over the world will be different, we will have time to interpret these changes then, and it will be fascinating. In the meantime, we can act on the emergency, we can weave ourselves within the social fabric in many ways, contributing to what needs to be done in the emergency, because the risk is precisely that the exaggeration of "prudence" of some will work as an accomplice to the denial and fear of others.

As for the anecdote Freud tells in that beautiful text of 1915, after explaining that the most intriguing aspect of the mourning mechanisms is the rigidity with which the libido clings to the lost object without noticing that the New is already awaiting it, Freud writes:

*My conversation with the poet took place in the summer before the war. A year later the war broke up and robbed the world of its beauty (...) it also shattered our pride in the achievements of our civilization, our hopes of a final triumph over the differences between nations and races. It tarnished the lofty impartiality of our science, it revealed our instincts in all their nakedness (...) It robbed us of very much we had loved, and showed us how ephemeral were many things that we had regarded as changeless.*

So Freud warns that those who relinquish the enjoyment of something because what is valued does not prove to be long-lasting are simply in a state of mourning for the loss, but he makes it clear that mourning will at some point expire, and adds: *When once the mourning is over, it will found that our high opinion of the riches of civilization has lost nothing from our discovery of their fragility. We shall build up again all that war has destroyed, and perhaps on firmer ground and more lastingly than before*[3]<sup>v</sup>.

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[1] Freud, S: "On Transience", *Standard Edition*, Vol. XIV, p. 305. The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis. London, 1957, p. 305.

[2] Lacan, J.: *Conference in Louvain (1972). Quarto 3. Lettre mensuelle de l'Ecole de la Cause Freudienne*. Paris, 1981.

[3] Freud, S.: “*On Transience*”, “*Complete Works*”, Vol. XVI, p. 307. The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis. London, 1957, p. 307.

By Jorge Assef March 31st, 2020 | COVID-19 / 2020 #29

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<sup>i</sup> See [On Transience : November 1915 \[1916a\] : Sigmund Freud](#) or [here](#)  
<http://www.lacanianworks.net/?p=12205>

<sup>ii</sup> Thoughts for the Times on War and Death: 1915b : Sigmund Freud, SE XIV 292– 3 : available to download from the internet

<sup>iii</sup> Mourning and Melancholia: 1917 : Sigmund Freud, SE XIV : Published [www.Freud2Lacan.com](http://www.Freud2Lacan.com) : available [here](http://www.freud2lacan.com/docs/FL13-Mourning%20and%20Melancholia.pdf) : <http://www.freud2lacan.com/docs/FL13-Mourning%20and%20Melancholia.pdf>

<sup>iv</sup> See [The Death is of the field of the Mad : 13th October 1972 \(Louvain\) : Jacques Lacan](#) or [here](#)  
<http://www.lacanianworks.net/?p=12522>

<sup>v</sup> See [On Transience : November 1915 \[1916a\] : Sigmund Freud](#) or [here](#)  
<http://www.lacanianworks.net/?p=12205>