Sorry For Your Loss: A Response to Frank

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Vengeance is a common theme in popular narratives. From *Old Boy* to *The Cask of Amontillado* to *Njall's Saga*, our ability to identify ourselves with the wounded gives us permission to enjoy the transgression, justifying the otherwise unjustifiable. Vengeance, as well as the pleasure that we take in witnessing vengeance, is typically thought of as an all-too-human surrender to the bloodlust of the id, the eye-for-an-eye of Old Testament or Greek gods. But these appeals to animal or historical origins hardly account for the deep sense of satisfaction we take in bearing witness to another's well-deserved punishment: Sonny beating Carlo with a trash can in *The Godfather* or, perhaps the purest expression of vengeful sentiment, "You killed my father, prepare to die." In order to understand our thrill as witnesses to these scenes, we might think of vengeance in terms of a clash of misrecognition. In the vengeance plot, the subject who suffers a loss suffers it doubly because they lack any public means to register their pain and suffering. In order to make their suffering heard, the vengeful must do violence to the world that ignores them, making a place where their hurt can be heard by tearing a hole in the fabric of our public imaginary.

In Njall's Saga the back and forth of bloody retribution is interrupted by the arrival of Christianity: a metaphysics that recognizes all loss through its universal claim, allowing mourning to happen for members of both sides. The marauding Vikings cast their burdens on the Lord and are unburdened: their pain has a place and a way forward through social recognition. But as Jeff Frank's essay "Polarization and the Student Mental Health Crisis" suggests, the greatest challenge to the divisions that define our contemporary culture is that we have no such universal metaphysics, no shared ultimate reality to resort to.[1] Instead, we stand in a relation of guarded hostility toward our neighbors, ready to score a seemingly unsolicited bit of violence in the form of a bumper sticker, a signalled virtue, or a shared bit of *schadenfreude* at the suffering of those who vote differently than *we* do. We stand on one side or the other of Hegel's definition of tragedy: two incommensurate worldviews that stand opposed to one another, unable to find resolution. For Hegel, the clearest illustration of

this definition is Sophocles' *Antigone*, in which both sides lose their humanity by choosing the comfort of death above their responsibility to the other. It should come as no surprise that children raised in a society that privileges the slow death of identity above the uncertain adventure and inevitable losses of transformation should suffer anxiety in the face of a world that does not stand still. As with Goethe's story of *The Beautiful Soul*, in which the finite bland materiality of the world fails to match the infinite interiority of the subject, we teach our children to attach themselves to impossible fantasies of purity, defined in opposition to the predictable evils of their political others.

That Frank arrives at mourning as a possible way out of this "morbid pathological disposition" should come as no surprise. Freud's work on mourning and melancholia places the two affects together as related responses to loss, allowing us to use the contrast between the two in order to see the details of each more clearly, but also prescribing the rites of mourning as a way out of our stuck position. Frank's essay, in part due to its engagement with Lear's Freudian/Sophoclean analysis of Lincoln, serves as a point for point meditation on the uses of Freudian theory in the area of social losses. As Freud makes clear, the losses associated with both mourning *and* melancholia include abstractions "such as one's country, liberty, an ideal" that are "taking the place" of the people we have loved and lost.[2] As Frank's argument lays out, at least part of the reason why we suffer loss in moving on from an idea that has reached its historical limit is that we don't come into our convictions rationally, choosing the best based on transcendental principles. Our attachments to our most profoundly held beliefs are fundamentally tied to those emotional connections that Rorty referred to as our final vocabulary. Just as the loss of a loved one is not eased by an autopsy but requires a public recognition of our loss by other subjects capable of telling us that the object we lost was worth loving, the loss of an ideal is an emotional transformation requiring new attachments made to those who recognize that our losses meant something.

In the absence of the social recognition that might allow us to let go, we do violence to the social norms in which we continue to exist, simply by refusing participation. We take on the badness of the lost object that the world

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won't recognize as a meaningful loss, internalizing and identifying with it. Like Antigone seeking justice for Polynices, we cannot speak our own losses without doing violence to those whose refusal to take our attachments seriously is itself the loss we suffer. Like Creon and Lincoln, we remain tragically tied to the script that derives its value from its opposition to the other.

By tracing Frank's argument through Lear to the Freudian insights that help us diagnose the tragedy of Antigone, we can underscore his position that loss without mourning encourages children to turn their backs on those discourses that occasion the loss. We can also imagine that some kind of public mourning, a processing of the losses that accompany any kind of education, might carry with it benefits for children's educational growth and emotional well-being, insofar as it might open up spaces in the child's psyche currently occupied by lost objects that need to be preserved and protected against extinction. But Frank's focus on the significance of mourning not only serves those who suffer losses as a result of their participation in public discourses: it also serves public discourses, insofar as it extends the reach of discursive power in drawing in and resolving differences that might otherwise calcify as opposition.

Frank structures his argument as one that cuts in more than one political direction: *anyone* who suffers a loss of identity as a result of their schooling through the diminution of their beloved objects should have the opportunity to mourn these attachments, if only to better integrate the learning subject into the fold of society, to begin making those new connections that will allow them to live as a responsible citizen. But despite Frank's efforts to play an ecumenical card, his own political preferences shine through, leading us, on the one hand to applaud the idea that the child of backward thinking, repressive parents should certainly be given the opportunity to mourn their losses, while at the same time begging the question of how committed we are to mourning when the shoe is on the other foot. Should the Dade County student with two mothers, silenced by the Florida legislature, be provided an opportunity to mourn his loss through the compassionate discourses of Evangelical fellowship, to see his attachment to LGBTQ rights in a different light, in which gay marriage rights were simply an ideological mistake, a matter of liberalism run rampant? Or would we want that child

to protect their attachment to their lost objects, internalizing and identifying with them, in order to hold a place for difference in a society that insists on restrictive norms?

Like Frank, I can see the value of mourning as an essential part of difficult education when children raised in oppressive, backward, ideological worldviews are released from the cave of *doxa* and emerge into the light of truth. But the question we are left with is whether the value of mourning can be affirmed universally across educational contexts, or whether it should simply be thought of as a tool, a discursive device that Lincoln had at his disposal and failed to use not out of an insistence on integrity but as a failure of tactical planning. We are left, moreover, with the disquieting realization that mourning in some form or another has already done its work on us, in all those habits of mind that have been imprinted upon us without remainder or residue, and the uneasy feeling that the beliefs we hold so dear are nothing more than the product of a process of mourning so successful that it has caused us to let go of something else we might have been.

REFERENCES

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