



## Jonathan Lear, *Imagining the End: Mourning and Ethical Life*

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Julian Young<sup>1</sup>

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Jonathan Lear's pleasantly written book is mostly a reworking of previously published material. As a result, the issues it covers sometimes "hang together" (Preface) only rather loosely. The subtitle *Mourning and Ethical Life*, however, identifies the center of Lear's concern. I shall try to articulate this, and mostly ignore more peripheral matters.

The book was written at the height of the coronavirus pandemic. It is, says the author, "a return to Freud in a time of pandemic" (p. 20). We live, Lear writes, in a time of anxiety, anxiety about "endings": we are anxious about polarization and the ending of democracy, about the coronavirus and the ending of cities (p. 31), and about the climate catastrophe and the ending of humanity. And so, Lear believes, we confront a "world catastrophe" similar to the one that Freud confronted in "Transience (*Vergänglichkeit*)", an essay written in 1916 in the midst of the slaughter of the First World War.<sup>1</sup> Like Freud, we confront the fragility, the "transience," of something dear to us and we have thought to be enduring. And so, by retuning to Freud, we can perhaps learn how to confront our own anxiety.

The loss both we and Freud confront is, as the cliché has it, "Western civilization as we know it". Prior to the war, Freud had believed in the broadly Hegelian history of the West as steady progress in a "civilizing direction", progress through art and science (including psychoanalysis) towards "social and psychic harmony" (p. 26). The brutality of the war shattered what Freud now took to be an illusion. What made this so traumatic was that he *identified* with the progressive narrative, and took personal pride in its achievements. And so, since he was an atheist, this was his version

of the "death of God" (p. 38). We (especially those of us who live the life of the mind) confront a similar trauma. Because we have submerged our identities in the Hegelian narrative (Martin Luther King's "moral arc" of history), the loss of that narrative is the loss of a "part of ourselves" (p. 27)—the part that allowed us to transcend individual finitude and "partake of eternity" (p. 26).

How are we to repair our "damaged" egos (p. 32)? One might, like a young academic at a conference on the climate catastrophe, take the view that "We will not be missed" (p. 1), that the end of the "Anthropocene" is what the planet needs and so should be welcomed on its behalf. But while this might be true, in its lack of nuance, the remark misses out on the greatness of which we have been capable, and thus contains an element of untruthfulness. As J. M. Coetzee says, the best argument for a benevolent God is the music of Bach (p. 142).

The healing response to the loss of something one has loved is "mourning", a concept Freud regards as the healthy counterpart of "melancholia" (depression). To mourn is to suffer, and so some people, the young academic, for instance, try to evade suffering by devaluing what has been (or will be) lost. Mourning, by contrast, accepts and experiences the suffering, but because it has a "spontaneous" end, one is able to work through the suffering and eventually "move on" with life (p. 37). How does this happen?

Pain is inseparable from love. To fall in love with someone is to make oneself "vulnerable to their vulnerability", to their "transience" (p. 35). Mourning understands and accepts this. (As Tennyson puts it, "tis better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all"). Mourning makes us "historical" (*ibid.*): in mourning, we keep the past alive in meaningful, emotion-filled memories. But it is also a farewell of the past. Nostalgic memories of childhood are delightful, but healthy development requires one to accept the pastness of childhood and progress to the new stage of oneself.

<sup>1</sup> 1916 is a significant date. It was the year in which, as it began to dawn on the Germanic world that it might lose the war, the excuse of a Jewish "stab in the back" reared its ugly head.

✉ Julian Young  
youngjp@wfu.edu

<sup>1</sup> Wake Forest University, Winston-Salem, NC, USA

Mourning, we know, is not confined to people. Like Freud, we can mourn an ideal or civilization. Like Stefan Zweig, we can mourn “the world of yesterday”. What is it to mourn a civilization? By the end of the mourning that is carried out in the essay, Freud has recovered from his desolation at the destruction of the world of yesterday. He resolves that “[w]e shall build up again all that war has destroyed, and perhaps on firmer ground and more lastingly than before” (p. 37). Effectively, though Lear does not put it this way, Freud recovers his faith in the Hegelian narrative by turning what was an “end” into an “antithesis”, one that, in the process of “rebuilding”, can be expected to give way to a new “synthesis” which, he hopes, will be “on firmer ground” than the original “thesis”.<sup>2</sup> How is the rebuilding to occur? To understand this, we need to turn to Lear’s discussion of “exemplars”.

As Aristotle says, the “end” or telos of the human being is happiness (*eudaimonia*), something achieved in a life that exemplifies the human excellencies (virtues), a life that is *kalon*, “fine” or “noble”. But how does one live such a life? Crucially, one models oneself on ethical exemplars. A quiet word from a schoolteacher that one should not use “profane” language in the playground provided Lear with one such exemplar: the figure of the teacher has stayed with him throughout his life. Such “local exemplars” (p. 48) are sources of inspiration and imitation. But local exemplars are exemplars only to the extent that they exemplify the exemplary figures that belong to the culture as a whole. This is what makes the humanities essential.

The humanities, says Lear, are dedicated to conserving our best accounts of what it is to be human, “human” in the normative, Aristotelian sense. They are an especially productive form of mourning. They mourn because they look on a glory that is past, they are productive because, if practiced well, they “conserve” that past glory: conserve, not in the sense of curating exhibits in a museum, but in the sense of preserving and presenting images of the past as models for creative “repetition”, repetition within which there is “a unity of sameness and novelty” (p. 56). The good philosophy teacher, for example, will not test students on the extent and accuracy of their knowledge of the *Nicomachean Ethics* but will rather encourage them to ask “What would Aristotle say about *this*?”—where “this” might be artificial intelligence, gene therapy, or transgenderism.

When Meghan married Harry, notes Lear, she organized a private ceremony before the public one because, as

she told Oprah Winfrey, she wanted to live “authentically.” That she was insensible to the performative contradiction in telling several million viewers that authenticity is quiet and private shows that she actually has no idea of what it is to be authentically human. Rightly sensitive to the phoniness of the public ceremony (Lear’s antipathy to British ritual is surely inconsistent with his emphasis on the importance of “repeating” the past), Megan succumbed to a phoniness of her own. That is because she had no exposure to the riches of the humanities,<sup>3</sup> for it is through their creative preservation of the exemplary that we know what it is to be “authentically” human. Without the humanities, “humanity” is a lost cause (pp. 65–80).

This is the core of Lear’s book. Only tangentially related to it is a discussion of the Gettysburg Address which he takes to be internally inconsistent because it wants to rebuild the “nation” without honoring the humanity of the Confederate dead. Another tangent concerns gratitude.

A disposition to gratitude, gratitude as a response to a favor that expects no return, is an Aristotelian virtue and is essential to psychic health. The origin of the disposition is explained by Melanie Klein. The infant experiences the pain of hunger but the good mother quickly comforts it. For the child, the “good breast” is the world, with the result that it develops into an adult grateful not merely for acts of generosity, but for the world, for existence as such (pp.119–131). Wittgenstein attached “absolute ... value” to this experience of cosmic gratitude which consists, he says, in “wonder at the existence of the world,” wonder that there is something—something intelligible to us—rather than nothing (p. 140). (Cosmic gratitude is a major theme in the later Heidegger: to think in a truly philosophical way is, he says, to be overcome by the “wonder that around us a world worlds, that there is something rather than nothing, that there are things, and we are in their midst” and so to experience “gratitude (*Danken*)” for the “favour (*Gunst*) that has been granted us.” “Thinking (*Denken*),” he concludes, is “thank-ing (*Danken*).”)<sup>4</sup>

Lear believes in the essential role of the exemplars conserved by the humanities in moral education, and since I do as well, I find much to agree with in his valuable book. I have, however, two reservations.

Freud disdained the traditional German distinction between *Kultur* and *Civilization*, using the latter term to cover both. But what traumatized him in 1916 was, in fact, the apparent death not of “civilization” (plumbing and the police), but rather of “culture,” of the ethical tradition that,

<sup>2</sup> Kierkegaard, Lear notes, believed that only religious faith could sustain such hope for the future (p. 40). Kant makes the same point: only faith in a “divine governor” nudging history in a “civilizing direction” can sustain belief in the “moral arc” (a divine governor who, with Hegel, becomes the dialectic of “world spirit”). Freud was, perhaps, not quite the atheist he took himself to be.

<sup>3</sup> That she did, in fact, obtain a BA from Northwestern’s “School of Communication” is not, I suspect, inconsistent with this claim.

<sup>4</sup> *Martin Heidegger: Gesamtausgabe* (Frankfurt a. M: Klostermann, 1977-) vol. 52 p. 64, vol. 9 p. 310, vol. 8 pp. 149–152.

for two millennia, had represented the West at its best. And Lear is right: the death of “culture” is our “death of God” as well. This “death”, however, has nothing to do with the pandemic. The virus is, at most, a threat to civilization (and, as we now see, not even that). What, then, is it that threatens the cultural tradition prized by humanists such as Lear and myself? In brief, I suggest, it is the combination of the reduction of the university to a training school for technicians, the destruction of historical consciousness by the Internet, and the self-immolation of the humanities in the form of postmodernism which, far from mourning the death of “the great metaphysical, scientific, technological, and economic adventure of the West” (Derrida), gleefully “deconstruct” its final remnants, thereby providing the *coup de grâce*.

The fact that Lear misses the true threat to the cultural tradition we humanists regard as “parts of ourselves” lends a curiously antiquated air to his discussion of exemplars and the humanities. For what he says about exemplars is almost exactly what Heidegger was saying in 1927—Heidegger, too, speaks of the creative “repetition (*Wiederholung*)” of the “heroes” of “heritage”<sup>5</sup>—and what Nietzsche was saying even earlier, insisting in 1870 that “the images of myth must be the unnoticed but omnipresent demonic guardians under whose tutelage the young soul grows up, and by whose signs the grown man interprets his life and his struggles”.<sup>6</sup> What Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Lear are all doing is describing what used to be the principal task of the university, the formation of character through immersion in the ethical pinnacles of the Western tradition—*Bildung*, as the Germans call it. Like Lear, I think of *Bildung* as the point of the humanities. But what does not seem to register, not at least in his book, is that *Bildung* is a thing of the past.

The humanities that Lear describes so well and so lovingly no longer exist. The “shallow” Megan (p. 76) is no outlier: she is a representative sample of the “historyless” character of postmodern existence.

My second reservation concerns the “good breast”. It is not clear whether Lear and Klein really mean to claim that good mothering is a necessary precondition of the disposition to cosmic gratitude or merely that it fosters such a disposition. If they mean the latter, the point is rather banal: if you had a good mother you are likely to be “well adjusted” to the world. If it is the former then the claim is that, in the absence of a good mother, neither religion, art, nor philosophy is capable of allowing one the experience of cosmic gratitude. This not only is a terrible devaluation of the power of the humanities but is also an obvious falsehood. Wittgenstein prized and experienced cosmic gratitude—“Tell them I have had a wonderful life”, were the last words of this troubled soul—but since three of his four brothers committed suicide, he cannot have had a good mother. The moral is that, to the extent that it renders the adult spirit prisoner to the child, psychoanalysis is not always good for philosophy.

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**Reviewer:** Julian Young is William R. Kenan Jr. Professor of Humanities Emeritus at Wake Forest University. The author of more than fifteen books, his main interests are nineteenth and twentieth century German philosophy, the meaning of life, philosophy and opera, tragedy, and postmodernism.

<sup>5</sup> *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1967), p. 385.

<sup>6</sup> *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings* trans. R. Speirs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 108.