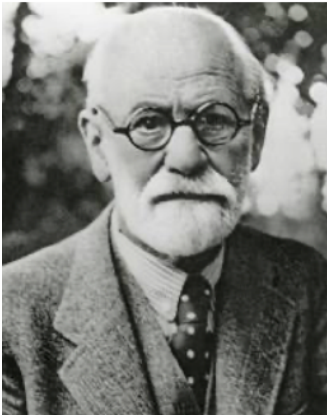


# The Mourning-Melancholy Mystery Story



Thanks to Sigmund Freud's 1917 essay, "Mourning and Melancholy," we have a puzzle about unhappiness, not just the unpleasant depressive feelings human subjects universally experience with both of these sad situations. Let's take a look at the clues as if we were in a detective novel.

We spray the crime scene of sadness with an aerosol that makes invisible marks, smudges, and fingerprints visible. Mourning and melancholy are both about *cathexis*, one of the fancy words James Stachey, Freud's translator, likes to use to make ordinary German words (*Besetzung* in this case) sound professional and fancy. It's "investment," primarily of feelings, but they leak over into symbolic things. Falling in love, for example, can lead to marriage.

Freud's over-arching observation is that the withdrawal of cathexis creates a void. Human beings do not like to abandon a position once they fill it with libido. This involves a fixed *measure* of investment. We don't know the units, but there is always a rational component (we explain to ourselves that we like someone because we enjoy doing the same things) and an irrational component (crazy in love, more often than not, with the wrong person). We might write this mathematically, as  $a+bi$ , the famous algebraic expression for complex numbers, involving  $i$ , the square root of  $-1$ . It can be plus or minus, doesn't matter.

Units of measure presuppose a circuit for energy conservation. We have a fixed amount of libido. We know this because when we invest and withdraw it, there is always the issue of how much is enough or too much.. When we feel *cheated* by loss, it is because we have *done the counting* and come up short. When we give someone flowers for Valentine's Day, it's because we feel we have to make up for a shortage. These all imply units of measure, although we can't represent them as easily as feet or meters or hours. They combine a natural component,  $a$ , with an irrational component,  $bi$ . With mourning and melancholy, there is always the issue of equalities and, hence, circuits to preserve those equalities.

It's no problem to have a circuit with an irrational unit of measure, but it means that there will always be a remainder, a residual, left over after we account for everything we know about a situation, and that, too, requires conservation and its own circuit. Lacanians call this  $bi$  element *jouissance* which can be positive (enjoyment) or negative (suffering). Sometimes we confuse one for the other, as anyone who has fallen in love knows all too well. Summary: the need to conserve energy > an insulated circuit > units of measure > a way of expressing this as a complex number, to account for the irrational element of libido.

## the difference between mourning and melancholy

We are spraying the crime scene with our magic aerosol. We want to know, was this a death or a robbery? No body present, but when we find one, we will want to know the NAME, then the MOTIVE and MEANS of the crime, and if it was murder. In other words, the missing person will be important because of its *symbolic* relations with others, and the crime will involve *symbolic* resolutions (arrest, conviction, punishment). This is because missing subject will be invested with subjective libido, a subject-to-subject transaction.

Now for the Big Distinction. The melancholic as melancholic invests in *objects*! For the melancholic it is a question not of who is missing but WHAT is missing. The problem is

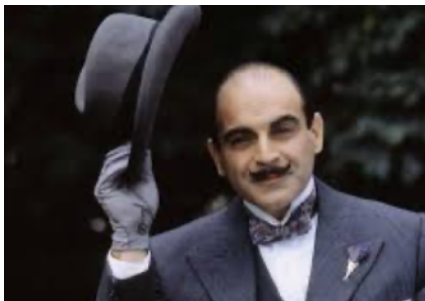




that our magic spray reveals nothing, or rather Nothing (a hole). The melancholic him/herself does not know WHAT it is that is missing. Now we have our first big clue. The mourner knows *all too well* WHO is missing (a subject, who has suddenly emptied the libido account with mostly symbolic investments, thanks to our symbolic relations with the WHO that is missing), and the mourning process will be primarily in the register of the symbolic. The melancholic not only is missing a WHAT, an object(-ive) something, he/she does not know what that something is. It is the *bi* part of the measure of libido. It is tied up with the mysterious  $\sqrt{-1}$  of *jouissance*, “agalma.”

The crime scene is, or rather *has*, a void — some *thing* or some *one* is missing. Our revealing aerosol spray can detect a body, but it doesn't show — can't show — what may have been stolen. SUBJECT cathexis will be unconscious, even to the one who has lost this object, because the object had an agalma, an un-specifiable *je ne sais quoi* that, undefinable, was nonetheless effective in creating a bond. Mourning's subject and melancholy's object are both present because they are absent, with the result of sadness.

How would you solve this mystery? Is it a matter of interviewing suspect, friends, relations? — Or is it a matter of determining a motive, which may very probably be irrational (the melancholy object)? The two investigations would proceed very differently. A lazy inspector would hope for the subject-cathexis crime. Find out WHOdunnit, arrest them and hold them accountable: a matter for the Symbolic of relations and the law. An energetic inspector<sup>1</sup> would possibly also be melancholic, like the criminal, and be attracted to the impossibility of finding WHAT is missing that the victim can't even identify. In contrast with the mourner's register of the symbolic, the melancholic crime-solver is looking for something that is unconscious. We don't even know what it is we don't know, while the mourner knows the loss *all too well*.



David Suchet as Agatha Christie's famous detective, Hercule Poirot.

### how would you solve this crime?

First of all, you might consider the difference between the *police* and the *private detective*. Are you looking at a murder or a robbery? Will this tell you anything about the *units of measure* of what is missing?

The void, a dead body or a missing some-*thing*, is sticky. We invest libido and don't want to abandon our investment. It is like the burning house. We want to run back inside to save something precious, a cat or an expensive vase. The void *continues* to be sticky, continues to make demands on our feeling investments. This has historically had great architectural and artistic effectiveness.

Monuments are, if anything, reduced to a crystalline perfection. They are architecture squeezed dry of *utilitas*, hard as a diamond. Dry and cold — the classic components of melancholy, meaning that they are more about objects than subjects (a tomb to an *unknown* soldier is more compelling than one to a known person, and even when the person is known, they are *abbreviated*).

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<sup>1</sup> In fiction writing, the famous detectives are all melancholics who are always in disagreement with the “symbolic-oriented” police who see things simplistically. Agatha Christie's Hercule Poirot, for example, emphasizes the unconscious aspect of crime, which calls for a lot of hard thinking. Poirot is an object-oriented puzzler, his obstacles are *subjects* who cannot abandon their *subjective* positions and will mourn the loss of their preconceptions.



Subject cathexis can be overdone with symbolic relations. The WHO is missed especially when we encounter the WHATs that identified them. Think, for example, of Vincent van Gogh's paintings of shoes or chairs, much more evocative than the painting of a corpse at a wake. The *empty* chair, or the unworn shoes, make us think immediately of who *used to use them*. This is *utilitas* in the negative, with an irrational twist, a  $\sqrt{-1}$ .

The shift from subject cathexis to object cathexis materializes melancholy but without providing a rational unit of measure. It is always a  $\pm$  matter. On one hand we are missing something, on the other hand, the clues and feelings are over-present. Our investment strategy involves a bitcoin whose value is determined randomly. One day it's up, the next it's down.

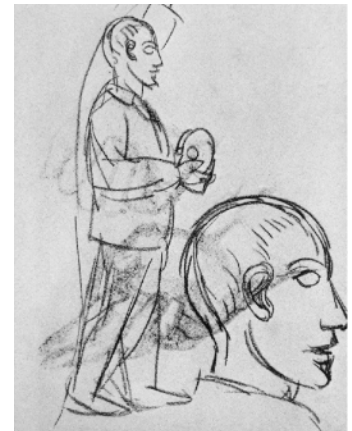
Maybe the biggest clue we have in this mystery is the role of the unconscious. This is the reason that *thinkers* are associated with melancholy — think Dürer, Rodin, Picasso ... Could we think of Picasso's famous *Desmoiselles d'Avignon* as a crime scene? Picasso apparently did, since early sketches for this famous painting focused on the brothel as a place of death and featured a medical student, skull in hand, opening a curtain to reveal, among other things, a seated figure in the classic pose of the historic icon of melancholy.

The unconscious, for both Freud and Lacan, has a rule. It returns its contents not as memories but relived experiences. In the mystery story tradition this is the element of re-enactment. The detective calls everyone together to re-narrate the events of the crime. The whodunnit is present for this concluding act. Reliving the crime repeats the scene but the logic runs in reverse. The *commission* of the crime will be solved by the *explanation*, where it will be made *apparent* — because we are re-imagining the events *theatrically* — with the reasons made clear, where before the reasons were clouded by emotions (affect). We could say that the concluding narration dries out and chills the evidence so that we can see it *objectively*. We have moved from mourning loss subjectively to contemplating it as an object of thought.

You may enjoy thinking about this, but because it is a puzzle, this enjoyment will be a pain-in-pleasure and pleasure-in-pain matter. That is to say, you yourself will be experiencing the *bi* of *jouissance*, you will, like Rodin's and Picasso's thinkers, be "at pains" to come up with some conclusion. Welcome to *jouissance*, the  $\pm$  unit that measures the circuit-investments of cathexis!

### the assignment

On one or two pages, outline a "study method" for pursuing the crime scene (PDF format). Automatically (because you are the thinking subject) you will be the detective, not the police, but because you are a hyper-rational (dry and cold) character, you will be *objectifying* the issues of loss, recovery, and the



Alas, poor Yorick! Early sketches for the *Desmoiselles* showed a medical student holding a skull.

unconscious (don't-know-what-you-don't-know). Your musings will be posted on a web page if you permit. Other statements on this subject are also welcome, as long as they can be made into a PDF.

### the reward

By now you have guessed that architecture is more a matter of object cathexis than subject cathexis. Why? What happens when, as architects invariably do, object cathexis becomes subject cathexis? You can write about this as well.

If the mourner works with symbolic relations and the melancholic with the unconscious, how does the irrationality of the latter, mathematized as the *bi* with its famous  $\sqrt{-1}$ , suggest a theoretical approach? Is the idea of the melancholic in history always about this irrational way of *measuring* and hence *completing* something? Is it always about something missing?

The object-oriented melancholic will almost always be compulsive, driven to repeat a scene or idea in hopes that the missing object will magically show up. The subject-oriented (and hence “symbolic”) mourner will be, in contrast, hysterical. Think of Hamlet, who wants to direct a play inside the play, versus Ophelia, who is made to mourn the death of her father. Hamlet can only be or not be; he must *re-stage*, repeat, in hopes of recovering the lost “Yorick-object” of death. (With a skull you “come up short” of what you lost). Is the melancholic detective the model for the theorist who is not content with explaining (symbolically) but re-staging, demonstrating? Does the detective know something about *jouissance* that we need to know? Is the *memento mori* (the skull is the classic form) not always the crisscross chiasmus we find in the crypt of the Cappuccino monastery?

We once were what you are;  
We are what you will be.



Mutter Museum skulls, Philadelphia

Solve the mystery!

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Boalsburg, Pennsylvania  
February 15, 2025