



Jo-Anne Berelowitz

Mourning and Melancholia in Memoir

... I was always especially entranced, said Austerlitz, by the moment when the shadows of reality, so to speak, emerge out of nothing on the exposed paper, as memories do in the middle of the night, darkening again as you try to cling to them...
W.G. Sebald, Austerlitz

It is no news to say that we die in our shadows, those selves that seem to perpetually occupy the space next to us.
Stanley Plumley, "Night Pastorals"

Shadow. Shade. I've always been drawn to the penumbral, have always preferred it to sunshine. Perhaps because I'm fair-skinned, Ashkenazic, my grandparents from Lithuanian ghettos where shadows were safer than sunshine. Or perhaps because I grew up in a subtropical town on the Indian Ocean seaboard of South Africa where the temperature never dropped below eighty and my private girls' school required bottle-green uniforms buttoned to the neck, woolen blazers, and, in what passed for winter in our balmy clime, thick black stockings—because my school, founded in 1877 by British colonial officials and an Anglican clergyman, followed an English model. And that's how girls dressed for school in England.

Perhaps my predilection for shadow has nothing to do with climate, pigmentation, or ancestral fear. Perhaps I am by nature inclined to the sombrous, to a moody lugubriousness, to sorrow, to the wearing of black, to preoccupation with death, to the archive, the remnant, the trace, the ghostly residue. In short, perhaps I am, by nature, melancholic.

Whatever the cause, I've always been drawn to shadow and shade. Perhaps that's why I thrilled, late in my career as an art historian, to an essay I stumbled upon by Michael Ann Holly, "Patterns in the Shadows." Impossible to resist such a title. I read with excitement, delighted to find, so many years after I first responded to the crepuscular galleries of the Louvre and the Rijksmuseum and the Uffizi (before

galleries became bright and modern and almost Disney-like) that a prominent art historian had declared art history a “melancholy art.” At least, that’s how Holly characterizes it in “Patterns in the Shadows.” I have read that essay so many times I’ve lost count. Fifteen, twenty, twenty-five times? I love it so much that I included it, semester after semester, in my seminar: “The History of Art History and its Methodologies,” always holding it in reserve until the last class to send students into summer in sober mien—a little wobbly, uncomfortable, and, hopefully, thoughtful. At the start of class they resisted the idea that their major might be melancholic, preferring to speak of joy—a preference I attribute to the surf and flip-flop culture of San Diego and, more globally, to the future-orientation that has marked this country from its earliest (New Jerusalem) days. But by the end of that final session, after we’d had a chance to reflect on all that we’d read together and about what we, as art historians, do, most students seemed reconciled, even happy, with the proposal that art history is a discipline marked by the strange oxymoron of (in Holly’s words) “melancholic joy.”

Holly writes:

I take it as axiomatic that all written histories are narratives of desire, full of both manifest and latent needs that exceed the professional mandate to find out what happened and when. And surely, given that the focus of our historical labors is always towards recovering what is lost, one of these primal desires must be labeled melancholic. (1)

Whence the “joy” in that oxymoronic characterization?

Here Holly turns to Walter Benjamin, that arch melancholic, who wrote elegiacally about ruins and fragments. Benjamin appreciated the transience of things—ruins, fragments, hybrids, supplements—finding consolation, even ecstatic joy, in confronting the lost “other” of the past, feeling an ethical obligation to preserve the traces of what is dead, or dying, working to enliven—even redeem—the past via the labor of present understanding and the search for new meanings.

Thirteen years after Holly published that essay on-line, she produced a longer, much expanded version, a book: *The Melancholy Art*, in which she takes a deep dive into what, she argues, is the melancholic ethos of art history. Had a professional lifetime devoted to art history deepened whatever tendency I'd emerged from my mother's womb with, so that, even though I was not born under Saturn, I now had a considerable (perhaps pathological) excess of black bile? I wondered if art history had been a vehicle—a kind of displacement—to explore my own hauntings, melancholia, desires, absences, and losses without directly, and too painfully, having to explore my own history—as I am now doing by writing memoir.

What if art history and memoir turn out to be close relatives? They do, after all, share moods: melancholia and nostalgia, loss and desire, awareness of absence and presence. And common engagements, most obviously with the archive; less obviously, with allegory, which tends to the fragmentary, the incomplete, the imperfect, the ruin, hybridic form, and palimpsest.

Am I, now, writing memoir, practicing art history by another name?

A difference between art historians and memoirists is that art historians have, traditionally, written about objects or periods. Memoirists write about lives, but if we regard our life or experience as an artifact, we position ourselves as curators of that life or experience, holding it in our hands and examining it. In doing so, we take on a scholar's detachment from our subject, weighing in with ourselves how best to represent it, how best to frame it. A crucial element in that framing is the singular first person of the narrator. How will the writer—who stands behind her text's singular first person like a puppet master behind his puppets—present that singular first person, that protagonist, that “I” who tells the story? How to paint her as a character who serves the ends of the essay/memoir?

I—puppet master/author—self-consciously choose a melancholic persona for my protagonist, choose it because melancholia serves my narrative.

It is also likely that I *am* melancholic. Indeed, I think it likely that all of us born—not under Saturn, but under the rule of apartheid that tyrannized South Africa from 1948-1994—are predisposed to

melancholia. Everything in that country was so acutely awry. Longing, grief, repression, guilt, anxiety, self-criticism were naturalized states—for everyone: white, black, and brown. Curiously, this is still the case even though apartheid is now over. Those same feelings prevail, but with an odd shift. That shift, as Thomas Blom Hansen, a professor of anthropology at Stanford University, argues, is a strange multilayered sense of loss, the loss of the obstacle that, we had thought, stood in the way of reaching our full potential. Hegel called this “the loss of the loss”—the removal of the blockage that serves to explain the problems of everyday life and seems to prevent true self-realization (16).

I had a fantasy of who I might become once I turned my back on South Africa and became a citizen of a country where apartheid was not tolerated—at least, not on the books. But as Aleksandar Hemon noted: “There is no way to leave history. There is no other place to go. As a diasporic person I’ve learned that it’s in fact really easy to leave your country. What is difficult is leaving its history, as it follows (or leads) you like a shadow. That kind of history is in your body” (83). And Deborah Tall: “...we are made of where we’ve come from...The experience of the place—its struggles, strife, and horrors—accrues....We are...its inevitable consequence” (288, 289).

And so I come to the three books that are the focus of this essay: Jenny Boully’s *The Body*, Paisley Rekdal’s *Intimate*, and Lauret Savoy’s *Trace*. In each, the author finds herself haunted by histories performed in her body and in her intimate self, histories that have marked her as deeply as erosive forces have marked the earth’s surface. Each text is an elegy filled with the presence of ruins and fragments. Each author strives to redeem the past by offering new meanings layered upon older ones. Each creates a richly textured palimpsest. All are profoundly melancholic.

Performing Melancholia

Sanja Bahun argues that modernist writers and visual artists *perform* melancholia via the strangeness (*ostranie*/defamiliarization) of their (experimental) form. This is unlike pre-modern writers such as Richard

Burton, who represented melancholia discursively in his 1621 text, *Anatomy of Melancholy*. It is also unlike visual artists such as Albrecht Durer who, in his famous 1514 engraving, *Melancholia*, represented it symbolically. Bahun captures this shift from discursive/symbolic representation to performative representation by comparing two images of melancholy: Durer's 1514 engraving and Paul Klee's 1920 *Angelus Novus*—a watercolor that resonated melancholically for Walter Benjamin, who owned the Klee and wrote poignantly about it.

Durer's engraving, Bahun notes, is "detailed, precise, and meticulously balanced. . . "[M]elancholy] is anthropomorphized in a realistically represented, female gendered, human body" surrounded by conventional emblems of melancholia—her dark face, her attitude of absorption, the alchemical emblems that lie about her. Klee's angel, in contrast, seems tentative, unfinished, ambivalent, grotesquely figured, an odd mix of genres and media (oil transfer drawing and watercolor on paper on cardboard). "Klee's angel," Bahun notes, "is not an *emblem* of melancholy but the *subject and expression* of melancholy" (42, my emphasis). The melancholia it articulates is in the very texture of the work, in the ambiguities of its readability. It is, she argues:

[t]his exteriorization of historical anxiety at the level of form that [is] the most important feature of modernist melancholia, one that distinguishes it from all preceding aesthetic engagements with the condition. Unsurprisingly, this effort to make artistic devices into strategies of 'obstruction' accords well with the twentieth-century reconceptualizations of clinical melancholia as readable not in symbols but precisely in the symptomatic *obstructions* to the used system of signs. A memento to the installment of these new clinical and epistemological models, the shift in representation observable in Klee's drawing profoundly affects the viewer, and does so exactly in the manner hoped for by Benjamin: it propels 'distracted' consideration rather than contemplation.

(42)

Many modernist works self-consciously *perform* melancholia, finding ways to *evoke* loss, to make it resonate via an uncognizability as an integral part of the text/artwork and the reader's experience of the text/artwork. Bahun calls this tendency (to give form to the impossibility of moving from melancholia to mourning) *a practice of countermourning*, a concept, she posits, that "allows one to envision a memorial articulation of loss that is at the same time expressive and critical...[and] yet utilizes the symptomatology of melancholia..." (43).

Melancholia

A cautionary comment—which I've borrowed from David Lazar's essay "Occasional Desire: On the Essay and the Memoir." He writes: "I have to approach [this] subject...as an essayist; my desire to understand this subject and any invocation [of my resources] should be instruments that I use warily and strategically" (41). Lazar does not discuss mourning or melancholia. He does, however, discuss *desire*, arguing that the essayist writes to understand her/his desires. When I came across his book I was struggling to understand the desire that underpins the three books I've chosen to focus on—and my own desire to read and write memoir. I kept asking the following questions: what desire underpins a memoir, what is the writer's desire, what is the reader's? What is the melancholic longing *for*? I was particularly puzzled and intrigued to find that Bouilly's *The Body* contains, or is, in part, a love letter to an absent lover. Rekdal and Savoy do not direct their texts to absent lovers. That's why I included them: to see what, if any, common melancholic longing drives all three texts. All three texts are narratives of longing and grief for someone, or some thing *not there*. All are characterized by a mood of un-assuage-able loss. Psychoanalysts and theorists who work in fields that draw on psychoanalytic literature call this mood *melancholia*.

Black Bile

There is a rich pre-psychoanalytic tradition of melancholia reaching back to Aristotle. The term *melaine chole* is part of the humoral theory of medicine in which four different humors or tendencies are said to predominate. *Melaine chole* means black bile and is found in those born under the sign of Saturn. When black bile predominates in an individual, it causes depression, excessive rumination, and stagnation and is a common attribute of artistic temperaments. However, when black bile can be clarified and liquefied, it becomes, according to this view, a fountain of creative inspiration that triggers redemptive possibilities.

In Freud's foundational text on the subject, his 1917 *Mourning and Melancholia*, he famously postulated that loss (of a cherished person, object, or concept) is marked by two responses: mourning and melancholia. Mourning-work, he argued, is a slow process of detachment from the lost object, with the mourner moving from grief to acceptance of the irreversibility of absence and a concomitant feeling of freedom and return of libido. Mourning, Freud initially claimed, attains resolution. He revised this position after the death of his daughter in 1929—as evidenced in a letter to Ludwig Binswanger: “...we know we shall remain inconsolable” the loss being “that love which we do not want to relinquish” (Bahun 27, 28). Melancholia, on the other hand, never achieves resolution, but remains always open-ended, ambivalent, without closure—an eternal grief. The grieving individual refuses to move beyond, or is unable to relinquish, the sense of loss, retains a relationship to the loss, allows the feeling of absence to fester, “like an open wound,” “a black hole, an abyss of dereliction” and may even be unable to identify what has been lost (Bahun 28). Loss—of country, of liberty, of an individual, of the past, of a community, of a potential—becomes the dominant feeling of the soul afflicted with melancholia.

There is a curious paradox in the symptomatology of melancholia: although it entails inhibition of the ability to verbalize, it is characterized by “insistent communicativeness”—the melancholic's unrelenting attempts to exteriorize the affect in language. The melancholic is torn between silence and the desire to write or speak to create something to substitute for the loss. Freud later argued that experiences of loss are an essential element of ego formation, the ego undergoing a constant process of forming and

being formed by experiences of loss. Later theorists have noted that this constant melancholic process makes the ego an elegiac formation. In *Civilization and its Discontents* (1929-30), Freud continued to develop the theme of loss, arguing that the world is not our home, that civilization is built on the repression of drives, which binds us to the workings of melancholia and its key symptom, the feeling of guilt. (I'm assuming—because I can't find an explanation for this—that feelings of guilt arise because of the violence of the drives, which are then repressed, but never so completely as to remove a deep sense of guilt from having had such drives.) To make the situation bearable, we generate sublimatory constructions like art and religion.

Melanie Klein, building on Freud, argued that the absence of the past is most effectively and poignantly compensated for through the presence of objects—material things that become invested or fraught with an aura of mystery, fascination, and terror. For Klein, an image of the loved one (or thing) is summoned from memory and installed among the images that constitute the inner world. It is, she argued, anxiety about object loss that brings about the melancholic condition. Julia Kristeva writes: “loss, bereavement, and absence trigger the work of the imagination and nourish it permanently as much as they threaten and spoil it” (9). Art, in Kristeva's view, attempts to represent an object that must always, to some degree, be lost in perception and lost again in representation. Melancholic representation awakens our longing for what must always remain inaccessible.

Jenny Boully: The Body

Visually, Jenny Boully's *The Body* makes me think of Alan McCollum, the contemporary artist whose work in the 80s consisted of “surrogate paintings” —black rectangles, white mat border, and frame. These he always grouped together, suggesting more a market place of mass-produced commodities than a gallery of unique, one-of-a-kind objects. McCollum's images are funereal, deeply melancholic, filled with the grief of a postmodernist who understands that originality is a myth that served ideological purposes. This insight

gives McCollum no pleasure, only awareness of the power of the consumerist lure of mass-produced industrial artifacts (an ideology of consumption and newness). McCollum, like Bouilly, performs an ache of absence—the image is not there, only the frame that marks the space that Art once occupied.

The reader of Bouilly's *The Body* is at once struck by the text's aberrance, for this slender volume is composed entirely of footnotes. The *body* of the text, for which footnotes are ordinarily a supplement, is absent, missing, a lacuna, a silence, a void, a death.

What is the reader to make of this?

Bouilly's book *performs* melancholia in the ways described by Bahun. Bouilly's work (and here I borrow from Bahun) is *strange, defamiliarizing, experimental, unfinished*. Whatever it articulates is in the *texture* of the work, *in the ambiguities of its unreadability*. Its *subject* is the footnote. The footnote is also its *expression* and form. The text *obstructs* conventional access to meaning, and is, in an odd way, *distracting*. It is the bearer of something *uncognizable*. The only way to "get" this text is to read it. Its affect (and effect on the reader) cannot be summarized or discursively explained—though that, paradoxically, is exactly what I'm going to endeavor to do.

I contend that Bouilly's book is deeply informed and influenced by Jacques Derrida, the twentieth century philosopher who developed a particular reading of texts that has become known as *Deconstruction*: a philosophical approach that asserts that meanings are always rendered unstable by their dependence on ultimately arbitrary signifiers. Much of Derrida's work focuses on the metaphysics of presence—which always assumes absence—and on what he called "hauntology"—the impossibility of *not* being haunted by historical or personal loss. (Derrida, it should be noted, also wrote extensively about Freud.) It is possible to read the entire project of Derridean Deconstruction as a performance of countermourning—a constant and almost obsessive articulation of loss that is also expressive and critical. I read Bouilly's *The Body* as a work of mourning, a melancholic longing for a world in which meanings were assumed to be stable and relationships between signifieds and signifiers secure, a world in which a reader could assume

that a text—or a footnote—held a plenitude of meaning and made some kind of sense. Bouilly's footnotes suggest, or are shadows of, a lost world in which meanings were held to be traceable back to sources. *The Body* performs a kind of ruin of that worldview. Her book is, I argue, a melancholic elegy for a pre-modern ability/willingness to believe in a transcendental signified.

In *The Body* what is usually “primary” (the body of the text) is absent. All the reader gets is the supplement—footnotes. There is no text, only an endless play of allusion. By foregrounding the body as absence, Bouilly undercuts any possibility of what Derrida referred to (dismissively) as the “metaphysics of presence.” The “signifier” in Bouilly's text is the absent body—a void, a silence, a death. The work is haunted by the absence of that body (of text). The reader longs for it as a bereaved person longs melancholically for the departed loved one. Reading the footnotes, the reader tries to construct the absent body, to *find* the body, longs to know something of Bouilly, wonders to what degree she is, or might be, the transcendental signified of her text. Where is she? Is the failure to find her the reader's? What is “her” (Bouilly's) relationship to the absent lover to whom some of the footnotes refer?

What Bouilly generates in the reader is *desire*: the longing to find a secure harbor where meaning is sheltered, where the body resides, where the reader can fulfill her longing for the vanished body (of the text, the lover, the object of desire). Bouilly's book (I return here to Bahun's characterization of modernist writing) is not *about* loss or melancholic yearning. It *performs* loss and melancholic yearning, presenting the reader with *obstructions* to the extraction of conventional meaning in much the same way as W. G. Sebald, another extraordinary modernist melancholic, does in *Austerlitz*. Here, for instance, is a Sebaldian passage (about footnotes) that is close to the mood in Bouilly's work:

In the week I went daily to the Bibliotheque Nationale in the rue Richelieu, and usually remained in my place there until evening, in silent solidarity with the many others immersed in their intellectual labors, losing myself in the small print of the footnotes to the works I was reading, in the books I found mentioned in those notes, then in the footnotes to those books in their own turn, so

escaping from factual, scholarly accounts to the strangest of details, in a kind of continual regression expressed in the form of my own marginal remarks and gloss, which increasingly diverged into the most varied and impenetrable of ramifications. (260)

With Sebald, as with Bouilly, the effect is dizzying. The reader is thrown into a *mise en abyme*, with “meaning” forever slipping away, out of reach—a *performance* of melancholic yearning, of melancholia as subject and expression. Interestingly, with both writers there is a sense of movement between near and far. Mostly, with Sebald, there is an ever-increasing sense of distance, though he does, occasionally, bring the reader in close—a closeness that tantalizes because it soon slips away into unreachable distance. With Bouilly there is a much sharper alternation of close and distant, for she constantly draws the reader into an erotics of the body, her own body and desires, and, even, to alternation of interiority: “. . . it was my cunt too . . .” (51), with distant exteriority. It is almost as if, with Bouilly, the text is haunted by memory of a body with its visceral immediacy and pungency. Yet the footnote in which she references her “cunt” is filled with images of death: the image of the hanged man, the non-sequitur of “Everything I do I do because I know I am dying” and “I know now why the line breaks: it is because something dies and elsewhere, is born again. . .”, *The Body*, even when it is visceral, is fundamentally about death and mortality. Indeed, a comment Derrida made about his own work applies well to Bouilly: “I speak of mourning as the attempt, always doomed to failure. . . to incorporate, interiorize, introject, subjectivize the other in me. . . I am in mourning there I am—dead with the other’s death, my relation to myself is primarily one of mourning, a mourning that is moreover, impossible” (xi). It occurs to me that Bouilly’s footnotes function like mourners who had a relationship to the deceased (the absent text) but not to one another. They are as disconnected as strangers at a funeral, literal footnotes to the laying to rest of an absent body.

Footnotes don’t only point the reader *away* from text to sources elsewhere, but also *to* the text that, customarily, lies above the line separating text from footnote. With conventional footnoting, a footnote number corresponds to a number *in* the text. But in Bouilly’s work there is no text, only the ghost of the

empty space above the line. The signifier (footnote) points to no thing, to absence, in much the way that memory refers to something that is gone, save for a residual imprint. Her footnotes are *traces* pointing elegiacally to a moribund convention of meaningful content, a text under erasure.

Her book makes me think of Roland Barthes's *The Death of the Author* and Stanley Fish's *Is There a Text in This Class?* Although both Barthes's and Fish's texts are discursive, they *also* perform, and offer the reader an understanding of, the elusiveness of meaning. In recounting the author's death and the absence of an authoritative text, these two theorists generate in the reader melancholic longing for the imaginary vanished "real," for the "transcendental signified" of an authoritative author who deliberately and consciously (it was once assumed) filled a text with particular meaning.

Why produce a "text" so marked by absence that all the reader "gets" is a specter? Answer: to make the reader aware of her own desire—for bodies and for bodies of meaning; to make the reader aware of her own melancholic longing for what is no longer attainable; to make the reader aware of the impossibility of satisfying her desire to find or pin down meaning; to make the reader aware of the impossibility of wholeness. Boully evokes the absent lover—who is also an allegory for desire—at the very beginning of her text: "It was the particular feel of him that made me want to go back: everything that is said is said underneath, where, if it does matter, to acknowledge it is to let on to your embarrassment. That I love you makes me want to run and hide" (1). She hooks the reader by suggesting that her content is a love affair, her longing for an absent lover. Indeed, in some ways, her content *is* a love affair, *is* about a longing for an absent lover. At the same time as she alerts the reader to the text's *content* (longing for what is absent) she is already *in* performative mode. Content and performance are indivisible. For example, she writes that "everything that is said [in her book] is said underneath" the line that separates footnotes from the "body" of the text (1). She wants, she writes "to run and hide." In effect, she has. She has hidden the narrative. All that she gives the reader are allusions, footnotes. In this text, footnoting—the "supplemental" text that (literally) subtends her and the reader's ache about the absent text above the line

—serves as a kind of allegory for what is unspoken and buried in a relationship—the heavy weight beneath the surface.

I’ve come to think of Bouilly as an allegorist. For a definition I turn to Craig Owens: “The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism,” a two-part essay spread over two issues of *October* in 1980. Owens writes:

...allegory occurs whenever one text is doubled by another...the allegorical work tends to prescribe the direction of its own commentary... In allegorical structure...one text is *read through* another, however fragmentary, intermittent, or chaotic their relationship may be; the paradigm for the allegorical work is thus the palimpsest (68).

This is pertinent to *The Body*, which is both a commentary on and a performance of desire and of which it might be said that it is nothing *but* palimpsest. There is much more I could apply to Bouilly from Owens’s essay (which is about visual art, though Owens draws heavily on Walter Benjamin and Paul De Man) but I’ll limit myself to two more excerpts: “Allegory is consistently attracted to the fragmentary, the imperfect, the incomplete—an affinity which finds its most comprehensive expression in the ruin” (70). And: “The allegorical work is synthetic; it crosses aesthetic boundaries. This confusion of genre, anticipated by Duchamp, reappears today in hybridization, in eclectic works, which ostentatiously combine previously distinct art mediums” (72).

I seem to find references to allegory everywhere. For example, turning from my desk, still thinking about allegory, I absent-mindedly picked Alberto Manguel’s *A History of Reading* off my bookshelf, opening it at the chapter: “The Missing First Page.” The chapter is about Franz Kafka and allegory and makes the argument that “every reading is in itself allegorical, the object of other readings,” adding that, for Paul de Man “allegorical narratives tell the story of the *failure* to read” (85). Bouilly’s *The Body* is about the failure of the book, historically a vehicle for meaningful communication, to *mean*. Moreover, her book

is about the fragmentary, *is* the fragmentary. It is also, by the terms of Bahun's definition, a work of *countermourning*.

Bouly, like all of us who inhabit the uneasy, boggy territory of postmodernism, harbors nostalgia for the old "certainties," the old "verities." Perhaps we are all melancholics, filled with grief for what has been irrevocably lost—though in truth we don't want most of those old "verities" restored—so that we become, like Durer's *Melancholia*, broody, disconsolate, burdened by the useless tools and emblems that lie about us. As Boym notes, "A modern nostalgic can be homesick and sick of home, at once" (50).

Paisley Rekdal, *Intimate: an American Family Photo Album*

The concept of palimpsest applies also to Rekdal, who gives us pictorialist images of people from the past in a book on a bedside table, photographs of Rekdal's parents, the sun traveling across the surface of the fissured glass frame, "images blending together, complementing, then arguing against each other" (x). It occurs to me that pictorialism is a palimpsestic mode: the overlay of a documentary medium by an approach that references the painterly art of the brush. Indeed, photography has been much discussed in language that resonates with melancholia: the freezing of a moment from the past, a spectral haunting into the present of vanished time and vanished people. The Victorians were keenly aware of this, taking photographs of deceased loved ones to perpetuate their memory—and to perpetuate the melancholia of the bereaved. I'll note, too, a fear, in the early years of photography, that the new medium would "murder" painting. Pictorialism is, perhaps, a particularly melancholic sub-category of photography because its practitioners aimed at imitating painting, *reminding* the viewer of painting, transforming it into a *trace* of a medium that many thought was now done for—just as Curtis wanted his images of Native Americans to stand in for a race that, it was thought—he thought—was nearing extinction.

The critical discourse about photography was tied, in multiple ways, to a rhetoric of death. The photographs in Rekdal's book are deeply melancholic, haunted by their ability to capture the tragedy and

horror of the racialized gaze. At the same time as they horrify (Rekdal's observation at the end of her book), the photographs are also disturbingly beautiful. They elicit from Rekdal, the viewer through whose eyes we see, both sorrow and joy—the paradoxical experience of what Michael Ann Holly termed “melancholic joy.”

Rekdal's book resonates with ache, a sense of the tragic, a desire to recover what has been lost—which is to say that the book is melancholic. It opens with a powerful evocation of mortality: sepia photographs from long ago, pills on a nightstand, her parents at a hospital because her mother has cancer. It ends with death: Upshaw's, Curtis's, Rekdal's father's. It is an elegy to what has vanished. Indeed, she identifies the book's subject as: “Eros, identity, and elegy” (236). Rekdal's book is hybrid: poetry, narrative prose, personal reflection, lyric nonfiction, photographs, different typeface, extensive white space. This hybrid unconventionality is, I'll contend, an expression of the impossibility of the task—the challenge and impossibility of finding an adequate language (visual or verbal) to represent the tragedies of history. Her text is, to borrow Bahun's word, “self-conscious”—which makes the reader aware of the “self” writing it. The white space conveys absence and loss. Rekdal is also, as I've pointed out, self-critical. She conveys her melancholia via a range of formal inflections rather than by description. It is not, or not all, personal memoir, but it is, I'll claim, memoiristic in its reaching for a past that has vanished but which continues to haunt the present.

The book's title—*Intimate*—warrants unpacking. “Intimate” is a noun, a verb, and an adjective—palimpsests of meaning stapled into a single word. The “Intimate” of the title suggests/intimates something about Americans (citizenry of a nation-state that implies a kind of family—the *imagined community* of Benedict Anderson's book of that title and the *American Family* of Rekdal's own title), families (intimates by virtue of consanguinity), and the writing of history—which always suggests/intimates an ideological position. *Intimate* is, I contend, a deeply political work about the spectrum across which a politics and ethics of responsibility play out: the personal realm, the realm of the larger body politic, the

realm of art/beauty, with its power to inspire love and desire. Rekdal wants to intimate/suggest that we all bear responsibility for history, for we are all, in some ways, intimates of one another, a family of humankind. Rekdal's point, I think, in choosing such a resonant word to title her book, is that we are *bound* to one another across time and space, that other lives and histories impact us, becoming part of our most intimate being, becoming, in a way, part of our own individual memory, heritage, and, therefore, responsibility. Other lives and histories *are* material for personal memoir. We understand, from the way Rekdal presents her material, that the history she addresses *matters* to her. We come to "know" her in ways we do not and cannot "know" Bouilly, whose project in her text is to hide from the reader.

What Rekdal's book addresses (and Bouilly's does not) is a *politics* of memory and melancholia. Her melancholia/mourning attempts to open up a space of remembrance in which historical injustice cannot find resolution in mourning but must be melancholically constantly re-examined and re-interpreted. What she attempts to do is what Derrida argued for in *Specters of Marx*: insist on an ethical obligation to those already dead—to ghosts—to an ongoing politics of memory and concern for justice.

Translation, a theme in Rekdal's book, is also introduced in the first paragraph: the attending nurse asks Rekdal: "Are you the translator?" She is—though not in the way the nurse intended her question to be understood. Rekdal is the "translator" of Curtis, who "translates" North American Indians into his own particular 19th century pictorialist aesthetic; of Curtis's translator Upshaw, who serves as an intermediary for Curtis with his Native American subjects; of the lives of her parents. Translation is, of course, always problematic, always secondary to an "original," always assumes a gap into which meaning falls. A translated text is always spectral, haunted by an assumed origin, shadowed by a kind of ontological ghost in which the translator is always reaching for, longing for, the (imaginary) transcendental signified of the original. The task of the translator is, thus, always melancholic. Walter Benjamin in his "The Task of the Translator" commented that a translation is part of the "afterlife" of a text, an "echo" of the original (71).

I understand the form of “memoir” that Rekdal has undertaken here in light of Derrida’s attempt “to incorporate, interiorize, introject, subjectivize the other in me.” Rekdal writes to effect some kind of reparation. But her project, as she comes to acknowledge at the very end of her book, is problematic:

What disturbs me most about [Curtis’s] pictures is that I adore them. Their sepias and blurry ochres. It is a moment of *intimacy* to take the Curtis book from my father’s table, to imagine that I have seen what he sees in them, that I might feel the way my father feels at the changing of his world: the slow collapse of his idealism, my mother’s illness—something that reflects but does not always include us. If I see what my father or mother sees, does that mean that I come closer? Or does it mean that I, too, become responsible for their vision in ways from which I naively hoped I’d be released? (243, my emphasis).

In taking the book from her father’s table, Rekdal implies a transmission of the historical account from generation to generation, a kind of intimacy of inheritance. Intimacy is a problem for Rekdal, as it is for all of us, as it is for Derrida: “in mourning there I am—dead with the other’s death, my relation to myself...primarily one of mourning, a mourning that is, moreover, impossible.” She understands—painfully—how much she “adores” Curtis’s pictures. In spite of having spent two hundred and forty-two pages problematizing his project and his vision, she recognizes the impossibility of “introjecting” the other, of effecting any kind of reparation. Her relationship to what she loves is filled with grief, for her own project, she acknowledges, is as much a failure as Curtis’s: she has attempted to “make [her] narrative seamless and, in its connections, beautiful. In this, I am no better, and no worse, than the photographer” (237).

Rekdal *looks*—and the photographs return the gaze. Curtis, too, looks, and the world looks back at him. There are references to looking and seeing throughout the book. Rekdal is asking: What do we *see* when we look? What *don’t* we see? What do we refuse to see? What we, the readers, see—and she is at pains to point this out—is the *misrecognition* at the heart of Curtis’s enterprise, his failure to see the Native

Americans he photographed as anything other than phenotypically marked bodies. I should note that Curtis's project was essentially elegiac—to capture the life and customs of Native Americans before their “inevitable” disappearance. In this, he continued a project begun a century earlier by George Catlin, a painter who traveled west in the 1830s to document Native Americans because he believed them to be a “doomed race” whom he would “rescue” via his art. Catlin, Curtis, and Rekdal all gaze melancholically, making the reader reflect on how the seemingly simple act of looking can also be a trajectory of grief. We, Rekdal's readers, reflect on how looking is almost always a failure to recognize, to *see*. What we don't always see—what Rekdal herself struggles to see—is our own desire: for these beautiful images and for the people and lost world they shadow. (This is where the “eros” of her book's subject comes into play.) We don't see our sentimental romantic nostalgia for the people and world we have destroyed. Looking, she seems to say, is fraught with tragedies of misrecognition. The failure to see—and the awareness of this inevitable failure—dooms the see-er to melancholia.

Lauret Savoy, Trace

Savoy, a professor of environmental studies and geology, draws on the discourse of geology to explore her personal history—the “traces of intimate, lineal past” that “converge” in her”(2). This is the project of the art historian and the memoirist. We are close relatives, sharing an obsession with palimpsests, erosions of time, fragile surfaces, alterations, tamperings, damages, displacements, effacements, concealments, woundings, disasters, the mute eloquence of scars, the voices of the dead. She allegorizes her personal history by doubling it with the history of the earth's erosion, the marks and traces of time on the earth's body. As a geologist, a scholar of fragments of the earth's crust, she works with “the fragmentary, the imperfect, the incomplete.” This is also her project as a memoirist: to trace residual marks and piece together fragments to construct a larger narrative.

Savoy's book is as fraught with desire as Bouilly's and Rekdal's. For example: "The past is remembered and told by desire (108). And: "I don't have answers, but I do have desires. That the intricate relations implicating us in each other's lives could be acknowledged by recent immigrant and native... taking responsibility for the past-in-present...to a true re-pairing toward truth and reconciliation" (113).

When I read the words "truth and reconciliation" I think, as all South Africans surely must, of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. This was a court-like restorative justice body assembled in South Africa in 1995, after the end of apartheid, to bear witness, record, and even grant amnesty to the perpetrators of human rights violations under apartheid and to offer reparation and rehabilitation to victims. *Trace* is, in a way, an accounting of truth and reconciliation in which landscape and the earth's *crust* are called upon to bear witness.

Landscape and the earth do not forget the past. They bear traces, hold history.

Perhaps Freud was wrong.

What if there is an *ethics* to melancholia that blocks the possibility of "resolution"? What if we *need* the ache of loss?

Do I study art history and write memoir to sustain that ache?

The earth, Savoy, and her family bear signs of erosion. For example, reflecting on her personal difficulty with the silence about origins that lies over her family, her parents' "muteness" about their origins, she writes: "silence is residue of memory's erosion." I find it curious—and provocative—to think of memory as a landscape subject to erosion. There are many instances of such borrowings/ allegorizations in Savoy's writing. For instance: "These woodlands and I are partly effaced palimpsests. Altered in the passage of time, yes, but still retaining traces of earlier forms and origins" (68). And: "Yes, I am a palimpsest too, a place made over but trying to trace back" (86). I am fascinated by her description of herself as a "place." What might it mean to conceive of self as place?

In feeling my way towards an answer, I think about the unique insights that a geographer-geologist brings to memoir. As a geographer, Savoy must be keenly aware of the “spatial turn” in the humanities and social sciences in the late twentieth century, a phenomenon dubbed “Thirdspace” by geographer Edward Soja in his book of that title. Soja defines Thirdspace as “a growing awareness of the simultaneity and interwoven complexity of the social, the historical, *and the spatial*, their inseparability and often problematic interdependence” (261). He describes this as an “ontological *trialectic* of spatiality-sociality-historicity” (262). It is, I’ll contend, this “ontological trialectic” that Savoy’s work embraces as a practice. She makes her reader (this reader, at least) think about the body/self as a *place* or location that was—still is—produced by social, historical and spatial experiences. This is a liberating understanding for a memoirist because it opens a way to step back from the narcissistic “I” to think more globally both *in* time and place and *as* time and place. How curious, odd, estranging even, to think of my body as a landscape beside other landscapes! When I do this, I detach from my “self,” becoming something not myself, some *place* within a larger framework of places. At the same time, my sense of responsibility deepens, because I become aware that my landscape (interior and exterior) impacts other landscapes. Context and self become inseparable.

Savoy comments: “We *are*, in a sense, the place worlds we imagine” (82).

Savoy’s penultimate chapter takes the reader to Washington, D.C. for the inauguration of Barack Obama. Although this chapter is near the end of the book, it seems to me to lie at its heart: Washington’s history is deeply implicated in the horrors of slavery, its auction houses and slave quarters hidden behind walls, its shame in the shadow of the capitol’s infrastructure. It is also the site where an African-American citizen is inaugurated into the nation’s highest office. Because Savoy stops her story here I think of her as a sanguine writer reaching for reconciliation, searching for light in shadow.

The key word is “searching.”

There is a line that Savoy repeats, like a refrain, early and late: the first time at the outset of what, in retrospect, she understands was the beginning of her journey when, a child, she left the place she’d known

as home; and much later, when her search for her history brings her to the bank of the Potomac River: “Odysseus said: ‘I belong in the place of my departure and I belong in the place that is my destination’” (17, 181). What lies between “departure” and “destination” is the journey, the search. Savoy’s last line is: “I must continue the search.” Though it is the book’s last line, it is not the end. The black hole, the abyss of dereliction continues to haunt her, propelling the continuation of her “search” (186). What she searches for is *home*. These two refrains, Odysseus and home, signal to the reader that *Trace* is more than a personal journey. It is an odyssey in which the seeker never finds home and never ceases searching for it.

Like the memoirist, like the art historian.

By Way of an Ending

If I were to follow Savoy’s example and draw on art history to find an allegory for myself, what art historical image might allegorize my narrative? What image might I borrow?

Perhaps Eva Hesse’s 1966 *Hang-Up*: A cloth-wrapped/bandaged square frame, a length of steel tubing emerging from the upper left edge, dangling down into the space in front of the frame, then reinserting into the lower right edge. Nothing within the frame but the blank wall. The frame’s primary reductive shape reminiscent of the anti-expressionist ethos of Minimalism. The anti-expressionist ethos undercut by the bandage. An injured frame. An absurd frame. The steel tubing an umbilicus dangling down, seeking a place of attachment.

In 2003 I saw Eva Hesse’s retrospective at San Francisco’s MOMA.

I walked through that show in tears.

I read South African history to find out more than *what* and *when*. What I want, what I need, what I desire, is to learn what it means to me and for me. How do I recover the past? How reactivate it? How

learn from it? How am I shadowed by it? How has my training as an art historian helped prepare me for this task?

Did I seek shadow and shade because bright light was unbearable, because shadows were safer than sunshine? Did I choose art history because beautiful images from long ago were a sanctuary from the terrible spectacle of every day life?

Perhaps there is/was a logic to my retreat into shadow?

Difficult to examine a history I wish I had not been part of.

Impossible now to avoid harsh light.

Is joy to be had from this examination, this attempt to write about the place of my departure, this attempt to step out of shadow and *see*?

Perhaps.

Melancholic joy.

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