Transience and hope: A return to Freud in a time of pandemic*

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ABSTRACT
This essay is about what it is like to read Freud again in the time of the coronavirus pandemic. It offers a close reading of Freud’s essay “On Transience” and it brings to light how it might be read differently with the thoughts of world-catastrophe on our minds.

KEYWORDS
Freud; superego; mourning

One day, when I was six years old, I got in the back seat with my sister and our parents drove us to visit our grandparents. When we arrived, there was a party going on. Lots of grown-ups, dressed up. My Grandma Jenny came over, bent down and told me that her father, my great-grandfather, had gone off on a long trip. I barely knew who he was, and I had no idea why she was telling me this. A moment later, an older cousin walked over and said, “He’s dead.” This is the moment I realized adults lie to children.

Why do they do this? Well, “they” don’t all. There have been cultural shifts, and my sense is that these days adults try to be more honest with children. Still, this moment is worthy of attention. My grandmother was not a reflective person, and I suspect she acted from an ingrained habit that expressed a cultural norm. Officially, the norm was to protect children – in this case, from a knowledge that would be too much for them at their age. But what knowledge is that? If my grandmother had said, “He died”, I doubt I would have learned much. What I did learn a moment later when my cousin spilled the beans was that the topic of death was treated by adults as dangerous, taboo, forbidden to children.

I am not here interested in my grandmother’s psychology but rather in a shared cultural imaginary of which she availed herself. In acting as though there is some “adult knowledge” from which one needs to protect the children, one tacitly reassures oneself that one has something – namely, the knowledge that is not to be passed on. But what knowledge is that? The cultural norm of protecting the children serves to protect the adults from recognizing that in this painful and important moment in life, they understand little or nothing.

Being an adult, so understood, thus involves playing the role of adult. It also allows gratifications of childhood play. When my grandmother said her father had gone on a long trip, I now wonder whether she was expressing her fantasy. That in playing the adult she was, at the same time, able to return to something from childhood. Perhaps her parents

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had told *her* that a grandparent had gone on a long trip. The fantasy may have been passed through the generations – the very words passing from adult to child – without anyone particularly noticing. Perhaps my grandmother was inviting me to join her in play – a transitional space of cultural experience in which we tacitly understand that the question of whether he is *really* on a long trip is not to be asked. Ironically, it was a child – my older cousin – who destroyed the play-space with the intrusion of thud-like reality: “He’s dead” (cf. Winnicott 2008, 1–34, 128–139).

This vignette came back to mind in the time of the coronavirus pandemic. There is something amusing in the reversal of roles. In this scene, it is the children who are able to face reality and talk about it frankly; it is the adults who live in childlike fantasy. But there is more. We also recognize that Grandma Jenny is getting something right in turning to imagination and fantasy in response to the death of a loved one. And her imagination tends in the direction of reassuring herself (and perhaps others) about the stability of the world in the face of death. Her father might be gone, but *we are still here*. And the idea of a *long trip* presupposes stability in time and space: for something to be a *trip* one must be able to get from *here* to *there*. So, *here* needs to remain stable enough for us to imagine it as a place of departure; and the idea of a long trip is meant to be a comforting image of immortality: somehow life goes on in happy-enough circumstances, however vaguely understood. In short, we get to comfort ourselves about both *here* and *there*.

It is this background stability that has come into question in the pandemic. We cannot experience a loved one on a long trip if temporality itself comes into question. But the coronavirus has infected our sense of the future. In normal times, a sense of the future is implicit in everyday life. In a time of pandemic, by contrast, the future becomes uncanny. It is like peering into a fog: if we turn on the high beams it only gets worse. Perhaps our vaccines will stay ahead of a transforming virus and we shall quickly look back on the pandemic as a momentary blip; but perhaps coronavirus will never go away; perhaps it will change the shape of warfare forever; perhaps historians will look back with curiosity at a time when total strangers sat in close proximity to eat meals in places called restaurants; perhaps it will transform human life on earth. Are the political and social institutions in whose midst we live stable or not? What will happen to our treasured values – values we live with in the present but which by their very nature direct us toward the future? Values as our unfinished business: are *they* finished? Of course, life is always uncertain, and the future always holds surprises, but uncertainty is now much more closely present to mind, present in our sense of the present.

Imagine a future generation looking back on us and telling our story. Here’s the rub: we *cannot really do it* – at least, in any way that does not immediately seem to be one person’s fantasy. We can imagine the narrative beginning, “They lived in a time of pandemic”; but then what? The pandemic has destroyed any shared illusion about how the future will unfold continuously from the present. And insofar as the meaning of our present is shaped by its future significance, the sense of the meaningfulness of the present must come into question. This, I believe, is a source of the anxiety so many feel.

In these extraordinary times, our ordinary practices become a matter of anxiety for the culture as a whole. So, if I were six years old today, I would not be able to get in the car with my parents and drive to my grandparents; I would not be able to enter a crowded room of adults talking with each other up close. How would Grandma Jenny tell me
her imaginary story, on Zoom? Would my cousin break the news using the private chat function? This is by way of saying that not only can we not see into the future, but the past does not seem to give us guidance about how to live in the present. We can no longer simply come together to mourn the dead. Nor can we simply come together to be with the dying. Sometimes we are forbidden to do so. People die in hospitals and hospices in isolation, on their own. We are haunted by images of dead bodies piling up that suggest a horrific prospect of society not being able to cope. On of the primary functions of any culture is to help its bearers bear death. The culture does so, in part, through rituals of mourning that are meant to give meaning and thus contain death as a phenomenon of life. But right now the liveliness of these rituals has come into question. The meaningfulness of the meaningful world has come into view in its fragility – and that makes us feel fragile.

In these unusual times, I want to return to a three-page essay Sigmund Freud published just over a century ago, in 1916, “On Transience”. I have long thought it a classic. The essay presents itself as philosophical in the broad sense of that term, speaking as it were timelessly about a phenomenon, transience, that marks the human condition. When it comes to us, transience is not itself transient. It is not that I think this self-presentation false, but I do read the essay differently now, refracted through the pandemic. The essay now seems to me a profound struggle with the intrapsychic consequences of living through world-catastrophe. Of course, catastrophes differ – and the geo-political upheavals of World War I will not be the same as the world-historical consequences of the coronavirus pandemic, which we are only beginning to comprehend. Even so, it is now much clearer that this essay is timely, and in an uncanny fashion it is about our time in a way I could not have understood until I found myself living in our time.

Although one must read the essay from beginning to end, it is illuminating to try to understand it from back to front – at least, almost. Narratively, the story moves in linear fashion from earlier to later. It begins with a nostalgic reminiscence from the recent past: “Not long ago I went on a summer walk through a smiling countryside in the company of a taciturn friend and of a young but already famous poet” (Freud 1916, 305). The poet and Freud have a disagreement about the meaning of transience; and that takes up most of the essay. It concludes a year later, in the author’s present as well as the present of the intended reader: in the midst of the World-War-I Europe. But try to think of that world-catastrophe not as the denouement of this essay, but as the problem that haunts it from the beginning. Freud is grappling with how to live with the radical uncertainty of the immediate future. In particular, can the structure of values which has shaped his world survive, even unto tomorrow?

Here is how Freud describes the world-situation in which he is writing. It is the penultimate paragraph of his essay:

My conversation with the poet took place in the summer before the war. A year later the war broke out and robbed the world of its beauties. It destroyed not only the beauty of the countrysides through which it passed and the works of art which it met with on its path but it also shattered our pride in the achievements of our civilization, our admiration for many philosophers and artists and our hopes of a final triumph over the differences between nations and races. It tarnished the lofty impartiality of our science, it revealed our instincts in all their nakedness and let loose the evil spirits within us which we thought had been tamed forever by centuries of continuous education by the noblest minds. It made our country small again and
made the rest of the world far remote. It robbed us of very much that we had loved, and showed us how ephemeral were many things that we had regarded as changeless. (Freud 1916, 307, emphasis added)"1

When I read this passage before the pandemic, it looked as though Freud was ruefully bringing to our attention that under the destructive pressures of war even the achievements of art, science and civilization show themselves to be fragile and transient (Lear 2018). But now, as I re-read it in the midst of this pandemic, I see that Freud is also, and importantly, suffering the loss of a piece of himself. To be sure, war destroyed the countryside beauty and art before it; it “robbed us of very much we had loved”. That is horrible, but we know war does that. But, as he puts it, “it also shattered our pride … our admiration … our hopes … ” (my emphasis).2 It “tarnished” our sense of science’s loftiness; it revealed severe limits on what the “noblest minds” can teach. I used to read this without pause; now I find it surprising and in need of explanation. It is one thing to be grief-stricken or depressed or enraged by the destruction of great art and great beauty. It is quite another thing to have “our” pride, admiration and hopes shattered.

Of course, Freud’s “our” need not include us. He is inviting his intended or expected readers to recognize something similar in themselves. The important point is that Freud is talking about a psychic phenomenon – shattered pride – that he takes to be a shared and significant response to the destruction of war, and one that can be recognized as such by those who are suffering from it. We contemporary readers may not find ourselves in this particular use of the first-person plural, but we can nevertheless learn from it.

There is something personal here: not just that Freud is personally affected, but that this somehow has to do with who he is. Freud is ashamed. He says that war “showed us how ephemeral were many things that we had regarded as changeless”. But that alone cannot explain shattered pride. It must have been that he himself – and his intended readers – were somehow invested, not just in these cultural achievements, but in their being eternal or “changeless”. The narcissism of this group seems to have been entangled in an illusion that civilization is itself an endless journey – a long trip in a civilizing direction, one that moves towards peace and mutual understanding, in which increased knowledge is a civilizing force, and reason and creative art promote social and psychic harmony. On this image, civilization opens indefinitely into the future and in the direction of the good. It is in this context that we can understand what Freud means by war tarnishing the “lofty impartiality” of our science. War does not show scientific results false, but it does destroy the illusion that science facilitates peaceful progress for all; and it shows how science is used to destroy civilization. Freud thus admits to a twofold illusion: first, that civilization is an endless progressive journey; second, that by participating in that journey one can take pride in oneself because one thereby partakes, as best one can, in something eternal and good. Disillusion thus comes as a blow to Freud’s sense of self. Shattered pride means that he was implicated in the illusion – not simply because he participated in it, but because he identified with it.

Here is the wishful kernel that, until this blow of recognition, has been part Freud’s self-conception: that if one hitches oneself up to civilization’s long trip, one can thereby

1Permission to quote from this article granted by the Institute of Psychoanalysis, London.
2“er brach auch unseren Stolz … unserer Respekt … unsere Hoffnungen” (Freud 1946, 360).
partake of eternity. Only thus could “our pride” be shattered in the recognition that eternity does not come with the bargain. There is also room for embarrassment in recognizing one’s complicity in maintaining the illusion. After all, European culture had been riven by wars for thousands of years; works of art and monuments to culture have been destroyed again and again through the ages. How could it be that over and over again there arises the comforting belief that we have somehow arrived at a turning point, where civilization at last gains the upper hand over destructiveness? I do not assume that the “we” of Freud and his intended readers overlaps with we current readers. And yet, I am reminded of a more recent time, just after the fall of the Berlin Wall, when Francis Fukiyama published *The End of History and the Last Man* – to great popular acclaim in magazines and journals. There is a repetition here – and in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic it is a good time to take another look at it.

Let me give a summary of where we have come thus far. First, the coronavirus pandemic intensifies our anxiety about the future: in particular about the stability of our shared social, political and cultural institutions. Second, I have suggested we go back to one of Freud’s attempts to analyze a world-catastrophe of his time. Third, in a time of world-catastrophe, one may suffer psychic upset and damage that is difficult to recognize as such. World-catastrophe threatens one’s sense of self by exposing the vulnerability of values in terms of which we have tried to understand ourselves. Our values are often drawn from socially available meanings – meanings that display their fragility in times of world-crisis.

So, while the transience of world-structures and civilizational achievements may be on our minds, what may be haunting our musings is the actual transience in the here-and-now of our own psychic well-being. We may anticipate mourning the end of the world, but be confused about how to acknowledge a lost or damaged part of ourselves. There is, then, something to be gained by reading Freud as working through this very problem. If as I have suggested we begin at the end of the essay with Freud’s shattered pride and admiration – as in response to world-catastrophe – we can then return to the main body of the essay and read it as an active attempt at intrapsychic mourning and repair.

Let us now go back to the beginning of Freud’s essay:

> Not long ago I went on a summer walk through a smiling countryside in the company of a taciturn friend and of a young but already famous poet. The poet admired the beauty of the scene around us but felt no joy in it. He was disturbed by the thought that all this beauty was fated to extinction, that it would vanish when winter came, like all human beauty and splendor that men have created or may create. All that he would otherwise have loved and admired seemed to him to be shorn of its worth by the transience which was its doom. (1916, 305)

It is all but certain that this summer walk never occurred (von Unwerth 2005; Lehmann 1966; Fachinelli 2015). The Editors of the *Standard Edition* tell us that Freud went on vacation in the Dolomites in August 2013; but they know nothing of the poet or friend. Scholars have pointed out that Freud did meet a famous poet a month later, in September, but that meeting took place in a city, in Munich, and in the midst of a fraught and frenetic Congress of the International Psychoanalytic Association. This was an occasion of the break between Freud and his hoped-for protégé Carl Jung. To put it mildly:
Freud had a lot on his mind. And there was no smiling countryside or other natural scene to admire. Lou Andreas-Salomé wrote in her journal that she was able to introduce her friend Freud to her friend and lover Rainer Maria Rilke. “I was delighted to bring Rainer to Freud, they liked each other, and we stayed together that evening until late at night” (Andreas-Salomé 1964, 169). Matthew von Unwerth says in his book Freud’s Requiem:

the meeting was not, in all likelihood, a trois, but in the company of other psychoanalysts attending the Congress, or perhaps with friends of Rilke and Lou. Their intimate conversation might have just as easily been shouted over laughter at a cramped corner table as passed in whispers to circumvent the crowding noise. (2005, 4)

On the basis of this Munich meeting, scholars have suggested that Rilke must be the famous young poet and Andreas-Salomé the taciturn young friend. One scholarly strategy has been to deploy literary and historical research to figure out what that conversation might have been. This has led to fascinating insights and no doubt more are forthcoming. It is a fruitful scholarly strategy. That said, in this essay I want to take a different tack.

Basically, for the purpose of this interpretation, I suggest we forget about Rilke and Andreas-Salomé. And we abandon the idea that there was any meeting – whether in the Dolomites or in Munich – that was the meeting we need to get clear about. Rather than follow Freud’s narrative, which is fiction, I suggest we begin with the psychic devastation recorded near the end of the essay. We should look to the beginning as a retrospective attempt to contain the anxiety. The encounter with Rilke may well have served as a day-residue. But the “Young Poet” is better understood not as corresponding to any real figure in the external world, but as a figment of Freud’s imagination. And, importantly, this figment of Freud’s imagination is also a fragment of his imagination. The Young Poet lacks nuance or complexity. From this perspective, it is a mistake to try to fill out the picture with a more textured sense of who this poet was or what the conversation might have been. As a figure in Freud’s inner world, it is the caricature that matters. The “conversation” that interests us here is not any real-life conversation that went on in the social world, it is rather the “conversation” of intrapsychic dynamics of part-objects. The recorded “conversation” is an attempt to repair psychic damage of living through world-catastrophe.

The fact is, the purported argument between Poet and Freud, if taken at face value, is a shambles. The Poet comes across as immature and arrogant: taking a dramatic stance – refusing to take any joy in beauty – for the sake of the drama, one for which his sole reason is the “transience” of all things and for which he gives no further explanation. It is more like a debating-position; a stance.

For his part, the Freud-of-the-vignette, the “I”, is an equally one-sided figure on the other side:

But I did dispute the pessimistic poet’s view that transience of what is beautiful involves any loss in its worth. On the contrary, increase! Transience value is scarcity value in time. Limitation of the possibility of enjoyment raises the value of the enjoyment. It was incomprehensible I declared, that the thought of transience of beauty should interfere with our joy in it. (1916, 305, emphasis added)

Incomprehensible? To be sure, we do have relationships in which we poignantly grasp their vulnerability, transience and overall finiteness. That may well contribute to our sense of their preciousness. But ask anyone who has declined to enter a relationship
because they did not think it would last. It is difficult to see how Freud’s enthusiasm for transference – “On the contrary, increase!” – could begin to persuade. Later in the essay Freud acknowledges the terrible pain of loss, but the “I” who appears in this conversation with the Poet is a thoroughly unambiguous figure. This is not a thoughtful engagement between two serious people about the meaning of transience in human life: it is a polarized stand-off between caricatured figures in Freud’s imagination. Neither stance is nuanced nor insightful about the position of the other. They are simply opposites set over against each other. The Poet is characterized by his refusal to take joy in transient beauty. The “Freud” of the debate is the opposite: taken up with the thought that the transience of beauty is the source and justification of joy.

This polarized stand-off makes perfect sense if one thinks of it as the aftermath of the disillusionment that Freud describes himself as having undergone. Freud has just lost an organizing fantasy of his life: the image of himself as participating in civilization’s long trip and thereby partaking of eternity. He is living with a damaged ego-ideal. What emerges is a divided structure – a “debate” in which no matter which side you are on, you do not rely on the fantasy of civilization partaking of eternity.

Note, too, that if the underlying kernel of anxiety is about the fragility of civilization, then the whole scene of a nature-walk is a projection outward to a place most unlikely to raise the issues genuinely at stake. Put yourself in the mindset of a European intellectual at the beginning of World War I and ask yourself: is there anything in the world that seems more permanent, more intransient, more unlikely to be harmed by human destructiveness than the Dolomite Mountains? If, by contrast, Freud had set his conversation at a café in Munich, the conversationalists might well be led to wonder whether these precious café-conversations might go out of existence; whether indeed cities might survive. (These are not unlike questions we are asking ourselves now.) And the Poet’s explicit concern, if taken at face value, is close to preposterous. He is reported to be “disturbed by the thought that all this beauty was fatal to extinction”; but what he means is “that it would vanish when winter came”. In short, he is talking about the lilies of the field in a high-altitude Dolomite meadow (cf. Kierkegaard 2010, 85–112). True, those lilies will die come winter, but is there any stronger image of permanence than the eternal cycle of nature in which the lilies’ “return” each spring? The Poet allegedly makes the connection to the human: “like all human beauty and splendor that men have created or may create”. If we take seriously the background of catastrophic destructiveness of world war and its immediate and anxious threat to civilization, the Poet’s picture seems rather wishful and upbeat. After all, the lilies will come back in all their splendor. I shall return to this at the end.

Freud gives a diagnosis of what is going on with the Poet and his friend:

These considerations appeared to me incontestable; but I noticed that I had made no impression either upon the poet or upon my friend. My failure led me to infer that some powerful emotional factor was at work which was disturbing their judgment, and I believed later I discovered what it was. What spoilt their enjoyment must have been a revolt in their minds against mourning. The idea that all this beauty was transient was giving these two sensitive minds a foretaste of mourning over its decease; and since the mind instinctively recoils from anything that is painful, they felt their enjoyment of beauty interfered with by thoughts of its transience. (1916, 306)
This is a justly famous diagnosis. The revolt in their minds against mourning picks a strategic but ultimately irrational mental activity that we would now call an attack on linking: the mind anticipates the pain of mourning in the future over a loss and rushes forward in the present to attack the formation of any attachment that would make one vulnerable to loss (Bion 1959; cf. Gardner 2007; Lear 1998).

So far, so good. But let us think again about where the revolt in the mind against mourning is located. Purportedly, it is over there in the mind of the Poet. But if we take a step back and take in the whole scene: we have one figure, the Poet, who refuses to take pleasure in beauty so as to avoid the pain of mourning in the future. And we have another figure, the “author” or “Freud”, who in this scene is an unambivalent advocate for transience. And thus willingness to acknowledge the ambivalence and accept the pain of mourning has – in this scene – been left out. That gives us reason to peek backstage: not to Freud as depicted in this scene but to Freud the author who, in depicting this scene, is leaving ambivalence out. This is a Freud who, as we are exploring, declared damage to his own ego (shattered pride and admiration) in the context of world-catastrophe. This damaged inner world depended on the illusion of the long trip: that one could participate in immortality (somehow) by identifying with civilization and its progress. The depicted scene – the stand-off between Poet and “Freud” – is, from this perspective, a first effort to restore ideals. It is a picture of omnipotent battle: purportedly, the Poet will never have to suffer, due to his high-principled strategy; and for the Freud of this scene, transience is an unambivalent measure of increase in value. A battle of ideals is in play but it is manic and fractured. However, this is an early stage in an attempted restoration.

Freud turns to mourning, the phenomenon he thinks the Poet is guarding himself against.

Mourning over the loss of something that we have loved or admired seems so natural to the layman that he regards it as self-evident. But to psychologists mourning is a great riddle, one of those phenomena which cannot themselves be explained but to which other obscurities can be traced back. (1916, 306–307, emphasis added)

This purported contrast between “laymen” (or ordinary people) and psychologists seems more like a fantasy of a social division than the real thing. For one thing, there is an important difference between grief coming naturally to us on the death of a loved one, and mourning seeming natural to us. The former seems true; the latter questionable. Mourning typically involves attempting to join a cultural ritual that puts itself forward as an adequate manner of response to the death of a loved one. For some, these rituals may be satisfying; for others, there may be moments of alienation; for others they may not work at all. The idea that there is a class of “ordinary people” for whom mourning seems so natural does not stand up to reflective scrutiny.

Let us instead entertain the thought that the purported social division that Freud describes is a projection outward onto society of a struggle going on within the human soul or psyche – a struggle that an individual human being like Freud (or his readers) could experience. The struggle is to restore a damaged ego-ideal in the midst of world catastrophe. How does one restore a sense of pride and admiration in relation to a world that is itself in turmoil? “Ordinary people”, in this context, are the imaginary

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3“dem Laien”(Freud 1946, 359).
others in relation to whom one can feel pride as one identifies with the inspiring image of the psychologist.

Who are the “psychologists”? I am struck that Freud uses the word “psychologist” rather than “psychoanalyst”.4 Freud may have intended to use it simply as a synonym, but the term has an expansive life. Officially it refers to a socially recognized class of professionals but the term opens out to a broader sense: to humans who, in response to a psychic shake-up seek to understand and give an account of what that shake up is – that is, to give a logos of the psyche. In short, the Psychologist is someone who can transform the pain of mourning into a riddle of what mourning is all about. In the figure of the Psychologist, Freud, in my opinion, is trying to build up an image he can admire, take pride in, and identify with. He is constructing a more robust ego-ideal.

Freud has taught us that our imaginary figures tend to be dense with condensations. I suggest there are at least four figures are condensed into the image of the Psychologist: Socratic, scientist, post-Oedipus and humanist. This condensation lends unusual robustness to the ego-ideal. Let me say a word about each.

- Socratic: The Psychologist knows that he does not know. For him, mourning is a “great riddle”. This is not a figure who can be brought down by pretending to a knowledge that he does not have.
- Scientist: Knowing that one has a riddle sustains open-ended curiosity about how things are.
- Post-Oedipus: For Oedipus, having a “great riddle” meant only one thing: find a solution! First time, it seemed like a triumph; second time, it was his undoing. By contrast, the Psychologist’s “great riddle” – mourning – is “one of those phenomena which cannot themselves be explained but to which other obscurities can be traced back”. Mourning is not the kind of riddle we solve. It is a riddle we learn to live with. We live with it well by learning how to trace other phenomena back to it.
- Humanist: One comes back to the human condition again and again not in the sense of explaining the riddle, but in trying to understand ourselves as creatures constituted by it. This is the spirit of the humanities.

Here is the riddle as Freud presents it:

We possess, as it seems, a certain amount of capacity for love – what we call libido – which in the earliest stages of libido is directed toward our own ego. Later, though still at a very early time, this libido is diverted from the ego onto objects, which are thus in a sense taken into our ego. If the object is destroyed or if they are lost to us, our capacity for love (our libido) is once more liberated; and it can then either take other objects instead or it can temporarily return to the ego. But why it is that this detachment of libido from its objects should be such a painful process is a mystery to us and we have not hitherto been able to frame any hypothesis to account for it. We only see that libido clings to its objects and will not renounce those that are lost even when a substitute lies ready to hand. Such then is mourning. (1916, 306-307, emphasis added)

The choice of the Latin term “libido” now looks like an attempt to appear “scientific” according to the social conventions of the time. But what Freud is really talking about,

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4“Dem Psychologen aber ist die Trauer ein grosses Rätsel …” (Freud 1946, 360).
as he tells us, is our capacity for love. His “great riddle” concerns the pain that is internal to our love-life: that is, to our actual loving. The point is that in falling in love with another we become attached to them; and we thereby make ourselves vulnerable to their vulnerabilities – in particular, to their being transient beings. Should they die, we do not just move on to someone else; we suffer their loss. Indeed, it is this suffering that transforms what otherwise would be mere change into loss. This capacity for love thus turns us into historical beings: in that we keep the past alive in emotion-laden, meaning-filled memories. We try to figure out what their lives have meant, what our lives have meant and now mean. Our imaginations get busy. Suffering loss takes time that is itself full of thoughts of past time. (Of course, there may be human beings who do not suffer – Freud is not talking about an exception-less law, but of a characteristic human manner of being.)

Freud is clear that we form attachments not only to other people, but to ideas and ideals, to nations and causes and peoples, to religious beings – God and angels and spirits – to cultural achievements and natural wonders and beauties. Through all our attachments we make ourselves vulnerable to loss. Indeed, we inadvertently make ourselves doubly vulnerable. For as we form our attachments we are liable, without quite noticing what we are doing, to identify with them: that is, to take personal pride in, say, the purportedly eternal achievements of civilization. Should there be disillusionment with the ideal, we not only suffer that loss, we also, as it were, are snuck up on from behind, and have to suffer the unexpected loss of a piece of ourselves.

“Such then,” says Freud, “is mourning”. He is speaking in the voice of the Psychologist, which, I believe, is the voice of a newly refurbished ideal – which is at the same time a refurbished ego-ideal – one that is created in the very act of formulating the Psychologist’s great riddle. This is itself an act of mourning: mourning the loss of a less robust ideal of civilization as an endless trip of progress. In short, Freud is speaking from his own loss and suffering. We readers are in some sense caught up in Freud’s love affair – in this case, with the ideals with which to love and identify.

The English translation of this essay is “On Transience” – and the preposition “on” suggests that the author takes himself to writing on a topic, transience, from a scientifically respectable distance. But the German title has no preposition. It is simply Vergänglichkeit. If I were to take a translator’s liberty I would not add a preposition, but rather two punctuation marks, an exclamation point and a question mark: Transience!? The essay is as much an expression of our feelings of transience as a study of it. There is no outside position from which to comment on it: no “meta”-position available.

As a native English speaker, I want to record a different valence I experience in the words transience and change. Change is impersonal. Change happens. It makes sense to us to talk about mere change. Transience signifies impermanence, but there is also the suggestion that our hearts are in it. Transience hints of loss. There is thus a wistfulness to transience that change does not have.

If we can experience this valence, then Freud’s essay poses a new version of the chicken-or-egg question. Do we mourn because of the transience of the world? Or is the world transient because we mourn it? Without there being beings like us – with our capacity to love – would there only be change? It is not that we impose transience on a world or that transience is merely a human projection. Rather, transience manifests itself in a world full of lovers and lovables. Transience and mourning would seem to arise together.
I am reading “On Transience” as *performance* of psychic repair in the midst of world-catastrophe. As Freud concludes, he *returns to the original scene* of psychic loss, but now with a restored ego-ideal:

I believe that those who … seem ready to make a permanent renunciation because what was precious has proved not to be lasting, are simply in a state of mourning for what is lost. Mourning as we know, however painful it may be, comes to a spontaneous end. When it has renounced everything that has been lost, then it has consumed itself, and our libido is once more free (insofar as we are still young and active) to replace the lost objects by fresh ones equally or still more precious. *It is to be hoped that the same will be true of the losses caused by this war.* When once the mourning is over, it will be found that our high opinion of the riches of civilization has lost nothing from our discovery of their fragility. We shall build up again all that war has destroyed, and perhaps on firmer ground and more lastingly than before. (1916, 307, emphasis added)

Who are these people Freud diagnoses as mourning – those tempted to renounce civilization’s achievements because of their fragility? It must be Freud himself and his intended readers. Or, rather, it is Freud as he described his previous condition – a moment ago, as it were – before performing the psychic repair expressed in this very essay. Indeed, Freud’s own mourning comes to an end precisely in his diagnosis of others as being in mourning. And if readers can use this essay to make a similar journey – indeed, use this passage as an *interpretation* – they too may be able to emerge from their own mourning, now recognized as such.

At first, this conclusion can be disturbing. *Even mourning,* it seems, is transient. Freud’s great riddle, as he presented it, is that we are creatures who mourn at all. But the other side of that riddle is that after some time we move on. Of course, mourning is not itself fickle: people’s lives, personalities, memories, values and commitments can be changed forever by the people with whom they fall in love and, indeed, by the causes they have come to identify with. Freud is talking about mourning in the familiar sense of that term: the socially recognized period of withdrawal from what had been everyday forms of life. However, in a deeper, psychoanalytically informed sense of the term – one made possible by Freud’s own meditations – mourning may continue on throughout a life and, indeed, constitute our humanity (Loewald 1962).

But what does a return to life consist in *in the midst of world-catastrophe?* Freud says, “It is to be hoped … .” and is in those very words Freud is *expressing hope.* He is doing this in the midst of the catastrophe. The war is not over, yet his words mark the *return* of hope. And this return of hope is his emerging from mourning: mourning the loss of the ideal of civilization as never-ending *progress.* War has destroyed that. For an Enlightenment atheist like Freud, this is the secular equivalent of the death of God. Freud can no longer imagine himself as doing one’s meaningful bit by participating in this image of eternity.

But then, how does one emerge from mourning? I want to claim that Freud here installs an ideal of *repetition* that he does not explicitly conceptualize as such. He expresses the hope that “we shall build up again all that war has destroyed”. No one could mean that literally. We do not wish to bring back destroyed systems of injustice, exploitation and evil. To that we say, *good riddance.* We are in fact hoping for transience

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5 Es steht zu hoffen” (Freud 1946, 361).
… of the bad and evil. Freud expresses the hope of building back up again all the good that catastrophe has destroyed, but maybe in this next repetition it will be even better. The words Freud uses are: “perhaps on firmer ground and more lastingly than before”. The hope acknowledges that we cannot be all that determinate about what we are hoping for (Lear 2006). The hope, then, is both ironic and at the same time earnest: for a return … of the better! This is what it is for Freud to emerge from mourning the destruction of civilization.

It might be surprising to see a positive conception of repetition in the writings of Freud. In his explicit writings on the topic, the concept of repetition has a negative aura. Repetition is the condition of neurotics, people failing to flourish. They unconsciously repeat conflicts, over and over again (Freud 1914). It almost feels fated. There is even an intimation of eternity: that the repetition of the unhappy-making same is all there is. This negative conception of repetition is contrasted with positive conceptions of remembering and working-through.

Freud does not formulate a positive conception of repetition named as such but it is there to be found in his conception of mourning. Of course, the world may overwhelm us, it may destroy us, it may eliminate any chance of happiness or psychic well-being, it may make us miserable for life. But if it does not, then it is characteristic of us that we respond to loss with pain and suffering but then tend in the direction of returning to life. The return is itself an expression of hope. We may not be able to say what we are hoping for – but in the broadest and most indeterminate sense, hope hopes for the good. So what we have here is a return of hope which is itself a hope for a return of the good. From Freud’s point of view, this is who we are when we are doing well.

It seems to me now, writing in our time of pandemic, that Freud, writing in his time of world-catastrophe, was struggling with issues of legitimacy in imaginative life. In particular, he saw that longings for immortality could no longer be gratified via a fantasy of civilization’s long trip. The substitute ideal – repetition – is admittedly more fragile: we are not guaranteed that our species is eternal or that a habitable world will last. Still, this acknowledgment can open room for more sustainable forms of fantasy, for a good-enough imaginative world. There is an intimation of eternity in repetition: (for as long as we endure) we shall tend in the direction of returning with hope, a hope for the return of the good. It seems to me that there is further hope to be gleaned from the recognition of the durability of hope (even in the midst of our fragility) that is internal to the human.

But repetition in this positive sense has been less explored in the psychoanalytic tradition than the pathological forms. The only thinker I know of who has thought deeply about repetition in this “good sense” is Søren Kierkegaard – but for him repetition was available only through Christian faith (Kierkegaard 1946, 2014). A question thus opens up for psychoanalysts and philosophers of whether a plausible conception of healthy repetition can be formulated in such way as to be available to a wide range of people and their forms of living. It remains important unfinished business in the human understanding of the human to comprehend the scope, limits and possibilities of repetition in this “good sense”. Perhaps the pandemic has opened up some opportunities for understanding.6

6An earlier and abridged version of this paper was delivered as the David L. Wagner Distinguished Lecture for Humanistic Inquiry via The Newberry Library in Chicago.
References