

## I

### *The Melancholy Art*

Melancholy betrays the world for the sake of knowledge. But in its tenacious self-absorption it embraces dead objects in its contemplation, in order to redeem them. . . . The persistence which is expressed in the intention of mourning is born of its loyalty to the world of things.  
—Walter Benjamin

Writing about visual art, like looking at it, can on occasion console, captivate, and enrapture. The act of trying to put into words, spoken or written, something that never promised the possibility of a translation can sometimes, but not very often, blur the boundaries between author and work, enveloping the writer in a greater world of mutual understanding.<sup>1</sup> Usually language gets in the way. The enchantment that transpires between beholder and work of art has no name because it resists linguistic appropriation. Try as philosophers might, we resignedly call the “feeling” the “aesthetic” and trust that this lone word covers the compelling, unseen, ineffable, mysterious lure of certain objects. Even Bernard Berenson, self-assured connoisseur that he once was, recognized that something more was at work in the contemplation of visual objects than empirical knowledge:

In visual art the aesthetic moment is that fleeting instant, so brief as to be almost timeless, when the spectator is at one with the work of art he is looking at. . . . He ceases to be his ordinary self, and the picture or build-

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ing, statue, landscape, or aesthetic actuality is no longer outside himself. The two become one entity; time and space are abolished and the spectator is possessed by one awareness. When he recovers workaday consciousness it is as if he had been initiated into illuminating, formative mysteries.<sup>2</sup>

The experience of visual captivation (when “the two become one,” as Berenson puts it) is transitory, even ephemeral, however powerful its aftereffects. In “workaday consciousness” its consolation lingers, and like the contemplation of ruins across many cultures and several centuries in faraway places, these material objects provoke a sad and romantic yearning for something that has long ago passed away: “The gods adored by nations are now alone in their niches with the owls and the night-birds. The gilded Capitol languishes in dust and all the temples of Rome are covered with spiders’ webs,” according to Saint Jerome.<sup>3</sup> At the close of this past century, the late storyteller W. G. Sebald mused on what troubled Sir Thomas Browne in 1658 as he contemplated a treasure trove of recently unearthed burial urns in Norfolk:

The winter sun shows how soon the light fades from the ash, how soon night enfolds us. Hour upon hour is added to the sum. Time itself grows old. Pyramids, arches and obelisks are melting pillars of snow. . . . The heaviest stone that melancholy can throw at a man is to tell him he is at the end of his nature.<sup>4</sup>

Mourning, melancholy, monuments lost, monuments found. The duty of any serious art historian is to discover their many stories and then turn these explorations, through the act of writing, into an ever-growing corpus of visual knowledge. Nevertheless, what kind of scholar is drawn to what objects and why? What psychic role does the act of writing about works of art fulfill? Writing about art of the past is a magical game, full of illusions. On the surface it suggests that we

can hold onto the past—tame it, compel it to conform to a reasonable narrative—and that conviction makes us go on. Surely that is not all there is to it. It does not take much insight to recognize that something else pricks this sober veneer of professional commitment. The “aesthetic moment,” for lack of a better phrase, quietly waits in the background, and when it makes itself felt, it so often hurts. What is it that ails us? Or, conversely, sometimes empowers us?

In this chapter, I am going to make a case for bestowing a name on our disciplinary companion: *Melancholy*. Or perhaps her twin sister, *Mourning*. Sometimes, despite Freud, it is difficult to tell them apart (I will comment more on the individual character traits of these two phantoms shortly).<sup>5</sup> Other fields of inquiry also engage with benumbed objects, but the history of art invites melancholy to come along in a distinctly concrete way. The works of art with which art historians traffic come from worlds long gone, and our duty is to care for these waifs and strays and to respond to the life still left within them. “The humanities . . . are not faced by the task of arresting what otherwise would slip away”—argued the great art historian Erwin Panofsky, in contradistinction to the sciences—“but of enlivening what would otherwise remain dead.”<sup>6</sup> If a work of art were indeed “dead” (and here I might argue with Panofsky), art historians could not respond in any affective way. It is not our duty but our nature to react to its continuing presence, however flickering a candle it might appear to be. The philosopher Martin Heidegger once said, “World-withdrawal and world decay can never be undone. The works are no longer the same as they once were. It is they themselves, to be sure, that we encounter there, but they themselves have gone by.”<sup>7</sup> A work of art stands before us, as he would say, in its “thingliness,” hung on the wall as though it were a rifle or a hat,<sup>8</sup> yet so very many of the living, pulsating cords that once-upon-a-time connected it to a live, busy surround have withered away. Nevertheless, something is still undeniably there.

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True enough, Shakespeare's original manuscript of *Othello*, or a recently discovered fragment of the *Sea Scrolls*, might, if we were allowed to hold it in our hands, weave similar kinds of melancholic spells around us. So, too, with the score of a Bach partita. For the most part, we encounter these orphans only through reproductions, editions, or many successive printings and performances. An original work of art—a Renaissance painting, for example—exists in our own time and space (even in the artificial ambience of a museum), and it beckons us for corporeal response by dint of its sheer physical presence. The world of the past is metonymically attached to the present through the material stuff it has left behind.<sup>9</sup> By this reckoning, a museum—itsself another kind of art historical “writing”—is a place “where the dead, through the care of the living, perpetuate their afterlives.”<sup>10</sup> The kind of professional care with which we respond as art historians resides comfortably in our essays and books, but whence comes the *desire* to write about these works in the first place? Surely the melancholic awareness of time gone by, the enforced abandonment of place by these material exiles in the present, pricks our professional competence and denies an easy access to the loss that we are struggling to ignore.<sup>11</sup>

A couple of proleptic remarks: this essay is addressed directly to the scholarly commitment of writing art history and only indirectly to the role of evocative and meaningful historical objects in our memories, archives, and attics. No doubt, the key to the Bastille that lies quietly in the French National Assembly, or a fragment of an inscription from a recently excavated Mayan tomb, or even the love letters that my grandfather wrote to my grandmother in 1918, evince a powerful phenomenological pull all their own. The metonym is the message. Nonetheless, the objects to which I wish principally to allude are those that are *represented* through the genre of writing acknowledged as the discipline of art history. Works of art almost always come to us already mediated. By crossing the axis of aesthetics (hallowed works) with that of history

(time gone by), historians of art have confronted, over the past century, the oxymoronic challenge of turning the visual into the verbal.

Since the eighteenth century, rightly or wrongly, scholars have ennobled certain objects with the mantle of “art,” thereby separating the realm of artifacts from visual objects that bear the impress of a special aesthetic status. It is this historically and epistemologically identifiable genre of writing that I wish to explore. The subject of this essay is writing *art history* as it has been, or, indeed, still is. Works of contemporary art are nearly as distant from those who write about them as those of the past—most obviously because the effort of translating the visual into the verbal must inevitably fail to reach its aim. The contemporary is never fully with us in any sense of plenitude. So much of it belongs to the past and is swallowed up by the future.

Writing of any sort pushes the raw phenomenological experience further and further into the background. It is an activity that promises warm solace but delivers cool distance. Writing, even that of “ordinary” scholarship, is a product of dread, as the late Maurice Blanchot has reminded us, for one is tormented by the realization that anything to which one has been attached is forever lost.<sup>12</sup> Of course, art historians are a special breed of “suffering” human beings. We children of Saturn, to paraphrase Panofsky, are born wise but not necessarily happy.<sup>13</sup> Since our discipline’s founding over a century ago, as scholars we have striven for objectivity and critical distance when it comes to our chosen objects. We are historians after all, and our mandate is to proceed according to certain established principles of investigation. Berenson, for example, would have been thoroughly convinced of that. No doubt, the foundations of our creed may have been shaken by a powerful series of postmodernist earthquakes at the end of the past century, but most of us have gone on in the hope of finding some element of certainty, or, at least, understanding, in an archive, an attribution, or an analysis. And perhaps that is just as

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it should be, else historical knowledge would not “progress.” As Georges Didi-Huberman eloquently reminds us, though, sorrow and yearning can emanate from many sources: “Before an image, finally, we have to humbly recognize this fact: that it will probably outlive us, that before it we are the fragile element, the transient element, and that before us it is the element of the future, the element of permanence. The image often has more memory and more future than the being who contemplates it.”<sup>14</sup>

Might we not consider melancholy as the central trope of art historical writing, the conceit that underwrites the deep structure of its texts?<sup>15</sup> How might melancholy, not as a medieval or Renaissance “humor” but as both a metaphor and an explanatory concept in the twenty-first century, help us as practitioners to acknowledge the elegiac nature of our disciplinary transactions with the past? I take it as axiomatic that all written histories are narratives of desire, full of both latent and manifest needs that exceed the professional mandate to find out what happened and when. Given that the focus of the history of art’s labors is always toward recovering that which is almost gone, this primal desire must be labeled melancholic. There is a twist, however, to this easy characterization. The materiality, the very physicality, of the works of art with which we deal is a challenge to ever seeing the past as over and gone. They exist in the same space as their analysts, yet their sense of time is hardly congruent with ours—of that we are acutely aware. And so we work incessantly to familiarize the unfamiliar. In the plaintive writing of art history, we have a “loss without a lost object” (an authentic melancholic predicament) in which the object is both held onto and gone astray simultaneously.<sup>16</sup> As scholars we inhabit a paradox, one that enlivens as much as it paralyzes. Echoing Blanchot, the literary critic Richard Stamelman declares that “writing is loss as it comes to exist in another form. . . . Language signifies . . . not the thing but the absence of the thing and so is implicated in the loss.”<sup>17</sup>

In this chapter, I want to shine an oblique light on the busy workaday activities of art history, like the kind of black light that illuminates the wondrous world of moths fluttering about on late summer nights. This reflection on our disciplinary drives must necessarily invoke some tenets of psychoanalysis. Is there an “unconscious” of the history of art? What kinds of spaces, what kinds of time might it occupy? Is it deep, hidden in the darkest corners of our profession, or is it not about depth at all? Does it forever haunt art historical practice; does this melancholic awareness shadow most all of our activities? Or is it simply the other face of this discipline, a different surface of our commitment to writing about incandescent objects—objects, like orphans, who come to us from an unknowable past but beseech us for attention and care in the present? Orphans, above all, have the right to cry.

A well-respected philosopher of history, Frank Ankersmit, has recently written *Sublime Historical Experience*, in which he offers this earnest assessment: “How we *feel* about the past is no less important than what we *know* about it—and probably even more so.”<sup>18</sup> Like Thomas Browne in the seventeenth century, not to mention scores of contemporary thinkers in the wake of postmodernism,<sup>19</sup> Ankersmit wishes to gather the fragments of the past, the ruins lying all around us if we care to see them (and we do indeed see them if we are art historians!), into a semblance of meaning. And their meanings, ironically, reside in their perpetual loss of meaning. What Browne or Robert Burton or John Milton may have once-upon-a-time called “melancholy,” or Raymond Klibansky, Erwin Panofsky, and Fritz Saxl in their wartime magnum opus later refined to “poetic melancholy” and “*melancholia generosa*,” Ankersmit names the sublimity of historical experience, which originates from the contradictory emotions of disappearance and recovery in our contemplation of the past.<sup>20</sup>

Melancholy, that “noonday demon,” is a shape-shifter, depending on what historical period it is when “she” makes an appearance.<sup>21</sup> The 1911 *Encyclopedia Britannica*, heralded for

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being the ultimate compendium of all knowledge before the world was split asunder in the Great War, provides a terse characterization (on the eve of Freud writing his oft-cited essay “On Mourning and Melancholia” of 1915). In the Renaissance, for example in the writing of the Florentine Neo-Platonist Marsilio Ficino, melancholy was classified as one of the “humors,”<sup>22</sup> originally a mental and/or physical condition resulting from an excess of black bile, but by the seventeenth century it was regarded as possessing both a more complex etiology and a greater range of symptoms for abject grief.<sup>23</sup> By the nineteenth century, the personification of melancholy had persuasively braided together seemingly contradictory attributes—neurasthenic suffering and bursts of creative brilliance—and thereby served as a coveted standard for the Romantic sensibility.<sup>24</sup> For many thinkers, the time elapsed between the fourteenth century and the “end” of modernism in the twentieth represents the era of melancholy,<sup>25</sup> a meta-narrative “inaugurated by the Renaissance, refined by the Enlightenment, flaunted by Romanticism, fetishized by the Dec[a]dents, and theorized by Freud” before its reappearance in postmodern critical theory.<sup>26</sup>

Before delving into the complexities of Freudian and post-Freudian thought on the subject, we could no better than heed two formidable philosophers of history, Friedrich Nietzsche and Alois Riegl. These two thinkers, one from the late nineteenth and the other from the early twentieth century—around the same time that the owl of art historical wisdom took wing in German-speaking countries—embody the rueful obsession with history and its baleful effects. Nietzsche begins his “The Use and Abuse of History” by asking us to consider the cows in the field:

[T]hey know not the meaning of yesterday or today; they graze and ruminate, move or rest, from morning to night, from day to day, taken up with their little loves and hates and the mercy of the moment, feeling neither



*melancholy* or satiety. . . . The beast lives *unhistorically*; for it “goes into” the present, like a number, without leaving any curious remainder. It cannot dissimulate, it conceals nothing; at every moment it seems what it actually is, and thus can be nothing that is not honest. But man is always resisting the great and continually increasing weight of the past. . . . he cannot learn to forget, but hangs on the past: however far or fast he runs, that chain runs with him. It is matter for wonder: the moment that is here and gone, that was nothing before and nothing after, returns like a specter to trouble the quiet of a later moment.<sup>27</sup> (my emphasis on the word *melancholy*)

Haunted by the past, humans turn to history, living with it, killing each other because of it, erecting monuments to it, even writing it down and interpreting it. The danger is an obvious one, for history gives us the conviction, according to Nietzsche, that we are all mere latecomers, vitiated voyeurs to the panorama that is the past. If this pervasive cultural situation can ever be remedied, it will be by knowing “the right time to forget as well as the right time to remember, and instinctively see when it is necessary to feel historically and when unhistorically.”<sup>28</sup> One special early art historian attempted just that intellectual feat.

Riegl, that Janus-faced Viennese thinker who turned one face toward the great philosophers of the nineteenth century and the other toward the future of the brand-new discipline of art history, wrote a justifiably famed essay early in the twentieth century on “The Modern Cult of Monuments,” in which he distinguishes between “*historical value*” and “*age value*” in monuments that have fallen under the art historical gaze. Both are implicated in the nascent commitments of the history of art; yet it is their inability to coexist that provides fodder not only for the battle over the issue of preservation, but also for the direction of the new branch of the humanities:

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Age-value appreciates the past for itself, while historical value singles out one moment in the developmental continuum of the past and places it before our eyes as if it belonged to the present. . . . An aesthetic axiom of our time based on age-value may be formulated as follows: from man we expect accomplished artifacts as symbols of a necessary process of human production; on the other hand, from nature acting over time, we expect their disintegration as the symbol of an equally necessary passing. . . . In the twentieth century we appreciate particularly the purely natural cycle of becoming and passing away. . . . The nineteenth century is rightly called the historical one because . . . it relished the search for and study of particulars.<sup>29</sup>

The cult of ruins, so prominent in earlier musings on the traces the past has left behind, weakened in the late nineteenth century and only periodically returned at the beginning of the twentieth century as an antidote to the passion for preservation. “While age-value is based solely on the passage of time, historical value, though it could not exist without recognizing time’s passage, nevertheless wishes to suspend time.”<sup>30</sup> It was the suppression of the first phenomenological, perhaps aesthetic, reaction to “old things” in favor of the scientific creation of meaning that won the disciplinary day. Banished, but hardly gone, the romantic attitude to the past continued to course, like an underground wave, through the unconscious of art history. Janus-faced in this respect as well, the philosopher Riegl certainly was aware of that predicament:

*Historical value does not exhaust the interest and influence that artworks from the past arouse in us. . . . When we look at an old belfry we must make a . . . distinction between our perception of the localized historical memories it contains and our more general awareness of the passage of time, the belfry’s survival over time, and the visible traces of its age. . . . the traces of age strike us as*

testimony to natural laws inevitably governing all artifacts, [not to mention those]. . . which trigger in the beholder a sense of the life cycle.<sup>31</sup> (my emphasis)

In Hamburg at about the same time, the scholar Aby Warburg diagnosed Western society as split between Apollonian and Dionysian commitments, divided between “rational conscious poles” and “inspired-ecstatic” ones that would suddenly erupt, throwing the calm surface of supreme cultural productions, such as Renaissance art, into creative turmoil.<sup>32</sup> Obsessed with problems in cultural memory, Warburg early in the twentieth century began building a library that over the course of his life would bear out his beliefs, a collection whose passions and intellectual commitments would especially intrigue thinkers in the twenty-first. It would be difficult to imagine a scholar of the visual more different in temperament from the connoisseur Berenson with whom we began this essay than the cultural historian Warburg. Nevertheless, in their writings and lectures, both, in very different ways, were motivated by the sorrows of loss about what we do not know, what we cannot understand: the kind of historical attitude seized and satirized with justification by Nietzsche but given psychological depth by Riegl.

And so we have come back again to an auspicious time, around the year, as Virginia Woolf claimed, when human understanding met its match in a world that denied access to its secrets: “On or about December, 1910, human character changed.”<sup>33</sup> “If death was still an exotic member of late nineteenth century thinking,” as Thomas Harrison noted, “by 1910 it had received full citizens’ rights.”<sup>34</sup> Henceforth, in that tortured age, if anything was to be explained by its philosophers and historians, they had to go underground, so to speak, into the nether region of Orpheus and Eurydice, where very different narrative levels were at work. In their fascination with ruins, death, and time gone by, the Romantics had gestured toward the existence of melancholy, but its scientific ground-

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ing came with the work of Sigmund Freud. At that historical moment, Viennese Freudianism and the Warburg library in Hamburg together embodied a new field of cultural inquiry.<sup>35</sup> It was not easy, however, for the intelligent proponents of the new *Kunstwissenschaft* (i.e., art historical science) to get on with their charge, unless a major act of renunciation took place. And that's where Melancholy, who might have been expected to exit the stage of art history as a science, makes an entrance into the argument once again. This privileged aspect of Freudian and post-Freudian psychoanalysis, I hope, might help us reflect on what was and is at stake in the evolution of our discipline.

Because these two fields of knowledge developed at the same time, and their evolution along parallel tracks can intimate, if not reveal, possible ways of thinking about shared understandings, it makes some sense to consider these cultural discourses in tandem. What might psychoanalytic thinking about melancholy, mourning, and death drives indirectly tell us about reading the corpus of art historical thought that has always run alongside it? As a historiographer of art history, I am interested as much in the discipline's renunciations, displacements, fantasies, and oblivions, as in its intellectual history "proper." In this chapter, I am invoking a particular strain of psychoanalysis only to lend me words and concepts that might help make apparent the sources of the poetry, and perhaps the joys and sorrows, of my own discipline.

Ever since he wrote "On Transience" in 1915, Freud acknowledged that mourning was the crucial conundrum that the therapist must penetrate. "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."<sup>36</sup> Provoked by the devastation of war, that meditation speaks reassuringly of an end to the world's mourning, the point where a far kinder and richer world loses noth-

ing with the discovery of its fragility.<sup>37</sup> Although Freud would not hesitate to alter or modify ideas during his long career, “his fundamental interest in the ways the past can cause pain in the present was a stable component of his psycho-analysis.”<sup>38</sup> Not long before his beloved daughter, Sophie, died in an influenza epidemic, he also wrote “On Mourning and Melancholia” (1915; published 1917).<sup>39</sup> In that packed and suggestive essay, he is intent on distinguishing two reactions to the loss of the “object,” either in actuality or in fantasy. “Objecthood,” of course, can be conferred on an actual person who has died, but it also can refer to a fantasmatic thing, an abstraction in the mourning individual. The deep and pervasive sorrow that accompanies the one left behind, according to Freud, is “normal,” natural, non-pathological. He or she of necessity “works through” the anguish and emerges on the other side (wherever that may be) a changed and sorrowful person, certainly, but not a self-tortured one. On the other hand, there is the inconsolable condition of melancholia:

The distinguishing mental features of melancholia are. . . in some way related to an object-loss which is withdrawn from consciousness, in contradistinction to mourning, in which there is nothing about the loss that is unconscious. . . In mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself.<sup>40</sup>

The hurt that the “crushed” state of melancholia inflicts upon its victim cannot help but diminish his or her connectedness to the world outside. Once “the shadow of the object fell upon the ego,” all is lost.<sup>41</sup> According to Karl Abraham, Freud’s fellow explorer in mapping this uncharted psychic topography, melancholy is an archaic form of mourning.<sup>42</sup> The melancholic is no longer a romantic figure. Entrapped in narcissistic regression, he or she resists any consolation and inhabits a surround devoid of affect and feeling, other than that of a compulsive desire to repeat once again the shock and

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despair of loss. In many ways these two states of grieving echo the demands of the death drive (*Thanatos*) in their struggle with the dynamics of the life instincts (*Eros*). At the very beginning of consciousness (when one becomes two) a permanent division is inscribed in the psyche, and an eternal yearning is put into play: the moment when *Eros* asserts itself in its drive toward life, *Thanatos* steps in and reverses the course of action, thus perpetuating the psychic struggle.<sup>43</sup> Outside the confines of the Freudian vocabulary, melancholy and mourning are usually regarded as synonyms for each other. Freud, however, distinguished them by one persistent feature; as he graphically and disturbingly asserts, “The complex of melancholia behaves like an open wound.”<sup>44</sup>

That is the place, for the time being, to leave Freud in order tentatively and temporarily to venture into the century-long thicket of post-Freudian refinements and challenges on the subject. The theme of melancholy, especially in connection with works of visual art, leads on this occasion in one direction exclusively: to British object-relations theory and its “origin” in the work of the well-known analyst and thinker, Melanie Klein. The young woman from Vienna, first in analysis with Sandor Ferenczi in Budapest (1912) after the death of her mother, soon fell under the influence of her mentor and therapist, the Freudian analyst Abraham, who urged her to join the psychoanalytic community in Berlin in the early twenties, after which she emigrated to London in 1926. Klein accomplished much in England. Not only did she practice analysis without any formal analytic or medical certification (not unusual for a woman of her time), but she also adapted Freudian ideas in novel, and often challenging, ways and did not hesitate to publish them. She also suffered immensely: her son was killed in a climbing accident in 1934, and her daughter, also an analyst, permanently deserted her. Ultimately, her commitment to understanding the human psyche (especially that of children) as it interacts with objects (toys) led to the founding of what has been called the British school of object-

relations theorists.<sup>45</sup> Klein's claim that the loss of the past can be compensated for by the presence of meaningful objects, real or imagined, has far-reaching implications for my own argument, both metaphorical and material.

Six compelling principles, or characteristics, of Kleinian psychology hint at the links between the complex of melancholy and the writing of art history that I wish to draw. Figuratively, and sometimes literally, they enumerate—always by innuendo, for certainly Klein is not addressing the professional commitments of art historians—the motives behind or before or beneath the writing of art history, motives with which this particular brand of psychoanalysis would be clearly resonant.<sup>46</sup>

- 1) *The significance of "play"*: toys or other *objects* bridge the gap between an inner and outer world, and in doing so they represent the operations of phantasy as it comes from within and imagines what is without.
- 2) *Space not time*: for Klein time exists in space, and she does not separate present and past; what she "observ[ed], describ[ed], and theoriz[ed]" is the very absence of history and historical time.<sup>47</sup>
- 3) *Meaning of mourning*: grief, imagined or real, over another's death later in life revives all sorts of infantile fears about inevitably losing the "good mother."<sup>48</sup>
- 4) *Eros and Thanatos*: the death drive that Freud had posited in "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" in 1920 is crucial for Klein as well. According to Julia Kristeva, Klein describes the death drive as "directly linked to the life drive, and not dissociated from it. . . . the death drive manifests itself only through its relation to an object."<sup>49</sup>
- 5) *Fear and hurt*: "pining" is Klein's word of choice for "feelings of sorrow and concern for the loved objects, the fears of losing them and the longing to regain them. . . . Pining for the lost loved object also implies dependence on it, but dependence of a kind which becomes an incentive to reparation and preservation of the object."<sup>50</sup>

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- 6) *Writing*: the act of reparation, making whole once again, lies within the domain of the arts. “Pain, suffering, and reparation are at the foundation of creativity and sublimation.”<sup>51</sup> Indeed, writing (and painting) provide routes for re-creating not only the once-upon-a-time harmony of the inner world but also offer the promise of continuing connections with the ever-present outer.

It might seem at best naive, or at worst presumptuous, to equate Klein’s “toys” with the objects with which art historians play (#1). As far-fetched as this material analogy may be, there is nevertheless something provocative about reading the two practices, art history and psychoanalysis, alongside each other. Klein stresses that “*there is no instinctual urge, no anxiety situation, no mental process which does not involve objects, external or internal; in other words, object relations are at the centre of emotional life,*” an insight she claimed showed her all sorts of activities in a new light.<sup>52</sup> Her conviction also, I believe, helps to illuminate the melancholic predisposition that shadows many an art historical writing. Such a fixation on *objects*, the felicitous semantic hinge that connects works of art to the fixtures of Klein’s fascination, intimates the many ways in which certain works of art might be doing something more for our disciplinary psyche than providing handsome materials for advanced research.

The emotional life of art history is predicated upon loss (of time, of context), even though it is refracted through *objects*, shadows of their former selves, that insistently persist in occupying a strange and lonely contemporary space (#2). Fear of losing that which is always already gone (#3) leads to a celebration of what remains. Indeed, what other choice is there (#4)? The feeling of loss that is our constant companion, try as we might to repress it, is the source of a profound disciplinary yearning, a need—because of time’s incessant disappearance—that can never be satisfied (#5). And so we write (#6), but writing never satisfies, for every word only



widens the phenomenological divide between our objects and ourselves. In this regard, art history, an inquiry that originates with actual objects of aesthetic fascination, could be viewed as the “modernist literary discourse” par excellence of the sort that Esther Sanchez-Pardo, although she does not directly mention the discipline, invokes in a recent book on Klein and the malady of modernity:

Modernist literary discourses are haunted by the specter of object loss: loss of a coherent and autonomous self, loss of a social order in which stability reigned, loss of metaphysical guarantees, and in some cases loss and fragmentation of an empire. . . . Modernist literary and visual texts strive on many levels to deny the contemporaneous sense of loss, to hide its sadness, to mark and disavow its absence, to vent and contain rage, and to doubt any project of reparation. . . . Where is the labor of melancholia to be closed and how can we begin the work of mourning? . . . To what extent is this melancholic labor telling us of a deeper melancholia that may have to do with reading and writing as entombments, as memorials to all the cultural and emotional losses of our pasts?<sup>53</sup>

Hers are weary words. There might, however, be a contrary way of construing this predicament so that we can think differently, even unconventionally, about the passions and commitments of writing art history. Two British analysts—D. W. Winnicott from the middle of the twentieth century and Christopher Bollas, who practices and writes in England today—might help. What makes their object-relations studies suggestive for contemplative art historians is their mutual commitment to the Kleinian notion of *reparation* and its therapeutic goal of restoring an affirmative vitality to the state of melancholy.

In the work of Klein’s “blithe and unbeglamoured” colleague D. W. Winnicott (1896–1977), the first pediatrician in England to undergo training in psychoanalysis, emphasis

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is placed on living rather than suffering.<sup>54</sup> Analyzed no less both by James Strachey (best known as the general editor of the *Standard Edition* of Freud) and Joan Riviere (translator of Freud and author of numerous works in psychoanalysis), Winnicott adopted Klein's faith in the diagnostic potential of playing phantasy games with children. His focus is on the social interaction between mother and child (the "holding environment"), rather than with the infant's developing sense of aloneness.<sup>55</sup> His principal break with Klein resided, in fact, over the conception of the mother as agent (who always needs to be just "good-enough"). In Winnicott's universe there is no anger, no single-minded drive to destruction. The demise of the infant's "objects," primarily the mother (both "good breast" and "bad breast"), may be desired, but there is inevitably "joy at the object's survival."<sup>56</sup> Constancy is the reward, and objects and their "transitional substitutes"<sup>57</sup> (e.g., baby's blanket) that pass unscathed through this psychic valley of death can now be manipulated to the infant's (and later the adult's) own ends. He or she grows up half happy in a world of using or making "objects."

If blessed, he or she may make art, or even write about it. Artistic sublimation, for Winnicott, is the process by which inner states become actualized in external form: "in painting, writing, music, etc., an individual may find islands of peace."<sup>58</sup> Writing about works of art, by extension, becomes a medium not only for invoking their past, but also for finding deep consolation for the self in visual forms that survive into the present. Art is the supreme embodiment of the imagination, for it camouflages, or even sublimates, the original pain of separating from the lost object.

Objects lost, objects found. Always they return us to the mysteries of writing art history: an art in its own right, very similar in many unconscious respects to the making of art, whether it be literary, musical, or visual. Whereas artists embody, however, art historians tend to deny. Needing our historical accounts to function as models of sound empiricist knowledge, we often forget that it is the desire to understand

ourselves and our need to create these consoling stories that might also be at work in this special, sustained form of sublimated melancholy. Ideas about this psychic state generated in the work of Bollas, the third in my triad of British object-relations analysts, then, might have the most direct implications for those of us interested in the meanings and motives, as well as the consolations, of our chosen profession.

In his 1987 book *The Shadow of the Object: Psychoanalysis of the Unthought Known*, Bollas is most interested in “that part of the psyche that lives in the wordless world,” and he illustrates this place of stillness by works of art and the spells with which they enchant their beholders. When a person feels “uncannily embraced” by a meaningful object (shades of Winnicott’s “holding environment” that a “good-enough” mother provides for her infant), it has much to do with the work of art’s ability to reenact a much earlier, preverbal, memory. Echoing Berenson’s words with which we began, this is the aesthetic moment of profound rapport (when two become one) with a work that gives the viewer (art historian, aesthetician, critic, or other) the sense “of being reminded of something never cognitively apprehended but existentially known.” This experience originates as a “crystallization” of time into a space where objects and subjects achieve an intimate and wordless “rendezvous.”<sup>59</sup> In a study a decade later, he extends this suggestive analogy to the past (a “cemeterial concept”) and to history writing:

By making past events meaningful, the historian exercises an important psychic capacity, that of reflection: this does not confer retrospective truth on the past—indeed, almost the contrary—but creates a new meaning that did not exist before, one that could not exist were it not based on past events and did it not transform them in a new place. That new place—in history proper the text of the historian . . . is a psychic act. . . . Unlike the past, which as a signifier sits in the self as a kind of

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lead weight, history requires work, and when the work is done the history is sufficiently polysemous to energize many unconscious elaborations. . . . [The historical text] saturates [its many details] with new meaning created through the very act of retrieval.<sup>60</sup>

If done well, writing history summons its own aesthetic power, heeds the call of redemption that Benjamin followed.<sup>61</sup> But what of art history? What exactly is lost in its own special dominion of the dead? The past, but not the objects from the past. It would be easy if they were one and the same, but they so clearly are not. Most of us, both experts and laypersons, know that the past is irrecoverable, but what do we do with relics and material orphans “so vivid, so tantalizingly concrete, that we cannot help but feel deprived” in their presence?<sup>62</sup> This is the distinctive dilemma of the history of art from which we cannot escape, and melancholy is the key that locks us in.

Were it not for the open wound, still bleeding—“perpetuating that love that we do not want to relinquish,” as Freud characterizes it—there would be nothing to try and say, no commitment either to the dead or the living.<sup>63</sup> No history of art, no history of aesthetics, no museums. Melancholy holds us there, and in the act of aesthetic yearning we strive to keep the works of art alive, even with the awareness that their historical being vanishes deeper into the past with each passing day. Historians could conceivably soften their willfulness by heeding the orphic voice of poets. “Sad, strange, but also sweet is the emotion” cultivated by those writers. “Loss is celebrated as much as is mourned,” according to the critic Peter Schwenger. “Thus melancholy is often the very thing (or Thing) that poets strive to impart to their readers.”<sup>64</sup> Once again we contemplate the paradoxical union of pain and pleasure enabled by history writing.

What now for the history of art? Whitney Davis, writing on Johann Joachim Winckelmann, archaeologist and historian of ancient art, suggests one possibility:

The history of art is lost, but art history is still with us; and although art history often attempts to bring the object back to life, finally it is our means of laying it to rest, of putting it in its history and taking it out of our own, where we have witnessed its departure. To have the history of art as *history*—acknowledging the irreparable loss of the objects—we must give up art history as a bringing-to-life, as denial of departure. If it is not to be pathological, art history must take its leave of its objects, for they have already departed anyway.<sup>65</sup>

Despite the eloquence of Davis's words, in this essay I have been suggesting a different route. Art historians may, in their empiricist inclinations, strive to make the objects return to the past from whence they came by replacing them "in historical context," by putting them in their own history and taking them out of our own. Yet that is not where the *art* of art history comes from, and as philosophers, or poets, we feel that tug acutely. There is no end to art history. We cannot let the life of these lonely works of art entirely disappear. If this is pathological, so be it; if it is symptomatic of melancholy rather than mourning, it is nevertheless the only romantic, reparative act in which caretakers can engage, thereby "soothing the sadness of our condition," as Hegel puts it.<sup>66</sup> *Still* art *still* matters, and works of art, in their hushed material presence, insistently press us not to let time swallow them up again.

In sum, the melancholy that courses through the history of art is a product of its perhaps unconscious awareness that works that seem so present are actually absent. It is the loss embedded in this ambiguity that both haunts and animates its activities. Rather than consign them to past history, the art historian tries to repair the damage by ascribing new meanings in the present. In the face of their apparent "meaninglessness," as survivors of a storm that has deprived them of their authenticity, our writing attempts what cannot actually be done—to restore to these works that power which they have

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nearly, but not quite, lost. In the midst of this compromised act of recovery, however, art historians can find something of themselves, or at least can cultivate the exquisite sensitivity toward age-value that Riegl once extolled.

Reading Proust's reveries hazily circling round the most privileged object from his past—his grandmother's *madeleine*—Benjamin himself meditates on the impossibilities of any authentic recovery:

“In vain we try to conjure [our own past] up again; the efforts of our intellect are futile.” Therefore Proust, summing up, says that the past is “somewhere beyond the reach of the intellect, and unmistakably present in some material object (or in the sensation which such an object arouses in us), though we have no idea which one it is. As for that object, it depends entirely on chance whether we come upon it before we die or whether we never encounter it.”<sup>67</sup>

Art historians, of course, deliberately select which objects to “save”—or else find the objects that we hope will “save” us. In doing so, we heighten sensitivity to worlds gone by as much as we quiet our incessant yearnings by presuming we can recreate or understand. This chapter's excursions into object-relations theory provided a few psychoanalytic concepts from the past century—the same century in which the historical study of art became a legitimately acknowledged discipline—that attempted to come to grips with the strange aesthetic power that works of art and other relics from the past can yet exert over us.

By way of ending this beginning, permit me to identify a trio of emphases, each pirouetting around the inescapable lure of talking about looking, what I like to think of as the poetics of art history writing. First of all, melancholy is not exclusively the gloomy, sorrowful state that several thinkers, both then and now, would have it be. Scholars in the Renaissance long ago recognized, as did their historiographers through

subsequent times, that the saturnine temperament (as Dürer engraved it five centuries ago [chapter 4, figure 23]) always contains the potential for creative liberation. A spirit of contradiction lies at melancholy's core. The Romantics knew this (that the painters and writers who "suffer" are the ones who feel most acutely), as do the contemporary philosophers who have made a plea for the return of affect and feeling, no matter its source, to the writing of history. Consequently, consolation, even perhaps the prospect of reparation in Klein's terms, lies at the heart of any melancholic gesture. The poignancy of struggling to capture a visual sensation in written words is itself often a gesture toward reparation and wholeness.

Secondly, it is the paradoxical capacity of language to make present what is absent that lends it the ephemeral and compromised quality of its "meaning." This is what requires generation after generation of historians, empiricist or critical, to keep writing. Nothing can ever be settled, but the material insistence of our objects incessantly encourages us to try. There are both "positive" and "negative" dimensions to the art of writing. Writing is loss only if it suggests the impression of having something fixed (i.e., "dead") with which to begin. Writing is that proverbial handshake toward the dead, that act of touching that cannot let go.

And thirdly, melancholy is what engenders the poetry of loss when it does make its appearance in the studies of some art historians. It scarcely needs saying that there are many ways to write art history. In one way or another, loss haunts each one of us, but only those with poetry in their souls have the disquieting inclination to recognize it. "Theory" today, of course, is as guilty as the positivism of yesterday for dampening the effect of mood. Whatever we say is never what we mean, and what we do not know and what we do not understand is what compels us to keep trying to turn images into words in the practice of art history. Or at least some art history, for the discipline is notoriously too often a matter-of-fact exercise. Nevertheless, many kinds of art historical writing operate in this

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landscape of “despair,” or at least unrest. A historiographer does not have to scratch the surface very deeply to recognize that the wound caused by the separation of time and distance will always continue to bleed. Words about images that struggle to offer a powerful cure, as much as they are a regrettable demonstration of inadequacy, are those that make some kinds of art history writing survive, while others quietly fade away.