Darian Leader, *The New Black. Mourning, Melancholia and Depression*, **Hamish Hamilton, 2008, pp. 223, € 14.95, ISBN 9780141021225**

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The British psychoanalyst and philosopher Darian Leader gives a sharp critical account of the up-to-date concept of depression by means of a resumption of the forgotten concepts of mourning and melancholia. The result is a brilliant and enjoyable analysis that points out the tormented ways in which contemporary human beings in Western societies deal with lack, as the correlate of a loss; as the book shows with many examples, ranging from the history of medicine to contemporary art, from psychoanalysis to comparative anthropology, torment is increased by the repression of lack that occurs in Western societies.

This repression is far from being a solution, because it is the root of the discontents which put so much light on one of the most diagnosed pathologies of our time, that is, depression: by recovering the concepts of mourning and melancholia, and by stressing their correlation to the performative and common feature of arts and rituals, the author tells stories of salvation from the shadows of "our new dark ages" (p.59) and unravels the basic lines for a genealogy of depression.

As the author points out in the introduction, literature on mourning and melancholia almost disappeared after the groundbreaking work of Freud, Klein and Abraham. Such a decrease of scientific and clinical attention toward these topics is itself a symptom of the repression of the treatment of the lack as such; instead of investigating the nature of the lack as the correlate of a loss concerning human beings as such, that is, instead of the thematization of an existential and ontological problem, one confuses the lack as such with a lack with a genitive, i.e., the lack of something determined, may it be the lack of success or the lack of serotonin.

The only literature to be found for a treatment of the concept of mourning, as the elaboration of a more original lack, consists in literature itself! It is not difficult to see that all literature, ranging from the great masterpieces of mankind to the contemporary best sellers, is a literature of "loss, separation and bereavement" (p.6).

That such a topic is put in the framework of the fiction confirms the symptom of the aforesaid repression: the theme of lack and loss can be spoken of only insofar as it is kept away from reality; nevertheless, the abundant presence of such a topic in the literature is at the same time an indication of its correlation to the scope of artistic creativity: as Leader points out in the third chapter, the very concept of "framework" and, more generally, the function of "artificiality" are both essential for a successful elaboration of a mourning.

The repression of the treatment of the lack as such and the correlate increase of the diagnosis of depression, is the theme of the first chapter, which points out the birth of this disease in the second half of the twentieth century. Since its birth, and still today, such a word is used as an umbrella term to group common symptoms, such as disturbances of sleep-wake rhythms, appetite and moods; in other words, the word "depression" has become a label that refers to a set of phenomena which deviate from a standard pattern of behavior; insofar as these phenomena differ from such a pattern, they become symptoms of a pathology, the remedy of which is considered, in its turn, as a matter of medications: since depression consists in an alteration of some behavioral patterns, and since medications can bring these altered patterns back to the standard, the remedy of depression consists in medication.

Such a reductionist diagnosis considers the symptoms as disorders to be erased and not as the bearers of the truth within a singular individual; moreover, the use of the word "depression" as an umbrella term to gather common patterns of symptoms overlooks the very fact that the same patterns of symptoms can correspond to very different issues.

The exposition of such issues is carried out by the treatment of the aforesaid couple of concepts, namely mourning and melancholia: these share the properties of being the reaction to a loss and the response to a lack; moreover, both hold a strong ambivalence toward the object of the loss. As Leader points out by quoting Freud, all strong attachments entail a fusion of love and hate, as the renowned verses by Catullus expressed in a very efficacious way; such attachments of love and hate manifest themselves in an identification with the lost object.

The different manners in which a person reacts to the identification with the object of loss comprise the very difference between mourning and melancholia: the mourner

identifies with a particular aspect of the lost object, whereas the melancholic identifies his/her very self with the whole object.

This difference explains why mourning involves a process which can be connoted by right as a "work": the mourner has to process all the different aspects of the lost object one after the other, in order to remove any reference point that mattered in life. As Leader brilliantly points out, it is not for nothing that Freud's essay on *Mourning and Melancholia* is coeval to the development of cubism, in which an object is seen contemporarily from all possible points of view. Such an overview helps the mourner to remove all reference points to the lost object, which necessarily entails the aforesaid fusion of love and hate: once this series of images is processed, their absence "is registered, inscribed indelibly in our mental lives" (p.29).

On the other hand, the melancholic's identification with the lost object overwhelms the whole self, which becomes the ruthless target of every possible reproach, due to the hate lying in the ambivalent sentiment toward the lost object.

After an exposition of the distinction of these two issues, which must be safeguarded instead of being confused by the catchword "depression", Leader dedicates the second and the third chapters of the book to the issue of mourning, and comes back to the issue of melancholia only in the fourth and last chapter.

The second chapter points out the fundamental role that the community plays on the work of the mourner. As Leader writes, in Freud's essay, mourning is treated as a private practice, as a work that the individual must undergo on his/her own; it is not for nothing that Freud's essay was written during the First World War, that is, in a period when the public aspect of mourning began to significantly decrease: mourning was impossible in front of the enormous number of corpses produced by such a massive carnage; curiously, the same decrease in the public aspect of mourning is to be found today in Africa as a consequence of the massive number of deaths by AIDS.

In other words, we are losing the ritual dimension of mourning and its correlate, that is, the inscription of the death in the symbolic order which structures our language, our representations and our rules.

Death is no longer a symbol, that is, it does not find a shared meaning that allows a community to tame it as an event; instead, the absence of death's symbolic function corresponds to the inflation of its simulacra, that is, the indistinct and meaningless

repetition of representations of death, in cinema and in the media.

Nevertheless, the work of mourning necessarily needs the recognition of other people in order to be carried out: the ritual aspect concerns the intervention of a third party, a witness such as a priest or a shaman, who has to confirm that the loss has occurred and that it is something real and shared. The funeral of Patroklos in the *Iliad* provides an occasion for everyone to cry for one's losses: "The women lament his passing openly, while at the same time 'each one for her own sorrows', and the men 'each one remembering what he had left home'" (p.75).

To share one's story with the others helps the work of mourning insofar as it allows one to see one's story *as* a story, and this is the point in which the aforesaid roles of the "framework" and of "artificiality" emerge.

The third chapter points out how the artificial feature of rituals can help the work of mourning succeed and result in a judgment of non-existence. The presence of the recurrent framework in the dreams of mourners, may it be a wall, a fence or even a portrait frame, is the symptom of the strife after another space; this space is artificial and the loss must be inscribed in it. Such an inscription is the completion of the procession of all the representations of the lost object, for it allows the mourner to conceive these representations *as* representations.

The artificiality of the symbolic space shows the artificiality of the role of the lost object in one's life and, first and foremost, the artificiality of the image of oneself that one shaped in the relationship with this lost object. To go through a work of mourning is not only to mourn a person's death, but also to mourn the way one believed oneself to be seen by this person: this image once belonged to one's symbolic framework and its loss entails the bewilderment of the whole framework, which must be constructed again. For this work to be carried out, however, it is necessary to recognize the artificiality of the image itself and, consequently, the difference between the lost object and the place it once held in the symbolic framework. The attention to this difference entails, in turn, that one recognizes the alterity of the object of love, that is, its absolute extraneousness to the way in which one identified with it.

In other words, for mourning to succeed, a sacrifice is required: one has to give up one's identification with the lost object, which entails a symbolic death of the lost object. The relation

with this object must result in a relation to an absence, which must be understood *as* absence: to construct this relation, one has to create "a frame for absence" (p.208).

However, in melancholia the sacrifice of one's identification becomes the sacrifice of one's own self, for the identification with the lost object is total. As Leader points out in the last chapter of the book, such an identification can take either the form of a real sacrifice of the self, that is, suicide, or the sacrifice of one's world: one lives in a split world, belonging at the same time to the world of the living and the world of the dead, thus becoming literally an undead. This last word points out the logical and ontological distinction between mourning and melancholia, for it is constructed as the affirmation of a negative term, instead as the negation of a positive term.

It is not the same to deny that something is a man, that is, to say that something is not a man, and to say that something is a "not-man": the process of mourning "involves the process of establishing the denial of a positive term, a recognition of absence and loss. We accept that a presence is no longer there. Melancholia, on the other hand, involves the affirmation of a negative term" (p.199).

By living in two different worlds, the melancholic finds no possible place from which the work of mourning can begin; nevertheless the necessity of finding a way to express the absence of this possibility, that is, this very impossibility, points out the way for a possible salvation: the melancholic tries "*to find words to say how words fail*. And isn't that one of the functions of poetry?" (p.191).

As Leader points out in the conclusion of this brilliant study, all these works of art share the feature of having been made, that is, of having emerged from absence into presence; can we find in them an indication to absence as such, as the great repression of our community?