

## **An elegy for mourning and 'subjecticide'.**

In my side vision a small bird glimpsed, flying towards the car, disappears from view ... reappears, tumbling up over the bonnet. Suspended, for a moment it seems, in front of our eyes; strangely folded upon itself, the breast feathers pale, the back darker. I think I see two trailing legs, impossibly thin, and then it is gone, sucked up and away, a tiny feathered packet of shattered bones, to find its resting place, somewhere on the roadside just outside the town of Puechabon in Rousillon, France.

'Couldn't you have avoided it?'. My wife putting into words my own fantasy; going back in time, replaying the events with a different outcome. For a moment it seems inconceivable, as though it couldn't have happened, perhaps it hadn't; no impact had been heard or felt, perhaps the bird was not dead at all...? But of course, it had happened, and the bird's life was certainly extinguished. Could I have avoided it? The whole event was over in perhaps a second, the bird's fate sealed in the trajectory of its flight and that of our travel.

I wanted to blame the car. It wasn't the small vehicle that we had requested. The hire company had 'upgraded' us to the only vehicle they had left; big, black, ruthless, a computer on wheels, like some kind of twenty first century 'rough beast'. But no, it wasn't the machine itself, rather the 'ghost in the machine' who must take responsibility, who made the decisions and took the steps, that had sealed the fate of the little bird. Mercifully the driver, the ghost in the machine, has not yet been made redundant ... .

I drove on, surprised by a profound sense of sadness and loss. The acute feeling soon passed, but all that day, and into the night the image of the broken bird seemed to hang somewhere in my mind, not far away, demanding a response. Why was I so affected? There was, of course, the extreme vulnerability of the bird, and then it seemed such a long time since I had killed a bird while driving. I thought back to my own country forty years ago; there were so many birds that their random killing was an inevitable consequence of driving; a certain amount of slaughter was the accepted price that had to be paid. Life entails the inevitability of death; was this all to do with my own growing older? The nearer we approach the end, the more insistent we may feel its presence. It seems there often comes a point in life at which we begin to live with this consciousness ever present in the back of our mind; living in the shadow of death creates both a new poignancy in life, and a new urgency to live.

Perhaps this sense of loss was sharpened by the fact we were returning from a walk in the countryside of Rousillon, where we had remarked how few birds there seemed to be. I thought of the ruthless exploitation of migratory birds in the Mediterranean countries for food. In his 2010 essay *The Ugly Mediterranean* Jonathan Franzen documents how in the mid 1990's, two decades after songbird trapping had been outlawed in Cyprus, 'as many as ten million songbirds a year were being killed. To meet the restaurant demand, traditional lime-stick trapping had been augmented by large-scale netting operations.' Then the Cypriot government, 'which was trying to clean up its act and win entry in the European Union, cracked down hard on netters. By 2006 the annual take had fallen to around a million' (Franzen: 79). However, 'In the past few years, .... with Cyprus now comfortably ensconced in the EU, .... the number of active trapping sites is rising' (Franzen: 80). The results of lime-sticking and netting are evoked painfully in Franzen's description of entering what might be described as a war zone, where members of the organization 'The Committee Against Bird Slaughter' attempt, at considerable risk to themselves, to disrupt and sabotage these illegal

activities; activities that would seem to serve a collective greed and macho pride. As Franzen discovers, the violence is not just for the birds. Some sins certainly are deadly.

As the course and reality of the First World War unfolded, Sigmund Freud was forced to recognise the presence of a delusional state within his mind. In *The Disillusionment of War* one of two linked essays published as *Thoughts for the Time on War and Death* (1915), Freud documented his belief before the coming war, that this would proceed as a 'chivalrous passage of arms, which would limit itself to establishing superiority of one side in the struggle, while as far as possible avoiding acute suffering that could contribute nothing to the decision, and granting complete immunity for the wounded...' and so on. 'There would, of course, be the utmost consideration for the non-combatant classes...' but, 'Then the war in which we refused to believe broke out, and it brought – disillusionment. Not only is it more bloody and destructive than any war of other days, ... it is at least as cruel, as embittered, as implacable as any that has preceded it' (Freud 1915: 278).

Freud recognised he had been under the sway of wish fulfilment and an 'illusion' about the human potential for violence and destructiveness. He concedes that if we embrace illusions in order to spare ourselves 'unpleasurable feelings', then we 'must not complain, ... if now and again they come into collision with some portion of reality, and are shattered against it' (Freud 1915: 280). In *Our Attitude Towards Death*, the companion piece in *Thoughts for the Time on War and Death* (1915), Freud suggests there is a gain in having to confront the reality of death, and giving death its due also helps us to escape from illusion, and therefore allows a fuller appreciation of the value of life. worth'. In his essay *On transience* Freud creates the impression that a young poet is in a melancholic state of mind, and conjectures there must have been some powerful emotional factor disturbing the judgement of the poet and his friend. He concludes, 'What spoilt their enjoyment of beauty must have been a revolt in their minds against mourning.' (Freud 1916: 306)

He suggests, transience can only increase the value of what is beautiful: 'A flower that blooms only for a single night does not seem to us on that account any less lovely' (Freud 1916: 305).

Freud was soon to publish perhaps his most penetrating text of all, *Mourning and Melancholia* (1917) written mostly in 1915. In it he considers the similarities and overlap of the pictures of states of mourning and states of melancholia. He observes that melancholic states are accompanied by a critical, even violent attitude towards the self, a feature absent in mourning. He explores the nature and origin of these destructive elements in melancholia and makes the point that melancholia is like a derailed mourning where the awareness of what has been lost is withdrawn from consciousness.

Mourning, by contrast, is a fully conscious experience depending upon the awareness of what has been lost. Mourning is a painful process that follows its own course and, if followed to completion, results in a restoration of the good, and restoration of the capacity to love. If there is no awareness of what has been lost mourning is not possible, but without mourning there is no restoration or renewal.

The absence of mourning leaves us in a ruthless and depleted world; a melancholic, pre-ruth world. But the capacity to experience loss and to mourn is a complex and fragile one, dependent upon an appreciation of realities; in particular the awareness of loss and limitation, the reality of death, and the awareness of our own destructiveness. Unless we recognise and feel the loss of the bird populations of Europe, effective action to restore what has been lost would seem unlikely. Here in Australia, if we do not collectively recognise the realities of

global warming, deforestation, ocean pollution and species loss, whether on land or in the sea, then mourning for a damaged environment cannot take place, and effective redress is unlikely.

Our post-modern world however would seem in danger of lurching into a post-mourning world. Are we collectively destroying and losing the capacity to mourn? Are we now faced with the need to mourn the loss of the capacity for mourning? It is a fraught endeavour to attempt to characterise and predict social currents, but increasingly we live in an operationalised world, where outcomes and the 'deal' trumps any appreciation of reality and truth. A 'be happy' world where nothing is lost and consequently there is nothing to mourn.

Psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas has suggested the existence of a collective psychic trend in western culture towards the destruction of personhood and the capacity to think, feel, and register the pain of the human condition, for which he has coined the term 'subjecticide'.

Bollas' thesis is that violence that is not directed physically towards the person may be re-directed towards wiping out personal subjectivity. He suggests we appear to be gradually slipping away from negotiating our realities, and accepting 'a selective perception of the world that is turning negative hallucination into an art form' (Bollas: 538). In contrast to the hallucination, the perception of something that is not there, the psychoanalytic concept of a 'negative hallucination' refers to the denial in perception of what actually is there. Bollas' term subjecticide, with its suggestion of being a suicide equivalent, captures the real violence involved in the attack upon truth and the perception of reality.

Good literature has always been and always will be about enhancing the appreciation of reality, of what is there, and from this perspective fosters the development of the capacity to mourn what has been lost. Mourning is the very heart of poetry in particular; the manifest theme of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, is destruction of the albatross, loss, depression and mourning. Or consider John Keat's *When I have fears I may cease to be*:

And when I feel, fair creature of an hour,  
That I shall never look upon thee more,  
Never have relish in the faery power  
Of unreflecting love—then on the shore  
Of the wide world I stand alone, and think  
Till love and fame to nothingness do sink.

Statistically, we are informed, the global citizen is less likely to meet a violent death than at any time in the historical past. Encouraging no doubt, but not, I believe, grounds for optimism. Violence towards truth is a necessary precondition for the outbreak of mass murder and collective violence that the world witnessed in the holocaust, and there seems little to suggest that the assault on truth is any less potent or pervasive today. If Bollas' analysis is correct, that both homicide and suicide, which psychoanalytically we recognise as the inverse of one another, are becoming further transformed into a third possibility 'subjecticide'; then the assault on truth may be more, rather than less, pervasive.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> Century the focus of the psychoanalytic endeavour has become the pursuit of truth, with the necessary qualification that truth is always multifaceted and often extremely difficult to discern. Truth is apprehended through exploration of our individual capacity to deny or modify what is true. Elusive as 'the truth' may prove to be, nevertheless the pursuit of truth

can often be sharply distinguished from violence towards the truth, the pursuit of lies and 'fake news'. Psychoanalysis, environmental activism, literary creativity, and all truly artistic, scientific and humanitarian activities, lend weight to the recognition of reality, the pursuit of truth, and development of the capacity to mourn. They may or may not be enough, but they are all that we have to stave off subjecticide, and our collective capacity for self- destruction.

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