A new reading of the origins of object relations theory

Some writers write what they think; others think what they write. The latter seem to do their thinking in the very act of writing, as if thoughts arise from the conjunction of pen and paper, the work unfolding by surprise as it goes. Freud in many of his most important books and articles, including “Mourning and melancholia” (1917b), was a writer of this latter sort. In these writings, Freud made no attempt to cover his tracks, for example, his false starts, his uncertainties, his reversals of thinking (often done mid-sentence), his shelving of compelling ideas for the time being because they seemed to him too speculative or lacking adequate clinical foundation.

The legacy that Freud left was not simply a set of ideas, but as important, and inseparable from those ideas, a new way of thinking about human experience that gave rise to nothing less than a new form of human subjectivity. Each of his psychoanalytic writings, from this point of view, is simultaneously an explanation of a set of concepts and a demonstration of a newly created way of thinking about and experiencing ourselves.

I have chosen to look closely at Freud’s “Mourning and melancholia” for two reasons. First, I consider this paper to be one of Freud’s most important contributions in that it develops for the first time, in a systematic way, a line of thought which later would be termed “object relations theory” (Fairbairn, 1952). This line of thought has played a major role in shaping psychoanalysis from 1917 onward. Second, I have found that attending closely to Freud’s writing as writing in “Mourning and melancholia” provides an extraordinary opportunity not only to listen to Freud think, but also, through the writing, to enter into that thinking process with him. In this way, the reader may learn a good deal about what is distinctive to the new form of thinking (and its attendant subjectivity) that Freud was in the process of creating in this article.

Freud wrote “Mourning and melancholia” in less than three months in early 1915 during a period that was for him filled with great intellectual and emotional upheaval. Europe was in the throes of World War I. Despite his
protestations, two of Freud's sons volunteered for military service and fought at the front lines. Freud was at the same time in the grips of intense intellectual foment. In the years 1914 and 1915, Freud wrote a series of 12 essays which represented his first major revision of psychoanalytic theory since the publication of *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900). Freud's intent was to publish these papers as a book to be titled *Preliminaries to a Metapsychology*. He hoped that this collection would "provide a stable theoretical foundation for psychoanalysis" (Freud, quoted by Strachey, 1957, p. 105).

In the summer of 1915, Freud wrote to Ferenczi, "The twelve articles are, as it were, ready" (Gay, 1988, p. 367). As the phrase "as it were" suggests, Freud had misgivings about what he had written. Only five of the essays — all of which are ground-breaking papers — were ever published: "Instincts and their vicissitudes," "Repression," and "The unconscious" were published as journal articles in 1915. "A metapsychological supplement to the theory of dreams" and "Mourning and melancholia," although completed in 1915, were not published until 1917. Freud destroyed the other seven articles which papers he told Ferenczi "deserved suppression and silence" (Gay, 1988, p. 373). None of these articles was shown to even his innermost circle of friends. Freud's reasons for "silencing" these essays remain a mystery in the history of psychoanalysis.

In the discussion that follows, I take up five portions of the text of "Mourning and melancholia," each of which contains a pivotal contribution to the analytic understanding of the unconscious work of mourning and of melancholia; at the same time, I look at the way Freud made use of this seemingly focal exploration of these two psychological states as a vehicle for introducing — as much implicitly as explicitly — the foundations of his theory of unconscious internal object relations.3

I

Freud's unique voice resounds in the opening sentence of "Mourning and melancholia":

 Dreams having served us as the prototype in normal life of narcissistic mental disorders, we will now try to throw some light on the nature of melancholia by comparing it with the normal affect of mourning.

(1917b, p. 243)

The voice we hear in Freud's writing is remarkably constant through the twenty-three volumes of the *Standard Edition*. It is a voice with which no other psychoanalyst has written because no other analyst has had the right to do so. The voice Freud creates is that of the founding father of a new discipline.4 Already in this opening sentence, something quite remarkable can be heard

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which we regularly take for granted in reading Freud: in the course of the twenty years preceding the writing of this sentence, Freud had not only created a revolutionary conceptual system, he had altered language itself. It is for me astounding to observe that virtually every word in the opening sentence has acquired in Freud’s hands, new meanings and a new set of relationships, not only to practically every other word in the sentence, but also to innumerable words in language as a whole. For example, the word “dreams” that begins the sentence is a word that conveys rich layers of meaning and mystery that did not exist prior to the publication of The Interpretation of Dreams (1900). Concentrated in this word newly created by Freud are allusions to (1) a conception of a repressed unconscious inner world that powerfully, but obliquely exerts force on conscious experience, and vice versa; (2) a view that sexual desire is present from birth onward and is rooted in bodily instincts which manifest themselves in universal unconscious incestuous wishes, parricidal fantasies and fears of retaliation in the form of genital mutilation; (3) a recognition of the role of dreaming as an essential conversation between unconscious and preconscious aspects of ourselves; and (4) a radical reconceptualization of human symbology — at once universal and exquisitely idiosyncratic to the life history of each individual. Of course, this list is only a sampling of the meanings that the word “dream” — newly made by Freud — invokes.

Similarly, the words “normal life,” “mental disorders,” and “narcissistic” speak to one another and to the word “dream” in ways that simply could not have occurred twenty years earlier. The second half of the sentence suggests that two other words denoting aspects of human experience will be made anew in this paper: “mourning” and “melancholia.”

The logic of the central argument of “Mourning and melancholia” begins to unfold as Freud compares the psychological features of mourning to those of melancholia: both are responses to loss and involve “grave departures from the normal attitude to life” (p. 243). In melancholia, one finds a profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity, and a lowering of the self-regarding feelings to a degree that finds utterance in self-reproaches and self-revilings, and culminates in a delusional expectation of punishment.

(Freud, 1917b, p. 244)

Freud points out that the same traits characterize mourning — with one exception: “the disturbance of self-regard.” Only in retrospect will the reader realize that the full weight of the thesis that Freud develops in this paper rests on this simple observation made almost in passing: “The disturbance of self-regard is absent in mourning; but otherwise the features are the same” (p. 244). As in every good detective novel, all clues necessary for solving the crime are laid out in plain view practically from the outset.
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With the background of the discussion of the similarities and differences—there is only one symptomatic difference—between mourning and melancholia, the paper seems abruptly to plunge into the exploration of the unconscious. In melancholia, the patient and the analyst may not even know what the patient has lost—a remarkable idea from the point of view of common sense in 1915. Even when the melancholic is aware that he has suffered the loss of a person, "he knows whom he has lost but not what he has lost in him" (p. 245). There is ambiguity in Freud's language here: is the melancholic unaware of the sort of importance the tie to the object held for him: "what [the melancholic] has lost in [losing] him." Or is the melancholic unaware of what he has lost in himself as a consequence of losing the object? The ambiguity—whether or not Freud intended it—subtly introduces the important notion of the simultaneity and interdependence of two unconscious aspects of object loss in melancholia. One involves the nature of the melancholic's tie to the object and the other involves an alteration of the self in response to the loss of the object.

This [lack of awareness on the part of the melancholic of what he has lost] would suggest that melancholia is in some way related to an object-loss which is withdrawn from consciousness, in contradistinction to mourning, in which there is nothing about the loss that is unconscious.

(p. 245)

In his effort to understand the nature of the unconscious object-loss in melancholia, Freud returns to the sole observable symptomatic difference between mourning and melancholia: the melancholic's diminished self-esteem.

In mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself. The patient represents his ego to us as worthless, incapable of any achievement and morally despicable; he reproaches himself, vilifies himself and expects to be cast out and punished. He abases himself before everyone and commiserates with his own relatives for being connected with anyone so unworthy. He is not of the opinion that a change has taken place in him, but extends his self-criticism back over the past; he declares that he was never any better.

(p. 246)

More in his use of language than in explicit theoretical statements, Freud's model of the mind is being re-worked here. There is a steady flow of subject-object, I—me pairings in this passage: the patient as subject reproaches, abases, vilifies himself as object (and extends the reproaches backward and forward in time). What is being suggested—and only suggested—is that these subject-object pairings extend beyond consciousness into the timeless unconscious and constitute what is going on unconsciously in melancholia that is not occurring...
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in mourning. The unconscious is in this sense a metaphorical place in which the “I—me” pairings are unconscious psychological contents that actively engage in a continuous timeless attack of the subject (I) upon the object (me) which depletes the ego (a concept in transition here) to the point that it becomes “poor and empty” in the process.

The melancholic is ill in that he stands in a different relationship to his failings than does the mourner. The melancholic does not evidence the shame one would expect of a person who experiences himself as “petty, egoistic, [and] dishonest” (p. 246), and instead demonstrates an “insistent communicativeness which finds satisfaction in self-exposure” (p. 247). Each time Freud returns to the observation of the melancholic’s diminished self-regard, he makes use of it to illuminate a different aspect of the unconscious “internal work” (p. 245) of melancholia. This time the observation, with its accrued set of meanings, becomes an important underpinning for a new conception of the ego which to this point has only been hinted at:

the melancholic’s disorder affords [a view] of the constitution of the human ego. We see how in . . . [the melancholic] one part of the ego sets itself over against the other, judges it critically, and, as it were, takes it as its object . . . What we are here becoming acquainted with is the agency commonly called “conscience” . . . and we shall come upon evidence to show that it can become diseased on its own account.

(p. 247)

Here, Freud is re-conceiving the ego in several important ways. These revisions taken together constitute the first of a set of tenets underlying Freud’s emerging psychoanalytic theory of unconscious internal object relations: first, the ego, now a psychic structure with conscious and unconscious components (“parts”), can be split; second, an unconscious split-off aspect of the ego has the capacity to generate thoughts and feelings independently – in the case of the critical agency these thoughts and feelings are of a self-observing moralistic, judgmental sort; third, a split-off part of the ego may enter into an unconscious relationship to another part of the ego; and, fourth, a split-off aspect of the ego may be either healthy or pathological.

II

The paper becomes positively fugue-like in its structure as Freud takes up still again – yet in a new way – the sole symptomatic difference between mourning and melancholia:

If one listens patiently to a melancholic’s many and various self-accusations, one cannot in the end avoid the impression that often the most violent of
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them are hardly at all applicable to the patient himself, but that with insignificant modifications they do fit someone else, someone whom the patient loves or has loved or should love... So we find the key to the clinical picture: we perceive that the self-reproaches are reproaches against a loved object which have been shifted away from it on to the patient's own ego.

(p. 248)

Thus, Freud, as if developing enhanced observational acuity as he writes, sees something he previously had not noticed — that the accusations the melancholic heaps upon himself represent unconsciously displaced attacks on the loved object. This observation serves as a starting point from which Freud goes on to posit a second set of elements of his object relations theory.

In considering the melancholic's unconscious reproaches of the loved object, Freud picks up a thread that he had introduced earlier in the discussion. Melancholia often involves a psychological struggle involving ambivalent feelings for the loved object as "in the case of a betrothed girl who has been jilted" (p. 245). Freud elaborates on the role of ambivalence in melancholia by observing that melancholics show not the slightest humility despite their insistence on their own worthlessness "and always seem as though they felt slighted and had been treated with great injustice" (p. 248). Their intense sense of entitlement and injustice "is possible only because the reactions expressed in their behaviour still proceed from a mental constellation of revolt, which has then, by a certain process, passed over into the crushed state of melancholia" (p. 248).

It seems to me that Freud is suggesting that the melancholic experiences outrage (as opposed to anger of other sorts) at the object for disappointing him and doing him a "great injustice." This emotional protest/revolt is crushed in melancholia as a consequence of "a certain process." It is the delineation of that "certain process" in theoretical terms that will occupy much of the remainder of "Mourning and melancholia."

The reader can hear unmistakable excitement in Freud's voice in the sentence that follows: "There is no difficulty in reconstructing this [transformative] process" (p. 248). Ideas are falling into place. A certain clarity is emerging from the tangle of seemingly contradictory observations, for example, the melancholic's combination of severe self-condemnation and vociferous self-righteous outrage. In spelling out the psychological process mediating the melancholic's movement from revolt (against injustices he has suffered) to a crushed state, Freud, with extraordinary dexterity, presents a radically new conception of the structure of the unconscious:

An object-choice, an attachment of the libido to a particular person, had at one time existed [for the melancholic]; then, owing to a real slight or disappointment coming from this loved person, the object-relationship was
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shattered. The result was not the normal one of a withdrawal of the libido [loving emotional energy] from this object and a displacement of it on to a new one . . . [Instead,] the object—cathexis [the emotional investment in the object] proved to have little power of resistance [little capacity to maintain the tie to the object], and was brought to an end. But the free libido was not displaced on to another object; it was withdrawn into the ego. There, . . . it [the loving emotional investment which has been withdrawn from the object] . . . served to establish an identification of [a part of] the ego with the abandoned object. Thus the shadow of the object fell upon [a part of] the ego, and the latter could henceforth be judged by a special agency [another part of the ego], as though it were an object, the forsaken object. In this way an object—loss was transformed into an ego—loss [a diminution of one’s self—regard] and the conflict between the ego and the loved person [was transformed] into a cleavage between the critical activity of [a part of] the ego [later to be called the superego] and [another part of] the ego as altered by identification.

(pp. 248—249)

These sentences represent a powerfully succinct demonstration of the way Freud in this paper was beginning to write/think theoretically and clinically in terms of relationships between unconscious, paired, split—off aspects of the ego (i.e., about unconscious internal object relations?). Freud, for the first time, is gathering together into a coherent narrative expressed in higher order theoretical terms his newly conceived revised model of the mind.

There is so much going on in this passage that it is difficult to know where to start in discussing it. Freud’s use of language seems to me to afford a port of entry into this critical moment in the development of psychoanalytic thought. There is an important shift in the language Freud is using that serves to convey a re—thinking of an important aspect of his conception of melancholia. The words “object—loss,” “lost object,” and even “lost as an object of love,” are, without comment on Freud’s part, replaced by the words “abandoned object” and “forsaken object.”

The melancholic’s “abandonment” of the object (as opposed to the mourner’s loss of the object) involves a paradoxical psychological event: the abandoned object, for the melancholic, is preserved in the form of an identification with it: “Thus [in identifying with the object] the shadow of the object fell upon the ego . . .” (p. 249). In melancholia, the ego is altered not by the glow of the object, but (more darkly) by “the shadow of the object.” The shadow metaphor suggests that the melancholic’s experience of identifying with the abandoned object has a thin, two—dimensional quality as opposed to a lively, robust feeling tone. The painful experience of loss is short—circuited by the melancholic’s identification with the object, thus denying the separateness of the object: the object is me and I am the object. There is no loss; an external object (the abandoned object)
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is omnipotently replaced by an internal one (the ego-identified-with-the-object).

So, in response to the pain of loss, the ego is twice split forming an internal object relationship in which one split-off part of the ego (the critical agency) angrily (with outrage) turns on another split-off part of the ego (the ego-identified-with-the-object). Although Freud does not speak in these terms, it could be said that the internal object relationship is created for purposes of evading the painful feeling of object-loss. This avoidance is achieved by means of an unconscious “deal with the devil”: in exchange for the evasion of the pain of object-loss, the melancholic is doomed to experience the sense of lifelessness that comes as a consequence of disconnecting oneself from large portions of external reality. In this sense, the melancholic forfeits a substantial part of his own life — the three-dimensional emotional life lived in the world of real external objects. The internal world of the melancholic is powerfully shaped by the wish to hold captive the object in the form of an imaginary substitute for it — the ego-identified-with-the-object. In a sense, the internalization of the object renders the object forever captive to the melancholic and at the same time renders the melancholic endlessly captive to it.

A dream of one of my patients comes to mind as a particularly poignant expression of the frozen quality of the melancholic’s unconscious internal object world. The patient, Mr K, began analysis a year after the death of his wife of twenty-two years. In a dream that Mr K reported several years into the analysis, he was attending a gathering in which a tribute was to be paid to someone whose identity was unclear to him. Just as the proceedings were getting under way, a man in the audience rose to his feet and spoke glowingly of Mr K’s fine character and important accomplishments. When the man finished, the patient stood and expressed his gratitude for the high praise, but said that the purpose of the meeting was to pay tribute to the guest of honor, so the group’s attention should be directed to him. Immediately upon Mr K’s sitting down, another person stood and again praised the patient at great length. Mr K again stood and after briefly repeating his statement of gratitude for the adulation, he re-directed the attention of the gathering to the honored guest. This sequence was repeated again and again until the patient had the terrifying realization (in the dream) that this sequence would go on forever. Mr K awoke from the dream with his heart racing in a state of panic.

The patient had told me in the sessions preceding the dream that he had become increasingly despairing of ever being able to love another woman and “resume life.” He said he has never ceased expecting his wife to return home after work each evening at six-thirty. He added that every family event after her death has been for him nothing more than another occasion at which his wife is missing. He apologized for his lugubrious, self-pitying tones.

I told Mr K that I thought that the dream captured a sense of the way he feels imprisoned in his inability genuinely to be interested in, much less honor,
new experiences with people. In the dream, he, in the form of the guests paying endless homage to him, directed to himself what might have been interest paid to someone outside of himself, someone outside of his internally frozen relationship with his wife. I went on to say that it was striking that the honored guest in the dream was not given a name, much less an identity and human qualities which might have stirred curiosity, puzzlement, anger, jealousy, envy, compassion, love, admiration or any other set of feeling responses to another person. I added that the horror he felt at the end of the dream seemed to reflect his awareness that the static state of self-imprisonment in which he lives is potentially endless. (A good deal of this interpretation referred back to many discussions Mr K and I had had concerning his state of being “stuck” in a world that no longer existed.) Mr K responded by telling me that as I was speaking he remembered another part of the dream made up of a single still image of himself wrapped in heavy chains unable to move even a single muscle of his body. He said he felt repelled by the extreme passivity of the image.

The dreams and the discussion that followed represented something of a turning point in the analysis. The patient’s response to separations from me between sessions and during weekend and holiday breaks became less frighteningly bleak for him. In the period following this session, Mr K found that he sometimes could go for hours without experiencing the heavy bodily sensation in his chest that he had lived with unremittingly since his wife’s death.

While the idea of the melancholic’s unconscious identification with the lost/abandoned object for Freud held “the key to the clinical picture” (p. 248) of melancholia, Freud believed that the key to the theoretical problem of melancholia would have to satisfactorily resolve an important contradiction:

On the one hand, a strong fixation [an intense, yet static emotional tie] to the loved object must have been present; on the other hand, in contradiction to this, the object-cathexis must have had little power of resistance [i.e., little power to maintain that tie to the object in the face of actual or feared death of the object or object-loss as a consequence of disappointment].

(p. 249)

The “key” to a psychoanalytic theory of melancholia that resolves the contradiction of the coexisting strong fixation to the object and the lack of tenacity of that object-tie, lies, for Freud, in the concept of narcissism: “this contradiction seems to imply that the object-choice has been effected on a narcissistic basis, so that the object-cathexis, when obstacles come in its way, can regress to narcissism” (p. 249).

Freud’s theory of narcissism, which he had introduced only months earlier in his paper, “On narcissism: an introduction” (1914b), provided an important part of the context for the object relations theory of melancholia that Freud was developing in “Mourning and melancholia.” In his narcissism paper, Freud
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proposed that the normal infant begins in a state of "original" or "primary narcissism" (p. 75), a state in which all emotional energy is ego libido, a form of emotional investment that takes the ego (oneself) as its sole object. The infant makes a step toward the world outside of himself in the form of narcissistic identification—a type of object tie that treats the external object as an extension of oneself.

From the psychological position of narcissistic identification, the healthy infant, in time, develops sufficient psychological stability to engage in a narcissistic form of relatedness to objects in which the tie to the object is largely comprised of a displacement of ego libido from the ego onto the object (Freud, 1914b).

Thus we form the idea of there being an original libidinal cathexis of the ego, from which some [of the emotional investment in the ego] is later given off to objects, but [the emotional investment in the ego] . . . fundamentally persists and is related to the [narcissistic] object-cathexes, much as the body of an amoeba is related to the pseudopodia which it puts out.

(1914b, p. 75)

In other words, a narcissistic object-tie is one in which the object is invested with emotional energy that originally was directed at oneself (and, in that sense, the object is a stand-in for the self). The movement from narcissistic identification to narcissistic object tie is a matter of a small, but significant shift in the degree of recognition of, and emotional investment in, the otherness of the object.

The healthy infant is able to achieve a differentiation and complementarity between ego-libido and object-libido. In this process of differentiation, he is beginning to engage in a form of object love that is not simply a displacement of love of oneself onto the object. Instead, a more mature form of object love evolves in which the infant achieves relatedness to objects that are experienced as external to himself—outside the realm of the infant’s omnipotence.

Herein lies for Freud the key to the theoretical problem—the “contradiction”—posed by melancholia: melancholia is a disease of narcissism. A necessary “preconditions” (1914b, p. 249) for melancholia is a disturbance in early narcissistic development. The melancholic patient in infancy and childhood was unable to move successfully from narcissism to object-love. Consequently, in the face of object loss or disappointment, the melancholic is incapable of mourning, i.e., unable to face the reality of the loss of the object, and, over time, to enter into mature object love with another person. The melancholic does not have the capacity to disengage from the lost object and instead evades the pain of loss through regression from narcissistic object relatedness to narcissistic identification: “the result of which is that in spite of the conflict [disappointment leading to outrage] with the loved person, the love relation need not be given
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up” (p. 249). As Freud put it in a summary statement near the end of the paper, “So by taking flight into the ego [by means of a powerful narcissistic identification] love escapes extinction” (p. 257).

A misreading of “Mourning and melancholia,” to my mind, has become entrenched in what is commonly held to be Freud's view of melancholia (see for example, Gay, 1988, pp. 372–373). What I am referring to is the misconception that melancholia, according to Freud, involves an identification with the hated aspect of an ambivalently loved object that has been lost. Such a reading, while accurate so far as it goes, misses the central point of Freud's thesis. What differentiates the melancholic from the mourner is the fact that the melancholic all along has been able to engage only in narcissistic forms of object relatedness. The narcissistic nature of the melancholic’s personality renders him incapable of maintaining a firm connection with the painful reality of the irrevocable loss of the object which is necessary for mourning. Melancholia involves ready, reflexive recourse to regression to narcissistic identification as a way of not experiencing the hard edge of recognition of one's inability to undo the fact of the loss of the object.

Object relations theory, as it is taking shape in the course of Freud’s writing this paper, now includes an early developmental axis. The world of unconscious internal object relations is being viewed by Freud as a defensive regression to very early forms of object relatedness in response to psychological pain — in the case of the melancholic, the pain is the pain of loss. The individual replaces what might have become a three-dimensional relatedness to the mortal and at times disappointing external object with a two-dimensional (shadow-like) relationship to an internal object that exists in a psychological domain outside of time (and consequently sheltered from the reality of death). In so doing, the melancholic evades the pain of loss, and, by extension, other forms of psychological pain, but does so at an enormous cost — the loss of a good deal of his own (emotional) vitality.

III

Having hypothesized the melancholic's substitution of an unconscious internal object relationship for an external one and having wed this to a conception of defensive regression to narcissistic identification, Freud turns to a third defining feature of melancholia which, as will be seen, provides the basis for another important feature of his psychoanalytic theory of unconscious internal object relationships:

In melancholia, the occasions which give rise to the illness extend for the most part beyond the clear case of a loss by death, and include all those situations of being slighted, neglected or disappointed, which can import
opposed feelings of love and hate into the relationship or reinforce an already existing ambivalence. . . . The melancholic's erotic cathexis [erotic emotional investment in the object] . . . has thus undergone a double vicissitude: part of it has regressed to [narcissistic] identification, but the other part, under the influence of the conflict due to ambivalence, has been carried back to the stage of sadism . . .

(1917b, pp. 251–252)

Sadism is a form of object tie in which hate (the melancholic's outrage at the object) becomes inextricably intertwined with erotic love, and in this combined state can be an even more powerful binding force (in a suffocating, subjugating, tyrannizing way) than the ties of love alone. The sadism in melancholia (generated in response to the loss of or disappointment by a loved object) gives rise to a special form of torment for both the subject and the object — that particular mixture of love and hate encountered in stalking. In this sense, the sadistic aspect of the relationship of the critical agency to the split-off ego-identified-with-the-object might be thought of as a relentless, crazed stalking of one split-off aspect of the ego by another — what Fairbairn (1944) would later view as the love/hate bond between the libidinal ego and the exciting object.

This conception of the enormous binding force of combined love and hate is an integral part of the psychoanalytic understanding of the astounding durability of pathological internal object relations. Such allegiance to the bad (hated and hating) internal object is often the source for both the stability of the pathological structure of the patient's personality organization, and for some of the most intractable transference-countertransference impasses that we encounter in analytic work. In addition, the bonds of love mixed with hate account for such forms of pathological relationships as the ferocious ties of the abused child and the battered spouse to their abusers (and the tie of the abusers to the abused). The abuse is unconsciously experienced by both abused and abuser as loving hate and hateful love — both of which are far preferable to no object relationship at all (Fairbairn, 1944).

IV

Employing one of his favorite extended metaphors — the analyst as detective — Freud creates in his writing a sense of adventure, risk-taking and even suspense as he takes on "the most remarkable characteristic of melancholia . . . its tendency to change round into mania — a state which is the opposite of it in its symptoms" (p. 253). Freud's use of language in his discussion of mania — which is inseparable from the ideas he presents — creates for the reader a sense of the fundamental differences between mourning and melancholia, and between healthy (internal and external) object relationships and pathological ones.
I cannot promise that this attempt [to explain mania] will prove entirely satisfactory. It hardly carries us much beyond the possibility of taking one's initial bearings. We have two things to go upon: the first is a psycho-analytic impression, and the second what we may perhaps call a matter of general economic experience. The [psychoanalytic] impression . . . [is] that both disorders [mania and melancholia] are wrestling with the same [unconscious] 'complex', but that probably in melancholia the ego has succumbed to the complex [in the form of a painful feeling of having been crushed] whereas in mania it has mastered it [the pain of loss] or pushed it aside.

(1917b, pp. 253—254)

The second of the two things "we have . . . to go upon" is "general economic experience." In attempting to account for the feelings of exuberance and triumph in mania, Freud hypothesized that the economics of mania – the quantitative distribution and play of psychological forces – may be similar to those seen when

some poor wretch, by winning a large sum of money, is suddenly relieved from chronic worry about his daily bread, or when a long and arduous struggle is finally crowned with success, or when a man finds himself in a position to throw off at a single blow some oppressive compulsion, some false position which he has long had to keep up, and so on.

(1917b, p. 254)

Beginning with the pun on "economic conditions" in the description of the poor wretch who wins a great deal of money, the sentence goes on to capture something of the feel of mania in its succession of images which are unlike any other set of images in the article. These dramatic cameos suggest to me Freud's own understandable magical wishes to have his own "arduous struggle . . . finally crowned with success" or to be able "to throw off at a single blow [his own] . . . oppressive compulsion" to write prodigious numbers of books and articles in his efforts to attain for himself and psychoanalysis the stature they deserve. And like the inevitable end of the expanding bubble of mania, the driving force of the succession of images seems to collapse into the sentences that immediately follow:

This explanation [of mania by analogy to other forms of sudden release from pain] certainly sounds plausible, but in the first place it is too indefinite, and, secondly, it gives rise to more new problems and doubts than we can answer. We will not evade a discussion of them, even though we cannot expect it to lead us to a clear understanding.

(1917b, p. 255)
Freud — whether or not he was aware of it — is doing more than alerting the reader to his uncertainties regarding how to understand mania and its relation to melancholia; he is showing the reader in his use of language, in the structure of his thinking and writing, what it sounds like and feels like to think and write in a way that does not attempt to confuse what is omnipotently, self-deceptively, wished for with what is real; words are used in an effort to simply, accurately, clearly give ideas and situations their proper names.

Bion’s work provides a useful context for understanding more fully the significance of Freud’s comment that he will not “evade” the new problems and doubts to which his hypothesis gives rise. Bion (1962a) uses the idea of evasion to refer to what he believes to be a hallmark of psychosis: eluding pain rather than attempting to symbolize it for oneself (for example, in dreaming), live with it, and do genuine psychological work with it over time. The latter response to pain — living with it, symbolizing it for oneself, and doing psychological work with it — lies at the heart of the experience of mourning. In contrast, the manic patient who “master[s] the [pain of loss] . . . or push[es] it aside” (Freud, 1917b, p. 254) transforms what might become a feeling of terrible disappointment, aloneness and impotent rage into a state resembling “joy, exultation or triumph” (p. 254).

I believe that Freud here, without explicit acknowledgment — and perhaps without conscious awareness — begins to address the psychotic edge of mania and melancholia. The psychotic aspect of both mania and melancholia involves the evasion of grief as well as a good deal of external reality. This is effected by means of multiple splittings of the ego in conjunction with the creation of a timeless imaginary internal object relationship which omnipotently substitutes for the loss of a real external object relationship. More broadly speaking, a fantasied unconscious internal object world replaces an actual external one, omnipotence replaces helplessness, immortality substitutes for the uncompromising realities of the passage of time and of death, triumph replaces despair, contempt substitutes for love.

Thus Freud (in part explicitly, in part implicitly, and perhaps in part unknowingly) through his discussion of mania adds another important element to his evolving object relations theory. The reader can hear in Freud’s use of language (for example, in his comments on the manic patient’s triumphantly pushing aside the pain of loss and exulting in his imaginary victory over the lost object) the idea that the unconscious internal object world of the manic patient is constructed for the purpose of evading, “taking flight” (p. 257) from, the external reality of loss and death. This act of taking flight from external reality has the effect of plunging the patient into a sphere of omnipotent thinking cut off from life lived in relation to actual external objects. The world of external object relations becomes depleted as a consequence of its having been disconnected from the individual’s unconscious internal object world. The patient’s experience in the world of external objects is disconnected from the enlivening
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“fire” (Loewald, 1978, p. 189) of the unconscious internal object world. Conversely, the unconscious internal object world, having been cut off from the world of external objects, cannot grow, cannot “learn from experience” (Bion, 1962a), and cannot enter (in more than a very limited way) into generative “conversations” between unconscious and preconscious aspects of oneself “at the frontier of dreaming” (Ogden, 2001a).

Freud concludes the paper with a series of thoughts on a wide range of topics related to mourning and melancholia. Of these, Freud’s expansion of the concept of ambivalence is, I believe, the one that represents the most important contribution both to the understanding of melancholia and to the development of his object relations theory. Freud had discussed on many previous occasions, beginning as early as 1900, a view of ambivalence as an unconscious conflict of love and hate in which the individual unconsciously loves the same person he hates, for example, in the distressing ambivalence of healthy Oedipal experience or in the paralyzing torments of the ambivalence of the obsessional neurotic. In “Mourning and melancholia,” Freud uses the term “ambivalence” in a strikingly different way; he uses it to refer to a struggle between the wish to live with the living and the wish to be at one with the dead:

hate and love contend with each other [in melancholia]; the one seeks to detach the libido from the object [thus allowing the subject to live and the object to die], the other to maintain this position of the libido [which is bonded to the immortal internal version of the object].

(1917b, p. 256)

Thus, the melancholic experiences a conflict between, on the one hand, the wish to be alive with the pain of irreversible loss and the reality of death, and on the other hand, the wish to deaden himself to the pain of loss and the knowledge of death. The individual capable of mourning succeeds in freeing himself from the struggle between life and death that freezes the melancholic: “mourning impels the ego to give up the object by declaring the object to be dead and offering the ego the inducement of continuing to live . . .” (p. 257). So the mourner’s painful acceptance of the reality of the death of the object is achieved in part because the mourner knows (unconsciously and at times consciously) that his own life, his own capacity for “continuing to live” is at stake.

I am reminded of a patient who began analysis with me almost twenty years after the death of her husband. Ms G told me that not long after her husband’s death, she had spent a weekend alone at a lake where for each of the fifteen years before his death, she and her husband had rented a cabin. She told me that
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during a trip to the lake soon after his death, she had set out alone in a motorboat and headed toward a labyrinth of small islands and tortuous waterways that she and her husband had explored many times. Ms G said that the idea had come to her with a sense of absolute certainty that her husband was in that set of waterways, and that if she were to have entered that part of the lake, she never would have come out because she would not have been able to "tear" herself away from him. She told me that she had had to fight with all her might not to go to be with her husband.

That decision not to follow her husband into death became an important symbol in the analysis of the patient's choosing to live her life in a world filled with the pain of grief and her living memories of her husband. As the analysis proceeded, that same event at the lake came to symbolize something quite different: the incompleteness of her act of "tearing" herself away from her husband after his death. It became increasingly clear in the transference-countertransference that, in an important sense, a part of herself had gone with her husband into death, that is, an aspect of herself had been deadened and that that had been "alright" with her until that juncture in the analysis.

In the course of the subsequent year of analysis, Ms G experienced a sense of enormous loss — not only the loss of her husband, but also the loss of her own life. She confronted for the first time the pain and sadness of the recognition of the ways she had for decades unconsciously limited herself with regard to utilizing her intelligence and artistic talents as well as her capacities to fully be alive in her everyday experience (including her analysis). (I do not view Ms G as having been manic, or even as having relied heavily on manic defenses, but I believe that she held in common with the manic patient a form of ambivalence that involves a tension between, on the one hand, the wish to live life among the living — internally and externally — and, on the other hand, the wish to exist with the dead in a timeless dead and deadening internal object world.)

Returning to Freud's discussion of mania, the manic patient is engaged in a "struggle of ambivalence [in a desperate unconscious effort to come to life through] loosen[ing] the fixation of the libido to the [internal] object by disparaging it, denigrating it and even as it were killing it" (p. 257). This sentence is surprising: mania represents not only the patient's effort to evade the pain of grief by disparaging and denigrating the object. Mania also represents the patient's (often unsuccessful) attempts to achieve grief by freeing himself from the mutual captivity involved in the unconscious internal relationship with the lost object. In order to grieve the loss of the object, one must first kill it, that is, one must do the psychological work of allowing the object to be irrevocably dead, both in one's own mind and in the external world.

By introducing the notion of a form of ambivalence involving the struggle between the wish to go on living and the wish to deaden oneself in an effort to be with the dead, Freud added a critical dimension to his object relations theory: the notion that unconscious internal object relations may have either a
living and enlivening quality or a dead and deadening quality (and by extension, every possible combination of the two). Such a way of conceiving the internal object world has been central to recent developments in psychoanalytic theory pioneered by Winnicott (1971a) and Green (1983). These authors have placed emphasis on the importance of the analyst’s and the patient’s experiences of the aliveness and deadness of the patient’s internal object world. The sense of aliveness and deadness of the transference–countertransference is, to my mind, perhaps the single most important measure of the status of the analytic process on a moment-to-moment basis (Ogden, 1995, 1997b). The sound of much of current analytic thinking — and I suspect the sound of psychoanalytic thinking yet to come — can be heard in Freud’s “Mourning and melancholia,” if we know how to listen.

Freud closes the paper with a voice of genuine humility, breaking off his enquiry mid-thought:

— But here once again, it will be well to call a halt and to postpone any further explanation of mania . . . As we already know, the interdependence of the complicated problems of the mind forces us to break off every enquiry before it is completed — till the outcome of some other enquiry can come to its assistance.

(1917b, p. 259)

How better to end a paper on the pain of facing reality and the consequences of attempts to evade it? The solipsistic world of a psychoanalytic theorist who is not firmly grounded in the reality of his lived experience with patients is very similar to the self-imprisoned melancholic who survives in a timeless, deathless (and yet dead and deadening) internal object world.

VI Summary

In presenting a reading of Freud’s “Mourning and melancholia,” I have examined not only the ideas Freud was introducing but, as important, the way he was thinking/writing in this watershed paper. I have attempted to demonstrate how Freud made use of his exploration of the unconscious work of mourning and of melancholia to propose and explore some of the major tenets of a revised model of the mind (which later would be termed “object relations theory”). The principal tenets of the revised model presented in this 1917 paper include: (1) the idea that the unconscious is organized to a significant degree around stable internal object relations between paired split-off parts of the ego; (2) the notion that psychic pain may be defended against by means of the replacement of an external object relationship by an unconscious, fantasized internal object relationship; (3) the idea that pathological bonds of love mixed with hate are
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among the strongest ties that bind internal objects to one another in a state of mutual captivity; (4) the notion that the psychopathology of internal object relations often involves the use of omnipotent thinking to a degree that cuts off the dialogue between the unconscious internal object world and the world of actual experience with real external objects; and (5) the idea that ambivalence in relations between unconscious internal objects involves not only the conflict of love and hate, but also the conflict between the wish to continue to be alive in one's object relationships and the wish to be at one with one's dead internal objects.