



PROJECT MUSE®

---

## The Vicissitudes of Melancholia in Freud and Joyce

Nouri Gana

James Joyce Quarterly, Volume 44, Number 1, Fall 2006, pp. 95-109  
(Article)

Published by The University of Tulsa

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/jjq.2007.0009>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/217425>

## The Vicissitudes of Melancholia in Freud and Joyce

Nouri Gana  
*University of Michigan, Dearborn*

But what breaks the hold of grief except the cultivation of the aggression  
that grief holds at bay against the means by which it is held at bay?

Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*

In “*Dubliners* and the Art of Losing,” John Gordon maps Joyce’s various literary appropriations of a strange Irish habit that converts accidental absences into engineered subtractions, simple lacks into suffered losses.<sup>1</sup> Gordon then glosses over the more sedimented cultural twin of such a habit—in effect, the tendency to defuse transhistorical or individual losses into constitutive or structural absences—and attributes the habit to a hermeneutics broken loose from its historical moorage. I would rather ascribe it, however, to a fully fledged psychic apparatus, set in motion largely by a post-Famine cultural history of successive losses. Rather than remapping the literary inscriptions of such a history—a task accomplished by scholars such as David Lloyd, Seamus Deane, and Declan Kiberd<sup>2</sup>—my interest here is more modest: to lay bare, through a close examination of two characters from *Dubliners*, the patterns of psychic engagement with loss at the level of individual, personal history.

While the short stories that constitute *Dubliners* present us with a wide variety of characters who have experienced the pangs of loss, “The Sisters” and “A Painful Case” are unique in their exposition of a sequential trajectory that ranges from attachment, loss, and melancholia to mania or suicide. Joyce intuitively inscribes through the character of Father Flynn in “The Sisters” an interactive relationship between loss, melancholia, and mania and through the character of Emily Sinico in “A Painful Case” a similar relationship between loss, melancholia and suicide. In this, he anticipates Sigmund Freud, who articulates the psychic rationale behind the regression of some melancholics into mania and the adoption by some others of a more lethal line of flight—suicide. This essay exposes the striking parallels between the literary inscriptions of the turn from melancholia to mania and from melancholia to suicide in Joyce’s stories and Freud’s psychoanalytic exposition of the vicissitudes of melancholia. Not

only will the reconstruction of Freud's struggle with the subject of melancholia enable us better to grasp its dynamic in relation to other psychic forces, but it will also throw some light on the mysteries of Father Flynn's mania and Emily Sinico's suicide.<sup>3</sup>

### Melancholia and its Vicissitudes

To square the literary inscription of melancholia in Joyce's two stories with Freud's psychoanalytic work, we first have to elucidate the latter's concept of melancholia in relation to its originary cognate—the concept of mourning. In "Mourning and Melancholia," Freud distinguishes the two, while attributing both to a common origin: loss. He contends that, although both affects originate in (a reaction to) loss, they diverge in their ways of dealing with it. While mourning is a normal affect accomplished once all object-cathexes are withdrawn from the lost object and displaced onto a new object, melancholia originates from an unfaltering fixation on the lost object. It then culminates in a regressive process of incorporating, if not devouring, the lost other—a process which might eventually enact a primary narcissism and which Freud suspects of a pathological disposition.

Whereas in mourning the lost object is integrated into the texture of the psyche, in melancholia, the object is engraved within the psyche, and the cathectic ties with it are intensified rather than relaxed. In other words, the reconciliation with reality consoles the ego for its loss in mourning, while in melancholia the very denial of loss devolves into an unbreakable fixation on the object. Melancholia thus enacts nothing less than a vicissitude of normal mourning—an indefinitely prolonged denial of loss—and Freud identifies it as a pathological disposition. Yet, while Freud never fully accounts for the waning of the affect of melancholia after the passage of a certain period of time, he contends that the resolution of mourning itself cannot occur without a passage through melancholia. "[S]etting up . . . the object inside the ego," Freud suggests in *The Ego and the Id*, "makes it easier for the object to be given up or renders that process possible" (19:29). Thus, melancholia becomes the condition of the possibility for mourning. This is one of the most puzzling conclusions that can be drawn from a reading of "Mourning and Melancholia" in tandem with *The Ego and the Id*—a conclusion on which Freud does not, unfortunately, linger. What is important for us to bear in mind is that melancholia is at the horizon of all possible mourning. This is to say that, whenever mourning fails, either the melancholic introjection of the object has been suspended, or it has been denied altogether by the forces that override the ego. In either case, the object is engraved on rather than integrated into the psyche. Such is the melancholic state whose mutation, rather than resolution, into other neighboring pathological

forms like mania and suicide relentlessly engages Freud's analytical acumen. Being at least provisionally a vicissitude of normal mourning, melancholia generates its own vicissitudes.

In "Mourning and Melancholia," Freud alludes to the outbreak within melancholia of what he would later christen, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, a "death drive" that results in the "overcoming of the instinct which compels every living thing to cling to life" (14:246). When the ego picks up an object during the phase of libidinal approach and attachment, it proceeds, once the loss of that object occurs, to set it up within the ego in a way that provokes the super-ego's anger. The act of relocating the lost object within the ego—which Freud loosely calls "identification," "incorporation," or "introjection" (18:105-10)—seems, no matter how imperative it potentially is for the accomplishment of the work of mourning, to be at the origin of whatever misfortune will later plague the whole organism. It is, after all, alleged to be at the origin of the "cleavage between the critical activity of the ego and the ego as altered by identification" (14:249).

In *The Ego and the Id*, Freud elucidates how in this act of incorporation the ego fraudulently "assumes the features of the [lost] object" (19:30) and forces itself upon the id as its (lost/regained) love-object, essentially introverting the outward emittance of the id's entire libido. Such an illicit undertaking by the ego, while being "the sole condition under which the id can give up its objects" has grave consequences (19:29): it tosses the whole organism onto the verge of a lethal conflict between the ego and the super-ego—a conflict in which the super-ego might drive the ego into its own death "if the latter does not fend off its tyrant in time by the change round into mania" (19:53).

While the loss of a given object-libido is inevitable, survival in the aftermath hinges on the psychic wherewithal of the individual organism. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud makes it patently clear that the more a living organism is stimulated into affective attachments, the more it becomes capable of both dealing with libidinal stimuli and shielding itself against their loss once they are hyper-cathected.<sup>4</sup> Melancholia thus appears to strike harder in individuals whose affective systems are less cathected. "The higher the system's own quiescent cathexis," as Freud points out, "the greater seems to be its binding force; conversely, therefore, the lower its cathexis, the less capacity will it have for taking up inflowing energy and the more violent must be the consequences of such a breach in the protective shield against stimuli" (18:30). Shielding oneself against libidinal stimuli proceeds by accommodating any libidinal cathexes before, as it were, lulling them to sleep. This is, however, neither the affective strategy of Father Flynn, whose attachment to the priesthood prompts him to transcend any stimulus that smacks of eros, nor is it the pragmatic strategy of Emily Sinico who is doomed "to sing to empty benches" after having

been cold-heartedly excluded from her husband's "gallery of pleasures" (D 109, 110). By multiplying and diversifying his love objects, her husband reduces her to "quiescent cathexis," an ineffectual element of his own libidinal attachments. Mrs. Sinico, however, is not exposed to the volume of cathectic stimuli and libidinal exchange that would enable her to fend off the inimical stimuli stemming from the break of her illicit romance with James Duffy.

Both Father Flynn and Emily Sinico are, by virtue of their fragile systems of cathexes, incapable of hosting new inflowing stimuli, let alone the strong, unpleasurable stimuli that might force them through their frail protective shields. For Father Flynn, the melancholy sadness and self-incriminating guilt that follow the loss of his chalice press him toward death until he is diverted into the circuitous route of mania. Emily Sinico's affective system is so weakly cathected, however, that it falls apart lethally following the breakdown of her amorous affair with James Duffy. Or, as Freud notes, "Owing to their low cathexis those systems are not in a good position for binding the inflowing amounts of excitation and the consequences of the breach in the protective shield follow all the more easily" (18:31). For both characters, a structural incompetence emerges, a constitutive inability to bind the mobile cathexes that threaten to dislodge their defensive systems altogether.

### Father Flynn's Melancholia—A "Change Round into Mania"

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud insists that the "[p]rotection against stimuli is an almost more important function than reception of stimuli" (18:27). By virtue of being a priest, Father Flynn is himself already entrenched in a strategy of defense against inflowing libidinal stimuli. As Henry Staten argues, Christianity, much like Platonism and Stoicism, is predicated on an ideology of sublimation and transcendence of mortal eros.<sup>5</sup> Transcendence is a mode of coming to terms with the temporal presence of a loved object flawed by mortality, that is, by the absence building in the horizon of its immediate presence. Transcendence is, in Staten's words, "a matter of learning how to extract one's libidinal substance from the mortal or losable objects in which it could be trapped" (5). In this respect, Father Flynn is, like potentially any priest, involved in the *askesis* or praxis of foreclosure or desexualization of every in- or out-flowing libidinal stimulus.

Invested in the Platonic-Stoic-Christian strategies of idealization and transcendence that exhort him to block eros at the very moment of its inception, Father Flynn has been able neither to host any inflowing stimulus nor to foster a psychic system that might enable him to convert efficiently any mobile cathexis into a quiescent one. Yet while

he denies himself any libidinal attachment by following the commandments of the priesthood, Father Flynn lavishes his desexualized libido on the ladder of transcendence or the imago of priesthood—the chalice. He is armored against libidinal attachments by the chalice (which condenses metonymically his life task—the commitment to the priesthood) but is not armored against its possible breakage.

When, before his death, Father Flynn reiterates to the boy narrator that he was “*not long for this world*” (D 9), he is spurred by the consoling idea of a better life in the hereafter. In the wake of the chalice’s loss, however, such an aspiration is undercut by a sweeping sense of disappointment, frustration, and hopelessness as if such a loss had brought in its trail the closure of the horizon the chalice first opened. In other words, the conciliatory narrative of automourning that Father Flynn shared with the boy gives way,<sup>6</sup> following the damage to the chalice, to a lethal narrative of melancholy sadness whose “deadly work” (D 9) had a bearing on the well-being of his whole mental organism. Donald T. Torchiana argues that Father Flynn dies a natural death, that neither paresis nor syphilis—but the breaking of the chalice—is at the origin of his crisis.<sup>7</sup> While I agree that the breaking of the chalice was a powerful factor in Father Flynn’s death, I nonetheless disagree with Torchiana’s conclusion that there was actually nothing wrong with Father Flynn. The inability to accomplish the ritualistic task of mourning is precisely what goes wrong within him.

While Father Flynn compromises his mortality by his devotion to the priesthood and his aspiration to a life-to-come, the breaking of the chalice proves to be too overwhelming to brook any compromise. His sister Eliza emphatically informs us that this accident instantiated a turning point in the priest’s strategy of idealization and transcendence: “*It was that chalice he broke. . . . That was the beginning of it. Of course, they say it was all right, that it contained nothing, I mean. But still. . . . They say it was the boy’s fault. But poor James was so nervous*” (D 17, my italics). “The Sisters” thus presents the broken chalice (and implicitly its desacralization), as a grave blunder, for which Father Flynn feels interminable grief.

As a sign of commitment to the priesthood, the chalice belongs to a system of symbolic exchange and reparation: unless it has become unserviceable, it can be—as the text of the story itself implies—repaired, regilded, and reconsecrated without complications. But as a singular and ideal object (ideal in satisfying, that is, the needs of sublimated sexual instincts), the chalice cannot be placed within an economic system of circulation and exchange. In drawing a firm connection between the breaking of the chalice and the onset of Father Flynn’s crisis, Eliza establishes that the chalice condenses the economy of priesthood (in effect, Father Flynn’s life task), and as such its loss pertains to an inimitable object that cannot possibly be recovered

or redeemed. As Freud intimates in "Mourning and Melancholia," the loss of an ideal object is hardly amenable to the conciliatory work of mourning. Father Flynn's uncertainty, in fact, about whether he committed a sin in breaking the chalice, intensifies his sense of having done so. This experience is not at all restricted to Father Flynn but extends to many other Dubliners, including Eveline, Mrs. Sinico, and Gretta. In all these cases, something untruthful and in excess of reality, something that contains *de facto* no guilt at all, burdens the mind of its creator and puts his or her psychological makeup in total disarray.

Such a burden constitutes one aspect of paralysis in *Dubliners*. Feeding primarily on a persistent sense of guilt, this paralysis translates into a self-ordained punishment, a warrant of self-indictment. In psychoanalytic terms, it might be understood as the upshot of a lack of acceptance of loss and especially of the conversion of loss into absence. In this respect, the breaking of the chalice is not perceived by Father Flynn as a loss that can be adequately addressed by the various techniques of reparation the church makes available; instead it brooks no reparation and comes ultimately to lay bare an originary sinfulness. The lack of the chalice translates as a loss of the priesthood, which is subsequently converted into an absence of the good, an absence of hope: "There was no hope for him this time" (D 9).

Dominick LaCapra cautions against the psychic apparatuses that tend unwittingly to convert suffered losses into constitutive absences.<sup>8</sup> "When loss," LaCapra points out, "is converted into (or encrypted in an indiscriminately generalized rhetoric of) absence, one faces the impasse of endless melancholy, impossible mourning, and interminable aporia in which any process of working through the past and its historical losses is foreclosed or prematurely aborted" (698). Joyce multiplies the adjectives that attest not only to Father Flynn's guilt-stricken conscience but also to his envelopment in an overall discourse of absence: Father Flynn is described as "too scrupulous always," "crossed," "disappointed," and "nervous" (D 17). His description of the "duties of the priest towards the Eucharist and towards the secrecy of the confessional" strikes the boy as so grave that he "wondered how anybody had ever found in himself the courage to undertake them" (D 13). The passage bears witness to the presence in Father Flynn's mind of aspects of what LaCapra calls an "all-or-nothing" tendency—a tendency that hardly tolerates the role of intermediary or transitional processes such as those afforded by the work of mourning (717). Indeed, Father Flynn's psyche can hardly conceive of any possible reparation for the transgression of his duties towards the Eucharist, here, the breaking of the chalice. The perception of the loss of the chalice as an instance of the absence of hope forecloses prematurely any potential prospect for recovery.



It thus coincides with the onset of melancholia—an affective process whereby the ego has no choice but to counterfeit the lost object so as to re-channel the id's outward release of (desexualized) libido—an action that comes to excite further the anger of an already furious super-ego.

According to Freud, the roots of the super-ego or ego-ideal strike deep in the Oedipus complex and relate to the ego's primal identification with the parents. Moreover, the super-ego stands for the social and moral agencies whose influences are infused into the child's mind during the early years of his or her development. What is thus so puzzling about Father Flynn's alleged sin of breaking the chalice is that, while the act is belittled by ecclesiastical authorities (that is, by those who partially stand for Freud's "super-ego"), it is stubbornly maintained by the priest himself. Even if we see Father Flynn from a Foucaultian perspective as an agent of the socio-religious structures that have informed his psychic makeup, we cannot fail to note the excesses of his auto-surveillance and the ways in which he turns against and overrides the ostentatious expectations of the ecclesiastical authorities. In other words, Father Flynn has reacted inversely to the socio-religious attempts to detoxify him from the overwhelming sense of guilt with which his consciousness is suffused. Such attempts serve, in fact, only to exacerbate his illness, as if the need for illness had gained the upper hand. He exhibits what Freud technically refers to in *The Ego and the Id* as a "negative therapeutic reaction" (19:49).

Through this character, Joyce illustrates a crisis in the Christian strategies of transcendence of mortal eros. By virtue of being a priest, he is undoubtedly entitled to release only a desexualized form of eros. His bond to the chalice is a means to an "eternal reward," as the boy's aunt puts it (*D* 16). Yet transcendent as it is, this strategy is also unstable. Once disturbed, the bond between the priest and his chalice—a bond that makes possible the economy of erotic transcendence—brings the priest to an impasse and hurls him back into the abyss of grief that he first attempted to bypass through sublimation. "It was that chalice he broke," Eliza remarks, and she adds, "That was the beginning of it. . . . *That affected his mind*" (*D* 17, my italics). Bereft of the transcendent power of his chalice, Father Flynn becomes vulnerable to the outbreak of grief. The last image of the priest "lying still in his coffin . . . solemn and truculent in death, *an idle chalice on his breast*" (*D* 18, my italics), though sealed in mystery, implies that the priest had not really been able to work through the emotional wreckage into which he was driven after the breaking of the chalice.

How can we interpret the presence of an idle chalice on the breast of a confined priest? Although this might simply be a mnemonic reference to the time when priests used to be buried with their emblematic objects, there is ample evidence to read it otherwise: as a symptom



of Father Flynn's melancholia whose drive towards death ("*I am not long for this world*") is countered by a change into mania. The chalice in the coffin attests to his failure to accomplish the work of mourning since he has maintained the affective ties with the sacred object, rather than detaching his desexualized cathexes from it. This interpretation does not, of course, obtain unless we assume that the chalice now on his breast is not a new vessel but the same one that he broke. The qualification of the chalice as "idle" (unserviceable) lends credence to such an assumption. Moreover, the fact that Joyce had himself settled on putting a chalice there—after he had formerly, in the *Homestead* version of the story (D 249), opted for a cross—implies that he had reviewed the tragic story of Father Flynn in such a manner as to center its origin around a single object: the chalice.

In melancholia, the lost object is incorporated within the psyche, rather than abandoned. Indeed, the ego itself disassembles the lost object, so as to exhort the id to direct its libido toward it, thus initiating a process Freud saw as a regression to infantile narcissism. Such a process provokes, Freud argues, the wrath of the super-ego, the agency that hosted the id's first libidinal expedition and had ever since stood apart from, and quite at loggerheads with, the ego. Feeling usurped, the super-ego exacts its revenge on the ego by inflicting it with guilt, if not thrusting it into death altogether. In Father Flynn's case, guilt is inseparable from its manic re-turn as demented laughter (D 18). This return, moreover, is symptomatic of aborted suicidal intents. The melancholic, guilt-pressured drive toward death defuses into the horizon of mania. After all, the Hamlet-like death wish expressed at the very beginning of the story ("*I am not long for this world*") tallies perfectly well with Freud's reconstruction of the turn from melancholia, in which the super-ego becomes potentially "a kind of gathering place for the death-instinct" into mania (19:54), in which the ego seems unwittingly to compromise its mental functioning not only to throw off the object but especially to occlude the destruction of the whole organism.

To better illustrate Father Flynn's slippage into mania as a counter-thrust to the super-ego's drive towards death, note this passage from *The Ego and the Id*:

If we turn to melancholia first, we find that the excessively strong super-ego which has obtained a hold upon consciousness rages against the ego with merciless violence . . . *we should say that the destructive component had entrenched itself in the super-ego and turned against the ego.* What is now holding sway in the super-ego is, as it were, a pure culture of the death instinct, and in fact it often enough succeeds in driving the ego into death, *if the latter does not fend off its tyrant in time by the change round into mania.* (19:53, my italics)

While the *Homestead* version of the story implies that some think Father Flynn mad, signs of his mania are everywhere in the drastically revised story: his moping, wanderings, and hysterical, soft laughs (like the ones in his confession-box) are symptomatic of his “change round into mania.”

Insofar as mania shelters the ego from self-annulment, it might be a price willingly paid in order to steer clear of the deadly embrace of the lost object, embodied in the workings of the super-ego. Yet, in the story, the object remains close by, resting on the chest of the priest who is “lying still in his coffin . . . solemn and truculent in death.” As Judith Butler suggests, “Mania marks a temporary suspension or mastering of the tyrant by the ego, but the tyrant remains structurally ensconced for that psyche—and unknowable.”<sup>9</sup> Mania emerges as an aggressive turn not only against the object but potentially against the socio-religious outposts congealed in the psyche, thus emphasizing the ethical aspect of Father Flynn’s paralysis.

In sum, although no more than a ghostly presence in the story, Father Flynn is quite complex. The turn to mania as a retaliatory and defensive tactic against the thrust of the superego towards death remains one of the clearer tasks that he manages to accomplish before dying. Such a task, moreover, proves especially difficult in the case of Mrs. Sinico whose melancholically driven suicidal behavior signifies her submission to the harsh taskmaster, the superego, that Freud calls the “gathering place for the death-instinct.”

### Emily Sinico’s Melancholia—A Turn Round upon the Ego

Unlike Father Flynn, whose commitment to the priesthood had enabled him to transcend carnal desires, Mrs. Sinico is a married woman expelled from her husband’s “gallery of pleasures.” While “A Painful Case” is partly about an aberrant marriage, it is, more emphatically, a critique of the premises of marriage itself and the social disciplining of sexual desire. Emily Sinico’s case is painful not only because illicit but because her grief must remain unresolved. Harboring an adulterous desire and failing so utterly to fulfill it leave her in a position where she must mourn the loss of her love-object (James Duffy) and work through the shame and guilt it creates. She must do so, furthermore, under the duress of loneliness, deprived of the crucial solidarity of an empathic witness.

Since the resolution of mourning hinges squarely on the externalization and exposition of guilt—that is, on the public avowal of her loss of a proscribed desire—Emily Sinico can neither sever the ties with the lost object nor escape the fixation on it. Silent about her love and grief, and fixated on her lost object while devastated by inflowing inimical stimuli, Emily Sinico’s ego becomes a battlefield

between higher moral codes (the super-ego) and the desire to love and be loved (the ego as modified by the identification with the lost love object).

A close look at the tropological structure in which Emily Sinico is represented enables us better to grasp the truly painful nature of her case. She is described as being earthy ("Her companionship was like a warm soil"—*D* 111), and as an introjective and transformational force (she "emotionalised [Duffy's] mental life"—*D* 111). In his *Final Contributions to the Problems and Methods of Psychoanalysis*, Sándor Ferenczi defines introjection as an "extension to the external world of the original autoerotic interests, by including its objects in the ego."<sup>10</sup> In other words, introjection is the process whereby libidinally charged objects are gradually included within the ego, thus enlarging and enriching it. In their reappropriation of Ferenczi's concept of introjection, Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok trace it back to the very early stages of childhood and to the child's entry into language, arguing that it parallels normal biological growth by constantly urging the individual to assimilate new and emerging desires.<sup>11</sup> "Introjection operates," Torok suggests, "like a genuine instinct."<sup>12</sup> Insofar as it sets in motion the whole psychic apparatus, introjection is, in the words of Nicholas T. Rand, "the driving force of psychic life in its entirety" (80n).

There is a profound difference between the strategies of introjection, deployed by Emily Sinico, and those of the transcending of mortal eros used by Father Flynn. No other case in *Dubliners* resembles Mrs. Sinico's, either in terms of the potential for libidinal expansion and introjection or in terms of the frustration with which these genuine instincts are rebuked. Unshielded against the ravages of desire and unequipped with the introjective psycho-tactics of binding mobile stimuli, Mrs. Sinico's story unfolds as a relentless thrust into the abyss of sorrow. The bottom falls out of her world when Duffy recoils from her. Such an end is hastened by the illicit nature of the aborted affair with Duffy and by the impossibility of articulating her feelings about it. It is also impossible for her to grieve enough to block the onset of melancholia, to displace into mania the thrust of the destructive forces gathering within her (super-ego), or to discharge aggression from the "psychical sphere" into the "motor sphere" (the world outside the self).

Her behavior—intemperate habits, an addiction to alcohol, crossing the railway lines late at night from platform to platform (*D* 112-13)—suggests that Mrs. Sinico has been profoundly scarred by her short-circuited affair with Mr. Duffy. Rather than severing the affective ties with James Duffy, her object-libido, Mrs. Sinico stubbornly proceeds to "incorporate" by force the lost-object within her ego and to fantasize about introjecting the desires that the object fails to medi-

ate, not realizing that she is but singing “to empty benches.” This is all the more true, because, as a married woman, her extramarital desire is proscribed and cannot therefore be worked out through the public expression of grief crucial for its success. The desire to grieve, which is also a token of love, must, therefore, be thwarted by means of a magical maneuver—the secret incorporation of the lost object within the contours of the ego. As Torok argues, “[t]he ultimate aim of incorporation is to recover, in *secret* and through magic, an object that, for one reason or another, evaded its own function: mediating the introjection of desires” (114, my italics).

Introjection, a process of egoic broadening and expansion, amounts to Freud’s version of an achieved mourning, understood as a process of de-attachment from an object and re-attachment with an other. Incorporation, however, is the fantasied ingestion of the lost love-object and resembles Freud’s conceptualization of melancholia: the ambivalent but sustained struggle in the ego between the forces that want to abandon the lost object and the other forces that want to force it, at whatever cost, within the ego (14:255). At length, even Torok’s description of incorporation as an “illegal” procedure (114) is in tune with Freud’s account of the ego’s cunning methods of recovering the lost object, of which melancholia is at once an initiatory force and an effect.

The melancholic is governed by the ego-poetics of simulacra, feigning to possess what it does not, and thus brings a measure of entropy and chaos to the distinction between reality and fantasy. This is all the more so in the case of someone whose system is not proficient in hosting and then binding mobile cathexes. Indeed, the whole emotional enterprise beckoning to Mr. Duffy and Mrs. Sinico is so novel for their impoverished and lowly cathected systems that neither of them is able to feel any uneasiness about it (prior to the time) when “their thoughts entangled” (D 111). As the narrator of “A Painful Case” remarks sarcastically, “[n]either he nor she had had any such adventure before and neither was conscious of any incongruity” (D 110). Yet, while James Duffy seems to have been cognizant of his under-cathected system and has therefore opted for a strategy of pre-emption, Emily Sinico lacks such psychic resources.

Mrs. Sinico has no recourse to the Platonic or Stoic thought that allows Mr. Duffy to see that “every bond . . . is a bond to sorrow” (D 112). She is but a crude introjective force. Since in lowly cathected systems the management of grief starts at the moment of inception of eros, it is always, therefore, as Staten surmises, “too late to master mourning once the loved object is lost” (10). In other words, mourning emerges as the condition of possibility of eros, where, as a rule, the one fuses in the horizon of the other. To master mourning, one must therefore give a wide berth to the temptation of eros, but once

eros has taken root, it becomes quite impossible to obviate the outbreak of mourning. While Mr. Duffy manages to guard himself from the entrapments of eros, Mrs. Sinico is already captive to its lure, so that when she hears Mr. Duffy's verdict, she is overwhelmed by sorrow and collapses (*D* 112).

Since the process of libidinal introjection in which she has been absorbed is suspended *sine die*, Mrs. Sinico is led to maintain the affective bridge with the object, rather than to renounce it. In an under-cathected organism, the ego, devastated by the sudden disappearance of the object, falls prey all too easily to the incorporative and reparative magic of melancholia. Relying on its plasticity and histrionic gifts, the ego thus proceeds to counterfeit and substitute the lost object. Being positioned "midway between the id and reality," the ego, Freud proposes, "only too often yields to the temptation to become sycophantic, opportunist and lying, like a politician who sees the truth but wants to keep his place in popular favour" (19:56). The incorporation of the object, or the identification with it, does not take place prior to the object-loss of which it is an effect. It is, however, incorporation, not object-loss, that instantiates a bifurcation within the brokered relations of the ego. In this regard, the super-ego unleashes its aggressive potential on the cowering and cunning ego, obliging it either to renounce the object or to face death.

Mrs. Sinico's psyche thus becomes the battleground of two contending forces: the one (the ego) seeking to host the id's libido after the withdrawal of its object, the other (the super-ego) seeking boldly and coercively to counter such an illicit readjustment. As Freud has shown, the super-ego is "not simply a residue of the earliest object-choices of the id; it also represents an *energetic reaction-formation against those choices*" (19:34, my italics). In other words, while it is a precipitate of abandoned objects (parents, teachers, heroes, and any other such figures), it becomes—once the resolution of the Oedipus complex has taken place—quite autonomous in its object-choices, thus constraining the otherwise duplicative adventures of the ego. Moreover, unlike the ego—which, when it succumbs to the thrill and magic of incorporation, loses sight of reality—the super-ego is acutely aware of the laws of the reality principle and does not hesitate to use them to instill in the ego a pressing sense of guilt. Indeed, Freud describes the super-ego as the "germ from which all religions have evolved": it can hardly be localized, but it "answers to everything that is expected of the higher nature of man" (19:37). What does not pertain to the higher nature of man is therefore experienced by the subject as pangs of conscience or as a harrowing sense of guilt.

The sadistic turn of the super-ego against the ego gains momentum the more feelings of frustration, disappointment, and erotic vengeance are denied outward expression, especially when "a *cultural suppres-*

sion of the instincts," as Freud suggests in "The Economic Problem of Masochism," "holds back a large part of the subject's destructive instinctual components from being exercised in life" (19:17). The painfulness of Emily Sinico's case thus stems primarily from the fact that both her love and her grief are proscribed and must, therefore, remain closeted and socioculturally unacknowledged. Few things are more tragic than the loss of a love in a culture marked by a lack of the adequate conventions that would otherwise acknowledge such a loss and thereby warrant the homeopathic performance of grief necessary for its reparation. As Butler argues, "Insofar as the grief remains unspeakable, the rage over the loss can redouble by virtue of remaining unavowed. And if that rage is publicly proscribed, the melancholic effects of such a proscription can achieve suicidal proportions" (148). The preponderance in Mrs. Sinico of a melancholic disposition, neither buffered by an outward discharge of grief or aggression nor defused by any social form of solidarity and empathy, therefore creates an inward turn against the ego.

Through her suicide, Emily Sinico finally assumes an active part in her destiny and exacts an erotic vengeance on James Duffy who will thenceforth have not only to grieve her death but also to suffer the guilt emanating from the suspicion of having caused such a death. The need to inflict as much pain on Mr. Duffy as she has suffered because of his cowering retreat into his world of exquisite loneliness has been denied concrete expression and, therefore, coalesces into an alliance with the super-ego in its assault against the ego. What has been barred from outward vindictive expression must ultimately refract itself as self-indictment. Establishing a zero-sum relationship between the outward and the inward expressions of aggression, Freud intones that "the more a man controls his aggressiveness, the more intense becomes his ideal's inclination to aggressiveness against his ego. It is like a displacement, *a turning round upon his own ego*" (19:54, my italics).

Bit by bit, the psychic rationale behind Mrs. Sinico's aggressive U-turn against her own ego is laid bare. When the sadistic raids of the super-ego are bolstered by the suppressed need of the ego for vindictive violence, the ego is left with no alternative but to fight back against the assault. In its retaliatory frenzy, the ego might, however, take a step whereby it unwittingly supplements the sadism of the super-ego and thus speeds up the process of its own diminishment. In this regard, Mrs. Sinico's intemperate habits such as "crossing the lines late at night from platform to platform" or "going out at night to buy spirits" (*D* 114, 115) can be read not only as effects of the evasion-reflex and as defensive measures against the persecution of the super-ego but as unwitting masochistic contrivances. Thus, the sadism of the super-ego, which expresses itself through the whips

of conscience, is inadvertently supplemented, in the very process of being countered, by the flight-reflex of the ego into behaviors that bring about its death. Freud notes that “[t]he sadism of the super-ego and the masochism of the ego supplement each other and unite to produce the same effects” (19:170). Deserted by all protective forces, strolling in the deathly stillness of exquisite isolation, and deceived by its own contrapuntal maneuvers, “the ego,” in the words of Freud, “gives itself up,” that is, “lets itself die” (19:58).

All forces have contrived against her; Emily Sinico dies even though “[t]he injuries were not sufficient to have caused death in a normal person” (D 114). The need for self-annihilation has, in her case, exceeded the constraints of self-preservation. The aggression that should have found utterance against James Duffy—and by implication against the sociocultural mores that regulate desire and the mourning of desire—is instead rerouted against her own ego. Nothing “breaks,” as Butler astutely implies, “the hold of grief except the cultivation of the aggression that grief holds at bay against the means by which it is held at bay” (162). In this respect, only erotic vengeance against Mr. Duffy would have broken the lethal hold that Mrs. Sinico’s impossible grief has laid on her psychic apparatus. Only an unashamed and public expression of her grief—be it maniacally or hysterically driven—would have enabled her to survive the abysmal onslaughts of conscience.

The difference between Father Flynn’s case and that of Mrs. Sinico proves that only mania has the leverage to resolve and mediate the conflict between the ego and the super-ego of which melancholia is both an effect and a driving force. Yet can we not discern underneath Emily Sinico’s suicide the contours of a strategy of posthumous vengeance, especially against James Duffy who is now himself overwhelmed by the guilt stemming from the suspicion of having had a hand in such a tragic end?

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> John Gordon, “*Dubliners* and the Art of Losing,” *Studies in Short Fiction*, 32 (Summer 1995), 343-52.

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, David Lloyd, “The Memory of Hunger,” *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, ed. David L. Eng and David Kazanjian (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2003), 205-28; Seamus Deane, *Strange Country: Modernity and Nationhood in Irish Writing since 1790* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997); and Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1996).

<sup>3</sup> See Sigmund Freud’s first explicit report on the subject, “Mourning and Melancholia,” *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey et al. (London: Hogarth Press, 1957), 14:239-58. Further references to Freud’s writings will be cited parenthetically in the text to this



collection by volume and page number.

<sup>4</sup> In Freud's parlance, an individual system that is highly cathected implies, by the same token, that it is highly effective not only in moderating and managing the inflowing stimuli but also in subduing the intrusive (libidinal) stimuli by converting them into what Freud calls, after Josef Breuer, "quiescent cathexis" (18:30). In this regard, Freud postulates that "a system which is itself highly cathected is capable of taking up an additional stream of fresh inflowing energy and of converting it into quiescent cathexis, that is of binding it psychically" (18:30).

<sup>5</sup> See Henry Staten, *Eros in Mourning: Homer to Lacan* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1995). Further references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

<sup>6</sup> On the phenomenon of automourning, see my "The Poetics of Mourning: The Tropologic of Prosopopoeia in Joyce's 'The Dead,'" *American Imago: Studies in Psychoanalysis and Culture*, 60 (2003), 159-78.

<sup>7</sup> Donald T. Torchiana, *Backgrounds for Joyce's "Dubliners"* (Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1986), p. 29.

<sup>8</sup> Dominick LaCapra, "Trauma, Absence, Loss," *Critical Inquiry*, 25 (Summer 1999), 696-727. Further references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

<sup>9</sup> Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1997), pp. 191-92. Further references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

<sup>10</sup> Sándor Ferenczi, *Final Contributions to the Problems and Methods of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Michael Balint, trans. Eric Mosbacher et al. (New York: Brunner/Mazel, 1980), p. 316.

<sup>11</sup> Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, *The Shell and the Kernel: Renewals of Psychoanalysis*, ed. and trans. Nicholas T. Rand (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1994). Further references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

<sup>12</sup> Torok, "The Illness of Mourning and the Fantasy of the Exquisite Corpse," *The Shell and the Kernel* (p. 113). Further references will be cited parenthetically in the text.