

Melancholic psychosis – A Lacanian approach

Derek Hook, Ph.D.

Duquesne University and University of Pretoria

Abstract

Drawing on the conceptual resources provided by Lacanian accounts of melancholia and the death-drive, and by means of reference to a clinical case summary and the film *Into the Wild*, this paper hopes to open up new ways of thinking about melancholic psychosis. The paper foregrounds a series of clinical themes that may be grouped under the rubric of problems in symbolic fixity: difficulties in receiving gifts, inability to mediate relations of intimacy, yearning for anonymity/disappearance, and the condition of the twilight world. These themes, while not obviously associated with Freud's account of melancholia, represent areas of diagnostic priority for a Lacanian approach attuned to the role of symbolic processes and the traumatic 'real' object.

Keywords: death-drive, Lacan, melancholia, psychosis, object a, symbolic fixity.

Introduction

The objective of this paper is to explore key facets of melancholic psychosis, and to do so by making reference both to a clinical case and *Into the Wild*, Jon Krakauer's (1996) book depicting the tragic story of Christopher McCandless. My more specific aims are twofold. I want, firstly, to engender a distinctively Lacanian perspective on melancholic psychosis (hereafter, simply 'melancholia') which may prove of interest to an audience largely unfamiliar with Lacanian theory. Secondly, bearing in mind Freud's (1923) remark that in melancholia we observe "a pure culture of the death instinct" (p. 53), I want, in the second section of the paper, to foreground the role of the death drive in such a Lacanian account.

As will soon become apparent, the approach I will develop toward melancholia may initially appear at odds with Freud's (1917) account which focuses largely on the role of a previously loved yet subsequently hated and internalized lost object. A different set of conceptual priorities comes to the fore in a Lacanian reading. For a start, Lacan, unlike Freud, locates melancholia squarely in the domain of psychosis. Secondly, Lacan insists on the death drive as enacted *within* the symbolic realm. This is the death drive understood not as a quasi-biological or organic force. The Lacanian death drive is instead a type of *life in excess of life*, and it entails the wish to break from – to destroy – the network of given symbolic roles, debts and obligations that structure social existence.

I begin the paper with a brief clinical case summary that highlights a series of striking - and initially somewhat confounding – symptoms. Following this, I turn to a discussion of *Into the Wild*, Jon Krakauer's (1996) book (subsequently filmed by Sean Penn (2007)), which documents the story of Christopher McCandless. As will become apparent, there are a number of extraordinary parallels between these two cases. With this illustrative material in place, I move on to develop a series of Lacanian perspectives on melancholia. A crucial point of reference here is Russell Grigg's (2015) recent argument that it is the *presence* of the object rather than its absence that is most crucial in melancholia. I conclude by highlighting a number of ideas relating to the death drive in melancholia that a Lacanian frame of reference allows us to foreground.

Evading the symbolic

Some years ago, I worked with a patient who presented with a series of puzzling symptoms, some of which seemed, on the face of it, to have little or nothing to do with melancholia. Several key themes came to the fore in the clinical work, which I list, in schematic form, below.

1. **Difficulties in receiving gifts/symbolic fixity:** The patient experienced extreme difficulty - and a considerable degree of anxiety - in situations where he was forced to receive gifts. Such an aversive reaction was apparent not just in the case of gifts from family and friends, but even when he was given small tokens of gratitude from work colleagues. To receive any token of the Other's desire was, in short, a painfully excessive experience. Even as a child he disliked receiving like receiving gifts, and he frequently contrived to get his birthday forgotten. One way he devised of dealing with this difficulty was to transfer such gifts. He would request, for example, that Christmas gifts take the form of charitable donations.

In one particular case the effects of receiving a large gift proved disastrous: it precipitated the ending of a longstanding familial relationship. This problem with accepting gifts was evident also in my patient's disinclination to accept any remuneration offered by his place of work beyond his usual salary. His preference for *giving to* (rather than receiving from) others was apparent also in a long-held wish to work for a charity. Related to this was his profound distaste for what he considered to be the unethical business practices of large financial institutions. He wished, by contrast, to play a part in *redistributing* rather than accumulating wealth.

My working theory was that he disliked his existence being too forcefully acknowledged *or symbolically marked* by any desiring Other. Much by the same token: he avoided wherever possible being locked into reciprocal relations of exchange that fixed him in a designated symbolic role or identity. His interest in charity appeared to fit this idea: the aversion to receiving gifts seemed largely to be about avoiding indebtedness, avoiding being locked into a relationship of obligation, into a stable symbolic, familial or professional identity. More succinctly: the prospect of being tied into a given symbolic position engendered massive anxiety (or in Lacanian terms: harmful *jouissance* (that is, morbid excitation)); it was something he resisted at all costs, something he was unable to endure.

2. **An inability to mediate intimacy (the ‘terror of closeness’):** My patient also experienced great difficulties in managing personal relationships. Romantic relationships would invariably become too intense, and he struggled to strike the right distance between the extremes of aloofness and suffocating proximity. This occurred in both social and more personal relations. There seemed to be no happy medium, no balance between his powerful need for distance from social others and the occasional bout of unbounded and ego-engulfing intimacy. Just as he experienced a ‘terror’ of gifts, so he exhibited what Verhaeghe (2004) refers to as a ‘terror of closeness’. He knew no viable way of moderating closeness, of introducing an ego-protecting modicum of distance between himself and the Other.

An accomplished sailor and solo yachtsman, my patient managed his problem of intimacy by participating in an exhausting – and often dangerous - series of regattas and one-man sailing events. For a lengthy period, participation in such events provided a solitary escape from intimate relations and social obligations alike; virtually all of his time was spent training for, travelling to, or participating in such events.

3. **A yearning for anonymity and disappearance:** My patient had a frequent need to uproot himself, to cut all social and professional ties, to move from one job or residential address to another. He periodically abandoned email accounts and cell phone numbers, starting afresh with new contact details that he shared with as few people as possible. Being in any one position for too long elicited considerable anxiety, and long-term recognisability was almost unbearable to him. He felt acutely the weight of social relationships with people whom he was certain he would, in due course, disappoint. He experienced his own existence as wretched, worthless, undeserved, as – the first significant indication of melancholia – inherently and irretrievably blameworthy, deserving of punishment. His negative self-evaluations clearly invoked Freud’s description according to which the melancholic patient “describes his ego...as being worthless...morally reprehensible, he is filled with self-reproach, he levels insults against himself and exerts ostracism and punishment” (2003, p. 313).

This certainty that others would soon discover his worthlessness was perhaps why he so frequently voiced the wish to become anonymous, to bypass any forms of symbolic registration – permanent roles, positions, relationships, etc. The reverie that he often experienced when talking of his more gruelling sailing events was one of disappearance or demise, of going ‘off grid’, being lost and never found. He had broken off all relations with his parents and extended family years ago, and he maintained an unconditional and bitter hatred toward his father.

4. **Existing in a twilight world:** The patient’s day-to-day thoughts were punctuated with images of his suicide. He had a richly developed and well-researched set of ideas about how his own death might most effectively be accomplished. Additionally, he often described what I thought of as ‘twilight scenes’, scenarios in which he, or others, were suspended between the worlds of the living and dead. These were typically scenarios in which people were poised on the threshold of their own death or surrounded by those who had already passed into another world. These images conveyed something of his

everyday experience. He existed in a state preoccupied with death, a condition that was incommensurable with the world of the living, and near impossible to explain to those around him. This condition of opting out of social life whilst at the same time endlessly contemplating actual suicide – the state of being ‘between two deaths’ in Lacan’s (1992) memorable phrase – is ultimately what made life bearable for him. Leader’s (2007) description of the melancholic’s existence as split between “the ‘unreal’ world of social being” (p. 182) on the one hand, and their ‘real’ existence, of “absolute solitude” (p. 174) proved particularly poignant in this respect. As did Verhaeghe’s (2004) comment that in melancholia “the subject is empty, has nothing...is a member of the living dead...[who] takes the entire guilt of the world onto its shoulders” (p. 455).

It took me a while to understand that my patient’s twilight scenes and his associated reveries of suicide were not indications of immanent risk. They served instead – paradoxically enough - a consoling function. The painful condition of his existence was assuaged rather than exacerbated through such imaginings. His melancholia was not simply about a drive to suicide, but about a more complex negotiation whereby the presence of death enabled him to live. Perhaps the most telling example of his melancholic state was his wish not merely to die, but that his life be somehow retrospectively erased, such that he had never lived at all. This desire for complete erasure was apparent in an obstacle he ran up against when contemplating suicide. He had the discomfiting thought that there would inevitably be some remainder – his body, traces of the suicidal act – that someone would discover, and which would as such call attention to the fact that he had lived and to the relationships which had in some respect defined him. This of course was precisely the opposite of what he wanted: to disappear quite literally without trace, without affirming the fact of his symbolic existence, without revitalizing the historical social and familial relationships that he so desperately wanted to erase.

The sobering details of this case – which I came to understand as one of melancholia – presented a number of conceptual difficulties. It was, for a start, difficult to appreciate what – following the Freudian theory of melancholia - the once loved and subsequently hated unconscious attachment may have been for my patient. The figure of the despised father may have provided something of a tentative (if unconvincing) answer here, but this did not explain a further crucial feature of the case. My patient’s daily experience was characterized far more by the *traumatic presence* of prospective human intimacies and confining symbolic identities than by a lost object. While the libidinal withdrawal from the social domain so typical of melancholia was clearly on display, my patient’s problems centred rather on damaging excesses (of anxiety/*jouissance*) than – or so it appeared - on an unconscious identification with the dead. A helpful perspective on the case came from an unlikely source: the story of Christopher McCandless.

Into the Wild

“I think I’m going to disappear for a while.” (Christopher McCandless, cited in Krakauer, 1996, p. 21).

Christopher McCandless grew up in an upper-middle class Washington DC suburb, graduating, with honours, from Emory University in 1990. Immediately after his graduation, Krakauer (1996) tells us,

McCandless dropped out of sight. He changed his name, gave the entire balance of a twenty-four-thousand-dollar savings account to charity, abandoned his car and most of his possessions, burned all the cash in his wallet. And then he invented a new life for himself, taking up residence at the ragged margin of our society, wandering across North America... His family had no idea where he was or what had become of him until his remains turned up in Alaska (1996, p. i).

McCandless's death in Alaska – suffering from hunger he had misidentified a harmful plant as edible and died as a result – captured the public's imagination when it occurred. A brief analysis of Krakauer's retelling of associated events will allow us to highlight a series of components that bear a striking resemblance to the case discussed above. Indeed, I noted in my case summary that the melancholic patient I worked with was exceedingly uncomfortable in situations in which he was made to receive gifts; that he preferred to transfer such gifts to others; that charity, rather than the accumulation of wealth, was important to him. I stressed that he disliked being symbolically marked; that he frequently broke off existing social and professional ties when they became either too intimate or threatened to tie him to a given symbolic identity; and that he yearned for anonymity, to disappear without trace. All of these themes are, in varying ways, apparent in Krakauer's depiction of McCandless.

A considerable portion of the pathos of *Into the Wild* concerns the degree to which McCandless was willing to cut himself off both from his family and from the values and symbolic roles expected of him, to forge instead an entirely different and more solitary life. His avoidance of everyday social norms, roles and obligations had however begun some time before he set out on his wilderness adventures. Krakauer relates how "McCandless would wander the seedier quarters of Washington, chatting to prostitutes and homeless people, buying them meals (Krakauer, 1996, p. 113); this "teenage Tolstoyan" seemingly "believed that wealth was shameful, corrupting, inherently evil" (p. 115).

"In college McCandless began emulating Tolstoy's asceticism and moral rigor to a degree that first astonished, and then alarmed, those who were close to him. (Krakauer, 1997, p. ii). In his final year in Atlanta, "Chris had lived off campus in a monkish room furnished with little more than a thin mattress on the floor, milk crates, and a table" (p. 22). Eric Hathaway, a university friend of McCandless, recalled that social life at Emory revolved around fraternities and sororities "something Chris wanted no part of...[W]hen everybody started going Greek, he...pulled back...and got more heavily into himself." (cited in Krakauer, 1996, p. 120). Krakauer (1996) adds to this: McCandless was offered membership in the Phi Beta Kappa fraternity but declined for the reason that titles and honours were, he thought, irrelevant.

A crucial turning point in Sean Penn's (2007) film version of *Into the Wild* concerns McCandless's angry refusal to accept a new car that his parents wanted to purchase for him as a graduation present. Krakauer adds a telling point of contextualization, noting that two years

earlier McCandless “announced to his parents that, on principle, he would no longer give or accept gifts” (p. 20). He goes on to cite a letter that McCandless wrote to his sister, Carine:

I can't believe they'd try and buy me a car or that they think I'd actually let them pay for my law school if I was going to go... they ignore what I say and think I'd actually accept a new car from them! I'm going to have to be real careful not to accept any gifts from them in the future (cited in Krakauer, 1997, p. 21).

McCandless's anger at being offer such a gift, along with his unwillingness to be symbolically indebted to his parents, appear to have been crucial factors in his decision to definitively cut ties with them:

for a few months after graduation I'm going to let them...think that I'm “coming around to see their side of things” and that the relationship is stabilizing. And then, once the time is right, with one abrupt, swift action I'm going to completely knock them out of my life. I'm going to divorce them as my parents once and for all...forever (cited in Krakauer, 1996, p. 64).

It is interesting that in both the McCandless story and the case discussed above, an unwanted gift – which is also of course an unwanted intimacy, an unwanted debt, a ‘too muchness’ of the Other – featured as a point of rupture. Clearly, like my patient, McCandless evinced a volatile reaction to being the recipient of a gift that would lock him into a designated or designated role (in this case, the dutiful son of his parents). Eric Hathaway, a university friend of McCandless's was perhaps more insightful than he realized when he commented that “Chris...would have been unhappy with any parents; he had trouble with the whole *idea* of parents” (cited in Krakauer, 1996, p. 115).

Several further incidents can be cited in which McCandless was either notably uncomfortable with, or sidestepped, forms of symbolic fixity (that is, being locked into a given symbolic identity). An example is the new name McCandless adopted when he began his travels: Alexander Supertramp. Upon reflection, this was not so much a *new* name as the *avoidance* of a name. I say this for two reasons. Firstly, ‘Supertramp’ is more a description than a name: McCandless had after all embraced the life of a destitute wanderer, albeit of a ‘super’ (youthful, adventurous) sort. Secondly, by incorporating the name of a famous rock band (‘Supertramp’), McCandless was substituting a well-worn signifier from American popular culture - one of a particularly bland and anonymous sort - for his name. ¹

A similar gesture is apparent in the case of another young man Krakauer discusses in *Into the Wild*, Everett Ruess, who, he felt, clearly exhibited similar tendencies to McCandless. Ruess sought escape from society in the American wilderness, and ultimately died as a result. He had adopted the name Nemo, the name of the sea captain in Jules Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* who, as Krakauer (1996) tells us, “flees civilization and severs his...every tie upon the earth” (pp. 94-95). Nemo, of course, also means ‘no one’, and as such it functions in much the same way as does ‘Supertramp’, not so much as a name, but as a refuge in anonymity.

From a Lacanian perspective, such an attempted re-naming (or an avoidance of naming) makes for a conspicuous feature of the case. Why so? Well, it amounts, in quite literal terms, to an erasure of the Name-of-the-Father. In Lacanian theory, the Name-of-the-Father refers to a symbolic function (Lacan, 1993), that of the transmission of cultural norms, laws and prohibitions that are most typically associated with the place and authority of a Father (Vanheule, 2011). That '*Nom-de-Pere*' in French is both the *Name* and the '*no*' of the Father is indicative: by assuming one's father's name, one assumes a symbolic place in a family lineage and societal network, and one internalizes a set of societal values and prohibitions.

The Name-of-the-Father is thus often understood as the anchoring signifier that makes the symbolic domain (of language, law, culture) operate, and operate in an internalized way (at least for non-psychotic subjects) (Leader, 2011). One begins to appreciate then why it is axiomatically so – certainly for Lacan – that the foreclosure of the Name-of-the-Father results in psychotic structure.² The above operations, of being uniquely placed within the symbolic domain (assuming a name) and taking on a viable relational identity, of inheriting apparently intuitive understandings of prevailing social values and norms, have quite simply not been adequately 'installed'. One could thus venture the hypothesis that if McCandless's rejection of the father's name (in both literal and more figurative senses) functioned in such a way, as stressing or underscoring a type of foreclosure, then there may well have been a psychotic dimension to the case. It is perhaps unnecessary to reiterate that in both the McCandless story and in the clinical case described above there were very determined attempts to reject the authority or influence of – and any relationship to – the father. (Paraphrasing Eric Hathaway's above-cited comment ("Chris...had trouble with the whole *idea* of parents" (cited in Krakauer, 1996, p. 115)), we might assert: Chris "had trouble with the whole idea of a *father*".)

The second key theme of the foregoing case study – my patient's difficulty in managing intimate relationships and a sense of feeling suffocated by them – may not immediately seem to fit with what we know of McCandless. McCandless, as portrayed in both the book and film versions of *Into the Wild*, did forge a number of significant if short-lived relationships. Krakauer (1996) remarks that Chris was "Outgoing and extremely personable when the spirit moved him", adding furthermore, that "he charmed a lot of folks" (p. 65) and that "He could be generous and caring to a fault" (p. 120). Nevertheless, a subsequent – and undoubtedly astute - observation made by Krakauer puts this apparent sociability into perspective.

He tells of how Ron Franz, a rudderless and disconsolate old man who had lost his family under tragic circumstances, befriended McCandless and subsequently offered to adopt him. If my earlier hypothesis regards the aversive reaction my patient experienced in the face of intimacy (the 'terror of closeness') holds also for McCandless – and I think it does - then such an offer was, unbeknownst to Franz, a sure-fire way of pushing McCandless away. Having escaped the constraints of family and a father figure in particular, it seemed unlikely that we would wish to resume such ties, even in a different context.

McCandless, Krakauer intuits, was uncomfortable with Franz's request, and dodged the question, promising it to reconsider it after his Alaskan adventure. Setting off North, Krakauer explains,

McCandless was thrilled to be on his way... and he was relieved as well – relieved that he had again evaded the impending threat of human intimacy, of friendship, and all the messy emotional baggage that comes with it. He had fled the claustrophobic confines of his family. He'd successfully kept Jan Burres and Wayne Westerberg [friends he had met on the road] at arm's length, flitting out of their lives before anything was expected of him. And now he'd slipped painlessly out of Ron Franz's life as well (Krakauer, 1997, p. 55).

A number of themes converge here, lining both of the above cases: an apparent inability to take a permanent position within an inter-subjective relationship; the need – via forms of anonymity and disappearance - to escape society and bypass symbolic debts and obligations; the apparent over-intensity of intimacies that prove difficult if not impossible to mediate. The Lacanian insight here is that precisely such difficulties might be considered as indications of psychotic structure.

Before turning to an exposition of related facets of Lacanian theory, we should consider a salient moment in the McCandless story that may appear to contradict my argument about the young man's apparent avoidance of gift giving. I have in mind an instance where McCandless gave a gift to his friend and former employer, Wayne Westerberg, who ran a custom combine crew that McCandless worked with in South Dakota. McCandless

gave Westerberg a treasured 1942 edition of Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. On the title page he inscribed, "Transferred to Wayne Westerberg from Alexander. October, 1990 (Krakauer, 1996, p. 19).

The *giving away* of possessions was clearly less of an issue than *receiving* gifts for McCandless. The same, incidentally, was true for my patient who wished he could work for a charity, and who wanted to redistribute as opposed to accumulate wealth. Perhaps this is partly the answer: to give something away does not necessarily burden one with the same responsibility and obligation that invariably accompanied being a recipient.

Nevertheless, the above anecdote does trouble my argument. After all, in this example, McCandless quite emphatically marks a symbolic transaction. Then again, perhaps this, the overly explicit marking of the transaction, is itself a clue. This is clearly not the case of a spontaneously given gift; it resembles rather a quasi-legal exchange process ("Transferred to..."). It is as if for McCandless the exchange of gift giving brings with it an inherent risk or vulnerability, and that as such the process needs as such to be formalized, the symbolic transfer logged in the protective fashion of a legal contract.

Differently put: if one has a solid grounding in the symbolic, then such transactions are commonplace phenomena that remain unburdened with weighty meaning or noxious emotional significance. If one's symbolic position is, by contrast, tenuous or somehow forestalled, then it stands to reason that one might wish to underline the symbolic transaction in a definitive (almost didactic) manner, so as to anchor the gesture, stabilize it, locking it thus into a set of clearly defined terms.

The over proximity of the object

Let us break here from our discussion of the McCandless story to register a few points of Lacanian theory. Doing so may help make sense of the conceptual dilemma stated above, that the most salient feature of my case – and arguably of McCandless’s – was not, as might be expected in melancholia, *the loss of an object* but rather a type of *anxiety-inducing over-presence of an object*. In approaching a Lacanian conceptualization, it is necessary, of course, to start with Freud.

Even those with only a passing familiarity with Freud’s (1917) *Mourning and Melancholia* are acquainted with the idea that the melancholic suffers from the loss of a once loved and subsequently hated object. Following this account, the melancholic, having narcissistically identified with object, wages a clamorous psychical war against it via the medium of their ego. We are thus able to explain one of the key features of melancholia repeatedly stressed by Freud, namely the fact that the constant complaints and allegations that the melancholic directs against themselves sound very much as if they fit another object altogether.

Without jettisoning Freud’s account, we might ask: is it really the loss of an object that plays the predominant role in the everyday affective experiences of the melancholic? Or, differently put, we might ask whether the loss of an *imaginary* (ego-supporting) object may not be coterminous with the invasive presence of an object of a different order – that of the Lacanian *real* – an object which cannot be kept at bay. This argument is advanced by Grigg (2015) who observes, in respect of the psychoanalytic transference that “it is the very presence of the object, rather than its loss, that is critical in...melancholia”. “[M]elancholia”, as such “is not about object loss”; “mourning...which is produced by the loss of an object, is a misleading model for melancholia” (p. 152).

A crucial facet of Grigg’s disagreement with Freud is the idea that the attack upon the self in melancholia is too devastating to be understood as internalised aggression against the object. The damage experienced by the subject, the eruption of harmful *jouissance* – indeed, the toxicity of the object - seems to exceed what can be accounted for in terms of superego violence. This seems to me to be clinically verified in the case of my patient, who most certainly did have a strong superego – but whose psychic pain seemed to issue not from this source alone, but from the very pain of intimate/familial/social others who ‘threatened’ him with the possibility of a relationship.

A conceptual qualification proves helpful here. Grigg, crucially, is conceptualizing melancholia “in light of the structural distinction introduced by Lacan between neurosis and psychosis” (p. 152). One important implication of this is that the psychotic subject does not have access to the same (repressive) order of defences that the neurotic subject does. Redmond explains:

castration, social identification and naming; importantly, all of these are factors that lead to the tempering of anxiety and *jouissance*. For the neurotic subject, the Name-of-

the-Father is deduced, in part, by observing its pacification effects.... In neurosis, castration is associated with repression and *limits* the subject's access to *jouissance* through prohibition... In contrast, in psychosis, this limit to *jouissance* is not evident: therefore, without these pacification effects... *jouissance* may be invasive, delocalized and overwhelming (Redmond, 2014, p. 120).

In short then: neurotic subjects *repress* what is disturbing or traumatic in their lives (subjecting it thus to amnesia, displacement, condensation, disconnections of affect and idea, projection, and associated primary process mechanisms of disguise) (Lacan, 1993). Psychotic subjects, by contrast, have a qualitatively different means of dealing with their most troubling experiences: foreclosure (Leader, 2011). Foreclosure is a more radical operation of negation than repression, one, which – and here Lacan draws inspiration from the Freudian notion of *Verwerfung* (repudiation) – involves a *rejection of an incompatible idea from the symbolic itself*.

What is repressed is nevertheless registered psychically (albeit in a disguised form). What is foreclosed is more drastically repudiated; no initial judgement of existence is involved, and the idea is effectively abolished from the symbolic altogether. Hence the famous Lacanian maxim according to which “what is refused in the symbolic order...reappears in the real” (Lacan, 1993, p. 13). The ‘real’ here is thus that which has not been psychically registered, something definitively ‘external’ to the subject. It is likewise that which has *not* been mediated by primary process mechanisms of – which for Lacan is to say, language itself – and that returns in the unmediated forms of hallucination, delusion, external (paranoid) persecutions, or as the traumatic object. In short then, whereas neurotics can, for Lacan, utilize language or the various defensive mechanisms of repression to mediate troubling forms of *jouissance*, the psychotic subject has no such (repressive/linguistic) filters with which to lessen the traumatic force of the object. Turning directly to Grigg’s account helps further articulate this point:

What makes melancholia so different from mourning is that the melancholic subject turns out to be defenceless against the object. The object cannot be memorialized, as in mourning, and instead remains forever there in the Real. The collapse of semblants that otherwise veil the object persists, and the “grimace” of the object, like the grimace of a skull behind a beautiful face, is exposed; for the melancholic, the veil of semblants, the *i(a)* over the *object a* falls altogether (p. 153).

This passage requires some unpacking. Crucial here, for a start, is the distinction between *imaginary* or ego-sustaining objects (*semblants*) which provide a type of fantasy covering (in neurosis), and the *real* object, that is, the *real* object which occurs minus any protective screen or repressive/linguistic mediation (in psychosis). This object - which Grigg equates with Lacan’s object *a* - is not merely the object-cause of desire, as it is so often characterized in the secondary literature. In its real, which is to say its *unmediated*, form, this ‘object’ is also traumatic – an excessive thing which irradiates the subject with inflammatory *jouissance*. This unscreened object exerts a type of toxic over-proximity:

[T]he proximity of the object *a* in psychosis means that the subject has not separated himself from it as the object cause of desire. This separation, which for

the neurotic subject is produced by the Other as locus of speech and language [that is, by the symbolic order], both regulates and limits his *jouissance*. In the absence of this separation a plenitude of *jouissance* is apparent in such typical psychotic formations as erotomania, hypochondriasis, and the persecutions characteristic of paranoia. ... In melancholia we encounter the same failure of separation from the object. The depressive function is explained by the fact that the unseparated-off object, in being a “piece of the Real” ...leaves the subject exposed and defenceless to its ravages. A comparison with paranoia might help: the paranoiac is prey to the evil Other who wishes him ill; the melancholic is likewise defenceless against the Real of a horrific object, unmediated by the Symbolic (p. 154).

One appreciates better, in light of the above argument, how melancholic psychosis might be understood not simply along the lines of a lost unconscious object, but rather in terms of difficulties with being definitively located or fixed in the symbolic. There are a great many ways in which this may be made apparent, as for example (referring back here to case details above), in instances of intense family/intimate relations that the melancholic experiences as claustrophobic or unbearable. It may likewise be evident in a reticence to accept any tokens of the Other’s desire that tie one into a series of reciprocal relations or obligations (as in the abovementioned inability to receive gifts).

What is important to stress is that this difficulty is the flipside of the problem with mediating intimacy (‘the terror of closeness’), in which relations with the Other seem either to plunge into suffocating over-proximity or to fall apart altogether. And, as is perhaps by now evident, these two inter-related problems (of symbolic fixity and mediating intimacy) can also be approached along the lines sketched by Grigg (2015), that is, as the problem of the ‘too muchness’ of a given object (here, Lacan’s object a). The object a in this respect is the traumatic kernel, the ‘piece of the real’ which, like the skull beneath the face that Grigg invokes, shines through the Other to exert its traumatic influence on the melancholic subject.

Let me reiterate again that from a Lacanian perspective, these various difficulties (of symbolic fixity, mediating intimacy and the traumatic object or relationship) all represent different perspectives on a given clinical phenomenon – that of psychotic melancholia. Put in more Lacanian language, we can say that difficulties of taking up a stable position relative to the desire of the Other are at one problems of symbolic fixity *and* of the failure to regulate the damaging *jouissance* of the object. It is not just the symbolic relation to the Other that is the problem: there is also the crisis of the traumatic object they make manifest, the dilemma of object a (‘what in them is more than them’).³ And it has come too close precisely because the melancholic subject lacks the (repressive/linguistic) means, the means of symbolic mediation necessary to protect themselves from it.

Life beyond life

Where though is the death drive in all of this? While not obviously present in the first sections of the foregoing case summary, the death drive does make itself apparent in the last of the over-arching themes that I mentioned (the condition of existing in a twilight world). The

extreme sailing risks and challenges that my patient undertook clearly took him 'beyond the pleasure principle', far exceeding what could in any ordinary terms of reference be considered either healthy or enjoyable.

Here though we need to add a clarifying proviso. For Lacan (1992), the death drive is apparent less in a literal wish to die, than as a type of *life in excess of life*. The death drive, following this tack, is apparent in activities of surplus vitality, in forms of unnatural ('undead') libidinal animation (*jouissance*) that override the biological imperatives of adaptation and self-preservation. It is for this reason that Lacan insists that the death drive is not "a perversion of instinct but rather a desperate affirmation of life" (1992, p. 263). As Žižek puts it:

The Freudian death drive....[is] the very opposite of dying – a name for the 'undead' eternal life itself... The paradox of the Freudian 'death drive' is therefore that it is Freud's name for its very opposite, for the way immortality appears within psychoanalysis, for an uncanny excess of life, for an 'undead' urge which persists beyond the (biological) cycle of life and death... The ultimate lesson of psychoanalysis is that human life is never 'just life': humans are not simply alive, they are possessed by the strange drive to enjoy life in excess, passionately attached to a surplus which sticks out and derails the ordinary run of things (Žižek, 2006, p. 61).

Žižek's comments are instructive inasmuch as they overturn the assumption that melancholia should be understood exclusively along the lines of a severe and/or encompassing mode of depression, and withdrawal. While this might be true – take for example William Styron's (1992) account of his own psychotic depression, *Darkness Visible*, it remains true that the death drive doubtless appears also in moments of 'unholy' stimulation, in *jouissance*-inducing highs, in the libidinal gratifications of the transgressive or the extreme. It is in such moments that the experience of being most fully alive comes full circle to embrace the limits or excesses of life more typically associated with death.

One might object that this theme of the death drive, be it manifest either in an apparent yearning for death, or in the 'unholy' stimulations of *jouissance* sought beyond the pleasure principle, seem absent in the McCandless case. This, of course, might simply be the point at which the two cases I have discussed here most sharply diverge. ⁴ And, to make the point explicit: I see no reason to assume that there was anything obviously suicidal about McCandless's excursions. It is interesting to note however that Krakauer's personal investment in the McCandless story stemmed from his own experiences of mountaineering, where he - and several others whom he writes about as kindred souls to McCandless – were fully aware of the mortal risks they were taking. Krakauer (2014) remarks, furthermore, that "When [McCandless] headed off into the Alaska bush, he entertained no illusions that he was trekking into a land of milk and honey; peril, adversity and Tolstoyan renunciation were precisely what he was seeking" (p. ii).

A consideration of several of McCandless's final communications proves suggestive. In the last postcard he sent to Westerberg, McCandless wrote:

This is the last you shall hear from me Wayne...If this adventure proves fatal...I want you to know you're a great man. I now walk into the wild (p. 69).

A similar note was received by Jan Burres, in which McCandless wrote:

This is the last communication you shall receive from me. I now walk out to live amongst the wild. Take care, it was great knowing you.

We cannot of course know what walking “into the wild” meant for McCandless, or what broader associations this signifier might have held – consciously, or unconsciously - for him. Krakauer describes the period when McCandless first set off on the road, in the following perceptive terms:

At long last he was unencumbered, emancipated from the stifling world of his parents and peers, a world of abstraction and security and material excess, a world in which he felt grievously cut off from the raw throb of existence. Driving west out of Atlanta, he intended to invent an utterly new life for himself, one in which he would be free to wallow in unfiltered experience (pp. 22-23).

This fits well with a brief description McCandless penned of himself in his journal:

On May 1... hit the road again... It is the experiences, the memories, the great triumphant joy of living to the fullest extent in which real meaning is found. God it's great to be alive! (cited in Krakauer, p. 37).

These references to “*the triumphant joy of living to the fullest extent*”, “the raw throb of existence” and feeling free “to wallow in unfiltered experience” call to mind our earlier qualification of the Lacanian death drive as a mode of surplus vitality, as libidinal enjoyment, “a desperate affirmation of life” (Lacan, 1992, p. 263). They resonate also with Žižek’s description of the death drive as that “excess of life...which persists beyond...(biological) life...[to which] humans are...passionately attached” (Žižek, 2006, p. 61).

Perhaps the closest we can come to an approximation of what going ‘into the wild’ meant for McCandless was a third person declaration he wrote on a piece of plywood that was found inside the abandoned bus where his body was eventually discovered:

TWO YEARS HE WALKS THE EARTH... ULTIMATE FREEDOM. AN EXTREMIST. AN AESTHETIC VOYAGER WHOSE HOME IS THE ROAD. ESCAPED FROM ATLANTA. THOU SHALT NOT RETURN...AFTER TWO YEARS OF RAMBLING COMES THE FINAL AND GREATEST ADVENTURE. THE CLIMACTIC BATTLE TO KILL THE FALSE BEING WITHIN AND VICTORIOUSLY CONCLUDE THE SPIRITUAL REVOLUTION... NO LONGER TO BE POISONED BY CIVILIZATION HE FLEES, AND WALKS ALONE UPON THE LAND TO BECOME LOST IN THE WILD. ALEXANDER SUPERTRAMP MAY 1992 (cited in Krakauer, 1996, p. 163).

Consider the above declaration in light of the following description of how certain subjects are, once pervaded by the 'undead' animation of the death drive, driven to escape the bounds of the symbolic:

The death drive...does not describe literal death, but death within the symbolic order. After having rejected the symbolic order...the subject persists... [T]his mode of existence gives form to destruction – death in form – so that those subjects who come back to life after rejecting the symbolic universe come back anew; they are no longer the subjects who were part of the symbolic order... The subject enjoys being rejected by the symbolic order, enjoys refusing the enjoyment offered within the symbolic order. ...[However] the subject does not completely escape the symbolic order...[but] recreates it to satisfy an undying urge to continue... [T]he death drive is obsession with continuation, not death itself... the death drive...is not the cessation of life but its continuation (Dawkins, 2015).

This is a rich passage that contains a series of ideas that helpfully illuminate the struggle with symbolic fixity that both my patient and Christopher McCandless appear to have experienced, albeit in different ways. We should note, firstly, that the death drive here is fought not exclusively against the boundaries of life but against the delimiting boundaries of the symbolic order (social symbolic roles, transactions, exchanges, identities, etc.). In McCandless's case, one could convincingly argue that "into the wild" signified precisely this: an attempted escape from – or opposition to – a given societal form of the symbolic order.

Secondly, defying the symbolic gives "form to destruction" for Dawkins (2015) in the sense that such defiant subjects "come back to life", are made anew; it enables new modes of enjoyment, and an undying urge to continue. The last qualification is crucial: the death drive – and this holds both for my patient's dangerous sailing expeditions and McCandless's Alaskan adventure – is not the cessation of life, but its insistence, beyond the bounds and limits of practicality, social norms and everyday comforts and expectations. McCandless's own words, his reference to "ultimate freedom", to himself as "an extremist...an aesthetic voyager...not [to] return", to "the battle to kill the false being...and...conclude the spiritual revolution" to thus no longer be "poisoned by civilization" (cited in Krakauer, 1996, p. 163), given articulate expression to such an interpretation of the death drive.

Let me refer back once more to Žižek, who offers another crucial qualification regards the Lacanian notion of the death drive:

[W]hat the death drive strives to annihilate is not...[the] biological cycle of generation and corruption, but rather the symbolic order, the order of the symbolic pact that regulates social exchange and sustains debts, honours, obligations. The death drive is thus to be conceived against the background of the opposition between...[the] social life of symbolic obligations, honours, contracts, debts, and its 'nightly' obverse, an immortal, indestructible passion that threatens to dissolve this network of symbolic obligations (Žižek, 1999a, p. 190).

This poses a challenge - indeed, potentially, a corrective - to how we think the death drive and melancholia alike. As we have seen, the death drive need not be viewed exclusively as a literal yearning for physical death (although, of course, such features may be clinically present in melancholic subjects). We need, by contrast, to read annihilation here in a different key, as aimed not merely at the stuff of life, but at the level of the *symbolic trace*. Intriguingly then, the Lacanian clinician should be attentive to a type of higher-order death, to the wish (indeed, *the drive*) to annihilate, or - less dramatically put - to *evade* the constraints of symbolic fixity, to secede from the “social life of symbolic obligations, honours, contracts, debts” (1991, p. 190). Of course such phenomena in and of themselves do not ensure a diagnosis of any sort - Lacanian diagnostics being based on structural rather than symptomatic features of a case - and yet they do provide an indication of the presence of the death drive, and, indeed potentially, as I have suggested above, of melancholia.

Conclusion

My focus here has been to identify a distinct series of diagnostic markers, to suggest that we need not think of melancholia only within the parameters of the lost, resented and subsequently internalised object, but also along a different set of analytical priorities. The chief of these analytical and diagnostic priorities include: problems in symbolic fixity; difficulties in mediating intimacy; and the obdurate presence of an excessive traumatic object. These three categories of difficulty seem to make sense of my patient’s (and McCandless’s) problems in receiving gifts, their aversion to being locked into symbolic obligations or identities, and their inability to securely place oneself relative to the desire of the Other. Introducing the topic of the death drive, furthermore, helps us make sense of two further features apparent in many cases of melancholia: a yearning for anonymity and disappearance, and a desire to exist beyond the constraints of a given symbolic domain (a place beyond the living, a going ‘into the wild’).

References

- Dawkins, S. (2015). Death Drive. <http://www.actforlibraries.org/death-drive/>
- Freud, S. (1917) Mourning and Melancholia. In J. Strachey (ed.), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XIV, 237-258*. London: Hogarth Press.
- Freud, S. (1923). The Ego and the Id. In J. Strachey (ed.), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XIX, 3-66*. London: Hogarth Press.
- Grigg, R. (2015). Melancholia and the unabandoned object. In P. Gherovici & M. Steinkoler (Eds), *Lacan on Madness: Madness, Yes You Can’t*, pp. 139-158. London & New York: Routledge.
- Krakauer, J. (1996). *Into the Wild*. Anchor: New York.
- Krakauer, J. (2014). Forward. In. C McCandles, *The Wild Truth*. New York: HarperOne, p. xi-xv.
- Lacan, J. (1992) *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959-1960*. Trans. from the French by D. Porter. London: W.W. Norton.
- Lacan, J. (1993) *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book III: The Psychoses, 1955-1956* (edited by Jacques-Alain Miller, translated by Russell Grigg). New York and London: W.W. Norton.

- Leader, D. (2003). Some Thoughts on Mourning and Melancholia. *Journal for Lacanian Studies*, 1, 4-37.
- Leader, D. (2008) *The New Black: Mourning, Melancholia and Depression*. London: Penguin.
- Leader, D. (2011). *What is Madness?* London: Penguin.
- McCandles, C. (2014). *The Wild Truth*. New York: Harper.
- Penn, S. (2007). (screenplay and director) *Into the Wild*. Paramount Pictures.
- Redmond, J.D. (2014). *Ordinary Psychosis and the Body*. London & New York: Palgrave.
- Styron, W. (1992). *Darkness Visible*. New York, NY: Vintage.
- Vanheule, S. (2011). *The Subject of Psychosis: A Lacanian Perspective*. London & New York: Palgrave.
- Verhaeghe, P. (2001). *Beyond gender: From subject to drive*. New York: Other Press.
- Žižek, S. (1989). *The sublime object of ideology*. London: Verso.
- Žižek, S. (1998). From “passionate attachments” to dis-identification. *Umbr(a)*, 1 3-17.
- Žižek, S. (1999). There is no sexual relationship. In Elizabeth Wright & Edmond Wright (Eds.) *The Žižek Reader*, pp. 174-205. London: Blackwell.
- Žižek, S. (2006). *The Parallax View*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

¹ I concede that an alternative interpretation is possible here: the pseudonym ‘Alexander’ – as a colleague made me realize - could also be read as a signifier connoting egoistic conquest. My attempt to reconcile this idea with my own argument is simply to note that the heroic symbolic resonances of ‘Alexander’ (the Great) need not necessarily undermine what I have been suggesting regards an signifier of anonymity. In other words, the conjunction of Alexander and Supertramp may however (un)consciously have represented for McCandless a heroic even legendary figure who nonetheless remained, in at least one significant respect, cut off from society, fundamentally unknown and anonymous. Alternatively, one might suggest that this combination of names is suggestive of the profound ambivalence of McCandless who goes on a heroic quest in the name of namelessness. I owe this point to an anonymous reviewer of this paper.

² Evans (1996) notes: “As early as 1938 Lacan relates the origin of psychosis to an exclusion of the father from the family structure...Later on in his work...he specifies that it is the absence of the symbolic father which is linked to psychosis” (p. 89).

³ It perhaps helps to add here that this distinction between the Other and that real object (object a) that is seemingly in them is already apparent in Freud’s (1917) famous declaration that the melancholic “knows whom he has lost but not what he has lost in him” (p. 245). In fact, this distinction of Freud’s was one of the origins of Lacan’s notion of the object a.

⁴ There is an important and perhaps definitive difference between the two cases. My patient wished to retrospectively erase all symbolic traces of his life. While during the course of his adventures ‘in the wild’ McCandless seemed to exhibit a similar wish, when it became apparent that he was dying, he left a note, signed, significantly, in his own full name: “I have had a happy life and thank the Lord. Good-bye and may God bless all. Christopher Johnson McCandless”.