Merleau-Ponty's Melancholy: On Phantom Limbs and Involuntary Memory

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Abstract: I offer a re-evaluation of Freudian melancholy by reading it in-conjunction with Merleau-Ponty's analysis of phantom limbs and Marcel Proust's involuntary memories. As an affective response to loss, melancholy bears a strange, belated temporality (*Nachträglichkeit*). Through Merleau-Ponty's analysis of the phantom limb, I emphasize that the melancholic subject remains affectively bound to a past world. While this can be read as problematic insofar as the subject is attuned to both the possibilities that belong to the present and the impossibilities that belong to the past world, I turn to Proust whose writings on involuntary memory indicate a way of taking up these futural (im)possibilities. I focus the discussion on the narrator's involuntary memory of his grandmother after her death to highlight the creative transformation of his melancholy.

In the following pages, I re-read the phantom limb syndrome, as presented by Maurice Merleau-Ponty in *Phenomenology of Perception*, in conjunction with Freudian melancholia and Proustian memory. In doing so, I aim to demonstrate the creative possibilities entailed in melancholy and the phantom limb as an attitude of bodily existence. Like Freudian melancholia, what I am calling Merleau-Ponty's melancholy is "unconscious," but the phenomenological unconscious is not the psychoanalytic unconscious. For Merleau-Ponty, the unconscious is in the world and consists of latent intersubjective significations that organize and classify a subject's perceptual fields.[1] The unconscious is invisible—belonging to the visible domain but not as any of its objects. It is feeling:[2] the body's persistent orientation toward someone or something that is absent. Experiences of being haunted—by the quasi-presences of phantom limbs, by the past as well as by the future—are not perceptual anomalies but reveal the extent to which perception is always already haunted, already coextensive with

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the imperceptible. As experience is already haunted by the quasi-presences of others, it becomes necessary to rethink what it means to grieve and how we respond affectively to our losses. In particular, I am interested in the creative potential of the melancholic body that refuses to mourn the dead, and in doing so, remains affectively bound to a past, "lost" world.

In the first section, I focus on the nonlinear temporality of the Freudian unconscious, *Nachträglichkeit*, to differentiate the time of mourning and the strange time of melancholy. While the time of mourning is linear and progressive, melancholy appears to leave one at a standstill, stubbornly defending against the unfolding of time. With *Nachträglichkeit*, I re-read melancholy's slowness through the movements of deferral and retroaction. In the second section, I read Merleau-Ponty's analysis of phantom limb syndrome in *Phenomenology of Perception* as a melancholic attitude of being-haunted. One who suffers from a phantom limb is still holding onto the possibilities of a past world that are no longer active possibilities for the subject. By holding onto the past world, the present opens onto futural im-possibilities and effectively arrests the personal time of the subject who enacts empty, mechanical repetitions. I am interested in this bodily intimacy with possibilities that exceed one's own personal existence and actual body. In being-haunted by phantom limbs or phantom others, there is an insight into the strange co-presence of distinct temporalities that populate the present; a presentiment of a more expansive, anonymous sociality. In the third section, I turn to Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* and the work of involuntary memory to illustrate the creative transformation of phantoms. The experience of being-haunted is an anxious experience and the narrator describes this anxiety in relation to those whom he loved as an inability to make them fully present. I focus on the narrator's involuntary memory of his grandmother after her death to show how the slowness of melancholy makes it possible for the narrator to encounter the presence of his grandmother that was not possible while she was alive. By retracing his life and drawing the figures of his loved ones, he recovers the time that was lost in his anxiety and in the process transforms his melancholy from a power of death into a poetic productivity.

I. Freudian Melancholy and the Time of the Unconscious

Modern psychoanalysis begins with Sigmund Freud and Joseph Breuer's 1895 text, *Studies on Hysteria*. Through the case studies on patients exhibiting "hysterical" symptoms (e.g., aphasia, limb paralysis, loss of vision or hearing, hallucinations, syncope), Freud and Breuer discovered that these symptoms, which had no apparent organic cause, could be abated through talking. The "talking cure" introduced into Freud's theory of consciousness a paradox of knowledge. In order for the patient to recognize the veracity of the analyst's suggestion re-

garding the meaning of the symptom, she must have already known the meaning of the symptom herself. At the same time, she must not have had the requisite knowledge or else it would not have emerged somatically in distorted form. In short, the symptomatic patient both knows and does not know the meaning of the symptom. In response to the psyche's resistances to self-transparency, Freud introduces the notion of an unconscious as a separate domain, inaccessible to conscious awareness. In the patient's words, the analyst was able to hear traces of the unconscious thoughts and wishes and bring these to the patient's conscious awareness. In the case of neurotic patients, Freud theorized that the elusive meaning of the patients' symptoms was tied to repressed memories of infantile sexual experience.[3] Importantly, the somatic appearances of repressed memories were catalyzed by the event of a loss that was not consciously avowed by the patient.

Freud introduced the neologism *Nachträglichkeit* (time of deferred action) in order to explain the nonlinear temporal relationship between an initial infantile experience and its later re-emergence as a bodily symptom and traumatic experience. A traumatic experience in the present may be a delayed reaction to an earlier scene that was not experienced as dangerous and had been repressed. The present situation revives the affect of the earlier event through the re-emergence of the past embodiment. The return of the earlier scene yields two consequences. First, the affect of the present situation is overdetermined by the earlier scene, which may have produced anxiety, guilt, and a desire to flee, and now intensifies present anxiety. Second, the present situation retrospectively transforms the earlier scene. From the present, the subject alters the memory of the initial experience, which becomes traumatic "after the event."

Essential to his early seduction theory of neurosis, *Nachträglichkeit* helped to explain the period of latency that separated etiological events. Further, it suggested that the arrow of time did not just move from the past to the present (deferral) but that events in the present transformed past events (retroaction). In the wake of the loss of his father in October 1896, Freud begins to abandon his seduction theory, as evidenced by his letters to Wilhelm Fleiss, replacing it with a narrative of psychosexual development.[4] Jonathan House and Julie Slotnick argue that the conceptual possibilities of *Nachträglichkeit* become arrested with the abandonment of the seduction theory and the centrality of trauma. From then on, it signifies a mechanistic relation between two etiological moments.[5] Instead of positing a mutually transformative relation between past and future, what remained was a relation of deferral between past and present, and the image of past events as a "ticking time bomb." As Laplanche writes, any suggestion of a possible retroactive effect—any notion of an antero-posterior action, which is what made the concept so rich—was gone."[6]

In 1917, Freud publishes the essay "Mourning and Melancholia," which remains a foundational psychoanalytic text on grief and loss. Mourning and

melancholia are presented as two affective responses to a loss, one a normal, conscious process, the other pathological and unconscious. We can clarify the relation between the unconscious and *Nachträglichkeit* by attending to some key differences between the mourning subject and the melancholic subject. In the wake of a loss, the bereaved subject both knows and does not know that the loss has occurred. They can account for the loss in the present, but they have not yet accounted for it in the memories, hopes, and desires that are not immediately present and that constitute the preconscious knowledge still entwined with the existence of the other. That is, they remain cathected to the other. Although painful, decathexis of the other is possible through the process of "reality-testing:"[7] The process, as described by Tammy Clewell, is that of converting "loving remembrances into futureless memory."[8] Because the mourner is able to attribute the meaning of their pain to the loss, Freud asserts that mourning work is "fully conscious."[9]

Between the event of loss and the completion of mourning, the mourner works to disinvest the ties that bind them to the absent other. As a "fully conscious" process, the depressive symptoms experienced by a mourner are bound to the event of loss and are intelligible. Without hesitation, the mourner says, "I am suffering because the other has died." Experiences of acute pain or sadness are coextensive with emergent recollections of the other or unrealized anticipations of their presence, and should become less acute and less frequent across the passing of time. Over time, the subject increasingly comes to know the event of the other's death, and comes to know the world that no longer bears the other's existence. Although the other's loss occurs at Time 1 (t1), the other remains quasi-present and effectively "haunts" the subject until the completion of mourning work at Time 2 (t2), when Freud theorized that every memory, hope, and expectation for the future will be inscribed with the fact of their death and located in the past.[10] The event that takes place at t1 is completed at t2. The amount of time that lapses between t1 and t2 is determinate but not determined; it is culturally and historically specific.

For the melancholic, we cannot say that the work of disinvestment is being undertaken across the passing of time. This is due, in part, to the inability of the melancholic to make a connection between their depression and the event of loss. Like the neurotic patients discussed earlier, the melancholic's depression is an affective response to a loss that "returns" unaccompanied by the memory of what has been lost, and thus is unintelligible to the sufferer whose pain is not causally related to the event. As Freud writes, the melancholic "knows *whom* he has lost, but not *what* he has lost in him."[11] What we expect to occur at t2 is not the completion of the event, which began at t1 for the mourner, but the event itself. In fact, what the melancholic defers is neither event nor the mutilation of the self that takes place with the other's loss; it is the recognition of a relationship

of meaning between the present suffering and the past event that is revealed at t2 and retrospectively modifies the past, rendering the loss "traumatic." In the future, the past event will be experienced for the first time as the direct cause of the patient's present suffering. It is this belated understanding that interests me as it indicates that there is still time for the event to undergo transformation. Even when one is in the grips of the traumatic event's painful repetitions, it is still possible for the past event to find future redemption.

It is my contention that Merleau-Ponty synthesizes both aspects of *Nachträglichkeit* (deferral and retroaction) but does so within a phenomenological rather than analytical framework. In doing so, he aims to bring to lived experience the creative and therapeutic potential of *Nachträglichkeit* that Freud located in the interpersonal relation between analyst and analysand. One can read Merleau-Ponty's analysis of phantom limbs as akin to Freud's diagnosis of melancholia, namely, as a problematic way of holding onto a past presence, one that closes the future through the subject's empty repetitions in the present. What I aim to recover is another reading of the phantom limb, which points to the creative transformation of melancholia that will be developed in conjunction with Proustian involuntary memory. By remaining affectively bound to a past world, the melancholic body may poetically repeat the past into an open future.

II. The Melancholy of Phantom Limbs

In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty offers a phenomenological reformulation of the Freudian unconscious by first situating consciousness in the body and its essential ambiguity as both subject and object. The body that sees is also one capable of being seen; the body that touches is at the same time the body touched. To recall Freud's paradox of consciousness, Merleau-Ponty's ambiguous body both touches and is touched at the same time, but knowledge of the unity of the body's two moments is delayed.

"I cannot touch touching" means I cannot simultaneously feel myself to be the subject and object of the touch; I feel in alternations. To reflect upon myself as body is to perceive the *encroachment* of the touching and the touched without coincidence. What is simultaneous is experienced as successive and reversible: "My left hand is always on the verge of touching the things, but…the coincidence eclipses at the moment of realization."[12] The simultaneity is both here and not here, both a reality and something yet to be achieved.[13]

In light of this tension between the simultaneity and reversibility of the sensing-sensible body, Merleau-Ponty introduces the phantom limb syndrome as a bodily phenomenon in which the reversibility of perception is disrupted. Like the hysterical symptoms of Freud's early patients, phantom limb syndrome is tied to an affective response to a loss that reveals a paradox of consciousness. Instead

of resolving the paradox through the emergence of a new domain, Merleau-Ponty stays with the paradox, and in doing so, resists the temptation to ascribe to the unconscious a separable domain that would be inaccessible to consciousness.

Merleau-Ponty introduces his analysis of phantom limb syndrome and anosognosia[14] as two bodily phenomena that resist the reduction to physiological explanations. Phantom limb refers to the persistent sensations of a former limb following an amputation. Although the patient recognizes that the limb is no longer present, its former presence haunts the body: it may persist as a vague sensation with an indeterminate size and shape; usually, it is experienced as the continued source of the patient's pain. Unable to say that the lost limb is still a thing like other things, or is here in the way that other limbs are here, the phantom limb is best described as the presence of something absent: it is "quasi-present."[15]

Neither fully present nor absent, the phantom limb haunts the present. Paradoxically, the patient both knows and does not know that a loss has occurred. The fact that I can both accept and reject the absence of the limb is not indicative of a Freudian unconscious but of the co-existence of two ways of knowing, two grasps on the world, "as though our body comprises two distinct layers."[16] One leaf—the actual body—is the body of my personal existence and conscious knowledge: I know that the limb is missing. The other leaf—the habit body—is the prepersonal, anonymous body and source of a preconscious knowledge. The habit body continues to be implicated in the world as it was before the event of the loss: I do not yet know that a loss has occurred. A schism emerges between the subject's recognition of the present situation and the body's memory of a past which continues to evoke sedimented behaviors that no longer correspond to the body's capabilities. When synchronized, the habit body appears to be at the service of the actual body, laying the groundwork for more expressive synchronizations. This is what Merleau-Ponty calls the "organic repression" of anonymous existence by the personal self. After the loss of the actual limb, the habit body is unsynchronized and unrepressed, its past sedimentations continue to be evoked, called out to by a world that I can no longer manipulate. Although the things in front of me are no longer manipulable *for me*, they appear as manipulable *for someone*—they do not call out to me but to one who could grasp—and the anonymous body is tuned into this general modality of existence.

Through the disrupted reversibility of the phantom limb, the ambiguity of the body's normal functioning is displaced by the ambivalent presence of possibilities that should no longer present themselves to a body that cannot enact them. Insofar as the limb continues to be open to the past world of manipulable things, it extends itself toward now-impossible futures. Unable or willing to foreclose these possibilities, the subject's past sedimentations open onto a future that is not for me but for someone. Bound by intentional threads to a lost world and an impossible future, "impersonal time continues to flow, but personal time is

arrested."[17] Impersonal, this is time that does not concern me and is not created by me: the time of the anonymous body. As Toadvine writes, the linear time of the personal self is distinct from the time of the anonymous body "that lives a cyclical, repetitive time." This impersonal time "remains an impossible time, the past of all pasts, or the immemorial."[18] It is through the repression of the anonymous body and its cyclical time that personal existence finds expression. When the intentionality of personal existence is disrupted and the future *for me* is arrested, the anonymous existence which is "invisible" to profane vision and that constitutes the "backside" of things, bodies, and others, is no longer repressed but illuminated, no longer forgotten but remembered.

With the phantom limb then we can say that the subject perceives the coexistence of anonymous time and personal time. Anonymous time refers to the past but it is not the past as it was *for me*, a past present, but the past as it was for one, an immemorial past. Bredlau extends the structure of the phantom limb beyond the quasi-presence of a limb and demonstrates how phantom structures can apply to our relation with the world and with others. In other words, the phantom limb is not an aberrant phenomenon but indicates a "phantom structure" as an attitude of existence that is catalyzed by a failure to acknowledge a loss.[19] Phantom limb not only signifies a failure on the part of the subject to acknowledge the loss of an arm, but further, it is a failure to acknowledge the loss of a world that was determined co-extensively with an attitude of the body. Given that the phantom limb seemingly indicates the displacement of the present for a repetition of the past, phantom engagements entail that we are not responsive to others as they present themselves to us, but to past others who continue to be evoked and structure new interactions. Unable or unwilling to completely give up the others who populate our past, we continue to animate them in the attitudes with which we relate to others.

In analysis, this is the phenomenon of "transference" whereby the analyst becomes, for the patient, the site of the return or reincarnation of an important relation from the past. "As a rule," Freud writes, the analyst "is put in the place of one or other of the patient's parents, his father or mother."[20] The patient acts out this relation, transferring feelings and reactions that belong to the past relation to the analyst. In the context of analysis, transference is ambivalent, comprising both positive and negative attitudes toward the analyst. As long as it does not crystallize into a wholly negative attitude, transference is an important part of therapy. By making the patient aware of the operative transference of feelings that find their source in the patient's primordial object-attachments, transference is transformed from a mode of resistance to a transformative, therapeutic tool. No longer compelled to repeat the past, the patient is able to work through the past by way of the feelings and behaviors evoked by the analyst. In this way, the

patient is able to liquidate the past and overcome the phantoms that overdetermine present situations.

In non-analytical contexts such an awareness and liquidation of past attachments may never arrive as we lack the neutral intermediary of the analyst who is capable of bringing this pre-personal knowledge to consciousness. In other words, we do not know that we are interacting with phantoms, or rather, the paradoxical knowledge itself—that we, at the same time, know it and do not know it—is deferred, perhaps indefinitely. Interactions with phantom others or phantom environments are problematic because, as we have seen, they open onto a lost world and thus, they open onto phantom futures that have been foreclosed. We do not know which situations are lived possibilities of the present and which are the im-possibilities of a phantom future that haunt the present but do not belong to it. The past has the power to either arrest us in an eternal present comprised of its compulsive repetitions, or open onto a future that is open and indeterminate. Since it is always with the sedimentations of the past that we engage the world, the past will repeat in the future, but these will either be the unproductive, compulsive repetitions that foreclose possibilities for action or the creative, poetic repetitions that build the world anew.

To illustrate the conceptual difference between a phantom as a mechanical repetition and a phantom as a creative, poetic repetition, I make a brief detour through Deleuze's writings on the stuttering that differentiate the bad from the great writer. The bad writer, attentive to the repetitions of their dialogical markers, substitutes "he said" for other vocal intonations, "like 'he murmured,' 'he stammered,' 'he sobbed,' 'he giggled,' 'he cried,' 'he stuttered.'"[21] These substitutions modify pre-existing words through an affectation of speech; they do not affect language itself, and amount to a mechanical repetition. The great writer[22] is the one who does not need to write, "he stuttered," but instead makes the language stumble, tremble, and vibrate. Poetic speech, writes Deleuze, "makes stuttering an affect of language and not an affectation of speech."[23] Through the creative use of repetitions, the writer makes language grow like a rhizome from the middle to the outside. Familiar language becomes strange as the system of equivalencies is pushed toward disequilibrium and silence.[24] Making language stutter is not about using language to be recognized as a great writer. Deleuze writes, "when it is a matter of digging under the stories, cracking open the opinions, and reaching regions without memories, when the self must be destroyed, it is certainly not enough to be a 'great' writer."[25] It is about using language to the point of silence; to be dispossessed of oneself and become something other than a writer. The stuttering of the great writer both destroys and re-creates themselves and language.

Does the phantom limb stutter like the bad or great writer? In other words, is it merely the sign of a malintegrated bodily schema, or is it the sign of a creative dispossession? It is my contention that the phantom limb stutters, and that

this is the creative stuttering of the so-called great writer.[26] Its quasi-presence is not the sign of a failure or inability to mourn the past. Through the analysis of involuntary memory in the following section, I aim to demonstrate this. For now, it suffices to point to the encounter with the anonymous body that the phantom limb makes possible. The phantom limb binds the body affectively to possibilities that are no longer possibilities for the subject, but for one who could grasp, one who could touch. Through the repetitions of the past-for-someone, the phantom limb opens onto encounters with the anonymous, general existence that do not return the subject to themselves but are dispossessions of the self. Like stuttering, this is not a mere modification of speech or a body, but a modification of the signifying field that wends its way toward the outside. For Deleuze, the outside toward which language stutters is an outside-within—an utterly foreign language that emerges from the language itself. Similarly, the limit of the body is an outside-within, what he calls a "body without organs."[27] For Merleau-Ponty, the phantom limb is also directed toward an outside-within, and this is indicated when he points to a "latent intentionality." In his later writings, it is what he comes to understand as the unconscious.[28]

A phantom is a disruption of the reversibility of the body as sensing-sensible: I feel what I cannot see; I talk to the other who can no longer hear my words. Again, a phantom is not a pathological bodily phenomenon but gives us access to the ambivalent co-presence of conflicting attitudes that cannot be reached through reflection. Through the analysis of the phantom limb and its irruption of anonymous existence, we can situate the unconscious within Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology. Unlike Freud, whose unconscious Merleau-Ponty charges with introducing "an I think behind the I think," the unconscious here is located within experience as the nonreflective, anonymous existence that subtends every perception, action, and hope for the future. Although it is beyond the reach of reflective consciousness, it is the movement by which reflection seeks what is sought, so we can say that the unconscious is both beyond and at the heart of reflective consciousness.

In order to illustrate the dialectic between these two modalities of existence, Merleau-Ponty describes the realization of his love for another. It is neither the case that his love had, before his realization, been hidden from him (Freud) or transparent to him as something he did not want to know (Sartre). Like love, the unconscious is the way he orients himself toward the world through an absent other. As he writes, love "is the movement by which I am turned toward someone, the conversion of my thoughts and of my behaviors…the love was lived—not known—from beginning to end."[29] Before it could be an object of reflective thought it was already there: lived in the anticipation he felt for the other which inspired anew the rhythm of his daily activities, and who became for him a fulcrum around which his actions, behaviors, and words gravitated. In the

context of a burgeoning love, the body is oriented toward a world of possibilities of which one is not yet aware. It is with the realization of love that these possibilities are taken up as concrete situations. With a phantom limb, part of me continues to hold onto what are no longer my existential possibilities. In both cases, the unconscious is not inaccessible to consciousness, but is the movement through which we are directed toward the world, a latent intentionality that organizes and signifies the perceptual field around our anticipation for an absent other.

As a latent intentionality, the unconscious, for Merleau-Ponty, is not *without* consciousness, but is another register of consciousness. Opposed to the activity of personal existence through which my actions and behaviors come to be organized around my goals and projects, Merleau-Ponty conceptualizes the unconscious in *Institution and Passivity*, as passive, an "oneiric" consciousness that subtends waking consciousness. As Merleau-Ponty writes in the *Passivity* lectures, this is not an "I think behind the I think." It is not the case that "I think" the other so much as "I dream" them, and this "I dream" haunts the "I think," classifying its events and objects with its "acquired intersubjective significations."[30] While the time of personal existence is linear and progressive, the oneiric register of consciousness touches all times at once; there is no cleavage, no means of discerning a past presence from a present absence. Merleau-Ponty writes, "I perceive myself in others, I perceive others in myself, I am in contact with my entire past, I have no temporal location, and my entire past is maintained only as the horizon of this present, sedimented."[31] Thus, to be haunted by the feeling of a phantom limb is to be aware of the contact we have at all times with the past—contact that we live but do not know.

In summary, Merleau-Ponty's account of the phantom limb depathologizes melancholia while situating the phantom limb as a melancholic response to loss. From the normative perspective of mourning, the subject experiencing the phantom limb is unable or unwilling to reactivate the sedimentations of the habit body that does not know that a loss has occurred. Through the analysis of the phantom limb, Merleau-Ponty uncovered the anonymous body of perceptual experience, which is normally rendered invisible through its "organic repression" by personal existence. Although a phantom limb gives the subject access to the anonymous body, it does so at a cost. The co-presence of the present and the world that corresponds to the lost limb requires the arrest of personal time; the subject is suspended in an "eternal present," and enacts compulsive, empty repetitions of the past. This kind of experience can be incredibly disempowering in the context of oppressive institutions where a subject may feel haunted by the quasi-presence of possibilities that are systematically denied to them (that are not for me, but for someone). Without denying the often debilitating effects of phantom limbs or phantom worlds, I turn to Proustian involuntary memory

and imagine the transformation of the pain of being haunted by the past into an encounter with loss that teaches us to see the world anew.

III. The Phantoms of Involuntary Memory

Throughout Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, the narrator expresses his anxiety over the absences of the others whom he loves. Although love desires to have the other completely, it is thwarted time and again by an absence of the other that persists even when they are present. When we peer at another with a loving gaze, they are transformed into an object of our desire. Through a loving gaze, we lose access to the other as they exist disentangled from our affections for them. Without full presence, the others are like phantoms, only "quasi-present."

Proust's narrator recounts his desire to overcome one of the many phantoms that make up his social reality, that of his grandmother. Instead of seeing her wholly, completely, as a being whose life extends beyond his, he only has access to that of her which was entwined with his affections. His love is derailed by an underlying narcissism that transforms the other into another I. Although he has imagined her—by herself, alone in her little country town—he writes, "I had pictured her as she was when she was with me, but eliminating myself without taking into account the effects on her of such an elimination."[32] In order to fulfill the demands of love, he imagines her, and makes present this person in their absence. But, as his imagination is driven by love, he cannot make present the absence he seeks: his grandmother disentangled from his affections.

After the event of her death, he continues to looks for her presence in the weight of his suffering. Although he senses her absence, this loss does not coincide with the feeling of her absence. Given the depth of feeling he had for her, he finds himself "astonished and remorseful" at having missed her so little.[33] Although the event has already taken place, he is in the position of the melancholic for whom it has not yet occurred. It takes time to experience the event of her loss; the "calendar of facts," he writes, is so often prevented from corresponding to the "calendar of feelings."[34] He continues to make her quasi-present in his recollections of her but finds nothing in them that "resembled my grandmother…I retained within me only in a potential state the memory of what she had been."[35] In life, the narrator strove to make his grandmother fully present. After her death, he continues to strive for her presence and reaches vainly into the past, looking for the memory that can recreate her living presence.

In *Institution and Passivity*, Merleau-Ponty writes of the futility of voluntary memory to recollect the past that reflection seeks. The past is there with us, like the unconscious and love, it is the "pulsation of desire" that structures my worldly engagements, that inspires my words no less than the rhythm of my daily activities. As Proust finds in the futility with which he tried to find his grandmother

in his memories of her, the existence of the past that is there with us cannot be reached through memory which either preserves the past as it was, rendering it passive and immobile, or continually reconstructs the past as it was for me, affirming the privilege of the present and active power of the subject. When we recollect the past through reflection, we are allowed only a small window onto the past, like a single coin extricated from "a treasure acquired one at a time."[36] Although we are accustomed to recollect the past from the perspective of the present, Merleau-Ponty writes of a "double current of memory," a bi-directional force that progresses from the present to the past and the past to the present. The past that we reach toward from the present is a past that has been instituted as past, thus we reach toward a past already directed toward the present which it has become. As instituted, the past is preserved for us, continuous with the present with which it shares significance. But as instituted, what we recollect of the past is not the past as it was in *its* former presence, but the past as it is in *our* current present. What we recollect are the remains after the loss of its presence, but we cannot reach before the moment of loss, which "is the presence memory seeks."[37]

We know that the past is there *with* us when it emerges suddenly, without volition, and disrupts the sedimentations of the natural attitude. During these moments, which Proust identified as involuntary memories, it is not reflection but the body that remembers the past. While reflection recollects the remains of the lost presence, the body remembers what memory forgets, whole and in tact. This forgetfulness of the past is not repression and it is not absolute forgetting, "as if the past had never been lived." What we forget are the sensible qualities that are deemed from the point of view of the present to be trivial and insignificant details of lived experience: "a blatter of rain…the smell of an unaired room… the first crackling brushwood fire in a cold grate."[38] With no relation to utility, these are the details of the past that were there with me but, constituting the general atmosphere of my personal existence, they did not concern me; they did not come into focus as an object of desire and stayed in the background as the general milieu. It is this atmosphere of the past that the body remembers and that cannot be recollected through reflective thinking. Since this past atmosphere never came into focus, this is a past that does not concern me. Rather, it is there for me, wholly preserved, and capable of being encountered through the body's remembrance. This is not the past of my personal existence, but the past that belongs to the anonymous, general existence that makes up the horizon of my life.

One of the major insights of *In Search of Lost Time* is the distinction between voluntary and involuntary memory. In brief, voluntary memory is the work of the intellect and recalls the past-present, that is, the past that was foregrounded through the objects of desire or utility. Involuntary memory is the bodily re-membrance of a mythic past. A product of the imagination, this is a past that "never was a present," and remained as the background or general milieu of one's

personal existence. I highlight the involuntary memory here because it is through the re-emergence of a nonreflected past and its accompanying pleasure that the narrator is able to transform his melancholia into a productive, transformative affect.[39] While trauma closes the future, involuntary memory opens the future through the body's affective attunement to an incomplete past.

According to Merleau-Ponty, Proust's mourning of his grandmother bears the same structure as that of the phantom limb. He writes,

> The amputee senses his leg, as I can sense vividly the existence of a friend who is, nevertheless, not here before my eyes. He has not lost his leg because he continues to allow for it, just as Proust can certainly recognize the death of his grandmother without yet losing her to the extent that he keeps her on the horizon of his life.[40]

We recall that mourning, according to Freud, is an entirely conscious process, one that begins at the event of the other's death, and consists in untying oneself (decathexis) to the lost other by resignifying one's memories, hopes, and expectations with the fact of their death. As a result of this process, which occurs in the context of a community, the mourner can renew their presence to oneself, others, and the world. Melancholy on the other hand is an unconscious process that refuses the mourner's renunciation of the other and instead disavows the world that no longer bears the possibility of co-presence with the lost other. Through the phantom limb, which is recognized as concomitant with the subject's inability to come to terms with the loss, Merleau-Ponty provides an embodied account of melancholy that attends to the complex nonlinear interactions between the subject and world. Although the loss is a past event, insofar as the subject is not conscious of the loss (their habit body does not know it has occurred), this event is not behind them in time, but in front of them, on the horizon of the subject's perceptual field as a situation to be taken up. When the subject takes up this situation which finds its source in the past, the nonmetaphysical past is retrospectively modified, transformed from a contingent past to a necessary one: "it had to be the case that the loss of x occurred," or, "The reason for my suffering is the loss of x."

Like the subject with the phantom limb, Proust knows that he has lost his grandmother as a being in the world but he has not yet lost her insofar as he continues to allow for her. As a being on the horizon of his life, his desire for an encounter with her, this absent other, continues to organize and signify his perceptual field. Although common wisdom tells us that the event of another's death marks irrevocably the difference between life/death and presence/absence, these distinctions were already at-play, structuring their interactions and his recollections of her. The young narrator, we recall, despairs of the death prefigured in his grandmother's life, of the absence that haunts her presence. Instead of her

death occurring at the completion of her life, this event itself was deferred, laid before him at the horizon of his experience as an event to come.

Describing the narrator's involuntary memory, Proust writes,

> I bent down slowly and cautiously, to take off my boots, trying to master my pain. But scarcely had I touched the topmost button than my chest swelled, filled with an unknown, divine presence, I was shaken with sobs, tears streamed from my eyes.[41]

In this moment, the present sensation is united to the past sensation of his grandmother unlacing his boots many years ago in Balbec. Through this sensation, he finds his grandmother present—not in the partial way in which he encountered her in life or recollected her in death—but as a "living reality," fully present in her absence from him. In contrast to the strange indifference with which he first encountered this face, a year later his love again wants to rush ahead of the encounter and seize her. It was only in the "wild desire to fling myself into her arms…that I became conscious that she was dead."[42] Unable to reach her in her absence, his love opens onto the untraversable distance that separates—him from her, the lost world to which they were co-present from the present reality—and, for the first time, he finds himself undone by her loss. The intentional threads that bound him to her and to the world they shared are broken.

What returns in the involuntary memory is the desire of a past self, and it is this return of an old desire that the narrator requires to become conscious of the present fact of his grandmother's death. I parse this out in two directions in order to emphasize the nonlinear temporality of the involuntary memory and the passive subject of the sensation.

First, given that it is the *same* sensation first encountered in the past and now in the present, we can say that the past and present co-exist in the involuntary memory. It is not the same moment (the past is not the present) but it is the same sensation traversing two moments given in simultaneity. As simultaneous, the two now's coincide while maintaining the distance necessary to ensure that they are discernible as two distinct now's. This is in contrast to the way that a former embodiment can be relived in the repetition of a traumatic experience. Catalyzed by the repetition of the same sensation in the present that was encountered in a past, dangerous situation, the subject's present existence is displaced by the former embodiment's re-emergence. Although the subject may know that the present is not the past, that this situation does not bear the same danger as that of the past situation, the body does not know it. Like the subject with the phantom limb who continues to hold onto and be called by a world of manipulable things that can no longer be grasped, the person reliving a trauma continues to hold onto a past world in anticipation of a past danger that is still to come. Between the two moments there is not here simultaneity, but the displacement of the present for

the past. Since there is no distinction felt between the past and present embodiments, there is between these moments, no possibility for communication and exchange. The simultaneity of past-present illustrated in involuntary memories indicates a double current of memory that flows from the past to the present and from the present to the past. As the two moments are occurring simultaneously, it is not just the case that the past is occurring alongside the present, but the present is occurring alongside the past. This future present was there, alongside the past moment, haunting it like a "halo of preexistence."

Second, recall that through touching the other, I return to myself as both toucher and touched. This reversibility with the other is lost with their loss. The desire to return to myself through the encounter with the other is a longing left unfulfilled. When the narrator bends down to unlace his boots and is flooded with the lost world of Balbec, there is both an impossible encounter with the other and the return of himself as toucher and touched. The sensation of the involuntary memory, as we have said, announces the return of a noninstituted past—the general atmosphere of a past world as well as the unfulfilled wishes of the desiring body. As a child in Balbec, the narrator's grandmother would bend down to unlace his boots, and between the activity of her unlacing and the passivity of being unlaced, there emerged a unique sensation, cut across their two compossible bodies. In the involuntary memory, it is not her unlacing his boots, it is the narrator unlacing his own, and yet, the result is the same sensation. What he experiences in fact is her touching him through his own touch. And yet, it is a touch that cannot be returned. Although he desires "to fling himself wildly into her arms," he is touched by what he cannot touch. Like the madeleine, the involuntary memory of his grandmother catalyzed by the touch of his hand on his boots revealed to him that the grandmother for whom he longed was "in essence, me."[43] All of the anxieties his past self experienced at the thought of being separate from her vanished as it was revealed the depth at which she was lodged inside of him: at the horizon of his experience.

The involuntary memory allows Proust's narrator to re-read the past, and in re-reading, to re-create the past as it could not have been lived, namely, as really present. It is the full presence of the other that is sought by love. The lived present is haunted by two absences: the past and the future that love seeks in vain from the other. While the quasi-presence of the other evokes both pleasure and anxiety when lived for the first time, what returns the second time is pleasure. What returns through the body's remembrance is the desire for the other without the anxieties that characterized the initial pursuit.

The first time, the object of his desire was extrinsic to him—his mother, grandmother, Albertine, the writer he wanted to become. The second time, the beloved other is not understood as a being extrinsic to the self. It is "in essence, me" means that the beloved other in whose desire the self is located is revealed to

be oneself. What one desires the second time is not the other's desire but desire itself; one desires desire. No longer mediating the relationship to oneself as the object of desire, the other as a worldly, extrinsic being dies for the first time. In the desire to return the touch that touched him, the narrator submits for the first time the beloved other to the reality principle and is undone by the fact of her death. Now, the work of mourning can begin.

IV. Conclusion

In the essay, I called for a re-evaluation of melancholia and phantom limbs based on a reading of Proust's involuntary memories. Through Merleau-Ponty's analysis of the phantom limb, I situated melancholia within the melancholic body for which the present is superimposed by a general, anonymous past "for someone." For Merleau-Ponty, the co-presence of the present and past as two conflicting attitudes is not a pathological sign of a failed repression. Rather, the phantom limb reveals the anonymous existence that subtends our waking life and surrounds it as the waking body's perceptual horizon. In the wake of the loss, both the melancholic and the person feeling persistent sensations of an absent limb are affectively bound to the world in ways that exceed their bodily capabilities. Instead of reading this as an unproductive nostalgia for the past, I find in Proust's involuntary memory a way to imagine its poetic and creative possibilities.

The phantom world that the phantom limb is affectively bound to is the world as it is for someone who was loved. To maintain an affective closeness to this world keeps what is lost close, reachable, and locates the absent others at the horizon of our experience. Following Merleau-Ponty's words, "we still allow for the other." In my melancholy, it is not that I become the other who is lost and identify with their fate, but I incorporate their way of having a world, their style of being, their desire. Although the narrator was lacing his own boots at the irruption of the involuntary memory, he has incorporated his grandmother's activity, her way of having a world, and encounters her touch through his own. When we identify with the other's activity in the strange delayed time of melancholia, we do not have to make the decision to remain with the phantoms of the other or to "let the dead bury the dead." As Proust reminds us, the other is "in essence, me."

Notes

1. Merleau-Ponty, *Institution and Passivity*, 157.
2. Merleau-Ponty, *Themes from the Lectures at the College de France*, 130.
3. From these studies, Freud proposed in 1896 the controversial "seduction theory" of neurosis, which hypothesized that every case of neurosis can be tied to one or more childhood sexual experiences. "Aetiology of Hysteria," in *The Freud Reader*, 103.

4. Freud realized that if the seduction theory were true then "in every case the father, not excluding my own, had to be blamed as a pervert." In a letter to Fliess, Freud revises his theory, announcing that it is rather the case that these aroused memories are phantasies that are not *from* childhood but relate *to* it—it is the drama of *Oepidus Rex*, not the trauma of a sexual encounter, that is revealed to be the "universal event of early childhood." "September 21, 1897," and "October 15, 1897," in *The Freud Reader*, 112, 116.
5. House and Slotnick, "*Apres-Coup*," 696.
6. As quoted in House and Slotnick, ibid.
7. Freud describes the process of decathexis as such: "Having shown the subject that the loved object no longer exists, reality "proceeds to demand that all libido shall be withdrawn from its attachments to that object." "Mourning and Melancholia," 244.
8. Clewell, "Mourning Beyond Melancholia," 44.
9. Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," 252.
10. In later developments of his mourning theory, Freud gives up the notion that an end to mourning is possible, and resituates melancholia as a necessary component of the ongoing work of mourning.
11. Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," 245.
12. Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 147.
13. Ibid., 117, 251, 266.
14. "Anosognosia" refers to a condition in which the subject is unable to recognize that a deficit in their cognitive or bodily capabilities has occurred.
15. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 79.
16. Ibid., 84.
17. Ibid., 85.
18. Toadvine, "Natural Time and Immemorial Nature," 215.
19. Bredlau, "Phantom Limbs and Phantom Worlds," 78.
20. Freud, *An Outline of Psychoanalysis*, 7.
21. Deleuze, "He Stuttered," in *Essays Critical and Clinical*, 107.
22. As great writers, Deleuze points to Beckett, Melville, and Kafka, among others.
23. Deleuze, "He Stuttered," in *Essays Critical and Clinical*, 110.
24. Language stutters toward the outside not through the use of "asignifying particles" but by the use of propositions and parentheses that make language bear the weight of its nested relations; or, through the stubborn use of substantive nouns that defers action and makes language dwell in the anticipatory anxiety of beginning. Ibid., 111.
25. Ibid.
26. Catherine Malabou offers a critique of Merleau-Ponty's presentation of the phantom limb as a secondary and derivative substitution that has displaced the originary integrity of the bodily schema. Drawing on recent neurobiology, she argues that the compensatory reorganization of the body schema resulting in the phantom limb is not a secondary but a creative substitution, and that the "second" schema may well be contemporaneous with the originary schema or may be the "originary" schema itself. "Phantom Limbs and Plasticity," 17.

27. Deleuze's "Body without Organs" is not a concept but a notion of the body as a set of practices and field of intensities that remain after the dispossession of the self and its fantasies of "significances and subjectifications." Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 151.
28. See Merleau-Ponty, "Phenomenology and Psychoanalysis: Preface to Hesnard's *L'Oeuvre de Freud*."
29. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 400.
30. Merleau-Ponty, *Institution and Passivity*, 157.
31. Ibid., 160.
32. Proust, *The Guermantes Way*, 183.
33. Proust, *Sodom and Gomorrah*, 210.
34. Ibid.
35. Ibid.
36. Merleau-Ponty, *Institution and Passivity*, 198.
37. Ibid.
38. Ibid., 197.
39. The paradigmatic involuntary memory is that of the "*petit madeleine*." For more detailed readings of this oft-discussed passage in Proust, see Carbone, *An Unprecedented Deformation*, esp.1–11; Beistegui, *Proust as Philosopher*, 45–56.
40. Ibid., 83.
41. Proust, *Sodom and Gomorrah*, 210.
42. Ibid.
43. On the forgotten past that re-emerges in the involuntary memory of the petit madeleine, the narrator explains that it was not "in me, but is, in essence, me." Proust, *Swann's Way*, 51.

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