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ARTICLE

## 'Reading the New Ruins: Loss, Mourning, and Melancholy in *Dissident Gardens*'

Andrew Rowcroft

University of Lincoln, GB  
arowcroft@lincoln.ac.uk

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This article argues Jonathan Lethem's *Dissident Gardens* (2013) possesses the workings of a critical apprehension set against the more violent ends and commemorative strictures of mourning, loss, and despair. Typically, twentieth-century literary works which actively intervene in the past risk either commemorating political failure and defeat or mourning the trauma of a collective agony that is repeatedly experienced. Instead, I propose twenty-first century fiction produced at a certain historical, cultural, and geographical remove from the centres of state-socialism and communist atrocity articulates an ability to properly trace the political, psychological, and aesthetic contours of left loss in more reparative ways. Specifically, this article is concerned with the ways in which Lethem's text stages a series of cultural practices through which it can express and work through left loss, disappointment, injury and despair. It sets out to juxtapose, and place into dialogue, key thematic strands from Lethem's novel with critical accounts of mourning, memory, and loss by Freud and other psychoanalytic theorists.

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**Keywords:** Marx; Communism; Mourning; Freud; Lethem

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'Do not think that one has to be sad in order to be militant, even though the thing one is fighting is abominable. It is the connection of desire to reality (and not its retreat into the forms of representation) that possesses revolutionary force'.

(Michel Foucault, 1977)<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Michel Foucault in Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault*, trans. and edited by Sean Hand (London: Continuum, 1999), p. vii.

For the political left, the collapse of communism in the closing decades of the last century marked an intensification of a melancholic vision of history which Walter Benjamin first termed 'Left-Wing Melancholy'.<sup>2</sup> Understanding left political struggle as a series of losses, left melancholy is an affective state which manifests as a feeling of guilt for not challenging authority, in a mourning for the human costs of political resistance, and in a sense of despair and failure for not realising utopian aspirations.<sup>3</sup> Far less commonly acknowledged is the understanding that within this extraordinarily rich tradition lie further resources for transformative political action. As in the most significant works in the field, productive tools for rethinking left loss are to be found in the psychoanalytic model of trauma, affect theory, and twenty-first century fiction.<sup>4</sup> Typically, twentieth-century literary works which actively intervene in the past often risk either commemorating political failure and defeat or mourning the trauma of a collective agony that is repeatedly experienced. As Fredric Jameson has remarked on this issue, such approaches remain 'locked in the past, but in active and passive registers respectively; the one brooding over the failures of praxis, the other immobilized by intense and vivid physical suffering relived over and over again.'<sup>5</sup>

Without a more critical reflection on loss numerous problems rise. If the history of left political defeat is brought forward without recourse to the promise of radical change, an insistence on loss may slip into fatalistic forms of melancholic occlusion. Alternatively, overemphasising a culture of victimhood would hamper the future formation of any left collective agency. Perhaps even more disastrously, uncritical reflections on loss and victimhood could lead to the justification of violent ends in the present. This problem is perhaps compounded by Marx's understanding of western modernity: where the idea of a progressive unfolding of history towards a just and

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<sup>2</sup> See Walter Benjamin, 'Left-Wing Melancholy (On Erich Kästner's New Book of Poems)', in *Screen* 15.2 (1974), pp. 28–32.

<sup>3</sup> See Enzo Traverso, *Left-Wing Melancholia: Marxism, History, and Memory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).

<sup>4</sup> See Patricia Ticineto Clough, 'Introduction' in *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social*, edited by Patricia Ticineto Clough with Jean Halley (Durham, N.C: Duke University Press, 2007), pp. 1–33.

<sup>5</sup> Fredric Jameson, 'Foreward: A Monument to Radical Instants' in Peter Weiss, *The Aesthetics of Resistance*, volume 1, trans. by Joachim Neugroschel (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005), pp. vii–xlix, p. xvii.

equitable conclusion assigns tasks to historical agents who know themselves to be in agreement with the meaning of history. Critical reflection on viable interpretations of loss is therefore very much in demand.

This article argues Jonathan Lethem's *Dissident Gardens* (2013), a novel that articulates a multigenerational saga of American communism, possesses the workings of a critical apprehension set against the violent ends and pious commemorative strictures of twentieth-century approaches to mourning, loss, and despair. By this I mean to suggest a critical rethinking of left loss as a more viable and valuable politics pertinent to the present moment. Instead, I propose twenty-first century fiction produced at a certain historical, cultural, and geographical remove from the centres of state-socialism and communist atrocity articulates an ability to properly trace the political, psychological, and aesthetic contours of left loss in more reparative ways. Specifically, this article is concerned with the ways in which literary texts invent and stage a series of cultural practices through which they can express and then work through left loss, disappointment, injury, and despair. It sets out to juxtapose, and place into dialogue, key thematic strands from Lethem's novel with critical accounts of mourning, memory, and loss by Freud and other psychoanalytic thinkers.

While left radical currents take on a plurality of intellectual tendencies, Marxism remains the dominant expression of most twentieth-century revolutionary movements. In the present situation this relation to Marxism is far more ambiguous, with left political parties and protest groups invoking the spirit of Marx while seeking to avert revolutionary upheaval and the overturn of private property. As Warren Breckman has remarked of Occupy, for instance, 'a Marxist call for revolution could not be counted even as a minor key in the chorus of protests'.<sup>6</sup> A movement like Occupy was acting 'against a certain kind of capitalism, not against capitalism *as such*'.<sup>7</sup> Occupy is symptomatic of the emergence of a spontaneous, leaderless, and

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<sup>6</sup> Warren Breckman, *Adventures of the Symbolic: Post-Marxism and Radical Democracy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013) p. 3.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3. For an authoritative account detailing the distinctions between Marx's thought and Stalinism see Alex Callinicos, *The Revenge of History: Marxism and the East European Revolutions* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1991).

sporadic social protest movement which spurns traditional political groupings and Marxist ideologies, and sets itself against the politics of class and party which irrevocably shaped and defined the array of twentieth-century movements. Lethem's fiction attempts to come to terms with these political shifts and legacies, ultimately mirroring this movement away from party affiliation towards more inclusive and non-hierarchical forms of protest.

My approach unpacks the meta-textual commentaries on loss in Lethem's novel, before situating the text as a powerful extension of Freud's famous essay 'Mourning and Melancholia' (1917). I argue that Rose Zimmer's disruption of the normal-psychopathological binary of loss articulated by Freud offers a new sensitivity to forms of communist praxis. As Maria Melgar has noted on this issue, Freud's text does 'not answer the question of how the psychic pain produced by the loss of a person or an ideal, of something concrete or abstract, can trigger creativity.'<sup>8</sup> In mining Lethem's text for such creative spaces, I argue Rose's working through of the 'intimate wounds' of left loss offers a symbolic efficacy that stages new and open relations with Marxist-communism.<sup>9</sup> Concomitantly Lethem's staging of left political struggle through genealogy and familial discord resists a compelling historical operation that reduces the multiplicity of communisms to the dictatorial synonym of Stalinism.<sup>10</sup>

It seems important to outline, from the outset, the way in which this chapter interacts with the broader field of psychoanalytic criticism, affect theory, and literary scholarship on twenty-first American century fiction. Perhaps the most troubling point of contention here is that *Dissident Gardens* deploys a range of narrative devices long familiar from postmodern theory and practice. Nevertheless, as I will show, this text evidences a clear concern to rethink loss outside the prison-house of postmodern apathy, coolness, and cynicism, and is instead concerned with imbuing loss with more critical and creative affects. The problem here, as Amy J. Elias notes,

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<sup>8</sup> Maria Cristina Melgar in *On Freud's "Mourning and Melancholia"*, edited by Leticia Glocer Fiorini, Thierry Bokanowski, and Sergio Lewkowicz, (London: Karnac Books, 2009), pp. 110–122, p. 110.

<sup>9</sup> Jonathan Lethem, *Dissident Gardens* (London: Vintage, 2014), p. 37.

<sup>10</sup> Jodi Dean has discussed the variety of communisms that have existed set against the attempt, by late capitalism, to reduce these political oppositions to one. See Jodi Dean, *The Communist Horizon* (London: Verso, 2012), p. 23.

is that critical consensus on postmodern fiction still orbits theoretical perspectives developed by Fredric Jameson, Linda Hutcheon, and Patricia Waugh as far back as the 1980s.<sup>11</sup> A more recent challenge to traditional conceptions of postmodern epistemological frameworks has been recently mounted by Adam Kelly. In an essay on the fiction of Dana Spiotta, Kelly argues for selected narratives to be located within a subset of new 'literary novels about the events of the radical years [...] published by American writers too young to have participated in the activities of those years, and in many cases, too young to remember the period at all.'<sup>12</sup> For Kelly, as writers like Spiotta (and Lethem) reached maturity under the developing doctrines of American neoliberal hegemony, their fiction concomitantly:

Displays a deep nostalgia for the radical years, for an era widely perceived to be prior to total corporate conglomeration and hegemony, an era when political agency still seemed possible, when individual acts of protest could make a difference in the public sphere, and when notions of responsibility, while difficult and pressing, seemed comparatively well-defined.<sup>13</sup>

In Kelly's reading, the looming future history of conservative entrenchment offers a powerful pull on fiction writers to repackage the prior decade as an unfulfilled moment of political idealism that has returned to haunt the present. Labelled the emergence of a 'New Sincerity', Kelly's approach highlights the existence of a political impulse that compels a new generation of novelists to return to key incidents in the left political heritage and retroactively inscribe these lost moments as possessing affective qualities which challenge the more cynical traits of postmodern writing.

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<sup>11</sup> See for example Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2009), Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, second edition (London: Routledge, 2002), and Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (London: Methuen, 1984).

<sup>12</sup> Adam Kelly, "Who Is Responsible?" Revisiting the Radical Years in Dana Spiotta's *Eat the Document* in 'Forever Young': *The Changing Images of America*, edited by Philip Coleman and Stephen Matterson (Universitätsverlag Winter, 2012).

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 220.

Viewed through this lens, twenty-first century American fiction occupies something of a remedial function, working through both the real and imagined losses that have occurred under the more damaging elements of postmodern political, social and ethical vacuity. As Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan argues on this issue, what remains distinctive about twentieth-century postmodern experimental fiction, and postmodern and poststructuralist theories in general, is that they posit 'the absence or loss of an inner centre holding together the different aspects of the individual' and the 'replacement of the anthropomorphic view by an outlook that puts impersonal systems rather than people in the centre.'<sup>14</sup> Contemporary authors engaging with sincerity however do not necessarily seek to reject all aspects of postmodern literature. Rather, the move away from irony still brings with it doubts about the existence of an authentic self. Nicoline Trimmer has sought to clarify these debates, claiming a 'turn to the human' in recent fiction and theory does not necessarily 'amount to a naïve return to the more traditional view of the self as centred and autonomous meaning-maker'.<sup>15</sup> Particularly in the fiction of David Foster Wallace, Dave Eggers, and Mark Z. Danielewski, both system and self are '*inter-personally* constructed' where the self resurfaces as a 'vague presence' and 'systems and structures [...] are no longer conceived as impersonal'.<sup>16</sup> Moving from the taxonomy of postmodern experience, the self that emerges in twenty-first century fiction is relational, geared towards 'emphatic expression of feelings and new sentiments' which envisage 'possible reconfigurations of subjectivity that can no longer be framed [...] as postmodern.'<sup>17</sup>

As should be clear here, among the most prominent approaches to fiction in recent years has been a preference for models of critique focused on the cultural politics of emotion. In particular, Sara Amed has proposed the circulation of emotion, sentiment and feeling results in an 'affective economy which refuses Marxian

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<sup>14</sup> Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *A Glance beyond Doubt: Narration, Representation, Subjectivity* (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2015), p. 13.

<sup>15</sup> Nicoline Trimmer, *Do You Feel It Too? The Post-postmodern Syndrome in American Fiction at the Turn of Millennium* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2010), p. 51–52.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

and psychoanalytic distinctions.<sup>18</sup> Seeking to complicate this distinction the article now turn to Lethem's conceptualisation of left loss.

### **What Remains? Mourning Marxist-Communism in *Dissident Gardens***

*Dissident Gardens* chronicles a fictional history of the modern American left, following the lives of left political cadres Rose Zimmer, her daughter Miriam and musician husband Tommy, chess prodigy and numismatist Lenny, and academic Cicero Lookins. Divided into four parts, each section of the novel is subdivided into four chapters. Section one details Rose's expulsion from the American Communist party, and an extended oratory given by Rose on memory, mourning, and loss which form the central concern here. Section Two features an abortive appearance by Miriam on a TV game show and flashbacks of a speech given by Albert Zimmer to a Jewish commune. Section Three follows Miriam's affiliation with the student protests movements of the 1960s and her eventual rape and murder in the revolutionary seizure of power in Nicaragua in 1979. With the two-fold circumstance of Miriam's death and Reagan's ascent to the White House, Rose experiences a psychological-break and is interned in a nursing home, albeit with visits from her former lover's son, Cicero.<sup>19</sup> The fourth and final section closes with Miriam's son Sergius being detained for attempting to board a flight, his speculations on the ambiguity of the term '*American communist*' (an affiliation he wishes to proclaim but ultimately cannot utter), and the eventual realisation that his communist political beliefs make him as a 'cell of one'.<sup>20</sup>

Largely confining my analysis to the opening section of the novel, I want to remain with Rose's reflections on her 'living room trial' conducted by fellow members of the communist party:

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<sup>18</sup> Sara Ahmed, 'Affective Economies' *Social Text*, 79 (2004), pp. 117–139, p. 121.

<sup>19</sup> Nick Witham's recent account explores these challenges in detail, demonstrating that despite Reagan's popular appeal and unheralded success, his presidency was marked by domestic protest, civil unrest, anti-interventionist sentiment, and a wave of revolutions which were sweeping the Central Americas. See Nick Witham, *The Cultural Left and the Reagan Era: US Protest and Central American Revolution* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015).

<sup>20</sup> *DG*, p. 366. Italics in original.



There were five, including [Sol] Eaglin. They'd overdressed, overcompensated with vests and jackets, now arraying themselves on her chairs like some Soviet oil, postured as if on some *intellectual* assignment. In pursuit of that chimera, the Dialectical Whosis, when really there was no dialectic here. Only dictatorship. And the taking of dictation [...] the respectable lynch mob that availed themselves of your hospitality while dropping some grenade of party policy on your commitment, lifting a butter knife to slather a piece of toast and using it in passing to sever you from that which you've given your life.<sup>21</sup>

For Rose, as for the Marx, historical repetition as rhetorical device cancels the performative power of the ruling ideology.<sup>22</sup> Towards the close of this passage Rose intimates that the very banality of the living room inquisition serves to compound the emotional trauma of the committee 'severing the affiliation'.<sup>23</sup> And yet, what Rose terms the 'executioners' errand' appears in a chapter titled, 'Two Trials'.<sup>24</sup> In making coffee for the guests shortly after they have arrived, Rose candidly remarks that 'this second one, really, [was] only a lousy parody of the first. The first one, *that* had been something. Then Rose was important in American Communism.'<sup>25</sup> Rose reflects here that the 'first trial [...] the one that mattered, that changed everything', actually occurred in the 'spring of '47'.<sup>26</sup> In a form of 'classic party perversity', Rose's husband Albert, 'wrongly accused of spying when he was only an incompetent blabbermouth

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid, p. 4.

<sup>22</sup> As Marx writes, 'Hegel remarks somewhere that all great world-historic facts and personages appear, so to speak, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce.' Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* in Karl Marx, *Surveys from Exile: Political Writings, Volume 2*, edited and introduced by David Fernbach (London: Verso, 2010), p. 143–250, p. 143. As Susan Buck-Morss argues, 'For Marx, history legitimates political revolution. The suturing of history's narrative discourse transforms the violent rupture of the present into a continuity of meaning.' See Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in the West* (Massachusetts: MIT press, 2002), p. 45.

<sup>23</sup> *DG*, p. 6.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, p. 7/3.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, p. 7. Italics in original.

<sup>26</sup> *DG*, p. 9.

[is] made a spy' and shipped 'into service overseas' to become 'an East German citizen and spy'.<sup>27</sup> As a 'lousy parody' Rose's exile from the party – the loss of that to 'which you've given your life' – no longer effectively functions as the fundamental 'real and final expulsion'.<sup>28</sup> In returning to the site of the past, Rose is able to re-inscribe the former trial as the true moment of 'Kafkaesque penalty', enabling her to mitigate, albeit partially, the effects of the more recent expulsion.<sup>29</sup>

Freud's theory of *Nachträglichkeit* is useful here.<sup>30</sup> Receiving its most extended elaboration in the case history of the 'Wolf Man', Freud advanced the thesis that the neuroses experienced by this individual were a product of a delayed response to a traumatic 'impression to which he is unable to react adequately'.<sup>31</sup> Unable to respond to the 'primal scene' of his parents engaged in sexual intercourse, it is 'only twenty years later, during the analysis, [that he] is he able to grasp with his conscious mental processes what was then going on in him.'<sup>32</sup> As Peter Nicholls has noted, *Nachträglichkeit* is 'not simply a matter of recovering a lost memory, but rather of the restructuring which forms the past in retrospect as the original site [...] comes to be reworked'.<sup>33</sup> As such, the psychic mechanism of *Nachträglichkeit* demonstrates a complex temporality in which the subjective impact of the encounter is shown to be marked by dimensions far beyond the objective temporal particulars of the event itself.<sup>34</sup> For Freud then, far from reducing the subject's history to a

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid, p. 9–11.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, p. 4/p. 15.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, p. 15.

<sup>30</sup> J. Laplanche and J.B. Pontalis have defined *Nachträglichkeit* as a term 'frequently used by Freud in connection with his view of psychical temporality and causality: experiences, impressions and memory-traces may be revised at a later date to fit in with fresh experiences or with the attainment of a new stage of development. They may in that event be endowed not only with a new meaning but also with psychical effectiveness.' See J. Laplanche and J.B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, trans. by Donald Nicholson-Smith (London: Karnac Books, 1988), p. 111.

<sup>31</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'From the History of an Infantile Neurosis [The "Wolfman"]' in *The Penguin Freud Reader*, edited by Adam Phillips (London: Penguin Classics, 2006), pp. 196–309, p. 221.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, p. 226.

<sup>33</sup> Peter Nicholls, 'The Belated Postmodern: History, Phantoms, and Toni Morrison' in *Psychoanalytic Criticism: A reader*, edited by Sue Vice (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996), pp. 50–67, p. 53.

<sup>34</sup> See Stef Craps and Stijn Vanheule, 'Nachträglichkeit: A Freudian Perspective on Delayed Traumatic Reactions' in *Theory & Psychology*, 24.5 (2014), pp. 668–687, p. 668–9.

linear determinism, past and present become malleable, or rather, the past can be reactivated in the present and produce life-changing effects.

*Nachträglichkeit* strikingly illuminates Rose's response. Rose's 'deferred action' can be positioned as an attempt to mitigate her 'incomprehensible loss' by appealing to the prior trial in an effort to underscore, what for her, is the arbitrary nature of the latter.<sup>35</sup> As such, the 'lousy parody' currently unfolding in the living room, then, is not so much chronologically revised – whereby Rose would come to realise the true importance of the first trial – as it is retroacted, wherein the first trial is suddenly endowed with a new force, visibility, and intensity.<sup>36</sup> To complicate this further, Rose's current trial is ameliorated, albeit partly, by the emergence of a deeper historical awareness in which her liberatory efforts are seen to be too far ahead of their time: 'bringing revolution to Negroes, fine. To have one [...] black cop in her sheets, not so fine.'<sup>37</sup> Through the injunction of a historical apprehension unavailable during the moment the text purports to represent, Rose slips into the meta-fictional, recalling that: 'none among them knew American communism wouldn't wake from this particular winter. Oh the beauty of it! After all Rose had seen and done, to be kicked out bare months before Khrushchev, at the Soviet Congress, aired fact of Stalin's purges.'<sup>38</sup> In keeping with the Freudian concept of *Nachträglichkeit*, the text stages, as Peter Nicholls writes, the necessity of a 'second event to release [the] traumatic force' of the former.<sup>39</sup> Here however, it is slightly more complex: the narrative evidences a trauma (the first trial) that awaits revivification with a similar encounter (the second), while simultaneously leaping forward in time to take refuge in the very processes of historical linearity it seeks to decry. While clearly registering highly

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<sup>35</sup> *DG*, p. 268.

<sup>36</sup> In a letter to Wilhelm Fliess, Freud writes of *Nachträglichkeit*: I am working on the assumption that our psychological mechanism has come to being by a process of stratification: the material present in the form of memory-traces being subjected from time to time to a *re-arrangement* in accordance with fresh circumstances'. Sigmund Freud, 'Letter to Wilhelm Fliess, 6<sup>th</sup> December 1896' in J. Laplanche and J.B. Pontalis (1988), p. 112. Italics in original.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>39</sup> Peter Nicholls, 'The Belated Postmodern: History, Phantoms, and Toni Morrison' in *Psychoanalytic Criticism: A Reader*, ed. by Sue Vice (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996, pp. 50–67, p. 53.

on the spectrum of metafictional practice, Rose's refusal to surrender to the more fixed empirical distinctions posited by Freud can be read as a legitimization strategy for registering loss as a more open, active, and creative politics.

*Dissident Gardens* is not merely a novel that challenges the critical judgements of Freudian psychoanalysis. It is not simply a re-working of psychoanalytic theory that is at stake here, but rather a challenge to the affective political dimensions of left loss. To elucidate this argument further I will now turn to the more prominent theoretical currents of Freudian analysis, specifically Freud's identification of two mutually exclusive responses to loss – mourning [*Trauer*] and melancholia [*Melancholie*].<sup>40</sup> This distinction, synonymous now with the understanding of 'normal' versus pathological responses to loss, is predicated on the acceptance and acknowledgement of a lost object or ideal. For Freud, mourning is:

The reaction to the loss of a loved person, or [...] some abstraction [...] such as one's country, liberty, an ideal and so on. [...] although mourning involves grave departures from the normal attitude to life, it never occurs to us to regard it as a pathological condition and to refer it to medical treatment. We rely on its being overcome after a certain lapse of time, and we look upon any interference with it as useless or even harmful.<sup>41</sup>

Central to Freud's conception of mourning is the notion of a progressive, even healthy, slow psychic detachment from the object of loss, where the 'mourner is able to declare the object dead and to move on to invest in new objects'.<sup>42</sup> While mourning is considered a type of closure, a location where the past is declared resolved, even finished, melancholia is constituent of an enduring devotion to loss, one characterized by an inability or unwillingness to disengage from the loved object, place, or ideal:

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<sup>40</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia' in Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*; edited and translated by James Strachey, Volume XIV, 1914–1916, (London: Hogarth Press, 1957), pp. 243–258.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 243–244.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 244.

Melancholia [is] the loss of a more ideal kind. The object has not perhaps actually died, but has been lost as an object of love [...] a loss of this kind has occurred, but one cannot see clearly what it is that has been lost, and it is all the more reasonable to suppose that the patient cannot consciously perceive what has been lost either.<sup>43</sup>

Typically manifesting as 'an extraordinary reduction in self-esteem [and] a great impoverishment of the ego', Freud argues for the emergence of a voice or critical conscience that splits from the subject's ego to render harsh judgment upon it.<sup>44</sup> Melancholia, then, creates a 'lowering of the self-regarding feelings to a degree that finds utterance in self-reproaches and self-revilings and culminates in a delusional expectation of punishment'.<sup>45</sup> As Freud's clinical experience shows, these failings are not really directed to the object of lost love: 'the self-reproaches are reproaches against a loved object which has been shifted away [...] to the patient's own ego'.<sup>46</sup>

Characterising melancholia's devotion to the lost object as antithetical to the ego's well-being, Freud also casts some doubt upon the inevitability of these distinctions, implying, as David Lang has argued, that to 'understand melancholia better [...] one would no longer insist on its pathological nature'.<sup>47</sup> In the remaining section I wish to demonstrate how Rose's performance of left loss can be situated as an extension of Freud's terminological apparatus, in addition to forming a richer, varied, and more complex tapestry that interlinks individual and collective encounters with left loss.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid, p. 245.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, p. 246.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, p. 245.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, p. 247.

<sup>47</sup> David L. Eng and David Kazanjian in *Loss* (2003), p. 3.

<sup>48</sup> The relation between psychoanalysis and politics is one of considerable debate. Sean Homer states that although psychoanalysis can engage a 'continuing critical dialogue with political and social theory' its inability to develop a positive sense of ideology means the [im]possibility of a psychoanalytic political theory'. Likewise Elizabeth Bellamy has argued despite an acute analytical potential, psychoanalysis does not offer further opportunities for political action than that previously developed. Both these accounts are discussed in Chris Macmillan, Žižek and Communist Strategy: On the Disavowed Foundations of Global Capitalism (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), p. 12.

It is worth mentioning what Freud's observations ignore. As Vamik Volkan argues, Freud fails to account for the existence of 'perianal mourners': 'individuals [who] become stuck for years – or even for a lifetime – unable to let the lost person or thing go'.<sup>49</sup> Distinct from the melancholic, such an individual 'cannot identify with the enriching aspects of the mental representation of the lost person or thing [or locate] "suitable reservoirs" for externalizing the representation'.<sup>50</sup> While the healthy mourner engages in 'project identification' (the act of depositing the images of the lost object or person within 'a suitable reservoir'), the 'perennial mourner' cannot assimilate the object-image or 'introject'.<sup>51</sup> For Volkan:

An introject is an object representation or a special object image with which the individual who has it wishes to identify. But the identification does not take place, and the object representation or the special object image, with its own "boundaries", remains in the individual's self-representation as an unassimilated mental construct.<sup>52</sup>

The 'perennial mourner' then is unique for their adoption of new ego mechanisms which try and assimilate the introject, and yet for Freud these attempts are absent from clinical experience and do not constitute new relations with loss.

A potential example of the 'perennial mourner', Rose gives the clearest signposts yet for a discussion of the relationship between mourning and left loss. Unable to deposit the images of the lost object within a suitable reservoir, Rose's response to the collective failures of global-communism is to absorb and assimilate these defeats, triangulating left political commitment, the female body, and the slow-time of geological tectonics:

Dying inside was for Rose a way of life. Within her mother was a volcano of death. Rose had spent her life stoking it, trying to keep the mess inside

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<sup>49</sup> Vamik Volkan, 'Not Letting Go: From Individual Perennial Mourners to Societies with Entitlement Ideologies' in *On Freud's "Mourning and Melancholia"* (2009), pp. 90–109, p. 98.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98–99.

contained but fuming. In Rosa's lava of disappointment the ideals of American communism had gone to die their slow death eternally. Rose would never die precisely because she needed to live forever, a flesh monument, commemorating socialism's failure as an intimate wound'.<sup>53</sup>

As a 'flesh monument' to these radical instances, Rose spends much of the remainder of the novel staging a series of suggestive 'ego dissatisfactions' which recall a series of twentieth-century left political defeats. In one key narrative moment later in the same section, Rose's plays out a mock murder-suicide which bears striking allegorical reference to the Holocaust:

Like an animal freeing itself from a burrow inn which she'd nosed against a hostile occupant, Rose came clear of the oven. From her knees she tackled Miriam to the floor. For one instant Miriam found herself swept into her mother's incoherent embrace, arms of iron, bosom of cloying depths, corkscrewed face corroding her own with its bleachy tears. Then, as if she was and had always been only a child, her body to be handled, limbs shoved through sleeves, hoisted bruisingly here and there, a terrifying slackness came over her, feeling Rose's next intention. Every strength unavailable to Miriam had apparently flowed into her mother's monstrous wrists and shoulders, her wrestler's grip. Rose shoved Miriam's head into the oven. Miriam only slackened. Perhaps it didn't matter, so much gas filled the room already [...] That was how you earned the right to inflict murder: by showing a willingness to murder yourself first.<sup>54</sup>

Mirroring Freud's pronouncements that the melancholic cannot distinguish between a loss in an external object and a loss inside oneself, Rose's act attempts to weave aspects of signification around an event which poses profound challenges to punctual representation. In James Berger's phrase, the Nazi Genocide remains an

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<sup>53</sup> *DG*, p. 41.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid*, p. 43.

'absent referent' in which it is possible only to grasp the dimmest outline.<sup>55</sup> What is particularly notable however is the way in which Rose's parody avoids the pious referential status in which the Holocaust is typically figured. Reading each political failure as an 'intimate wound', Rose's staging of the Nazi genocide demonstrates an attempt, however limited, to weave aspects of signification around a historical occurrence which cannot be fully known. While demonstrating a sensitivity to the historical atrocities perpetrated in this period of human history, Rose's parody offers a number of discursive strategies that attempt to allow her to work through this event. Her melancholia avoids the traditional representations of piety and commemoration so prevalent in much of western memory discourse, but the scene, in its clear allegorical reference to the Auschwitz crematorium, represents a servitude to the lost object that enacts 'a hallucinatory wishful psychosis [...] on to the patient's own ego'.<sup>56</sup> The act calls, as it were, for a revision of the past through reinvention, exploring both the failures and dissatisfactions of mourning, but also opening up, as Fredric Jameson remarks, a 'vulnerable space and entry-point through which ghosts might make their appearance.'<sup>57</sup>

In addition to reading Rose's response as an individual and collective encounter, Rose can also speak to the importance of left loss in public ceremony. In the scene immediately following her kitchenette Shoah, Rose retreats into the bedroom, 'aligned sepulchral on its high narrow bed like a figure in a marble crypt, Grant or Lenin'.<sup>58</sup> In 'playing to some invisible distant gallery' Rose's performance of historical loss through excess – overplayed gestures and exaggerated acts – is marked by a servitude that nevertheless inaugurates new forms of political desire. As Susan Buck-Morss argues, the restaging of Lenin's mausoleum remains 'the ultimate ideological sign' where the project of political modernization turns to totalitarian

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<sup>55</sup> James Berger, *After the End: Representations of Post-Apocalypse* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), p. 106.

<sup>56</sup> Freud (1917), p. 244.

<sup>57</sup> Fredric Jameson, 'Marx's Purloined Letter' in *New Left Review* (January–February 1995), <http://newleftreview.org/1/209/fredric-jameson-marx-s-purloined-letter> [accessed 11/01/2016].

<sup>58</sup> *DG*, p. 44.



mummification.<sup>59</sup> For Rose then, the cognitive importance of her figurative death – ‘aligned [like] Grant or Lenin’ – offers both a proximity to the political vanguard she worships, while simultaneously staging a reality of oppression, and the ‘complete hopelessness of the situation’.<sup>60</sup>

Rose’s performance of left loss becomes particularly acute towards the end of the novel, when she becomes romantically attached to local tavern owner Archie Bunker.<sup>61</sup> Bunker was originally a fictional character in the television series *All in the Family* (1971–79) and its spin-off *Archie Bunker’s Place* (1979–83), a working class World-War Two veteran popular for his racism, bigotry, sexism, and stubbornness. After a catalogue of bereavements that include the death of her daughter Miriam, son-in-law Tommy, cousin Lenny, and former lover Douglas Lookins, Rose ‘went looking for a proper funeral, which turned out [...] to mean a proper *Jewish* funeral.’<sup>62</sup> At this point in the novel Rose attempts to disseminate the effects of melancholy through overexposure. As her ‘perambulations grew increasingly random [...] she began attending the funerals of strangers’.<sup>63</sup> As Rose reflects, in a rare moment of self-analysis:

Maybe she’d become meshuggah ahf toyt [Yiddish], loon crazy with bereavement. One of those who, losing everyone in cataclysm, begins seeking situations both anonymous and which exemplify grief. Possibly this wasn’t crazy at all, or crazy not like a loon but like a fox. The trick might be to diffuse and depersonalize the act of mourning, and also to freeze it, to entrench it as a permanent occupation. *We Jews mourn, there’s nothing to it, also nothing new to it.* Let me attend six million funerals, maybe then I’ll be done. By that time my personal dead will be raindrops in the sea. I’ll forget the names.<sup>64</sup>

<sup>59</sup> Susan Buck-Morss (2002), p. 48.

<sup>60</sup> V.I. Lenin, ‘Our Revolution’ in *The Lenin Anthology*; selected, edited, and introduced by Robert C. Tucker (New York & London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1975), p. 705.

<sup>61</sup> Rose resides in a nursing home, so the scene that unfolds is likely a hallucination.

<sup>62</sup> *DG*, p. 262.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid*, p. 261.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid*, p. 262. Italics in original.

Rose's attempt to 'entrench' and 'freeze' her mourning, offers a number of parallels with Freud's melancholic and Volkan's perennial mourner. As with Freud's original distinction between mourning and melancholy, Rose's desire to attend funerals lies with the growing sense of her mortality, alloyed to her status in revolutionary history: 'the difficulty with omitting the fire of your gaze to melt the humans down to ghosts was this: if Rose then glanced down at her hands gripping the teacup, they'd gone invisible too.'<sup>65</sup>

Spending increasingly more time with Bunker in his bar, Rose notes that these daytime drinking-sessions develop forms of 'Camraderism' absolved of the street pounding duties of communist party affiliation. Realizing that her years as an 'unrepentant communist' have 'frozen [her] into oppositional postures', Rose's full catalogue of loss, grief, and bereavement dissolves in an understanding that true communism is beyond the dictates of party affiliation:

[Communism] existed is the space between one person and another, secret sympathies of the body. Alliances among those enduring in the world. You found this where you found it, suddenly and without warning, at a certain meeting or protest. You'd then seek a similar sensation, at the next hundred such meetings [...] it might be found in a pickle factory, in the pleasures of actual solidarity in labor. You found it at the counter of the White castle, lunching on boiled eggs [...] And now, at a boor's tavern on Northern Boulevard.<sup>66</sup>

For Rose, to 'talk and laugh at inanities and drink' offers up an activity that is 'outside of capitalist exchange' which 'socialists can only dream' of.<sup>67</sup> As Rose intimates here, such an egalitarian enclave is only temporary, and quickly becomes undone when Archie rebuffs her sexual advances. Articulating a form of clichéd fatalism, this 'episode' marks a shift from the politics of loss to soap-opera drama,

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid, p. 264.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid, p. 272.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid, p. 272.

incorporating trademark witty dialogue, polarized romance, and para-textual features such as applause and end credits. In typical fashion, the use of these features provides the scene with a false sense of closure, solution, knowledge and finality, all of which Rose has ultimately been seeking throughout. Offering a potentially powerful extension of Freud's writings, Rose's performance makes these psychoanalytical terms flexible enough to encompass the emotionally demanding and historically varied processes by which individuals and groups respond to forms of social injury, injustice, and left loss.

### **The Mourning After**

In these pages I have argued to position *Dissident Gardens* within a critical lens sensitive to the regenerative potential of left loss. While theoretical accounts have often struggled to apply personal loss and mourning to issues of political crisis, Lethem's text enacts series of cultural practices that can be considered to work through left political defeat in more reparative ways. As I have demonstrated, Rose's performances establish a more malleable Marxist-communism that seeks out pragmatic relations with others rather than succumbing to the more disabling aspects of left melancholy.

It is important to remark here that left loss is not, never has been, and is never likely to be a consistent and co-ordinated offensive against capital. It is not to be considered a systematic politics or philosophy that ultimately advances towards some final pre-determined conclusion. Rather there can be multiple iterations of left loss, diverse and singular encounters. Indeed intrinsic to its successful operation is the ability to refuse a system: an attempt to hold something aside that could be considered universally valid. Its mode consists not in logical argumentation but in the shock, or failure, of recognition. It is tempting to reduce left loss to aesthetic endeavours, such as collections of paintings, groupings of poetry, and works of fiction. It certainly includes these manifestations, but in actuality it remains strikingly elusive. Present then not only in the formal properties of the individual work but also as a kind of state of mind, left loss displays a desire for insubordination, negativity, and revolt. A form unfolding in time but also reflecting its own historical situation.

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