**Notes on Loving a Mourner (with Roland Barthes and Others)**

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**Abstract:**

This essay examines the place of love in grief, staging a relation between a mourner and her lover. Taking as its point of departure Freud’s observation that mourning leads to a ‘loss of the capacity to love’, it considers the effects bereavement might have on the bereaved’s relations with those that love them, and the possibilities, pitfalls and ethics of care in such a context. This is explored largely through a reading of Roland Barthes’s late work (both as a writer of grief and a theorist of love), as well as ideas drawn from Sigmund Freud, Melanie Klein, Sara Ahmed, *Hamlet* and personal observation. Love and care are thought through alongside notions of ‘tact’, ‘benevolence’ and ‘parrying against reduction’ in late Barthes.

**Keywords:** mourning, love, Barthes, care, tact, benevolence

‘Well, everyone can master a grief but he that has it.’

Benedick, *Much Ado About Nothing[[1]](#endnote-1)*

The place of love in grief is prickly. For Freud, both mourning and melancholia are characterized by a ‘loss of the capacity to love’;[[2]](#endnote-2) Melanie Klein, meanwhile, offers love a tentatively, conditionally more prominent and more promising role in the mourning process: ‘*If* the mourner has people whom he loves and who *share* his grief, and *if* he can accept their *sympathy*, the restoration of the harmony in his inner world is promoted, and his fears and distresses are more quickly reduced.’[[3]](#endnote-3) This essay examines what it is to love someone struggling with grief, what it is to tarry with these ‘if’s, and the loving carer’s attempts to formulate and proffer a contentious ‘sharing of grief’, a contentious ‘sympathy’.

For Klein, whose essay on mourning has been perhaps less extensively discussed in critical-theoretical circles than Freud’s, the loss of a loved one provokes also the loss of the internal good object, the interiorized figure of the loved one that allows the subject to believe in the world’s goodness. The bereaved might thus experience anxious feelings of persecution and distrust, so that ‘friendly relations with people, which might at that time be so helpful, become impeded’ (MR, 354). But she does not go into detail about how those friendly or indeed loving relations might look if sustained against such feelings; indeed more generally, the position of loved ones in a griever’s grief is under- (even un-)theorized, under- (even un-)represented. This is, perhaps, of little surprise: dwelling on the hemming and hawing of peripheral figures before an individual’s mourning crisis feels trifling, if not callous. The troubles faced by the carer and the griever are incommensurable; theoretical foci inevitably fall on the latter. Nevertheless, we must run this risk if we are to understand grief as more than abstract and more than private, as taking effect in the context of continued but imperilled relations with others.

Implicit here is an assertion that grief is not, or not only, a private experience; this is true in the perhaps banal but important sense that the ramifications of loss—its toils—toll beyond the one who has lost. If we can call the work of mourning work, it involves some division of labour; though those close to a griever may not grieve, they are implicated in that grief’s unfurling. Notwithstanding, care is called for with regards to the kind of power dynamics this analysis might imply; read a certain way, as Sara Ahmed warns, ‘the subject who gives to the other is the one who is “behind” the possibility of overcoming pain.’[[4]](#endnote-4) Such a view objectifies, disenfranchizes the one who suffers, positioning them as the object of a caring subject’s noble cause.

This essay thus recasts a rhetorical question posed by Roland Barthes: ‘What Lucifer created *at the same time* love and death?’[[5]](#endnote-5) And Barthes is its prime interlocutor throughout, especially three late works written just before and just after his mother’s passing: *A Lover’s Discourse: Fragments*, *The Neutral* and *Mourning Diary*.[[6]](#endnote-6) Barthes thus here appears both as a theorist (not least of love) and as a writer (not least of mourning), and in both cases as a thinker whose work interrogates and inhabits the strained nexus of theory and experience, the general and the specific. The mode of engagement with Barthes in this essay is not, or not principally, exegetic;[[7]](#endnote-7) it aims to dialogue (at times critically) with his thought and, where necessary, fill in for and give voice to the missing figure of the (loving) other.

Part of the attraction of late Barthes’s thought and writings for this piece is the friction that attraction fires, his fractious resistance to the generalizing principle on which theory so often hinges; he reacts with exasperation, for example, to his friend Antoine Compagnon’s identification of his experience of mourning with ‘Mourning’ in general (MD, 71). This essay, in absorbing that resistance into its reflections on mourning and love, itself strains in that slip-slidey territory between comparison and care for the singular—territory that is also, urgently, that of the grief situation, where, as will be seen, how to mediate or tame generalization, metonymy and substitution become crucial questions, both for the griever and for the carer. Interrogating and inhabiting that strain, this essay brings Barthes’s writing into dialogue with a cast featuring Freud, Klein, Hamlet, Sara Ahmed and an autobiographical ‘I’, much like Freud, Winnicott, Proust, Werther and others appear alongside the ‘I’ of Barthes’s *A Lover’s Discourse*.[[8]](#endnote-8) Out of this dialogue a relation is staged, between two figures we might warily name the loving carer and the beloved bereaved (shades of the lover and loved object of *A Lover’s Discourse*). These epithets imply a distinction between a subject and an object of love, in line with Freud’s suggestion that mourning entails a ‘loss of the capacity to love’—though pressure will be put on the supposed unidirectional character of this relation.

A few introductory caveats: it might be objected that the dyadic structure of the relation here sketched does not match Barthes’s own situation in his bereavement: many friends, and some friends who are also lovers, figure in the pages of *Mourning Diary*, but there is not *one* that adopts the position of the primary carer. Nevertheless, he amply discusses the possibility of love in mourning, and what forms of sympathy might be possible in such a situation; this essay voices the other side of the relation these discussions imply. Finally, though the primary object of enquiry here is care in the context of bereavement, where pertinent, ideas about care more broadly conceived will be called upon; in turn, reflections here made might chime beyond that context’s contours.

*I*

‘If there is any good thing to be done/ That may to thee do ease and grace to me,/ Speak to me.’[[9]](#endnote-9) This statement, addressed by Horatio to the ghost of Hamlet senior, might be read to figure the affective predicament of someone who cares about someone who has lost someone they care about. Taking the appearance of the ghost as, in part, figurative of grief’s disturbances, Horatio’s unrequited appeal to the ghost desperately seeks guidance in how to redress that disturbance, and thereby appease his friend’s grief. The appeal illustrates a demand for content for an ethical demand, the demand to content Hamlet’s suffering. But it betrays also the ambivalent motivation for such a demand: ‘ease to thee and grace *to me*’—there is *also* self-interest here, one perhaps hardly extricable from friendship’s supposed selfless benevolence.

In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida writes about the ‘visor effect’ with reference to Hamlet: in the wake of mourning, the bereaved does not see the (lost) other she feels herself watched by, an impossible watching constituting an inherited ethical demand without definite content.[[10]](#endnote-10) In the case of the loving carer—caring for the beloved bereaved herself already negotiating that inherited ethical demand—there is no visor. Barthes writes of observing a loved other (here not specifically in the context of grief): ‘I see the other, with intensity: I see only the other, I scrutinize the other, I want to penetrate the secret of this body I desire’; moreover, ‘I see the other seeing me: I am intimidated, dazzled, passively constituted by the other’s all-powerful gaze’; finally, ‘the panic of this is so great that I am not able (or do not want) to recognize the fact that the other knows that I see them—which would disalienate me.’[[11]](#endnote-11) This passage pictures resistance to reciprocity: the lover here feels he is, or wishes he were, wearing a visor, a visor that would prevent him from being seen seeing, seen *as* seeing, seen *qua* seeing being. To be seen as seeing would be to be recognized as not just object but also subject of a gaze, which—Barthes claims—would be to be disalienated. He does not explain this resistance; but to not be seen seeing is also a position of power, and liberation from the alienation of this position would open onto another level of alienation. Seen as seeing, my gaze *itself* becomes available as the object of a gaze—an alienation glaring in the context of the loving carer, where the aptness of my response feels so urgent: I know that I am seen seeing (by that ‘all-powerful gaze’, no less), know that my own gaze, my way of looking is looked upon, scrutinized, judged by I know not what criteria; and do not know how to look *well*, to react and act right.

So I might choose to more listen than look, seek instruction and to do as I am told. But listening, when the needs and desires of a grieving subject (most of all) are so often so ambiguous, might lead to further commotion: for example, in his diary Barthes notes his ‘(apparently vital) need of solitude: and yet I have a (no less vital) need of my friends’ (MD, 181). Barthes is in a double bind here, as are his friends. Such double binds abound in Barthes’s late works, as do ways of thinking about and navigating them—if often fantasmatically. The seminar on *How to Live Together*, for example, considers models for living alone and together;[[12]](#endnote-12) as Diana Knight notes, citing *How to Live Together*, ‘Precisely because they are fantasies, both desired scenarios are resolutely positive and are not in competition with one another: “from a fantasmatic point of view, there is nothing contradictory about wanting to live alone and wanting to live together.”’[[13]](#endnote-13) But in other cases, Barthes’s fantasmatic virtues reflect more fractiously contradictory desires, contradictions patent when we attempt to translate them into ‘something more than fantasy’ (H, 153).

In this regard, in *A Lover’s Discourse* and *The Neutral*, I am most interested in ideas of ‘benevolence’, of *délicatesse* (translated by Richard Howard as ‘delicacy’, by Rosalind E. Krauss and Denis Hollier as ‘tact’) and of the ‘will-to-possess’ (and its opposite). These notions are scarcely circumscribable in any strict sense: as Claude Coste writes, ‘One must let concepts in Barthes float a little, appreciate case by case the semantic diversity born of a multiplication of contexts.’[[14]](#endnote-14) This ‘floating’ is true also for the relations between concepts—there is a kind of continuity of feel (which we might call ‘the neutral’) between these figures. Furthermore, this conceptual ‘floatiness’ performs the respect for difference with which these figures are concerned. These two works are written just before and just after Barthes’s mother’s death, and can be read as attending to his mother’s suffering in her illness, and his own in his subsequent grief.

Barthes distinguishes between two kinds of benevolence: ‘damp’, ‘on the side of demand: “kindness” (…) so as to be loved; diffuse aura of amiability’; and ‘dry’, ‘a stiff benevolence, because rooted in indifference (…): a kind of condescending and soft benevolence, a “transcendent” goodness. (I feel this “benevolence” for people who are such strangers to me that I have no occasion for internal conflict with them = total and peaceable communication)’ (N, 15). The former is tender, loving and attentive, but therefore brings with it demands and debts of reciprocity for its recipient; the latter is softer, more distant, less clinging or cloying, but thus less personal, manifesting a kind of indifference or lack of concern for its object. Barthes continues:

Subject prey to benevolence: strongly aware of this double postulation, the first of which he doesn’t trust, while he doesn’t like the second → finds himself confronted with an aporia: wishing for a logical ‘monster,’ the right mix of emotion and distance: emotion, mark of Agape, acknowledgement of desire, (unsuppressed) anchorage in the body, *and* distance, guarantee that one doesn’t crush the other under the stickiness of a demand, that one in no way blackmails him into tenderness. (15‒16, my emphasis)

The demand made of the benevolent predator, then, is a ‘logical monster’: a benevolence *at once* (the ‘and’ here gesturing towards not even a compromise, but a coalescence) devout and distant, anchored and floaty. In the context of grief, this might mean caring in such a way as to not add to the bereaved’s *guilt,* perhaps felt by her in two directions: towards the deceased, whose death might, as Melanie Klein notes, lead to unconscious feelings of triumph in the bereaved, triumph which itself gives way to guilt: ‘Infantile death-wishes against parents (…) are actively fulfilled when a loved person dies (…). Thus his death, however shattering for other reasons, is to some extent also felt as a victory, and gives rise to triumph, and therefore all the more to guilt’ (MR, 354). And guilt towards those who love and care for her, love and care reciprocation of which is complicated by the disturbance of the ‘capacity to love’ provoked by loss. Barthes writes frequently in *Mourning Diary* of the suffering this disturbance causes him: ‘Horrible figure of mourning: acedia, hard-heartedness: irritability, impotence to love. Anguished because I don’t know how to restore generosity to my life—or love. How to love?’ (MD, 178).[[15]](#endnote-15) Grief’s pain troubles the bereaved’s love for others, and, in turn, that trouble causes further pain—hard-heartedness (or at least, a sense of hard-heartedness[[16]](#endnote-16)) cycles as symptom and cause of suffering.

Barthes defines the related concept of *délicatesse* (delicacy, tact) as a resistance to reduction:

The behaviours marked by the principle of tact: kinds of active protests or unexpected parrying against reduction, not of the individual (it is not a matter of a philosophy of individualism) but of individuation (= the fragile moment of the individual, cf. Deleuze IRCAM) → each time that in my pleasure, my desire, or my distress, the other's discourse (often well meaning, innocent) reduces me to a case that fits an all-purpose explanation or classification in the most normal way, I feel that there is a breach of the principle of tact. (N, 36)

‘Protesting’, ‘unexpected parrying’ suggest tact involves a resistance to what would be the automatic, normative response, a norm that would be, precisely, to normativize the beloved bereaved’s response.[[17]](#endnote-17) Barthes acknowledges this form of recognition might well be well intentioned: those who say ‘don’t worry, it’s normal’ or ‘I know how you feel’ often do so in good faith. But that it is normal for grief to hurt does not make grief hurt less. Furthermore, Barthes vigilantly emphasizes here that he is talking about individuation, not ‘the individual’—that is, the process of becoming in which an individual is engaged rather than the ontology of what he or she is. That the *telos* of such a process might be understood from the start implies a kind of finality with which the bereaved is already tarrying, against which he or she is already struggling.[[18]](#endnote-18)

In addition to this privileging of difference in the tactful view of individuation, there is a privileging of difference in how we sustain engagement with one another; Barthes writes ‘tact requires the punctilious elimination of all repetition: tact is scared, it’s hurt by repetitions’ (N, 32). Tactful care would therefore seek to counter redundancy: I would, in this view, not simply be expected to respect the beloved bereaved’s specificity, but to demonstrate this respect through a rolling renewal of the specificity of my responses to her suffering. Fourteen years earlier, in the preface to his *Critical Essays*, Barthes addressed a similar point, with specific reference to the situation of consoling a bereaved friend:

A friend has just lost someone he loves, and I want to express my sympathy. I proceed to write him a letter. (…) I then realize that the message I want to send this friend, the message which is my sympathy itself, could after all be reduced to a simple word: condolences. Yet the very purpose of the communication is opposed to this, for it would be a cold and consequently inverted message, since what I want to communicate is the very warmth of my sympathy. I conclude that in order to correct my message (that is, in order for it to be exact), I must not only vary it, but also that this variation must be original and apparently invented.[[19]](#endnote-19)

He concludes: ‘Originality is therefore the price which must be paid for the hope of being welcomed (and not merely understood) by your reader’ (xvi). This example is used in the *Critical Essays* as an analogy for literary history and its development; but it can stand alone also as an illustration of the relationship between affect and communication in the grief situation. There is an equation here between stereotypes and coldness, despite the immediate, warm affective response occurring to the friend in the form of a stereotype; the stereotype is sincere in its conception, but banal in its communication. For this affect to be communicated, working at variation, at originality is necessary—this labour of resistance authenticates the affect. The loving carer, in more constant contact with the beloved bereaved, wages this work of variation not just once, in a letter of condolence, but time and again, face to face, beneath the gaze of the beloved. For the carer too, such variation is authenticating. Indeed, without this labour of originality, the carer’s own sense of the affect may fray: it is not just that I have a feeling and must find a way to communicate it to you, but rather, how I communicate it to you in turn sustains and shapes how I feel that feeling.

This need for originality is perhaps necessary in the grief situation most of all since as Barthes writes: ‘Death, Suffering are nothing but: banal’ (MD, 222). Against banality, then, my responses would be expected to demonstrate a vitality, a freshness, the potentiality of change; as Barthes says of art in *Critical Essays*, these responses should ‘unexpress the expressible’ (xiv). This can be related to a more general sense in *The Neutral* that ‘tact is (…) on the side of vividness, of what allows life to be felt, of what stirs the awareness of it: the utterly pure taste of life, the pleasure of being alive’ (N, 47). This statement comes in the context of an anecdote, one in which Barthes walks out into the street and is struck by the ‘tiny, perfectly futile details of street life: the menu written in chalk on the windowpane of a cafe (…), a tiny priest in a cassock walking up the rue Médicis, etc.’—he concludes that ‘to fall into the infinitely futile helps one's awareness of the feeling of life’ (N, 47). Futility thus appears as banality’s affirmative countervail: where the latter sees each thing through the broadening frame of repetition (death is death is death, suffering is suffering is suffering), the former latches onto the ephemerality of slight things—slightness on the lip of existence and its opposite—to see life in what *is*, barely is, more patently is for its barely being. And brushing up against banality might prime sensitivity to (or trigger a need for) futility. Against Freud’s assertion that both mourning and melancholia precipitate a ‘cessation of interest in the outside world’ (MM, 44), Barthes’s late work, written in loss (and banality)’s fallout, demonstrates a different perception of his environment, but a no less acute investment in it, whether it be the minutiae of the world’s materiality or a conversation (‘when confronted with a conversation, a means for me to regain control, to retake a grip on myself: no longer to hear it but to listen to it: at another level, to receive it as a novelistic object, a linguistic spectacle’ (N, 18)). Here, much like in the exchange of gazes discussed earlier, Barthes subtracts his perception of the spectacle from the spectacle, but here the power of that subtraction is gladly avowed (‘a means for me to regain control’). The loving carer might feature on either side, *in* the spectacle or *with* the spectator; see, for example, the appearance of Jean-Louis Bouttes in the diary entry describing the day Barthes’s mother’s body was taken from Paris to Urt: ‘I walk a few steps with Jean-Louis on one side of the square (with its hideous war memorial), bare ground, the sticks. And yet, something like a savor of life (because of the sweet smell of the rain), the very first discharge, like a momentary palpitation’ (MD, 13). Where the ‘hideous war memorial’, in its collation of the deceased in one stone, might figure banality, *against* banality the palpable smell of rain offers futility’s latch—and Jean-Louis walks *with* Barthes, unobtrusively co-present to his futile savouring.[[20]](#endnote-20)

*II*

Where the preceding part focused on an ethics implicit and explicit in late Barthes, with an eye to how this might be relevant to the relation between the beloved bereaved and the loving carer, this part will now put more pressure on that approach’s fault lines, will present some scenarios and dynamics demonstrating its potential limits and pitfalls. To do this, we might start with the exposition of *délicatesse* (here translated as delicacy) in *A Lover’s Discourse*:

I am moved, anguished, for it is horrible to see those one loves suffering, but at the same time I remain dry, watertight. (…) I bestir myself too much, in proportion to the profound reserve in which, actually, I remain. For at the same time that I ‘sincerely’ identify myself with the other’s misery, what I read in this misery is that it occurs *without me*, and that by being miserable by himself, the other abandons me: if he suffers without my being the cause of his suffering, it is because I don’t count for him: his suffering annuls me insofar as it constitutes him outside of myself. (…)

So I shall suffer with the other, but *without pressure*, without losing myself. Such behaviour, at once very affective and very controlled, very amorous and very civilized, can be given a name: *delicacy* [*délicatesse*, tact]. (LD, 57‒8)

Acts of causal and proportional evaluation are here key. Ahmed writes that ‘although pain may not be about something, it is still “because something”, and this because involves acts of attribution, explanation and narration, which function as the object of pain’ (CP, 25)—in turn, these acts entail others: responses and prescriptions against pain. First: I suffer because the beloved suffers—or rather, more generally, because it is horrible to *see* a loved one suffer. A level of visual mediation exists between her suffering and my own. Sticking at this level of attribution, two courses of reaction seem available: remove the other’s suffering from the suffering other, or remove the suffering other from my sight. Yet Barthes goes on to ascribe the degree of the lover’s suffering not directly to the degree of that of the beloved, but rather, in some sense, to its opposite: the lover suffers insofar as he does not directly suffer the beloved’s suffering. I do not suffer from the pain of her grief, but from my exclusion from that grief, my lack of active participation in it, the distance between myself and her. This proportional relation is in turn explained in terms of a preceding causal level, that is, the cause of the beloved’s suffering: the lover suffers because he is not the cause of the beloved’s suffering, because there is a force other than the lover sufficiently powerful to cause the beloved to suffer—I suffer because she suffers, because I do not suffer her suffering, because I am excluded from her suffering, because I did not cause her suffering.

An alternative antidote then presents itself, involving the subject’s relation to this distance in relation. Here virtue is made of necessity: the other’s suffering distances her from me, let me distance myself from her distancing. Yet in whose interest this virtue is practised is reversed relative to the discussion of *délicatesse* in *The Neutral*: while there such dryness, such subduction, aimed to avoid putting pressure on the other, to avoid a soliciting of guilt on their part, here the loss of pressure seems as much directed towards the tactful self, the loving carer. If the interests of the two’s non-coincidence were able to coincide, so much the better. But the dynamics of distance are rarely so straightforward.

For one thing, *délicatesse* is here framed as a response to a perceived attack or abandonment. That Barthes presents it as a reasoned, reasonable response does not annul its origin in fear and hurt. Such an approach might just as well function as a means of triumph over the beloved (once powerful enough to hurt me); as suggested earlier with Klein, triumph can give way to guilt. Barthes himself later acknowledges as much: ‘Any fissure within Devotion is a fault (…). This fault occurs whenever I make any gesture of independence with regard to the loved object; each time I attempt, in order to break my servitude, to “think for myself” (the world’s unanimous advice), I feel guilty. What I am guilty of, then, is (…) in short, “managing” (according to the world)’ (LD, 118). To manage is to distance, to triumph, to err. It is also, this citation suggests, to side with ‘the social’, ‘the world’s unanimous advice’—which risks further exacerbating the distance the bereaved feels *vis-à-vis* her lover. We have already touched upon the griever’s disdain for the social world, what Barthes calls a ‘disaffection with sociability that becomes quite radical’ (MD, 76); distance is thus juggled on both sides, between the loving carer and the beloved bereaved, and the beloved bereaved and the world.

This dynamic stages a complex interplay of pushing and pulling, hithering and thithering on both sides of the dyad. It performs a *fort/da* dance: a reference to the famous game Freud observed a child play with a ball-and-string, to manage the fear of loss inspired by his mother’s absences.[[21]](#endnote-21) Both the lover and the bereaved—though in different ways—fear the loss of the other, and both—though in different ways—seek to control this fear. The loving carer might do this by pulling towards the social, or by maintaining a kind of affective distance *vis-à-vis* the bereaved; *délicatesse* can be a gift, a generous approach, but can be wielded as shield and as weapon as well. Barthes acknowledges something of the sort in the last figure of *A Lover’s Discourse*: ‘And if the N.W.P. [the non-will-to-possess, the opposite of the will-to-possess] were a tactical notion (…)? If I still (though secretly) wanted to conquer the other by feigning to renounce him? If I withdrew *in order* to possess him more certainly?’ (233). And how do I know whether my tact is tactical or benevolent? Barthes is here writing about the use of distance as a way of presenting the other with a good, generous image of the self, but it might work also the other way, as a conscious or unconscious means of control by way of inspiring fear in the other and triumph in the self. I feel I have been abandoned; I will bring you back through fear that I might abandon you. Pulling away, then, might invite the bereaved to pull back her loving carer, might activate her guilt and her fear to demand reparations, signs and expressions of love.

For the bereaved also fears the loss of her lover. Barthes refers to D. W. Winnicott’s theory of the psychotic to describe his experience of grief: ‘I fear a catastrophe that has already occurred. I constantly perpetuate it in myself under a thousand substitutions’ (MD, 203).[[22]](#endnote-22) Loss breeds fear of itself; the lover might stand in as the object of this fear, as the next in loss’s line; might become the locus for experiencing this fear of catastrophe in external reality—an experience more than fantasmatic, given the very real possibility the strain placed on both parties might part them. In *Mourning Diary* Barthes describes a fear of this sort in relation to Jean-Louis Bouttes: ‘[The feeling that I am losing JL—that he is distancing himself from me]. If I were to lose him, I would be implacably dismissed, reduced to the region of death’ (MD, 77). Distance might be as much a cause for concern as it is an object of desire, the degree of its presence or absence arbitrating that concern and that desire’s calculus.

The *fort/da* of the bereaved might function in a number of ways. It might manifest itself in fantasies of the lover’s demise: dreams and daydreams in which I am drowned or am executed or jugulated over a coffee table. It might manifest itself in jealousy, fears and suspicions that the bereaved will be left for another, less turbulent, beloved. Freud writes about the melancholic’s ‘extraordinary diminution in his self-regard’ (MM, 246), and in these jealous bouts I see a coalescence of such self-reviling and the *fort/da* control of fear. *Hamlet* strikingly stages these mechanics. Freud claims that Hamlet extends his low opinion of himself to everyone else in the play (MM, 246); this is not quite true: in the affective division of the labour of mourning, Horatio is reserved the place of trusted friend and confidant (even if there is some element of self-interest in Horatio’s care). For those who do fall foul of Hamlet’s projections, not all do so equally; Gertrude and Ophelia become the privileged objects of Hamlet’s violent projections. The rotating declarations of love, desire and disdain for Ophelia figure the push and pull of fear and triumph. Take the following instances of distancing: ‘To a nunnery go, and quickly too. Farewell,’ then in short order, ‘God has given you one face and you make yourselves another. You jig and amble and you lisp, you nickname God’s creatures and make your wantonness ignorance’ (H, 291). If in the first example Hamlet aggressively demands from Ophelia distance, in a way that demonstrates some jealous fear of promiscuous desire, in the latter the procedure is subtler; as the editors of the Arden edition put it: ‘Hamlet shifts from his specific castigation of Ophelia to attacking women in general’—here for their supposedly lascivious use of makeup and ‘wantonness’. Ophelia is thus doubly attacked: both as a woman, and by being addressed not as an individual but as an example of a woman, in this shift to a plural ‘you’, to metonymy. Here the griever reduces the individuation of one who cares about him through generalization.

Experiences of loss are thus prone to multiplication, through fearful projections and simulations that then spread, to those who love and who care for the one that has lost. Barthes writes of such embedded experiences of loss: ‘I am abandoned by the other, but this abandonment is intensified by the abandonment the other himself suffers; his image is thereby washed out, liquidated; I can no longer sustain myself upon anything, even the desire the other might experience elsewhere: I am in mourning for an object which is itself in mourning’ (LD, 113). This passage details a telescope of suffering: someone has suffered and has died; the bereaved suffers because that someone has suffered and has died and because she has lost her; finally, I suffer because the griever is suffering, and because I fear I am losing her because she has lost someone. As she turns away (‘I am abandoned by the other’) her image is ‘washed out’, turns into absence.

In such circumstances, the issue of how and where the source of suffering is identified is paramount. As Ahmed puts it: ‘The differentiation between attachments allows us to aligns ourselves with some others and against other others in the very processes of turning and being turned, or moving towards and away from those we feel have caused our pleasure and pain’ (CP, 28). So as not to turn or move away, the loving carer might take care not to identify the griever as the source of pain, but rather the griever’s grief: my pain is because of her pain, not because of her. Yet I cannot turn away from grief without turning away from the griever. Not wishing to fully abandon the beloved bereaved, I might struggle to isolate and objectify that grief, to understand it in a teleological sense as something that will itself move away: to perceive, that is, in the normative sense as the progressive work of mourning, Freudian or otherwise. So, at times, I might take refuge in a (forbidden) teleology, in the hope or belief that the grief will leave the bereaved, leaving the bereaved the beloved. Yet I also perhaps fear the transformative effects of loss. Barthes writes: ‘Her death has changed me, I no longer desire what I used to desire. I must wait—supposing such a thing could happen—for a new desire to form, a desire following her death’ (MD, 18). The lover might wonder: What place will I have in the other’s desire, once grief has gone and change has happened? If the guarantee of future desire cannot be a contractual condition of care, dread of its decline perhaps conditions it. Moreover: What place will she have in my desire, changed also by the change in her and in hers? And so too teleology might inspire fear, and fear a desire to stay with grief. Indeed, my relation to the toing and froing of the *fort/da* might itself be subject to libidinal investment: the swinging between farness and nearness, detachment and attachment (felt all the more vividly by their chiaroscuro), *itself* constitutes a libidinal position in which I might invest, to which I am attached; as Freud writes, ‘it is a matter of general observation that people never willingly abandon a libidinal position’ (MM, 244). The fear of loss might lead to a fear of loss of the fear of loss—better *fort/da* than all *fort* and no *da*.

*III*

Closure, like conclusion, is supposed to reap wisdom. Pain and labour should pay for themselves with learned lessons, learning that lessens the labour’s pain. Barthes thought it *would* be so: ‘I had supposed that once she was gone I would sublime that absence by a sort of perfection of “kindness”, the surrender of all sorts of nastiness, jealousy, narcissism. And I am becoming less and less “noble”, “generous”’ (MD, 92). Before loss, Barthes had thought loss would make him better, more nearly perfect and more loving. Eugenie Brinkema has described Barthes’s grief as ‘fundamentally undialectical’, and grief’s pain as that which ‘resists mediation and ongoing processual struggle.’[[23]](#endnote-23) But extracts like the above point less to a grief that is undialectical, more to one that is undialectizable; a grief that anticipates the possibility of its transformation, and part of whose pain is the frustration of that possibility; a grief that looks forward towards its transformation, but is sorely stuck at this point of potential.

Thus grief emerges as an experience of *unknowing*, harking towards some new, sage ethical knowledge or principles, but stalled in its harking. Care, too, might involve unknowing; Ahmed suggests it should be so:

Insofar as an ethics of pain begins (…) with how you come to surface, then the ethical demand is that I must act about that which I cannot know, rather than act insofar as I know. (…) If I acted on her behalf only insofar as I knew how she felt, then I would act only insofar as I would appropriate her pain as my pain, that is, appropriate that which I cannot feel. (…) it is the very assumption that we know how the other feels, which would allow us to transform their pain into our sadness. (CP, 31)

Like Barthes’s *délicatesse*, the ethics of care Ahmed here proposes does not relate the specific to the general, but attends to the sufferer’s pain without prolepsis, in her individuation and that of her pain (‘how you come to surface’). I do not know her pain, and I do not know what will become of it. But submitting to unknowing might not stave off the transformation of the beloved bereaved’s pain into the loving carer’s sadness, as this passage suggests: I might still feel sad about that which I do not know or understand; indeed, I might feel sad *because* I do not know or understand it.

In a rare use of the third-person plural in the *Mourning Diary*, Barthes acknowledges that he is loved, and the limits of that love: ‘Many here love me, stand with me, but no one is *strong*: all (we’re all) crazy, neurotic—not to mention the distant ones, like RH. Only *maman* was strong, because she was intact against all neurosis, all madness’ (MD, 216). The lost loved one thus appears as a model of love and of strength, a model which unites the bereaved and those who love him (‘we are all’) in their failure to match up to its example. What might the absent ‘strength’ here posited look like? Another text by Klein, about loneliness rather than grief *per se*, suggests a way into thinking about dealing with grief’s repercussions: ‘External influences, particularly the attitude of people important to the individual, can (…) diminish loneliness.’[[24]](#endnote-24) She continues, giving the example of aggressive infantile defences against loss (hostile responses to this fear): ‘The parents, by accepting the existence of the child’s destructive impulses and showing that they can protect themselves against his aggressiveness, can diminish his anxiety about the effects of his hostile wishes. As a result, the internal object is felt to be less vulnerable and the self less destructive’ (312‒13). A certain *resilience* then—the continuation of love and care in spite of the hostile projections and impulses at play—might, with time, help rebuild the internal good object lost with the bereaved’s loss of the loved one.

For those who do not have Barthes’s mother’s strength—the ‘crazy’ and the ‘neurotic’—what shape might this resilience take? Perhaps the ‘unexpected parrying against reduction’ (N, 36) of Barthes’s *délicatesse*: on the one hand, ‘unexpected’, suggesting the variation of response discussed previously; on the other ‘parrying’, a present participle, suggesting this attitude is sustained. To parry against reduction is not to slay reduction, to banish all sense of comparison and the general; reduction is necessary as the foil which I might dodge. Indeed, perhaps I might be called upon as much to parry with reduction as against it, reduction parrying back my attempts to slay it, dodging my attempts to dodge its blow. The bereaved’s loss of a loved one rears fear of further loss, thus imperilling other loving relations; her fear provokes mine, and vice versa. If these two fears are incommensurable, they might be congruent, so that I might draw on mine, in a parrying way, to face hers. The resilience of care might thus take place at the point at which the specificity of the other’s grief meets my own experience and what I learn from others, at this parrying point of straining between knowing and unknowing.

1. Acknowledgement: I would like to thank Rosa van Hensbergen, Emma Wilson, Lewis Wynn and the anonymous readers at *Paragraph* for their comments on previous drafts of this essay.

   William Shakespeare, *Much Ado About Nothing*, ed. by A.R. Humphreys (London: Methuen, 1981), 150. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Sigmund Freud, ‘Mourning and Melancholia’ [1917] in *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, edited by James Strachey and Others, 24 vols (London: Vintage, 2001), XIV, 243‒58 (244). Henceforth abbreviated as MM. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Melanie Klein, ‘Mourning and its Relation to Manic-Depressive States’ [1940] in *Love, Guilt and Reparation and Other Works, 1921*‒*1945* (New York: Free Press, 1975), 344‒69 (362). Henceforth abbreviated as MR. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 2nd edition (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 22. Henceforth abbreviated as CP. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Roland Barthes, ‘*Longtemps, je me suis couché de bonne heure …*’ [1978] in *The Rustle of Language*, translated by Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 277‒90 (287). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Roland Barthes, *A Lover’s Discourse: Fragments*, translated by Richard Howard (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1978); *The Neutral: Lecture Course at the Collège de France (1977*‒*1978)*, edited by Thomas Clerc and Eric Marty, translated by Rosalind E. Krauss and Denis Hollier (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005); *Mourning Diary*, edited by Nathalie Léger, translated by Richard Howard (New York: Hill & Wang, 2010). Henceforth abbreviated as LD, N and MD respectively. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Much excellent work of a more exegetical bent has already been done on elucidating Barthes’s late writing; I would like to note in particular Lucy O’Meara’s *Roland Barthes at the Collège de France* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2012) and Katja Haustein’s *Regarding Lost Time: Photography, Identity, and Affect in Proust, Benjamin and Barthes* (Oxford: Legenda, 2012). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. It seems something about the way in which Barthes himself combined personal anecdote and cultural criticism has encouraged various combinations of thinking about his own work with autobiographical reflections; this is true both for those that knew him, where a narrative of friendship meets an examination of his work (see, for example, Antoine Compagnon, *L’Age des lettres* (Paris: Gallimard, 2015); Chantal Thomas, *Roland Barthes* (Paris: Seuil, 2015)) and those that did not (see Brian Dillon, ‘RB and Me: An Education’ in *Objects in This Mirror: Essays* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2014), 320‒346; Maggie Nelson, *The Argonauts* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2015)). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, edited by Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor (London: Bloomsbury, 2006), 161. Henceforth abbreviated as H. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, translated by Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994), 6. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Roland Barthes, ‘Right in the Eyes’ [1977] in *The Responsibility of Forms*, translated by Richard Howard (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 237‒42 (241), translation modified. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Roland Barthes, *How to Live Together: Novelistic Simulations of Some Everyday Spaces*, translated by Kate Briggs (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012). [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Diana Knight, ‘“Except When Night Falls”: Together and Alone in Barthes’s *Comment Vivre Ensemble*’, *Paragraph* 31:1 (2008), 50‒60 (51). [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Claude Coste, *Roland Barthes moraliste* (Villeneuve-d’Ascq: Presses universitaires de Septentrion, 1998), 44. My translation. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. See, similarly, MD, 92; 118; 179; 221. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Tiphaine Samoyault’s recent biography nuances Barthes’s ungenerous self-image, writing that in this period ‘Barthes was extremely generous [to his friends]. He loved paying for a meal, buying flowers for them and presenting them with small gifts. But, in spite of all this, he gave his friends the impression of always being rather bored and lonely.’ See *Barthes: A Biography*, translated by Andrew Brown (Cambridge: Polity, 2016), 482. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Barthes’s discussion of tact here might be fruitfully compared to Theodor Adorno’s reflections on the subject in *Minima Moralia*, though there is not space here to do that comparison justice. See ‘On the Dialectic of Tact’ in *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life* (London: Verso, 2005), 35‒7. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Implicit here is a resistance to the psychoanalytic explanatory framework. For a psychoanalyst attempting to integrate Barthes insights in *The Neutral* with psychoanalytic practice see, Henry P Schwartz, ‘Barthes, the Neutral and Our Neutrality’, *American Imago* 70:3 (Fall 2013), 487‒513. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Roland Barthes, ‘Preface’ [1963] in *Critical Essays*, translated by Richard Howard (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1972), xii‒xxi (xiv). [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. For Barthes’s relationship with Jean-Louis Bouttes, see Samoyault, *Barthes: A Biography*, especially pages 392‒3: ‘This relation was based on a mutual fascination: it cannot be easily described in the vocabulary of common emotions—it was what might be called a “necessary” relationship. It was definitely a love relationship, even if it was not based on passion, sexuality or possession’ (392). [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Sigmund Freud, ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’ [1920] in *Standard Edition*, XVIII, 7‒23. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. For Winnicott on the fear of a catastrophe that has already taken place, see ‘Fear of Breakdown’, *International Review of Psychoanalysis* 1 (1974), 103‒7. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Eugenie Brinkema, *The Forms of the Affects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 76; 71. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Melanie Klein, ‘On the Sense of Loneliness’ [1963], in *Envy and Gratitude and Other Works, 1946-1963* (New York: Free Press, 1984), 300‒313 (312‒13). [↑](#endnote-ref-24)