

Nineteenth-Century Major Lives and Letters

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Trauma, Transcendence, and Trust

Wordsworth, Tennyson, and Eliot Thinking Loss

Thomas J. Brennan, S.J.
For my parents,
Thomas J. and Elizabeth Brennan
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The consistent concern that the poets discussed have with the gaps in their experiences, especially in the light of traumatic loss. Indeed, such holes seem written into the concept of text, as literary criticism characterizes it. The term refers to “the very words, phrases and sentences as written” in discourse (OED 1a), but its etymology also connects it, from ancient times, to “that which is woven, web, or texture” (OED). In literary study, therefore, it has become a commonplace to think of texts as analogous to tapestries or fabrics. The words and lines of a poem weave around, but never completely crowd out, the blankness of the page or computer screen. Indeed, the white space of the page or screen corresponds to this necessary hole or gap in the fabric. Neither artifact would be comprehensible without it. Now, I might have said lack or emptiness where I have used hole or gap. As the reader may be disappointed to learn, the former, more abstract set of words is also part of this book’s lexicon. That is because they mark the melancholic and traumatized desire with which each of these poets grapples in the wake of loss. At the outset, however, holes and gaps have a refreshingly physical heft to them. Such a stress is salutary for this study in at least two ways. First, their concreteness reminds us that, however complex and theoretical literary responses to trauma necessarily become, these writers are people dealing with the suffering entailed on them by present losses. This suffering is typically embodied in their memories of the dead. Second, the more concrete pair of words suggests that the artifact or text built around such memories will always miss something. Of necessity, the memorial falls short because the substitution of words for the living person is never adequate or complete.

James Merrill’s famous poem “b o d y” aptly illustrates how the notion of a hole is written into the production of texts and, implicitly, that of bodies:

b o d y

Look closely at the letters. Can you see,
entering (stage right), then floating full,
then heading off — so soon —
how like a little kohl-rimmed moon
_0_ plots her course from _b_ to _d_
— as _y_, unanswered, knocks at the stage door?
Looked at too long, words fail,
phase out. Ask, now that body shines
no longer, by what light you learn these lines
and what the _b_ and the _d_ stood for.¹

Simultaneously, the “_o_” is both the center and the hole in the poem. Not only does the letter appear close to the middle of the title word, and to the middle of the poem, but its physical resemblance to the “_b_” and the “_d_” sets up a trajectory or “course” that marks its brief performance as one reads from left to right. In addition, its likeness to the numeral zero highlights that the “_b_” and “_d_” enclose a nullity. Most importantly, the act of framing the gap calls attention to the hole that is essential to the making of the “_b_” and “_d_” as well. What the “_b_” and “_d_” stand for, we might say, is that the attempt to frame loss or emptiness inevitably exposes the same quality in the attempt itself. Finally, the “_y_” remains “unanswered” while the performance continues; as long, that is, as the living body has life onstage and is in relationship to others, it must overlook—or miss—its own ending in death. Only in this way can the “_o_’s” “floating full” be momentarily achieved.

Formulated by Jacques Lacan, the schema of this missed encounter with death as one of the preconditions for life articulates, as we will see in the Introduction, one of the theoretical poles of this study. Another pole, however, is suggested by the question anticipated at the end of “_b_ o _d_ _y_.” Although words inevitably fail, the “light” within which we learn about them and apply them to our bodies remains. Literally, this reference recalls the beginning of the poem. In order to examine the letters as carefully as the speaker directs, one might need a fairly strong lamp. Light, though, also implies the frame of mind in which one makes this examination. The poem, in other words, assumes that a degree of trust in language’s power subsists with the lack that resides in any particular expression of it. Considering how trust and lack intertwine with each other leads me to Melanie Klein’s theory on subject positions that individuals assume as responses to the trauma and loss that life presents.

In making this connection, I am not arguing that Lacanian loss and Kleinian trust are reducible to each other. Rather, as chapters on _The Prelude, In Memoriam_, and _The Waste Land_ show, the explanatory
power of holes and gaps as principles of literary creation returns Wordsworth, Tennyson, and Eliot to trust as the lack within the lack or the hole within the hole that is never overcome. Consolation, or the plugging of the gap left by what has been lost with the words of the poem, eludes the writers discussed here. But trust in poetry as the language for this loss strangely persists, a stance that marks each poet as faithful to the desire that impelled writing in the first place.
This study began as a reading of Alfred, Lord Tennyson’s *In Memoriam* and grew into a consideration of William Wordsworth’s *The Prelude* and T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*. Along the way, I benefitted enormously from careful reading and re-reading of Jacques Lacan’s seminars with Laura Quinney, at Brandeis University, who eventually read and critiqued the whole manuscript in both its early and late stages. Francis Burch, S.J. at Saint Joseph’s University, did an early edit of the manuscript and has continually encouraged me in this work. Most recently, Deirdre McMahon, at Drexel University, completed a third reading and critique in the process of preparing the index. The professionalism—and the patience—of these colleagues puts me very happily in their debt.

Additionally, this work would not have been completed without the support and insight of these colleagues: William Flesch, Victor Luftig, Paul Morrison, Jeff Nunokawa, Ronald Wendling and the late Robert Barth, S.J. At Palgrave Macmillan Marilyn Gaull has been an encouraging series editor, and Brigitte Shull, Lee Norton, Rachel Tekula, and Joel Breuklander have all been indispensable in helping me navigate the work of putting the book into production. At Newgen Productions Rohini Krishnan and Kendra Millis worked very hard on the copyediting of this book. The English Department at Saint Joseph’s University, where I have taught for the last nine years, has proven a congenial place to work and think about many of the ideas in this book; I also benefitted from a year’s sabbatical from school to complete this work. Finally, no acknowledgment would be complete without mention of the ongoing support of my family and of the Society of Jesus (Jesuits)—in simplest terms my gratitude to them is beyond words.
Near the end of *Seminar VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, Jacques Lacan comments on Freud’s essay “Mourning and Melancholia”:

In a famous article called “Mourning and Melancholia,” Freud also says that the work of mourning is applied to an incorporated object, to an object which for one reason or another one is not particularly fond of. As far as the loved object that we make such a fuss in mourning is concerned, we do not, in fact, simply sing its praises, if only because of the lousy trick it played on us by leaving us. Thus, if we are sufficiently cruel to ourselves to incorporate the father, it is perhaps because we have a lot to reproach this father with.¹

The whimsical tone highlights the excess involved not in the Oedipal rivalry itself but in the way that rivalry comes into representation. In the same lecture, Lacan discusses Freud’s belief that the setting up of the superego as the internalized voice of the parent marks the end of the Oedipus complex in the child. The tone of the summary mimics the fierceness of the child’s representation of the father. At the same time, the tone conveys the inevitability of adducing the Oedipus complex as the explanation for subsequent feelings of loss in adulthood. Finally, perhaps Lacan recognizes the tension that inheres in the category of mourner as presented by Freud. In this regard, Leo Bersani claims that one reason for current interest in Freudian theory derives from the frequency with which that theory fails to formulate its position. Such moments of “theoretical collapse,” according to Bersani, signal to the reader—especially one familiar with literature—moments of “psychoanalytic truth.”² As I argue, Freud intuits this collapse in “Mourning and Melancholia.” Although he sets out
to differentiate the normal mourner from the pathological melancholic, he discovers that these theoretically distinct types of person in practice prove difficult to tell apart. Indeed, one of the definitive characteristics of the mourner—her ability to come to a close with grief and thereby frame it in narrative—only comes into view after the mourning has ended. In the interim, during the time of writing and reading the poem, we confront the repetition of grief that characterizes the melancholic’s utterances.

Yet the melancholic’s discourse need not constitute an impasse for reading about death and loss as it seems to have done for Freud in the analyzing of it. Where he speaks impatiently of the melancholic’s protestations of her worthlessness—suggesting that she is no doubt correct—I argue that the melancholic’s eschewing of narrative closure in literature has ethical potential that distinguishes it from the site of analysis as conceived by Freud. In particular, the refusal of narrative closure keeps the focus on desire as the manifestation of an unconscious knowledge in human beings. This desire derives from a lack at the core of being that trauma, as a concrete repetition of the death drive, instantiates. Lacan, not surprisingly, offers the methodology for this approach, especially with respect to his rereading of the dream of the burning child (from *The Interpretation of Dreams*) in *Seminar XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. As Cathy Caruth argues, Lacan’s focus on trauma lays special stress on the position of the survivor whose continuance in life is in no way a happy passage beyond disaster but a continued sign of the disaster’s return.

This reading of Freud implies that the survivor of trauma resembles a signifier—specifically of the lack that forms the center of human desire. To imagine the survivor in this way means recognizing that nothing occurs automatically or easily in the performance of this role. Rather, the necessity of the survivor’s resistance to consolation simultaneously links this figure to the melancholic and invests the former, as Lacan argues with respect to the character of Antigone, with tragic dignity. Most importantly, dwelling on this resistance to consolation calls attention to trust—a trust in desire that surfaces in the repetition of trauma. To articulate this notion, I turn to the work of Melanie Klein. Emphatically, for her, trust is not a consistent state at which one arrives as the result of an uninterrupted and linear process of development. Her concept of different “positions”—paranoid-schizoid and depressive—that the infant and baby endure precludes such an interpretation. Although Klein believes that paranoid-schizoid anxiety gradually diminishes with the advent of its depressive counterpart
after about the age of four months, the residue of the first position inheres in the second. Most importantly, adult mourning may reactivate both. Operating in the child’s idealizing of the parents, Kleinian trust suggests that the lack evident in the paranoid-schizoid position never has absolute sway. This claim, however, does not diminish the importance of working with lack and loss as they reappear in life; this dictum applies as much in Klein’s theory as it does in Lacan’s. Indeed, Klein’s emphasis on the trauma of the paranoid-schizoid position demonstrates a similarity in both writers’ understanding of the death drive, especially with respect to its deferral through anxious fixation on external objects. In this way, my stress on Kleinian trust attempts to account for why one might engage reparation as an ongoing but never completed work. On the one hand, because reparation always winds up reciting the loss and lack from which it arises, the trust it invokes always retains a melancholic color. On the other hand, because we can conceive of the trauma that informs this loss as shared, the ethical relation between those caught in its web—a relation Lacan envisions—becomes possible.

**Mourning and Theory**

At the outset of “Mourning and Melancholia,” Freud’s confident tone fits with his clinical purpose: he will differentiate between mourning as a temporal response to loss and melancholy as its non-temporal and possibly pathological counterpart. Yet, as the essay progresses, the similarities between the two states occupy him and undercut his confidence in the distinction he had stipulated. Especially when he arrives at his discussion of “profound mourning”—or mourning occasioned by trauma—he finds its connection to melancholy via narcissism both counterintuitive and theoretically compelling. Inasmuch as the melancholic speaks her loss and does so quite insistently, Freud’s difficulty in distinguishing the melancholic from the mourner proves instructive. Ultimately, the former’s volubility and the latter’s taciturnity do not simply delineate different types of people one might encounter in analysis or even different stages of grief in the same person. Rather, as divergent styles with respect to using language, they suggest the centrality of what we have not yet claimed in speech with respect to traumatic loss.

Freud begins this essay by confidently describing mourning as a comprehensible response to loss because it foresees closure through substitution: “Mourning is regularly the reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of
one, such as one’s country, liberty, an ideal, and so on.”^4 Repetition marks the mourner; Freud notes that she “regularly” reacts as he describes by substituting “a loved person” with a series of other objects as indicated by the “and so on” at the end of the sentence. In describing what mourning does, the prose mimes what he expects the work of mourning will accomplish: the substitution of one object (the actual lost person) with new ones. That this substitution embraces a potentially vast range of objects—also signaled by “and so on”—gives further warrant for the way the mechanism of mourning works. With supreme understatement, he then moves to the “work” itself: “In what, now, does the work which mourning performs consist? I do not think there is anything farfetched in presenting it in the following way” (SE XIV: 244). Seeing nothing “farfetched” in the description he has not yet offered, Freud imparts a sense of the inevitability of what he goes on to describe.

The same sense of inevitability also characterizes the description of substitution. Even the mourner’s apparently idiosyncratic investment in the lost object poses no surprise to the analyst. Rather, it represents a predictable stage in treatment: “Reality-testing has shown that the loved object no longer exists, and it proceeds to demand that all libido shall be withdrawn from its attachments to that object.” Although the command of reality stirs up resistance, this reaction is “understandable” inasmuch as “people never willingly abandon a libidinal position, not even, indeed, when a substitute is already beckoning to them” (SE XIV: 244). By saying, however, that the substitute “beckons” to the mourner, Freud suggests that a sign is already operating in this person’s ego that will bring the mourner’s attachment to the dead to a close. Additionally, by implementing the demands of reality “bit by bit,” the mourner plays out a “compromise” with reality’s demands but not defiance of them. Thus, with confidence grounded in “fact,” Freud finishes the description of the work of mourning: “The fact is, however, when the work of mourning is completed the ego becomes free and uninhibited again” (SE XIV: 245). By linking freedom with lack of inhibition, he suggests the irresistibility of “compromise.” The mourner’s instinct for survival, in other words, gradually rediscovers the desirability of a less trammeled existence and yields to this good.

If reality’s demands operate in the mourner via the substitute’s beckoning her back to ordinary pursuits, they also operate in the analyst who knows not to see this condition as pathological. Mourning’s clearly defined temporal trajectory underlies this confidence: the whole process resembles a plot. First, mourning structures events in
a meaningful sequence or plan that works through some tension (in this case the loss of a loved person) and finds resolution in a restoration of lost freedom. Second, this ending at least retrospectively brings the operation of the whole plan into focus. Some aptitude for other objects besides the dead person exists in the mourner and allows the substitutes mentioned by Freud to go to work. In this sense, we might say that the character of the mourner proves to be her destiny. Looking back on the whole course of mourning, it always had to be that this person would succumb—albeit slowly—to the power of “reality-testing.”

Within this temporal construal of mourning as a task or work to be finished, melancholy’s pathology does not reside in the resistance to the work. The mourner’s “reality-testing” constitutes an ordinary form of such resistance. Rather, the pathology comes into play through the melancholic’s exaggeration. Again with great understatement, Freud notices that the melancholic “does not behave in quite the same way as a person who is crushed by self-reproach and remorse in a normal fashion.” Rather, this person lacks a sense of decorum about the situation and annoyingly demands an audience for her adversities (SE XIV: 247). What the mourner avoids—other people’s attention—is precisely what the melancholic’s self-dramatizing language about her worthlessness seeks out.

I will have more to say about the melancholic’s approaches to language, but first we should notice that this self-dramatization on the melancholic’s part is the only feature that distinguishes her from the mourner. The other ones Freud mentions emphasize the similarity of the two states: depression, withdrawal from the “outside world,” diminished capacity for love, and the loss of interest in formerly pleasant activities. Only a “disturbance of self-regard” marks the melancholic (SE XIV: 244). Thus, a note of uncertainty comes into Freud’s discussion. In particular, he takes up the case of “profound mourning” or “the reaction to the loss of someone who is loved” (SE XIV: 244). Consistent with his view on the length of time the work of mourning takes, he states that one should not classify this condition as an illness. Indeed, with regard to profound mourning, Freud makes clear what the mourner has lost (“someone who is loved”) and that the mourner can begin to replace this lost object with other ones. Yet he characterizes profound mourning in oddly qualified terms: “It is really only because we know so well how to explain it that this attitude does not seem to us pathological” (SE XIV: 244). Mourning remains a non-pathological human behavior, but in extreme cases, Freud wonders about the etiology of this sense of ordinariness. Does
ordinary mourning simply reflect the analyst’s fluency in explaining it rather than anything intrinsic to the condition itself?

This uncertainty also applies to one of the basic assumptions of “Mourning and Melancholia” as a whole. The mourner’s lost object—especially when connected to a dead person—proves accessible to analysis because “there is nothing about the loss that is unconscious” (*SE XIV*: 245). While the mourner does not draw attention to the loss because she—and everyone else—is already conscious of it, the melancholic’s lost object is not as clear. Possibly the object has not died, “but has been lost as an object of love” (*SE XIV*: 245). Alternatively, this loss of love may have happened, but neither the melancholic nor the analyst perceives it: “In yet other cases one feels justified in maintaining the belief that a loss of this kind has occurred, but one cannot see clearly what it is that has been lost, and it is all the more reasonable to suppose that the patient cannot clearly perceive what has been lost either” (*SE XIV*: 245). Amplifying what he has said, Freud claims that the patient may know “whom he has lost but not what he has lost in him” (*SE XIV*: 245). In the process of discussing the distinction between mourning and melancholia, we see Freud gradually recognizing that the difference does not hold up as clearly as his initial discussion of mourning had suggested. On the one hand, the melancholic starts to resemble the mourner inasmuch as both may have suffered a loss verifiable by the analyst. On the other hand, the mourner’s conscious loss might prove to have the unconscious component adduced to melancholia. Neither condition has clearly intrinsic qualities; rather both have to be defined in terms of their differentiation from the other.

This difficulty in distinguishing between mourning and melancholia carries over to the discussion of ambivalence attending each condition. The “self-reproaches” of the mourner can give “a pathological cast” to this state inasmuch as the mourner behaves as if she has brought about the loss of the object. The severity of this obsession underscores the power of ambivalence, even when the drawing in of the libido—as in melancholia—has not occurred: “The obsessional states of depression following on the death of a loved person show us what the conflict due to ambivalence can achieve by itself when there is no regressive drawing in of the libido as well” (*SE XIV*: 251). The grounding for this theory lies in Freud’s theory of narcissism. The melancholic regresses to an oral state of gratification characteristic of infants. Instead of relating to an external object as external, the melancholic’s ego eats it up: “The ego wants to incorporate this object into itself, and, in accordance with the oral or cannibalistic phase of
libidinal development in which it is, it wants to do so by devouring it” (*SE XIV*: 249–250). Though mourning does not illustrate such regression, his calling attention to the power of the mourner’s ambivalence suggests that it bears traces of this earlier “cannibalistic phase” which it shares with melancholy.

The common etiology of mourning and melancholy in the cannibalistic phase of the infant’s development, though a theoretical exploration for Freud, also has enormous practical consequences. As theory, it links the conscious awareness of the mourner’s present narrative to an earlier supposed one. The trauma of the infantile state operates even in the mourner’s conscious discourse. This imbrication with trauma is even clearer with respect to the melancholic. Practically, the common origin for mourning and melancholy iterates the analyst’s style of listening to individual patients. Though “Mourning and Melancholia” at first looks like an attempt to categorize different types of patients, it ends by implying that a mourner resides in every melancholic and a melancholic in every mourner. In particular, by stressing the melancholic’s self-dramatizing behavior, Freud can hypothesize the cause of the difference between the mourner’s behavior and the melancholic’s. Above all, for the melancholic, the “self-criticisms” are very real ones. Regardless of their accuracy, Freud stresses “that [the melancholic] is giving a correct description of his psychological situation” (*SE XIV*: 247). In other words, his analytic approach takes seriously what the melancholic sees as self-evident: her worthlessness. This respect for the melancholic’s discourse leads Freud to emphasize the limits of treatment as fundamental. Just as one would not treat the mourner’s condition as “pathological,” so it is “fruitless” to contradict the melancholic’s self-criticism (*SE XIV*: 243).

Within the frame of “Mourning and Melancholia,” this type of listening allows Freud to narrate the alternate way in which the melancholic’s ego uses psychic energy. This supposition leads to the paper’s most famous discovery. In ordinary cases substitution of the lost object with a new one would have occurred, but in this case the psychic energy that would have enabled this substitution “was withdrawn into the ego” and redirected onto the lost object. The part of the melancholic’s ego that identifies with the lost object is criticized and judged as worthless by the part that has remained unaligned (*SE XIV*: 249). Hypothesizing its splitting leads him to argue that what looks like the melancholic’s self-hatred actually disguises a hatred of the person who has been lost. In its most radical expression, the melancholic’s suicidal wish really expresses the desire to kill the person
who has been lost since, crucially, that person is still experienced as alive by the melancholic (SE XIV: 252).

More broadly, Freud’s interest in the repetitions of the melancholic underscores the extent to which, even in an essay very invested in the patient’s conscious disclosure, unconscious trauma may still hold a position of mastery. As Thomas Pfau argues, the language of the Freudian melancholic is always inviting the analyst to identify the secret reason—secret even from the melancholic—for her distress. Pfau sees the same relation holding between the author/patient and critic/analyst. Regardless of the efficacy of either exchange, Pfau argues that the melodrama of the melancholic’s ordeal does not simply equate with an individual—and perhaps pathological—condition. Instead, the melancholic’s speech points to something more generally characteristic of all humans’ attempts at communication. As we have seen, Freud recognizes that the melancholic’s incessant reciting of diminishment cannot equate simply with the loss of a person—often enough, no person may have died. Expanding on this idea, Pfau argues that the melancholic’s use of language reflects “the speaker’s insight into the inescapably social and iterative character of all affective experience and language.”6 Though the melancholic might like to think of her loss as uniquely personal, Pfau says that we must also see her as recognizing, through the very repetitiousness of her claims, that this alleged interiority is “something inherently social.”7 The persistence of the melancholic’s discourse, especially the repetitious way in which she sticks to her story, thereby represents a defeat in Freud’s project of offering mourning as the normative account of response to loss, and, especially, of bringing it to closure. Even in the essay that tries to distinguish mourning from melancholy, we see Freud unable to maintain the distinction as sharply as he would have liked. Instead, he lingers between the poles of mourning and melancholy. To these features of survivorship, we will regularly return. Seventeen years before writing “Mourning and Melancholia,” however, he had already presented an example of a survivor in the father who dreams of his burning child in The Interpretation of Dreams. Freud’s failure to link this earlier trauma to the death drive—which bedevils Lacan—is the topic we now consider.

**Reading the Dream of the Burning Child**

Like “Mourning and Melancholia,” Freud’s account of the dream of the burning child admits of both an explanation that stresses its narrative components and a more theoretical one that derives from the
resistance to narrative which, as Lacan points out, shows up in the dream’s problematic connection to the waking world. Freud begins his discussion of “this model dream” by linking it to wish fulfillment:

A father had been watching by his child’s sick-bed for days and nights on end. After the child had died, he went into the next room to lie down, but left the door open so that he could see from his bedroom into the room in which his child’s body was laid out, with tall candles standing round it. An old man had been engaged to keep watch over it, and sat beside the body murmuring prayers. After a few hours sleep, the father had a dream that his child was standing beside his bed, caught him by the arm and whispered to him reproachfully: “Father, don’t you see I’m burning?” He woke up, noticed a bright glare of light from the next room, hurried into it and found that the old watchman had dropped off to sleep and that the wrappings and one of the arms of his beloved child’s dead body had been burned by a lighted candle that had fallen on them.8

In his analysis of the dream, Freud emphasizes three elements. First, the light from the fire hitting the father’s eyes, in addition to actually awakening him, also leads him to the conclusion that the candle had “set something alight in the neighborhood of the body.” This event confirms the fear that the father had before retiring: that the old man watching the body could not perform this task (SE V: 509–510). Second, by delaying the awakening when the need to get up and put out the fire was immediate, Freud argues for the dream as wish fulfillment. Despite the danger, the father has the child alive again for a few more moments. Finally, the words that the son addresses to the father are, Freud theorizes, probably words actually said to the father when the son was sick with fever (SE V: 510–511). The dream and its termination, therefore, represent the combination of a wish that the father meditates, actual memories of what the child said, and the immediate physical condition of the fire.

Commenting on the dream in Seminar XI, Lacan takes the father’s wish with equal seriousness, characterizing the dream as one “suspended around the most anguishing mystery, that which links a father to the corpse of his son close by, of his dead son.”9 The uncertainty of the dream contributes to the poignancy of the wish. Just at the moment when the dream seems to offer fulfillment of the wish as the boy speaks, the question reminds the father that it is already too late to do anything to save him. This momentary fulfillment inscribed in the larger defeat of the father’s wish leads Lacan to a question about
the efficacy of Freud’s example: “What is the point, then, of sustain-
ing the theory according to which the dream is the image of a desire
with an example in which, in a sort of flamboyant reflection, it is pre-
cisely a reality which, incompletely transferred, seems to be shaking
the dreamer from his sleep?” (1977: 34). As Lacan poses his question,
the dream of the burning child seems to parody wish-fulfillment in its
excess. The father gets the child back, but in a way that underscores
just how little he understands about the desire or “burning” at work
in his son or, for that matter, in himself (1977: 34). The momento-
arily fulfilled wish then returns Freud to the enigma in desire. In
particular, this mystery centers on “the world of the beyond”—the
unconscious—that does not belong to either the father or the son but
exists between them and speaks through the boy’s question. At this
juncture, Lacan introduces the Oedipal aspect to the example: “What
is [the son] burning with, if not with that which we see emerging at
other points designated by the Freudian topology, namely, the weight
of the sins of the father, borne by the ghost in the myth of Hamlet,
which Freud couples with the myth of Oedipus?” (1977: 34). The
father passes on his desire for the mother to the son. On the one
hand, the desire points out a transgression or “sin” in the son (just as
it was in his father vis-à-vis his father). On the other hand, it is only
by grappling with this transgression that the son becomes subject to
the father’s law, which enables desire itself to survive.

For Lacan, however, the Oedipal desire does not matter as much
as Freud’s failure to mention it. Meditating on this omission, Lacan
suggests that the “beyond” Freud is wrestling with anticipates Beyond
the Pleasure Principle, in which the unconscious death drive functions
“beyond” the purely economic principles of pursuing pleasure and
avoiding pain, which, on the surface, characterize conscious activity.
Lacan will discuss this primacy of the death drive near the end of
Seminar XI, but for the moment he defers this explanation, appar-
ently bowing to Freud’s purpose of showing rather than telling how
this truth of the unconscious is produced. As a result, the stress falls
on what Freud overlooks in this example—its susceptibility to an
Oedipal reading. Indeed, Freud backs away from such a discovery:
“Everything is within reach, emerging, in this example that Freud
places here in order to indicate in some way that he does not exploit
it, that he appreciates it, that he weighs it, savours it” (1977: 35). In
other words, Lacan sees Freud doing exactly what he expects his read-
ers to do: dwell in the midst of the dream’s non-explainable elements
with respect to the waking world. Rather than speaking on Freud’s
terms—that is, through the wish fulfillment and, for the moment,
the Oedipus complex—the unconscious manifests itself in the lingering sense of malaise the dream evokes. The father knows himself to be addressed by the dream, but he does not understand this address’s purport. Neither, Lacan argues, does Freud.

From this refractoriness of the dream to explanation emerges recognition. The insistence of doubting becomes its own indication of certainty. For this reason, Lacan sees Freud’s procedure as “Cartesian”: “doubt is the support of his certainty” (1977: 35). By putting such a heavy stress on “certainty” as intertwined with doubt, Freud avoids the mistake that his successors in ego psychology would make. For them “the first thing to be done is to overcome that which connotes anything to do with the content of the unconscious—especially when it is a question of extracting from it the experience of the dream” (1977: 35). Lacan highlights the futility of this undertaking; ego psychology is trying “to overcome that which floats everywhere, that which marks, stains, spots, the text of any dream communication—I am not sure, I doubt” (1977: 35). Instead of seeing the unconscious as what analyst and patient must ally against, Lacan sees Freud as recognizing that the “everywhere” in which the unconscious “floats” includes the conscious world. Dreams, Lacan argues, become Freud’s clue to this process. Just as the doubtfulness of the dream stains the whole dream (and not just a part of it), so the whole stained dream (as a product of the unconscious) stains the conscious discourse it inhabits.

As an indicator of this ubiquity of the unconscious, the stain operates in several fields of awareness. Most famously, Lacan relates it to vision. Specifically, it manifests itself as the blind spot in dreams and reveals we are all subject to others’ gazes as much as we are ones who gaze at others.10 We shall have more to say about the gaze and its castrating power in the chapter on Wordsworth, but we should notice that Lacan also sees the stain operating in a verbal and auditory register as much as a visual one: “Impediment, failure, split. In a spoken or written sentence, something stumbles. Freud is attracted by these phenomena, and it is there that he seeks the unconscious” (1977: 25). For Freud the stain is found in slips of the tongue that then point out the operation of the unconscious. Lacan, however, is suggesting that not only moments in conscious discourse but the discourse as a whole is made strange by such slips. Thus, just as the stain—as image—functions to screen the subject from its condition of being gazed at, so the stain as an auditory signifier functions to shield the subject from recognizing the extent to which her conscious discourse is actually preprogrammed in her body by the surrounding environment.