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A pervasive sense of loss and unease envelops us, a cultural sadness that can justly be compared to the individual who suffers a personal bereavement.

A hyper-technologized late capitalism is steadily effacing the living texture of existence, as the world's biggest die-off in 50 million years proceeds apace: 50,000 plant and animal species disappear each year (World Wildlife Fund, 1996).

Our grieving takes the form of postmodern exhaustion, with its wasting diet of an anxious, ever-shifting relativism, and that attachment to surface that fears connecting with the fact of staggering loss. The fatal emptiness of ironized consumerism is marked by a loss of energy, difficulty in concentrating, feelings of apathy, social withdrawal; precisely those enumerated in the psychological literature of mourning.

The falsity of postmodernism consists in its denial of loss, the refusal to mourn. Devoid of hope or vision for the future, the reigning zeitgeist also cuts off, very explicitly, an understanding of what has happened and why. There is a ban on thinking about origins, which is companion to an insistence on the superficial, the fleeting, the ungrounded.

Parallels between individual grief and a desolate, grieving common sphere are often striking. Consider the following from therapist Kenneth Doka (1989): "Disenfranchised grief can be defined as the grief that persons experience when they incur a loss that is not or cannot be openly acknowledged, publicly mourned, or socially supported." Denial on an individual level provides an inescapable metaphor for denial at large; personal denial, so often thoroughly understandable, introduces the question of refusal to come to grips with the crisis occurring at every level.

Ushering in the millennium are voices whose trademark is opposition to narrative itself, escape from any kind of closure. The modernist project at least made room for the apocalyptic; now we are expected to hover forever in a world of surfaces and simulation that ensure the "erasure" of the real world and the dispersal of both the self and the social. Baudrillard is of course emblematic of the "end of the end," based on his prefigured "extermination of meaning."

We may turn again to the psychological literature for apt description. Deutsch (1937) examined the absence of expressions of grief that occur following some bereavements and considered this a defensive attempt of the ego to preserve itself in the face of overwhelming anxiety. Fenichel (1945) observed that grief is at first experienced only in very small doses; if it were released full-strength, the subject would feel overwhelming despair. Similarly, Grimspoon (1964) noted that "people cannot risk being overwhelmed by the anxiety which might accompany a full cognitive and affective grasp of the present world situation and its implications for the future."

With these counsels and cautions in mind, it is nonetheless obvious that loss must be faced. All the more so in the realm of social existence, where in distinction to, say, the death of a loved one, a crisis of monumental proportions might be turned toward a transformative solution, if no longer denied. Repression, most clearly and presently practised via postmodern fragmentation and super-

ficiality. does not extinguish the problem. "The repressed," according to Bollas (1995) "signifies the preserved: hidden away in the organized tensions of the unconscious, wishes and their memories are ceaselessly struggling to find some way into gratification in the present — desire refutes annihilation."

Grief is the thwarting and deadening of desire and very much resembles depression; in fact, many depressions are precipitated by losses (Klerman, 1981). Both grief and depression may have anger at their root; consider, for example, the cultural association of black with grief and mourning and with anger, as in "black rage."

Traditionally, grief has been seen as giving rise to cancer. A contemporary variation on this thesis is Norman Mailer's notion that cancer is the unhealthiness of a deranged society, turned inward, bridging the personal and public spheres. Again, a likely connection among grief, depression, and anger — and testimony, I think, to massive repression. Signs abound concerning weakening immune defenses; along with increasing material toxins, there seems to be a rising level of grief and its concomitants. When meaning and desire are too painful, too unpromising to admit or pursue, the accumulating results only add to the catastrophe now unfolding.

To look at narcissism, today's bellwether profile of character, is to see suffering as an ensemble of more and more closely related aspects. Lasch (1979) wrote of such characteristic traits of the narcissistic personality as an inability to feel, protective shallowness, increased repressed hostility, and a sense of unreality and emptiness. Thus, narcissism too could be subsumed under the heading of grief, and the larger suggestion arises with perhaps greater force: there is something profoundly wrong, something at the heart of all this sorrow, however much it is commonly labelled under various separate categories.

In a 1917 exploration, "Mourning and Melancholia," a puzzled Freud asked why the memory of "each single one of the memories and hopes" that is connected to the lost loved one "should be so extraordinarily painful." But tears of grief, it is said, are at base tears

for oneself. The intense sorrow at a personal loss, tragic and difficult as it most certainly is, may be in some way also a vulnerability to sorrow over a more general, trans-species loss.

Walter Benjamin wrote his "Theses on History" a few months before his premature death in 1940 at a sealed frontier that prevented escape from the Nazis. Breaking the constraints of marxism and literariness, Benjamin achieved a high point of critical thinking. He saw that civilization, from its origin, is that storm evacuating Eden, saw that progress is an single, ongoing catastrophe.

Alienation and anguish were once largely, if not entirely, unknown. Today the rate of serious depression, for example, doubles roughly every ten years in the developed nations (Wright, 1995).

As Peter Homans (1984) put it very ably, "Mourning does not destroy the past — it reopens relations with it and with the communities of the past." Authentic grieving poses the opportunity to understand what has been lost and why, also to demand the recovery of an innocent state of being, wherein needless loss is banished.