

The melancholy of the forgotten: a Lyotardian affection

Sergio Alloggio

Finalmente senza memoria.
— Luigi Malerba¹

An early Arendt's pessimism

And really, excess likes to provoke a corresponding change in the opposite direction.
— Plato²

In the winter of 1949-50 Hannah Arendt, who immigrated to the United States in 1941, returns to West Germany to fulfil her commitment to the *Commission for Jewish Cultural Reconstruction*.³ It is her first post-war visit to her homeland, in a time in which she is no longer German and not yet American. “The Aftermath of Nazi Rule: Report from Germany”, an article published in the American journal *Commentary* in 1950, is the printed testimony of that intense trip.⁴ The *Report*, while a minor article in Arendt's *opus*, nonetheless presents a number of remarkable observations made by a “young” thinker facing both the moral and physical devastation of her native soil — “a cloud of melancholy” in the heart of Europe as Arendt states.⁵

The argument in the first part of the *Report* highlights the German people's negation of their own “nightmare”, a strange set of “inability to feel”, “absence of mourning for the dead” and a “general lack of emotion”.⁶ This collective coldness is the most striking feeling felt by an ex-fellow citizen epitomised by Arendt in the awkward reaction as the general “refusal to face and come to terms with what really happened”.⁷

What is at stake here, for post-war Germans, is the public willingness, with all its argumentative tricks analysed in the first part of Arendt's article, to run away from the responsibility of their own previous acts. This attempt at escaping-from-reality could easily be a gift from the totalitarian Nazi regime

¹ Luigi Malerba”, “Finally without memory”, in *Itaca per sempre* (Milano: Mondadori, 1997): 174.

² Plato, *The Republic* VIII, 563 e 6-7.

³ See her explanations on this topic in Hannah Arendt, *Essays in Understanding: 1930-1954* (Orlando: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1994): 14.

⁴ Now in Hannah Arendt, *Essays in Understanding*, 248-269.

⁵ *Ibid.* 248-249.

⁶ *Ibid.* 249.

⁷ *Ibid.* 249.

as Arendt argues, but perhaps there is even a more bitter consequence to this collective immaturity: the post-war German *ethos* has removed the *Nazi digression* and everyone, in Arendt's eyes, "talk[s] and behave[s] superficially as though absolutely nothing had happened since 1932".⁸ This immense although unconscious act of *damnatio memoriae* especially affects the post-war youth in its incapability to reach a "consistent thought". The defeat of the Nazi regime should have restored the correct correspondence between truth and opinion, but somehow this did not happen. The end of totalitarianism has shown to release this strange side-effect: along with its fall, everyday life was re-established at the price of *unplanned yet accepted* collective denial. Arendt, who can look beyond this ridiculous *horror vacui* since she is the "vanguard"⁹ of her ex-fellow citizens, argues that the surface of the new Germany as well as its businesses are safe but something different populates the living body of her motherland. And when it is time to phrase or address this new strange interior, the *Report* of a political scientist suddenly turns into a diary entry:

"And one wants to cry out: But this is not real — real are the ruins, real are the past horrors, real are the dead whom you have forgotten. But they are living ghosts, whom speech and argument, the glance of human eyes and the mourning of human hearts, no longer touch".¹⁰

Even the three solutions (denazification, a free market and federalisation) provided by the Allies to help West Germany are for Arendt a big mistake: they have worsened the social fabric, producing "moral confusion, economic chaos, social injustice, and political impotence".¹¹ The second part of the *Report* is a subtle analysis of this triple failure. At the end of the article, however, the pessimism returns and the conclusion about the "melancholy story of post-war Germany"¹² connects the totalitarian destruction of one's existential roots with the recent immaturity that Arendt experiences among Germans. Both their inability to articulate what they felt, thought and did throughout the era of the Nazi regime and the Allies' failed strategy to get West Germany back on track (an "impossible task" for Arendt) strengthen her opening description of the "Germans' reluctance to face the reality of their destroyed country".¹³ In what follows, I try to reshape this early pessimism of Arendt's through some of Lyotard's, Butler's and Žižek's formulations on

⁸ Arendt, *Essays in Understanding*, 252-253.

⁹ Arendt, *The Jew as Pariah* (New York: Grove Press, 1978): 66.

¹⁰ Arendt, *Essays in Understanding*, 254. Incidentally, this is the only statement in the article in which Arendt addresses the reader/the German, the German reader, in the second person.

¹¹ *Ibid.* 256.

¹² *Ibid.* 268.

¹³ Arendt, *Essays on Understanding*, 269.

forgetting, permanent opacity and melancholy.

Forgetting the *Forgotten*: Lyotard and “the Jews”

Charmed by the abyss where a secret echo of yourself could resonate.

— Luce Irigaray¹⁴

In 1988 Jean-François Lyotard published a text entitled *Heidegger et “le Juifs”, Heidegger and “the Jews”*.¹⁵ It is a minor work in Lyotard’s bibliography. The occasion behind the book is the so-called *Heidegger affair*, an international debate started in 1987 by Victor Farías’ book *Heidegger and Nazism*. In his book Farías definitively condemns Heidegger’s Nazi militancy and his lifetime silence on both this event and Holocaust. What is important here are not Lyotard’s analyses and theses on the *Heidegger affair* and his related objections to Farías, Derrida and Lacoue-Labarthe. I rather want to focus attention on the second part of the book title’s phrase, “the Jews”; for it seems to me that Lyotard is one of the very few thinkers who have tried to pose the question of the philosophical meaning of Holocaust without providing easy answers or convenient short-cuts.¹⁶ Lyotard uses lower case, plural, and quotation marks to make “the Jews” a name for a kind of community with no nation, no philosophical/political/religious subject and to differentiate “the Jews” from actual Jews. This blanking operation allows the French philosopher to bond “the Jews” and Nazi extermination with the most powerful reflection of his book, that on the “Forgotten”. A particular declination of Lyotard’s notions such as *infancy* or *the sublime*, the “Forgotten” symbolises the erased debt that Western thought must *always* pay to itself in order to be able to gain both the representative and dialectic faculties. In short, in order to be what it claims to be.

Giving a brief account of the “Forgotten” will make it easier to understand what the *extermination of the “the Jews”* stands for. According to Lyotard, the “Forgotten” is thought’s greatest aporia which provokes our rational life as defensive response. An aporia that must be overcome, removed and forgotten to establish chronological order, memory and politics as we know them. Heidegger’s *Sein* or Derrida’s *différence* resemble

¹⁴ Luce Irigaray, *Elemental passions* (London: The Athlone Press, 1992): 12.

¹⁵ Jean François Lyotard, *Heidegger and “the Jews”* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990).

¹⁶ Lyotard in *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), analyzes the conflicting phrasal regimes of testimony after “Auschwitz”. See in particular, sections 9-38, 81-93, 152-170. Jacques Derrida, in his *The Work of Mourning* (Chicago-London: The University of Chicago Press, 2001) addresses part of Lyotard’s reflections on “we”, the destiny of mourning and forgiveness after Auschwitz; see the chapter “Lyotard and Us”, 216-241.

Lyotard's characterization of this impossible object that disrupts both representation and linear chronology:

“A past that is not past, that does not haunt the present, in the sense that its absence is felt, would signal itself even in the present as a spectre, an absence, which does not inhabit in the name of full reality, which is not an object of memory like something that might have been forgotten and must be remembered (with a view to a ‘good end,’ to correct knowledge). It is thus not even as a “blank space”, as absence, as *terra incognita*, but it is there nevertheless”.¹⁷

In shaping his idea of the “Forgotten”, Lyotard creatively uses Freud's analyses on primary repression and Kant's concept of the sublime. The “Forgotten” as unaware affection is what Freud, especially the later Freud, perceives as working behind “the sexual, castration of the mother, incest taboo, killing the father, the father as name, debt, law, paralyzing stupor, and... exogamy”.¹⁸ All these phantasmic scenes never took place and nevertheless they are necessary in the making of the rational self. These scenes are outside the representational but create the representational itself through deferred actions. These *stories* are the “first scene” that has to be removed and forgotten by *the human* to establish itself. In regard to Kant, we observe Lyotard's manoeuvre pointing to the same extra-representational *affection*, a kind of immemorial feeling. The notion of the sublime, analyzed by Kant in his *Critique of Judgment*, is something that is eternally out of the synthesizing aesthetic borders (time and space) of subjectivity. The sublime, which has neither form nor minimal representation, accompanies itself only with a *feeling*, a weird mixture of pain and pleasure given that it overflows subjectivity itself with its overarching, formless “presence”.

What interests Lyotard most in Freud and Kant is, on the one hand, this primordial shock the subject feels but which he/she is forever unable to transform into rational categories and, on the other hand, the erection of the representational apparatus as answer to this unbearable event. The “Forgotten” as the name for this hollow feeling and its simultaneous injunction to be sublated — Lyotard respectively calls it “unconscious affect” in Freud and “anesthesia” in Kant:

“In primary repression, the apparatus cannot at all bind, invest, fix, and represent the terror (called originary, but without origin, and which it cannot situate), and this is why this terror remains ‘within’ the apparatus as its outside, infuse and diffuse, as ‘unconscious

¹⁷ Lyotard, *Heidegger and “the Jews”*, 11.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 19.

affect.”¹⁹

“[T]he incapacity into which imagination is put when it has to produce forms to present the absolute (the thing)... This is an insensible passibility and thus an anesthesia but one that leaves the soul open to an affection more ‘archaic’ than the givens of nature and that cannot be equaled by any imitation through form and figure”.²⁰

In short, the permanent diaspora,²¹ the unwanted alliance with a silent God, and the lack of any new *parousia* are the reasons why Lyotard indicates “medically incurable misery” as the “Jewish” *Grundstimmung*. Their legacy is to be constantly held hostage by a speechless other. Nonetheless “the Jews” must find a way to carry on this paradoxical condition of, as Lyotard puts it, an “interminable anamnesis of a ‘behind’, this too late in a deciphering of the too early according to the exorbitant law of listening to the inaudible”.²² It is the very notion of an impossible anamnesis that I think links the idea of “Forgotten” and “the Jews” in Lyotard’s book. “The Jews” as community are forced to keep the “first scene” in mind, otherwise they would be unfaithful to what has made them what they are. They are thus forced to remember something that happened outside one’s memory borders. For their “first scene” does not prescribe the means of its sublation, it reveals itself as an injunction whose force merely transforms “the Jews” into the heterogeneous community of who can never pay the debt back to their God. For that reason, the work of an (impossible) anamnesis undertaken by “the Jews” forbids them from any integration or domestication by the West — there is no chance for them of a restored authenticity or a political revolution. Lyotard names this attitude shared by “the Jews”, “the nomadism of thought”.²³ In this sense, the “Forgotten” is the general translation of the “jewish” experience of an unattainable anamnesis.

Consequently, the impossible anamnesis (through art and writing) is the only *positive* action left to them/us. And because their/our original dispossession and lack of a clear ending, anamnesis tolerates, allows and prescribes itself to “the Jews”/us only as an impossible operation: They are “[j]ammed between prophecy and endless repetition. One remembers constantly that it will arrive, and what arrives is only that one must remember it”.²⁴ In this sense, the impossible anamnesis binds “the Jews” with the

¹⁹ Lyotard, *Heidegger and “the Jews”*, 32.

²⁰ *Ibid.* 44-45.

²¹ The philosophical meaning of Israel is explained by Lyotard in *The Differend*, § 93.

²² Lyotard, *Heidegger and “the Jews”*, 22.

²³ *Ibid.* 40.

²⁴ Lyotard, *Heidegger and “the Jews”*, 37.

Western thought due to its operational laceration; it gives rise to a *sublime* hermeneutics in the former and to a writing/painting of the “unpresentable” in the latter.

Lost beginnings: Butler and Žižek between primordial opacity and convenient anamorphosis

Thus they are destitute of solid content and substantial filling.
— Hegel²⁵

In the book called *Giving an account of Oneself*,²⁶ Judith Butler argues that the “narrative capacity” of telling coherent stories about our life is the most important faculty to conquer responsibility and freedom. However, there is a limit in this subjective determination; that is a constitutive “opacity” which lives at the heart of the subject. This inner limit resides in those “early and primary relations [that] are not always available to conscious knowledge”,²⁷ and it exposes the subject to a permanent dispossession when one tries to give an account of the self. The blind spot, in Butler’s argument, is the very emergence of the self as “I” which remains always outside the reportable: “the exposure I seek to narrate is also the precondition of the narration, a facticity, as it were, that cannot yield to narrative form”.²⁸ Butler inscribes this impossibility in the formation of the primal experience of the body whose emergence enables “primary relations”, singularity and then the history of one’s life. Subjectivity, *already* formed by language and social relations, cannot jump behind the time of its own formation. Temporal impossibility inhabits all the stories that try to explain the primordial substance of their fabric:

“I cannot be present to a temporality that precedes my own capacity for self-reflection, and whatever story about myself that I might give has to take this constitutive incommensurability into consideration... [M]y narrative begins *in medias res*, when many things have already taken place to make me and my story in language. I am always recuperating, reconstructing, and I am left to fictionalise and fabulate origins I cannot know”.²⁹

²⁵ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Science of Logic*, 1 (London: Allen & Unwin, 1929): 58.

²⁶ Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005).

²⁷ *Ibid.* 20.

²⁸ *Ibid.* 38.

²⁹ Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 39.

This “partial blindness” and “a prior not-knowing”, in Butler’s terms, are a space in which the subject was born and, for this very reason, this immemorial space will be forever lost. The act of birthing will be never visible by the subject it created. As in Lyotard’s reading of both Freudian primal repression and Kantian sublime, in Butler the emergence of subjectivity radiates its incurable opacity from the very beginning to the rest of one’s life. And again, in Butler we perceive the same dynamics of Lyotard’s rhetorical economy: The more that primordial affection is *observed* spreading out its magnetic inefficiency, the more the subjectivity/“the Jews” is forced to translate it by means of impossible anamnesis — art and writing in Lyotard, responsibility to the other in Butler. The aim of Butler’s book is indeed to pose this *primordial opacity* whose matter is rigorously unreadable as the basis for an ethics of shared “vulnerability” and “humility”. What I would like to emphasise here is how both Lyotard and Butler agree in presenting something that exceeds thought, that caused its deepest desolation, and nevertheless life *must* deal with its ghostly guest forever. As Butler writes:

“This prehistory has never stopped happening and, as such, is not a prehistory in any chronological sense. It is not done with, over, relegated to a past, which then becomes part of a casual or narrative reconstruction of the self... This prehistory continues to happen every time I enunciate myself”.³⁰

The destiny of thinking for Butler and Lyotard is thus bound to this *primordial opacity/Forgotten* — a destiny whose burden is to find a peaceful way to live with that haunting parasite we never met and never will.

In one of his articles the philosopher Slavoj Žižek,³¹ discusses mourning and melancholy against the anti-Freudian mainstream. While Freud opposed correct mourning to everlasting melancholy, the current anti-Freudian movement assumes the melancholic posture as the correct way to remain faithful to the lost object. Mourning, in the current “hegemonic intellectual trend”,³² has become the foreclosed position and melancholy has progressively gained an “ethical primacy”. The mistake in the “rehabilitation of melancholy” is what Žižek indicates as the abolition of “anamorphosis”.³³ Anamorphosis, as explained by the Slovenian philosopher, is a symbolic dynamic caused by transferring one’s perspective into the perspective field or, more clearly, an external space becomes the owner of the subjective “gaze”, which is itself transformed, in this way, into an objective feature of the external construction. Žižek states that “the paradox of anamorphosis is obliterated in

³⁰ *Ibid.* 78-79.

³¹ Slavoj Žižek, “Melancholy and the Act”, *Critical Inquiry* 26, 4 (2000): 657-681.

³² *Ibid.* 658.

³³ *Ibid.* 659.

melancholy”: when the subjective resistance to mourning is transferred from the subject itself to the very lost object, this operation involves a “confusion between *loss* and *lack*”. The melancholic assumes the lack of the object or cause of desire as a loss of something actually owned. Žižek’s objection to melancholy is that this feeling, via anamorphosis, covers up the original poverty that attains the subject(ivity):

“[What] melancholy obfuscates is that the object is lacking from the very beginning, that its emergence coincides with its lack, that this object is nothing but the positivisation of a void or lack, a purely anamorphic entity that does not exist in itself... this deceitful translation of lack into loss enable[s] us to assert our possession of the object; what we never possessed can also never be lost, so the melancholic, in his unconditional fixation on the lost object, in a way possesses it in its very loss”.³⁴

However, the relation between melancholy, anamorphosis and rhetoric is a current debate and there are radically different opinions about this topic.³⁵ Melancholy, in Žižek’s view, allows the symbolic hallucination of desire to create a (fabulous) past in which the lost object was real, close, and even owned. Melancholy, if we see it working against the misery that for Lyotard and Butler originates subjectivity, is thus the perfect *pharmakon* in order to overcome that unbearable primordial terror held by the lost beginning. Melancholy and convenient anamorphosis are thus defensive tools to guarantee that there was a (full) start — and a start always allows a politics of reactivation, restoration or recovering. Melancholy is then what I would call a *transcendental hallucination* the subject promotes to produce foundational stories. What Žižek in his Lacanese detects at the cross-road between “anamorphosis and sublimation” is the work of this transcendental hallucination that spares the subject his/her constitutive misery:

“[T]he series of objects in reality is structured around (or, rather, involves) a void; if this void becomes visible as such, reality disintegrates. So, in order to retain the consistent edifice of reality, one of the elements of reality has to be displaced onto and occupy the central void — the Lacanian *object petit a*”.³⁶

What cannot remain

³⁴ Žižek, “*Critical Inquiry*”, 660.

³⁵ See Philippe-Joseph Salazar, “Rhetoric on the Bleacher, or, The Rhetorician as Melancholiac”, *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 41, 4 (2008): 48-49.

³⁶ Žižek, “*Critical Inquiry*”, 662.

Perhaps that what the most faithful inheritance demands is the absence of any testaments.

— Derrida³⁷

It is now time to come back to Hannah Arendt, I have not forgotten her. What Arendt experienced in her exchanges with post-war Germans is what she called “the absence of mourning for the dead”.³⁸ This inability is caused by a general immaturity, the *leitmotif* of the paper, which blocks Germans from promoting a serious debate on what happened under Nazism and during the Second World War. There is no further examination in Arendt’s early paper of the origin of this immaturity; for Arendt it is simply a by-product of the end of Nazi totalitarianism. But maybe we can argue that post-war Germans’ immaturity is directly connected with the forgetting of “Forgotten”. Western thought and, above all, Western politics in Lyotard rest on the very erasing of the “Forgotten”. In order to be established, the *polis* needs the “memory of the memorial... it requires the forgetting of that which may question the community and its legitimacy”.³⁹ Only after this act of forgetting, “narrative organisation” can originate itself through a “realistic decision” that makes the “immemorial dispossession” an explicable scene. In Nazi Germany, “the Jews” were the last obstacle to the establishment of the Nazi “narrative organisation”. The final solution was the final answer Western thought created to eradicate Lyotard’s *incurable misery* and Butler’s *primordial opacity*. Nazi totalitarianism could not spare the symbol of what refuses any “project of authenticity”. But what happened in post-Germany, what Arendt saw, was the massive effect of a triple failure.

First, the Nazi effort to exterminate “the Jews” was unsuccessful — and this failure was the greatest (unconscious) attempt to eradicate the “Forgotten” in Western history. The extermination was the extreme answer to that which caused Nazism as totalitarian configuration. Stripped of Nazi ideology, post-war Germans were naked in front of that immemorial misery which the Nazis tried to annihilate, but that now, on the contrary, they had to face with no defensive apparatus.

Second, Germans were left without any help in mourning the loss of their previous “narrative configuration”. As we have seen earlier, Arendt notes that the only way in which post-war Germans saved their everyday life was by erasing “Nazi digression”. With the exception of Berliners, as Arendt notes, post-war Germans returned to their pre-war German ethos. They automatically reframed their cognitive system to set it on a melancholic patten: Nazism, in this way, could not be mourned since it was transformed

³⁷ Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, 221.

³⁸ Arendt, *Essays in Understanding*, 248.

³⁹ Lyotard, *Heidegger and “the Jews”*, 7.

into a lost object. The sad thing to add is that post-war Germans acted in the same way as Žižek explains the working of the current “rehabilitation of melancholy” trend: keeping the object as lost enables its permanent anti-mourning effect. Lyotard knows the (political) tricks of melancholy. He is against mourning (we never possessed what causes the “first scene” therefore there is nothing to mourn) as well as Western melancholy (the “Forgotten” is something that must be forgotten in order to constitute the very basis of a subjectivity and this foundational forgetting creates its melancholic *pharmakon*). But I think that there is space in Lyotard for a different kind of melancholy, a melancholy which has no face and cannot even perceive the object of its longing. What I should call the Lyotardian *melancholy of the forgotten* is a pre-political affection whose force is to disrupt every political configuration Western thought erects to pay “that singular debt of interminable anamnesis”⁴⁰ to the “heterogeneous in itself”.

Thirdly, on the historical level another “narrative organisation”, another political beginning was to be established in post-war Germany, that is, the Allies’ reconstruction. In this sense, on both sides, East and West Germany, there was no need and no space for what undoes political legitimacy, for *the melancholy of the “Forgotten”*. Furthermore, how could the Allies have promoted in post-war Germany the impossible anamnesis of the “Forgotten” if they themselves are made by the same “realistic decision” against the terror of the unrepresentable? At the end, in post-war Germany, history, as forgetting of the “Forgotten”, needed to be on track as soon as possible.

University of Cape Town

⁴⁰ Lyotard, *Heidegger and “the Jews”*, 94.