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ONE

Trauma, Tragedy, and Theater
A Conversation with Simon Critchley

ERIC R. SEVERSON, SIMON CRITCHLEY,
ANN PELLEGRINI, RICHARD KEARNEY,
AND KATHLEEN SKERRETT

Eric Severson

I'd like to begin by introducing the participants of this discussion. These scholars embody the spirit of this emerging discourse between psychology and philosophy. Each of them moves humbly but bravely from their respective fields of expertise into interdisciplinary conversations. Such a movement is risky, difficult, daring, and often messy. These conversations occur far away from the more stable academic silos where all the terms are settled and the lines of contention were drawn long ago. Some discomfort is inevitable when we engage outside of the partitions and channels that have defined the discourses of psychology and philosophy, but the panelists before you today have each discovered and demonstrated how sparks of genius emerge from precisely these tensions.

Ann Pellegrini joins us from New York University, where she directs the Center for the Study of Gender and Sexuality. Ann has provided trenchant contributions for the last 20 years to the fields of psychology, human sexuality, religion, race theory, and performance studies. She's joined on our panel by Richard Kearney, the Charles Seelig Professor of Philosophy at Boston College. Richard's work has helped people around the world to see the philosophical and theological significance of the films they watch,
Sublimation is the process whereby civilized people adjust psychological impulses and desires that might be socially alarming or harmful if acted upon. Frustrated impulses, Freud suggests, lead to dissatisfaction and unhappiness. Freud suggests that a mature response to such frustrated impulses is a "shifting of the instinctual aims in such a way that they cannot come up against frustration from the external world. In this, sublimation of the instincts lends its assistance." Freud expects that this process of sublimation is a rare feat and "accessible to only a few people." He concludes, Dr. Critchley, how do you consider sublimation to be at work in Hamlet, and how might the appearance of sublimation in Hamlet be helpful for practitioners in psychology?

Simon Critchley

Thank you, Eric, and thank you to Ann, Richard, and Kathleen. Let me first address the important question of sublimation. Hamlet is a rather confused young man. He is, by most estimates, about 28 years old, and the death of his father sends him into a kind of unassailable grief. The first thought he expresses in the play, even before he learns that his father has been murdered, is the contemplation of suicide. As the play progresses, we should never forget that this is Hamlet's first thought. The only reason he doesn't kill himself is that there might be some notion of the everlasting. Hamlet declares: "Oh, that this too, too sullied flesh would melt, / Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew, / Or that the Everlasting had not fixed His canon 'gainst self-delighting! / O God, God!" (1.5.128–32).

Were there no everlasting, no divine condemnation of suicide, then Hamlet might be a very short play; he might have just offed himself in the first act. Another short version of Hamlet could have been written as follows:

**SCENE 1.**

Up on the battlements, Horatio, Marcellus, and Bernardo see the ghost pop up and wonder what it is.

**SCENE 2.**

We meet Hamlet, and he is feeling melancholic about his father's death.

**SCENE 3.**

They tell Hamlet about the ghost and return to see the spirit.
Scene 4. The ghost talks to Hamlet. They go off to the woods for a little while.

Scene 5. Hamlet comes back, the ghost tells him to revenge his father's murder and he avenges his father's murder. He runs into the bedroom where Claudius is with his mother. His Mother? That's the whole enigma: What does this woman want? What does his mother want? Hamlet sticks it to Claudius, and curtails.

The result is a five-minute, Tarantino-like action movie version of Hamlet, complete with a ghost, fast action, and a final sword fight. The problem and fascination of Hamlet is how we get from the five-minute version to Shakespeare's longest play. Instead of a few brief utterances, Hamlet becomes the character with the most lines in all of Shakespeare. Something is going on with Hamlet that prevents him from ending the drama in the first act, and this something is thinking.

Hamlet is a thinker. In this play, we watch as action and thought pull against each other: revenge is pitted against reflection; consciousness makes coward of us all; resolution fails to convert to action, returning instead to doubt and reflection; and the play goes on. So we have a suicidal, melancholic, young man who is given a violent task to carry out. For whatever reason, he does not follow through. And here we may find that sublimation is at work in Shakespeare as a kind of struggle of primal desires pitted against doubt and second-guessing. Hamlet is a confused, young man who simply cannot carry out the simple, violent task he is given.

Sublimation is the reification of thought and action, and that unification occurs in an action that redirects the primal desire. It may well be that Hamlet is itself a work of aesthetic sublimation, and that this maneuver is replicated by Hamlet when he orchestrates the play within the play. The play that Prince Hamlet orchestrates redirects the conflicted drive for revenge into an action that might be deemed socially acceptable. Hamlet orchestrates a theatrical performance designed to catch the conscience of his uncle, King Claudius. He calls the play The Mousetrap, and claims that the title is chosen metaphorically (or, "tropically," as in a "trope"). Hamlet's own work of sublimation is a theatrical performance that snares the mouse that he is too conflicted to attack directly. This is the closest we get to Hamlet's resolution of his problem, and it is found through an aesthetic act, the creation of a play within a play. And this act of sublimation succeeds, revealing the guilt of Claudius.

In his "Notes on a Case of Obsessional Neurosis," Freud writes, "A man who doubts his love may, or rather must, doubt every lesser thing," and we can talk about that in relationship to Hamlet. The first effect of the appearance of the ghost of his father relates to the love Hamlet once bore for Ophelia. As his mind reels in the insecurity and doubt of his ghostly mission to kill Claudius, all other loves are called into question. The first victim of this doubt is Ophelia, and Hamlet drops his love for Ophelia, now doubting "every lesser thing." He even doubts the ghost, the phantasm that cast him into this deep quandary. Hamlet is too trapped beneath and paralysed by his doubt to attack Claudius. Hamlet cannot act directly on his powerful impulse to vengeance, and this makes necessary a sublimation of that desire. The conceit of the play within the play becomes necessary and effective. It succeeds. The play works.

The King says "Light!" and leaves the theater. Hamlet, now confident of his uncle's guilt, heads to see his mother, a confrontation in which Shakespeare gives us the most violent, percussive intensity of any scene in any of his plays. But on the way to see his mother he passes Claudius, who had apparently gone straight from The Mousetrap to a place of prayer. Hamlet's sublimation has succeeded too well, for Claudius is convicted and remorseful and is confessing his "brother's murder." Sublimation, ideally, fulfills the unbridled desire by alternate and acceptable means. Hamlet's aesthetic expression has done more than his sword could have; his sublimated actions achieve what his primal impulses could not have attained.

Hamlet now had the opportunity to do it, to slay his uncle and avenge his father with no further doubt about Claudius's guilt. But once again, Hamlet stalls. As he was in his opening ruminations about "the everlasting," Hamlet is again concerned about the eternal implications of taking Claudius's life in the midst of his repentant prayer. If Hamlet were to kill Claudius now, in the midst of a heartfelt and earnest confession, the murderer would be rewarded with heaven! Once again, Hamlet the thinker begins to rationalize. He says to himself:
Up, sword: and know thou a more horrid hent:
When he is drunk asleep, or in his rage,
Or in the inconstant pleasure of his bed;
As gaming, swearing, or about some act
That has no refresh of salvation in’t;
Then trip him, that his heels may kick at heaven,
And that his soul may be as damned and black
As hell, wherein it goes. (3.3.88–95)

So Hamlet, afraid of rewarding Claudius eternally, determines to catch
him in his “inconstant pleasure” or some other godless act; that’ll be the
time to kill him. And so the play goes on for a couple more acts, as does
the ongoing sublimation of the murderous desire by further activities.
This sublimation serves as the ongoing psychological structure of the play,
even as it moves toward its bloody and violent conclusion. And perhaps,
if Freud suggests that sublimation is the successful and mature response
to primal impulses that might be violent and untempered, Hamlet’s sublima-
tion becomes less and less successful at the death of Polonius and violent
drama that unfolds in the play’s final scenes.

Richard Kearney

Thank you, Simon, for the stimulating book and these reflections. I begin
my question with the conclusion to your book, where you say that you
have sought, with Jamieson, to listen to Hamlet in another way. The
phrase you actually use is, “We have tried to listen for something else in
the distracted globe of Hamlet, words whispered in the wings, some other
way of loving.” Now, love kind of comes as a bit of a shock at the end.
Love is not a word that appears very often in Hamlet in any positive sense.
You have taken us through a series of readings of Hamlet, readings of
delusion, distrust, disgust, and carnage; then, suddenly this word “love”
 pops up. But, lest we think for a moment that this is going to be a
happy ending, you make it quite clear that this is a love for nothing. You
quote the famous Lacanian phrase that love is “giving what one does not
have to another who doesn’t want it,” following it with your own versions:
“Love as we see it, promises nothing” and “Love is best written about in its

absolute negation.” You write that passionate love is a passion of nothing,
a “radical exchange of naughts.”

What kind of love is it that you are proposing, and what is the thera-
peutic value, if any, of that kind of love? Also, there seems to be in this
book, but also in your other books, and particularly in Faith of the Faithless,
two ways of understanding “nothing.” There’s nothing and there’s nothing:
Nothing 1, Nothing 2. And so your favorite Irish author, Beckett, puts it,
“Nothing is more real than nothing.” Beckett provides a play where noth-
ing happens twice, but between these is an almost. So what interests me
is the “almost” that separates the first nothing from the second nothing.
Your work rehearse what I might call, very crudely, a negative nihilism.
You talk about an irresistible oceanic undertow of negation that threatens
to engulf us, both Hamlet and Nietzsche, but you are not recommending
that kind of nothing. You speak of nihilism as the philosophical corre-
spondent of narcissistic psychosis, where the amorous cord connecting us
to the world snaps and recolls back on itself. You’re not recommending
love for that nothing. So, my other question is, what is the second kind
of nothing, the nothing of love, and the love for nothing, that will save
us from Hamlet’s fate, and hopefully from Ophelia’s, although she is the
tragic hero of your reading of the play?

Critchley

Ophelia is the tragic casualty or tragic hero of the play, and it is her desires
that we try to track through Hamlet. She does not simply feign madness;
she becomes mad. Like Hamlet, her father dies and she unravels. She does
not endlessly speak, or pile upon upon, or word about word. She speaks
the language of song, a different kind of discourse, and offers extraordi-
nary, fragmented, and sexualized songs. To follow her speech and song
about flowers, a language of flowers, is to find ourselves in some strange
concerns. Baraillie has this amazing discussion of this “Language of Flowers”
that might help us understand Ophelia’s utterances. He points out that
flowers bare their sexual organs on the outside, exposed, whereas our
sexual organs are under whatever you’re wearing; at least, I hope so! So,
to give flowers is to give, as it were, exposed sexual organs, a very strange
thing to offer. Ophelia is exposed, and her language of flowers expresses that her gift of love is also a gift of nothing, a gift of death.

The form of love that we are recommending is a mystical love, and by that I mean an aphatic mysticism, negation. The more common sort of mysticism is one of descending affirmations, where one begins from some idea of God, or the good, and then moves downward toward the mystic. But there is another mystical tradition, which we might call ascending negation. I’m thinking about theologians like Marguerite Porete, Hildegard of Bingen, and Meister Eckhart. This type of mysticism is interested in persistently stripping away language. The process is called “de-creation” by Simone Weil, a sort of annulling and negating. The love here draws toward nihilism, the stripping away of love, as Marguerite Porete would say. To love is to back and bawl away at oneself to make a space that is large enough for love. This is the idea of negation and love that interests me. This way of loving is an act of absolute spiritual daring, which requires going into a kind of impoverishment, a rendering poor of oneself.

Severson

How is this love expressed in Hamlet? And might this way of talking about love be of interest to therapists?

Critchley

In Hamlet this form of love is there by its negation. Hamlet is about love precisely by way of negation. In this sense, the play is about what the play is not, which is love. Recall the scene where Hamlet speaks to Ophelia after she comes to spy on the prince. She is sent to bait him and to catch him. In response, Hamlet lets her know that whatever love he once had for her is utterly lost:

HAM. I did love you once.

OPH. Indeed, my lord, you made me believe so.

HAM. You should not have believed me; for virtue cannot so inoculate our old stock but we shall relish of it; I loved you not.

OPH. I was the more deceived.

(3.1.114–20)

At that point, Hamlet’s love for her drops and Ophelia is debased, sent to the nunnery with a whole series of misogynistic insults. We see a form of love in the very negation of love, in the death and annihilation of love. If we are looking at the play in terms of what the play is not, which is a play about love, we find ourselves reading it inside out or backwards. The play teaches about love even as love is debased.

In terms of therapeutic practices, I think there may be ways in which the therapist would utilize negation, a stripping away of language, in order to let something happen. Perhaps Hamlet can help here, too. Within the play, Hamlet gets advice from two analysts who assess his melancholy. The first analyst is Polonius, who declares with confidence that he knows what is wrong with Hamlet: “This is the very ecstasy of love; / whose vio- lent property fordoth itself / and leads the will to desperate undertakings” (2.1.102–04). Polonius, speaking to Ophelia, believes he has Hamlet figured out: love is his problem, and it is love for Ophelia herself, whom Polonius has commanded to withdraw from Hamlet. Here is a clumsy, cruddy kind of therapeutic response.

The true analyst in the play, the true therapist of the play, is the ghost. The ghost is nothing. Hamlet is not even sure that the ghost is there. At times, Hamlet sees the ghost in the room and others, like his mother, cannot see the ghost at all. The ghost reflects nothing back. And yet the ghost advises Hamlet, even as he storms into his mother’s chamber aroused in an almost sexual rage. The ghost tells him, as he enters the encounter, to remember that his encounter with his mother is merely a visitation to “what thy almost blunted purpose” (3.4.111). And then the ghost tells him to “step between her and her fighting soul” (3.4.113). He is to stand between Gertrude and herself. This is precisely what Lacan declares to be the role of the analyst. To step between her and herself is our work, and to enter into that moment, and not to offer simple remedies.

Kearney

Is this way of thinking about love, or mysticism, or nihilism, something you would recommend to a patient coming to you for therapy? How are these images you draw from Marguerite Porete, Simon Weil, and the
hacking and hewing of the self to be livable for most of us, and especially those seeking help from psychologists? Not that Polonius is something we should settle for, or his version of love. But can we live up to that hyperbolic ethics of impossible love where: we are ravished and invaded, where love overwhelms us, de-creates us, and the abyss of loss becomes the fullness of everything?

Critchley

I don’t know, honestly. In the case of Hamlet, we have a suicidal young man whose father has died. He is in an extreme position of grief. Hamlet has real doubts about what his mother wants and it’s tearing him to pieces. So what do we do with that? Prescribing drugs or producing solace would not necessarily be the right thing to do. It’s a question of trying to work through whatever is going on there in a serious way. Because there are Hamlets out there, who are approaching the anniversary of the Newtown massacre. There was a strange kind of Hamlet but with a semiautomatic rifle. And obviously the relationship of Adam Lanza with his mother is one of the factors in that tragedy. Well, I think you take the damn thing seriously and not try to approach it with palliatives, for a start.

As far as everyday people are concerned, no. I don’t believe we can live up to this version of love, and I think it is impossible to sustain, but one still has to try. Given the choice between that or living with a certain insipid and bovine contentedness, I will go with the former. That doesn’t mean that such a life will be happy or even fulfilled. On the question of therapy, if all we seek is some reassurance or reflection back to ourselves of imaginary fantasies, then I’d rather take up hiking — and I hate hiking.

Kathleen Skerrett

What I appreciate in *Stay, Illusion* is the distinction made between ancient forms of tragedy and modern forms of tragedy. Using broad strokes, we might say that ancient tragedy gives us characters who exemplify the risk of a justified will. Such characters represent a moral position, an ethical position; they are eloquent in its defense. They are almost totally justified in their actions. Yet in following through, their justified wills collide, and the tragedy is that destruction occurs because of some external contingency that makes them collide. This is a very powerful, very moving spectacle of the possibility of justified wills colliding destructively in the world. Such is the nature of ancient tragedy, roughly sketched. Modern forms of tragedy are different. *Stay, Illusion* beautifully turns to another kind of tragedy, which is focused on an internal collision. There may still be a justified will, but we may not be interested in that; it is the internal collision that creates the tragedy. Critchley and Webster read *Hamlet* as this modern tragedy.

To address Hamlet’s internal collision, we might delineate two possibilities of mourning, of grieving, that Freud beautifully adumbrates as mourning or melancholia. In order to work through mourning, there must be a sighing through of what was most cherished, what was beloved in the lost object. That sighing is incredibly painful because you have to recollect love, most intensely, most exquisitely, for what you know is already gone. The alternative to this sighing is melancholia, which many of us get stuck in. Melancholia causes the person to berate, to reject, to terrorize, to become an obscenity that rejects the lost object. If we can remain in the posture of rejection, we don’t have to account for what has been genuinely lost. In mourning, the justified will suffers an internal collision between holding on enough to the beloved to prevent melanchoic rejection of the lost object. This internal collision is extremely painful, just as the external collision in classical tragedies is painful. Both kinds of tragedy disclose the helplessness of the justified will, and yet both reveal such external and internal collisions that are sometimes amenable to narrative catharsis of that pain.

If we read *Hamlet* as a modern tragedy, the therapeutic moments that could ameliorate that internal collision appear in very fleshy ways in the play, and also in the lives of therapists and their patients. They are contingent moments. These are now internal, not external, contingencies. Those internal contingencies may be mapped aesthetically, which would allow one to face the choice to cherish what has been so painfully lost. Can you do the work of sighing through that which is cherished, the inventory of loving what has been lost? Or do you sustain the repetitive violent rejection
of what you cannot stand to lose? Much of the reason that Hamlet is stuck in an internal collision relates to the fact that he has no guidance for doing the work before him. To talk about a justified will seems futile; his grief exposes him to the risk of an internal collision in which the justified will seems to be what is at stake.

So, in thinking about love and tragic conflict in Hamlet, we might inventory those instances where Hamlet is possibly doing more than hanging over his mother with some sort of erotic rage. Hamlet also knows that he loves her, and he is caught between rejecting or remembering her care for him. Similarly with his father, the ghost is more than an instructor; the ghost is someone who has traced the contingency of Hamlet’s internal psyche with care. The questions that I pose to Simon are about nurture, the forgotten nurture, and gratitude. I mean that in the sense of pure wonder, the pure wonder that gratitude for nurture would bring to life. Nurture may be very fragmentary in Hamlet, but it is there nonetheless, and could form the content of the work of mourning. The work of mourning might be directed to those forgotten contingencies of nurture and wonder that nonetheless cost our grief. Yet, if philosophy is predicated on disappointment, then Hamlet may be stuck in the rejecting posture of melancholia. So the therapeutic question might be, “Can you give up being someone who needs to be disappointed?”

Critchley

Thank you for that. Philosophy begins in disappointment, but need not end in disappointment. I’m sincere when I say that. In Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, he tells us about the natural philosophers from Ionia who believed that philosophy begins in wonder. It is not clear for Aristotle whether it begins in wonder, but it’s a view that he offers. As for me, I’m not a person inclined toward modernity. The modern issue, the post-Kantian settlement in philosophy, is that things are not wonderful in that sense. We instead experience the world with a sense of something missing, with a sense of lack. This is what I call religious disappointment, the death of god, political disappointment, the experience of injustice. And this is what leads us to ask, for me, the key philosophical questions. Philosophy begins in disappointment, but it ends in affirmation. So the problem with beginning in wonder or gratitude is I wonder where that would take us? What questions would that present to us?

Your thoughts on *Hamlet* are absolutely brilliant. This is indeed a play of failed mourning. This is why *Hamlet* becomes a play of melancholia and mania. The soliloquies bear the marks of melancholy, and they carry with them extraordinary philosophical arguments. On the other hand, it is obvious that Hamlet can push aside that melancholia in manic action. If you think of him when he’s watching *The Mousetrap*, or when he’s playing with Rosenzweig and Guildenstern, he swells up like a balloon and fills the whole universe. So Hamlet oscillates between mourning and melancholia.

The psychological failure to mourn is precisely what leaves him in this divided and unstable condition. And there is, as you say, absolutely a question of the inability to remember the contingencies of nurture. I completely agree with that. The one time where that appears is in a very strange moment, which is the beginning of Act 5 just before he jumps in the grave and wrestles with Laertes. There is this poignant and almost gentle moment when Hamlet is with the clown and the gravedigger, and he holds up Yorick’s skull. Instead of being a source of disgust for Hamlet, Yorick’s skull makes him happy and reflective, perhaps nostalgic. The skull also can be a source of amusement, and he can chuck it around, back and forth. It’s a skull; it’s funny! And he then begins to remember “he hath bore me on his back a thousand times. [Horatio]” (5.1.175–76).

And in that moment Hamlet remembers being a child, and how funny it was being on the jester’s shoulders. This seems to be one such moment, though it is a darkly comedic moment, when he directly recalls nurture. Surely it could be found, less directly, in other scenes from the play.

Skerrett

There is a kind of fullness of contingency in that scene, a dark plenitude. And this is important for the beginning. To call what he has in that moment “options” is to use too technical a term. But Hamlet, in the dark moment when he remembers Yorick’s care for him, has openings to the original nurture from which he lives, however blinded he might be by his melancholia.
Critchley

Well, Hamlet cannot recall, or cannot sustain the recollection of these beginnings. And instead he turns against his mother: "she's a whore!" He uses all sorts of terms to debase her. She is a drab, or a board, or a scullion; these terms, the terms of whoredom sort of resonate in Shakespeare in different ways, particularly in Hamlet. At the same time, he idealizes his dead father. He holds up two pictures, "How could you go from this to this? How could you go from my dad to this bastard Claudius? Hyperion to assassin. How can you do that? How can you do that?" So he remembers nothing about his mother that is positive, and his dead father is idealized to a point that also blocks him, because he is consumed by what he fantasizes is his father's desire. He is consumed, also, with carrying out his father's desire, which is revenge. Hamlet is tortured by the enigma of his mother's desire, and the directness of his father's desire. Hamlet's desire is completely empty; she's consumed by the desires of his father and mother.

One interesting psychological and therapeutic aspect of the play would be this absence of Hamlet's own desire. Where can Hamlet find his desire? To some degree, it seems absent. The one desire he really expresses in the play is a desire to go back to Wittenberg and to keep on studying. He's a graduate student in Wittenberg, which also raises a whole series of other questions. And Wittenberg wasn't nowhere; Wittenberg was the place where Luther nailed the damn theses to Holy Trinity Church. This place he wants to return to, the only direct allusion of Hamlet's own desire, is to go back to where the Reformation began. He's a student at the center of Protestant theology. And one of the things that Protestant theology clearly rejects, from very early on, is purgatory. And the ghost turns up and describes himself as a ghost who spends his days in cleansing fires and during the nights he can wander around a bit. The ghost is in purgatory. So what's a Catholic ghost doing in a Protestant play?

Skerrett

Hamlet is consumed by the enigmatic desires of his mother and the vengeful desires of his father. And Ophelia, who might be the hero of the play, could actually embody another contingency of nurture, but she is subject to such bizarre and cruel rejection by Hamlet.

Perhaps this play can serve as a common scripture for psychologists. To do so would allow us to take various approaches to Hamlet from a therapeutic perspective. What does he offer to a therapeutic gaze? I think that as we start combing through what he says, and how he behaves, we discover that he is intensely melancholic. You wouldn't want to give him a gun. Hamlet is sick; he is not at all well. But he's not well in recognizable ways, and he's not beyond hope. Yet there may be something in the moment that he could pursue beyond his internal collision into a life. Such a turn, exploring such a contingency, would surely be painful, and would involve suffering and mourning, but this would be a better risk than the wild vacillation between suicidal and homicidal perversion.

Ann Pellegrini

I like very much what you have to say about theater, and perhaps that won't surprise since one of my institutional homes is performance studies. I am particularly intrigued by your meditation on the sort of the double theater of Hamlet. If this is a play about nothing, it is as a play about the nothingness of theater that it yet produces truth. The creative fictions of theater, for which we could substitute the word "fantasy," materialize in theater and may be truer than what philosophers want to call reality. Plato's hysterical rejection of mimeosis, or theater, or poetry in The Republic, is a mimetic rivalry. Plato's very rejection of theater is simultaneously a recognition of the tremendous power of theater, and the ways in which it commands a certain witness and witnesses back, and produces truth. So this is, in part, why Plato has to use the device of theater in order to do rivalry with theater. As Simon and Jameson note, Socratic dialogue is no small part theater.

It is worth asking: what aesthetic forms or genres are adequate to the challenge of ethics in our contemporary moment? Freud's essay "Mourning and Melancholia" might be helpful in this investigation, but we might read it with an eye on its social history. The essay is written and published during World War I, and it actually forms a connected series of thoughts Freud is having about the challenge of mourning, and the violence of melancholia when it turns to mania. Freud has an emergent social theory, and "Mourning and Melancholia" is part of this developing
theory of society. At the same time, the essay is more explicitly about the drama of the individual turned against herself or himself. Mania is the violence of that which cannot be mourned. Because we do not know the value of what we have lost, the violence gets turned outward and brings trauma to the other person; the other bears (and, perhaps, bears) the trauma that we cannot bear for ourselves.

This melancholia is an individual and painfully individualizing turn, but Freud wrote this essay very close to the great violence of World War I. A coincidence? There is no such thing as a coincidence in psychoanalysis, right? "Mourning and Melancholia" was written in close temporal coincidence to "Reflections on War and Death," which offers or comes close to offering a social theory of what happens when the death drive is handed off to another. There's an extraordinary moment in the second essay that comprises "Reflections on War and Death" where Freud points out that we are unable to imagine our own deaths. We are unable even to imagine the death of our beloved others. We have lost something of a drama of death, which is to say the risk of living. We will die. He writes:

Shall we not admit that in our civilized attitude towards death we have again lived psychologically beyond our means? Shall we not turn around and avow the truth? Were it not better to give death the place to which it is entitled in both reality and in our thoughts and to reveal a little more of our unconscious attitude toward death which up to now we have so carefully suppressed? This may not appear a very high achievement and in some respects rather a step backwards, a kind of regression, but at least it has the advantage of taking the truth into account a little more and of making life more bearable again. To bear life remains, after all, the first duty of the living.10

So this is one of the reasons why we return to representational forms. We turn to fictional forms, to theater, to return to us the risk of our own death. When we go to the theater, we see these characters dying night after night after night, and we have emotional response to their deaths, and we experience a vicarious death. Freud writes, "It is therefore inevitable that we should seek compensation for the loss of life in the world of fiction, in literature, and in theater."11 Death in the theater is a proxy witnessing to what will be delivered to us, what will be delivered to our beloveds. In war, we are no longer able to deny our deaths, and life has become interesting again. For Freud, because war makes life interesting again, it is as if we have no use for theater anymore. Yet Freud clearly envisions a gift from aesthetics to address the social and ethical challenges. But what are the aesthetic forms necessary to recall the charge of life, which is that we will die?

The one guaranteed contingency is our mortality. These are the questions that haunt us now. These are the many ghosts that we need to keep before us as we read your book and think about Hamlet for this contemporary moment.

Critchley

That's really helpful, and you rightly ask what aesthetic forms are adequate for the ethical problems of our time. I recently watched, at the Park Avenue Armory, the film Massive Attack vs. Adam Curtis. Adam Curtis is the filmmaker whose 2002 film The Century of the Self demonstrated the way Freudian theories of the unconscious were active in the development of advertising and public relations. His latest film is an extraordinary experience. The whole Park Avenue Armory is filled with eleven translucent screens. The screens together provide Curtis's essay on the emergence of a managed or static world that is governed by images. The impression is that art is ambiguous. Aesthetics can enchantingly sustain the conservation of corruption, or it can open our eyes to new ways of seeing and hoping.

The first play we have, the first piece of theater we have, is a play called The Persians, written by Aeschylus in about 472 BCE. The Persians deals with the historical event of the Battle of Salamis, in 480. The play depicts the court of the Persians in Susa after their defeat, which is largely due to the hubris of Xerxes as he overreaches in his expedition against mainland Greece. The Persians shows how the news of defeat at Salamis falls on the Persians. We see from this play that the Persians are emotional people, just like the Greeks, but perhaps even more so. There is much emotion in the play. There is also a ghost in the play, the ghost of Xerxes's dead father. Like Hamlet, this first play is framed by violence and war, and occurs in the frame of war. Like Hamlet, a ghost appears to reveal that something is profoundly wrong with the state. When the dead King
Hamlet appears, he does so because something is rotten in the state of Denmark. When the dead King Darius appears in *The Persians*, it is for precisely the same reason.

When time is out of joint, ghoasts erupt. Theater and war run together, and this takes us into Freud's essay, just as you point out. "Reflections on War and Death" is not a text I have considered in light of Hamlet, but I'm fascinated by the suggestion. It does seem that theater can point uniquely to the way that trauma exerts the effect of repetition. You murdered my father and I am therefore justified in murdering you. And it loops around with a powerful compulsion to repeat. Is there any way out of that loop? Theater can be the mechanism that works through and potentially breaks that pattern of repetition.

Aeschylus writes *The Persians* for a Greek audience in the midst of this social and psychological phenomenon. The battle against Xerxes was more recent to the first Greek audience than 9/11 is for us today. The play was acted out, in all likelihood, by war veterans and observed by war veterans. We have no record of the play, other than the fact that it was an award-winning drama. It seems that these thespian veterans, with scars still aching from the battle, would have been asked to exhibit sympathy for the enemy that had been defeated. And perhaps this repetitious cycle is first interrupted by aesthetics, as theater is an act of sympathy for an enemy. The play finishes with the ghost of King Darius, who serves up a warning to the audience, the Greeks: if you act with the same hubris that the Persians acted with, you'll meet the same end. You'll end up in the same disaster. Theater can be an aesthetic form that reflects back, in all its naked terror, the sort of repetition loops and trauma loops within which we find ourselves.

Skerrett

I like Ann's challenge to find the aesthetic genre that does not feed the compulsion to ricochet between the rejection of loss and of bearing others. Perhaps there is an aesthetic sublimation at work in theater; if theater expresses melancholia in a socially acceptable manner. But there is also the danger that theater would do something less beneficial than serve as the mature sublimation of the desire to repetitive violence. Theater might amplify or encourage the message, accelerating the very traumatic repetition to which you refer.

The challenge of Ann's question is to figure out what we should be looking for in this genre. How can tragedy contribute to therapy? There must be a difference between the theater that encourages the cycle versus aesthetic expression that interrupts it. What sort of genre points us to the extremely painful work of siftin through what is cherished? This work is not sentimental, but extremely painful. Sentimentality is another temptation of failed mourning. So what is the genre that furthers the work of mourning?

There are the contingencies internal to the individual and there are contingencies external; both create tragic risks for the justified will. There are individuals setting out toward death, the necroauts. All of us are necroauts, in a sense, but this is not the only sure contingency of our existence. Surely we all will die, it is also true that we are all born. We can also be necroauts. I'm not suggesting that one way is deeper than the other, only that there might be resources in necroauts to address the internal conflicts of disappointment.

Critchley

Necroauts rather than necroauts. I guess that would be a girl band rather than a boy band. The international necroautnautical society, of which I am still chief philosopher, is still kind of a boy band. And we are death-obessed, death-bound, and all too likely to forget about natality and the second, sure contingency that you mention. We necroauts have had a lot of fun with our dark focus, but perhaps not without some cost. The necroauts would be a good thing. So how do you switch? How do we move the messaging that has for so long neglected natality? Well the answer is love. Love is the answer. And perhaps theater, a kind of therapeutical theater.

Natality certainly turns our attention toward Hannah Arendt and her suggestions along these lines. There is the general impression that Heidegger was kind of a bad boy Nazi and he thought about death. This is opposed to Hannah Arendt, who is thought to be the good girl that thought about life, about birth, about natality. These generalizations are far too simple-minded. I could go into the reasons why, which are textual
and argumentative, but Arendt does not, in my estimation, point to a natality that goes down far enough.

For me, the thinker of natality is Levinas. What people don't take seriously enough, perhaps because it is also the most problematic area of Levinas's work, are the themes in the last section of *Totality and Infinity* where he talks about the relationship between eons, fecundity, and filiality. For Levinas, the challenge and tragedy of philosophy is that it emerges in a world already at war. *Totality and Infinity* and Otherwise Than Being begin with the fact of war; being is revealed to us in the face of war. He begins the preface to *Totality and Infinity* that the way out of the tragedy of finitude is through, what Levinas calls, the infinity of time that we epitomized in the birth of a child.

Severson

For Levinas, philosophy begins in the midst of violence and disappointment, but points toward a more primordial peace, the echo of which still reverberates in the face of the other, the face that cries out, "Do not kill me."

Critchley

Yes, though there remains a huge problem of the consideration of natality in Levinas: he thinks natality in terms of the uniqueness of the son rather than the daughter. To explore that problem and its consequences, I would point to the work of Tina Chanter and Luce Irigaray, both of whom have demonstrated interest in Levinas's gesture toward primitive peace, but have exposed the implications of Levinas's patriarchal language. Nevertheless, for me, the way to think about natality is through Levinas, and I think there is important work to be done in that direction, especially as it relates to therapy.

Kearney

Coming back to the question of theater and repetition: it strikes me that there may be three theaters at issue here. There is first the original theater of war. We refer to war as occurring in a "theater" already. War is not just blind action and passion; it's already narrativized. War is already figured and configured from the outset; war is a psychodrama. More could be said about that. Simon points to *The Persians*, which is certainly fascinating inasmuch as the earliest of plays is an act of compassion with the enemy. And this makes for a second kind of theater, a theater that allows for a sort of working through. Aristotle will articulately that in terms of poetics and catharsis. We could spend hours on catharsis and what that means for therapy, but there is some work in this direction performed by theater. This second form of theater, however, does not guarantee that things are worked through in the right direction. In repetition, we can rehearse and repeat a trauma that's been figured, but not transfigured and not sufficiently figured. This second form of theater is ambiguous, able to do much harm or much good.

A play is, therefore, an event that can catch the conscience without resolving the issue. Whether it is Greek or modern tragedy, we can have a cathartic experience watching the play and leave the theater better but not healed. The first two forms of theater can open and expose wounds that they do not have the capacity to redress, leaving some work to be done. So, then, the question would be the practice of therapy and how therapy might continue the work of theater into the therapist's office. Maybe this question should be posed to Jamieon who is a practicing therapist, as much as it is to Simon. I am wondering what goes on in the third theater of transference and countertransference in the therapist's office? Between analyst and analysand? What's the theatrical work there? Is it helpful to think of therapy as an extension of these first two forms of theater? It seems to me there's a certain antagonism in transference, in countertransference that cannot be delivered by a play. The work is performed for us, out there, on the stage, at arm's length. However, in the play between analyst and analysand, there is a struggle, a war or sorts. It is a war between love and hate. Does this third theater, the drama of therapy, add anything to this equation?

Critchley

I would rather defer to Ann on that excellent question.
Pellegrini

There are so many different ways to follow this theatrical lead. Richard refers to the compulsion to repeat a phrase that first appeared in Freud's 1914 essay "Remembering, Repeating, and Working Through." In this essay Freud offers an important spatializing metaphor of the place where analyst and analysand meet and do their work together: a "definite field." This term conjures the battlefield of Richard's first of three theaters: the theater of war. But it equally points to fields of play and fantasy, and to psychoanalytic practice as a kind of playground. I want to stress the play and the ground. Obviously, Winnicott seems essential here, but I want to stick with Freud, and not because he is the last word on transference/counterttransference, or as it is also called "traumatization," but because he is the first. Freud's and psychoanalysis's indebtedness to theater goes far beyond one or two plays, Oedipus and Hamlet. Psychoanalysis, as theory and practice, has theater deep in its bones. Put another way: the royal road may lead to the unconscious, but the road passes through the theater district. In Interpretation of Dreams, he likens hysteria to downtown performance artists before the name, who "act all the parts in a play single-handed." Hysteria is a kind of pathological — because hyper theatricalized — identification with others. Or, think of Freud's famous discussion of the melancholic, who becomes in some way like the lost object in order to stave off the realities of loss. See how much I am like the other! Love me as the other. Hate me as the other.

If theater sometimes appears as symptom of illness, it also functions, as form of cure. Psychoanalysis as homeopathy: admire just the "right" amount of repetition in the place of remembering: give transference just the "right" amount of free rein to play out the past. It does not always go as planned, for worse and for better. First, there is the pesky problem of counterttransference, a belatedly and undertheorized concept in Freud. Second, and more germane to Richard's preoccupation, is the paradox of transference, as it frazzles the lines between patient and analyst and between reality and fantasy. In Freud's 1915 "Observations on Transference Love," he compares the sudden irruption of the transference and its capacity to stop the treatment (how I want to write: stop the show), to the calamitous breaking down of the fourth wall: "There is a complete change of scene: it is as though some piece of make-believe had been stopped by the sudden irruption of reality — as when, for instance, a cry of fire is raised during a theatrical performance."22 Freud advises analyst and patient to stay seated, even as the flames burn around them. This is very serious play. This puts me in mind of a much repeated, indeed, probably the most repeated, passage from Jane Bowles's 1943 novel Two Serious Ladies. One little girl offers to introduce another to a new game called "I forgive you for all you sins." "Is it fun?" the prospective playmate asks? The answer: "It's not for fun that we play it, but because it's necessary to play it."23 And so, they do.

Severson

That's excellent, Ann; thank you, Simon, in the months since the publication of Stay, Illusion!, you have surely participated in numerous interdisciplinary conversations like this one. Has the discourse produced any fresh insights about the relationship of this play to philosophy and psychology? Could you conclude our conversation with some of the ideas that have emerged from these conversations?

Critchley

Yes, and let me conclude with some thoughts on the tragedy of misrecognition in Hamlet, ideas that have indeed emerged from conversations I've been having about this book. The melancholic Danish prince misrecognizes Polonius for the king when he kills the former thinking it was the latter. He misrecognizes Ophelia for his mother, saying to her all the nasty things he wanted to say to Gertrude: "Get thy way to a nunnerie," "God gave you one face and you make yourselves another," and so on. Hamlet calls Ophelia the whore that he suspects his mother to be. Hamlet confuses Gertrude with Claudius and Claudius with Gertrude. In one amazing moment, he even calls Claudius his mother. When the king protests, Hamlet's reasoning is as follows, "Father and mother is man and wife; man and wife is one flesh, and so, my mother" (4.3.50–51).
Hamlet cannot strike out at the one he hates — namely, Claudius — whom he cannot kill. He can only kill the one he idealizes, namely Laertes, who is a kind of double for Hamlet. He says of Laertes, "by the image of my cause, I see the portraiture of his" (5.2.77-78). Laertes is a mirror that Hamlet holds up to himself. And as we’ve known since Lacan, all that we experience in the mirror is misconstruction or méconnaissance, not ourselves but some imaginary other that fascinates us and holds us in thrall to our self-deception. It is not myself that I see in the mirror, but some sickly, captivating reflection that I am not.

Hamlet’s most fundamental misconception is in his relation to his own desire. He cannot recognize his own desire because he always lives through the desire of the other, doing the other’s bidding. Even if they share the same name (which was an innovation that, somewhat mysteriously, Shakespeare added to the source texts for the Hamlet story), the desire to revenge his father’s murder is the ghost’s desire, not his own. Hamlet Senior commands Hamlet Junior. He is also in lockstep with his mother’s desire throughout the play. It is not a question of Hamlet’s own desire that perplexes and punishes him; it is the exigens of her desire. What does Gertrude want?

At either end of the play, when Hamlet suspends his wish to return to Wittenberg (good old Protestant Lutherstadt), it is the desire of Claudius. Similarly, the whole conceit that leads up to the final, fatal, foul fight is not Hamlet’s plan; it is Claudius’s. Hamlet dies wearing his enemy’s colors. Hamlet does not live in his own time or at his own hour, but at the time and hour of the other.

Hamlet’s desire is deeply inhibited, and inhibition turns inward to a narcissistic melancholy that is unable to sustain any love for the living. Hamlet only loves what is dead: his idealized ghostly, phallic father; Yorick, the old court fool whose skull he idly toys with; and poor Ophelia. His narcissistic desire is only unleashed in relation to the other qua dead, i.e. quas impossibility. It is only when Ophelia is dead that Hamlet can declare his love for her, screaming in the grave in a life and death struggle with his double, Laertes: "I loved Ophelia; forty thousand brothers could not, with all their quantity of love, make up my sum" (5.1.257-59).

Hamlet’s dazzling linguistic brilliance — his ceaseless punning, antithetical metaphor, and manic rationalization — flows directly from his narcissistic inhibition of desire. Dostoevsky famously wrote in The Brothers Karamazov that hell is the incapacity to love. The Ghost of his father might well spend his days in painful, purgatorial fire, but Hamlet is in hell. This is why Denmark is a prison. This is why the world is a prison.

To make things even worse, Hamlet is a very bad Aristotelian. He undergoes no reversal or peripeteia, nor does he experience any recognition or anagnorisis. This is why Hegel is right to insist that Hamlet is a lost man. Furthermore, in my view, Hamlet permits no catharsis, no release or sublimation or purification of desire. Hamlet exhibits a relentless intelligence, a melancholy inwardness that occasionally flips over into manic energy and exuberance. But, we feel no release at the end of the play, which, of course, is Shakespeare’s longest (Hamlet in its entirety sometimes feels like Hamlet in its entirety). From beginning to end, the sheer violence and pernicious power of Shakespeare’s language has us rolling around on the floor or biting the carpet. And nor should Hamlet permit us any catharsis. If Hamlet is the quintessentially modern tragedy, this is because it enacts the tragedy of modernity, which also allows us no relief, release, or the satisfaction of desire. Hamlet is a wonderful, proto-Beckettian tragicomedy, a Trauerspiel without redemption, a mournful, melancholic, and melodramatic farce.

And so is our world.