

## Introduction

### The Melancholy Object of Art

Seven years after the fall of Troy, Aeneas's wanderings bring him, in book I of Virgil's *Aeneid*, to the city of Carthage. Upon the citadel's walls he finds depicted scenes from the Trojan war, whose story has outsped his ships. With tears running down his face, Aeneas speaks of tears of another sort, *lacrimae rerum*—literally, “the tears of things”:

... sunt hic etiam sua praemia laudi,  
Sunt lacrimae rerum, et mentem mortalia tangunt.

[Here too we find virtue somehow rewarded,  
Tears in the nature of things, hearts touched by human transience.] (461–62)

The title of this book appropriates Virgil's phrase and applies it in a way that will doubtless seem very strange to the classical grammarian; its evocative power, however, has been impossible to resist. From the broad range of probable meanings for *rerum* (e.g., affairs of men, events) I have narrowed the word to its most concrete meaning, that of material objects. Not that I am asserting that such objects shed tears—for themselves, for us—or that they feel the kind of emotion that would produce tears, or any kind of emotion. Nevertheless, there is a melancholy associated with physical objects. That melancholy differs from the traditional lament for the ephemeral object: the morning rose must fade alas, now you see it, now you don't. The melancholy I am speaking of underlies the

very moment when “now you see it”; it is generated by the act of perception, perception of the object by the subject. This perception, always falling short of full possession, gives rise to a melancholy that is felt by the subject and is ultimately *for* the subject. It is we who are to be lamented, and not the objects that evoke this emotion in us without ever feeling it themselves. The purpose of this introduction is to lay out the version of melancholy that underlies the chapters that follow, while indicating at the same time which versions do not apply. I will begin with three poems—by Emily Dickinson, Wislawa Szymborska, and Frank O’Hara—reading them through two philosophers, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Jean-Paul Sartre. These poets and philosophers explicate one another, creating a more fully dimensioned view of the elusive dynamic between objects and subjects.

We begin with Dickinson:

Perception of an object costs  
Precise the Object’s loss—  
Perception in itself a Gain  
Replying to its Price—

The Object Absolute—is nought—  
Perception sets it fair  
And then upbraids a Perfectness  
That situates so far— (486–87)

The “Object’s loss” in this poem can readily be connected to a certain melancholy dynamic. The lost object here, however, is not that of Freud’s “Mourning and Melancholia,” a love object whose loss triggers an ambivalent response that prevents a healthy and terminable mourning. Rather, this object is an entity in the material world; it is a thing, any thing. Instead of being raised to a special intensity by a psychological dynamic such as fetishism, this object enacts a more ordinary dynamic: through perception, it is simultaneously apprehended and lost. The balance is “precise.” The idea that perception is “a Gain/Replying to its Price” is Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s as well: “It can literally be said that our senses question things and that things reply to them,” he contends in *The Phenomenology of Perception* (319), then adds a quotation from Conrad-Martius that stresses the ambiguity of this reply: “The sensible appearance is what reveals (*Kundgibt*) and expresses as such what it is not itself.” The appearance, that is, is not the “Object Absolute”—which is an idea, and only an idea, that comes down to “nought” in Merleau-Ponty’s opinion. The notion that the object can be apprehended objectively seems natural enough; the verbal echo reinforces

this trajectory. The problem for Merleau-Ponty is that such objective thinking is based on the assumption of “the object as *in itself* and of the subject as pure consciousness. . . . But in reality all things are concretions of a setting” (compare “Perception sets it fair”). This means that “the thing is inseparable from a person perceiving it, and can never actually be *in itself* because its articulations are those of our very existence” (*Phenomenology* 320).

Not only does our existence articulate that of an object through the language of our perceptions, the object calls out that language from us, and with it our own sense of embodied experience:

After all, we grasp the unity of our body only in that of the thing, and it is by taking things as our starting point that our hands, eyes and all our sense-organs appear to us as so many interchangeable instruments. The body by itself, the body at rest is merely an obscure mass, and we perceive it as a precise and identifiable being when it moves toward a thing. (*Phenomenology* 322)

Though the body “moves toward” a thing with all the instruments of its embodied perception, indeed embodying itself *through* that perception, it enacts at best a tendency, without ever reaching the “Object Absolute.” And to this degree precisely it loses not only the object but the subject. The subject’s embodiedness in the world does not ever achieve even the degree of focus that an object does when “Perception sets it fair”—fair, but also far. We fill our senses with appearances in order to blunt the always implicit sense that the things of this world are fundamentally distant from us:

Our perception, in the context of our everyday concerns, alights on things sufficiently attentively to discover in them their familiar presence, but not sufficiently so to disclose the non-human element which lies hidden in them. But the thing holds itself aloof from us and remains self-sufficient . . . a resolutely silent Other. (*Phenomenology* 322)

For many, the familiar presence of things is a comfort. Things are valued not only because of their rarity or cost or their historical aura, but because they seem to partake in our lives; they are domesticated, part of our routine and so of us. Their long association with us seems to make them custodians of our memories; so that sometimes, as in Proust, things reveal us to ourselves in profound and unexpected ways. Yet all this does not mean that things reveal themselves, only our investments in them. And those investments often carry with them a melancholy in the very heart of comfort—as is the case with Mrs. Ramsay in Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*:

It was odd, she thought, how if one was alone, one leant to things, inanimate things: trees, streams, flowers; felt they expressed one; felt they became one; felt they knew one, in a sense were one; felt an irrational tenderness thus . . . as for oneself. (74)

But what is this self? It is described just before this passage as “a wedge-shaped core of darkness” (72), found only through “losing personality” (73). What we have here, then, is a manifestation of Freud’s death drive: a moment of longing (one of many) for an anterior state of things, the state indeed of being a thing. For the death drive, as Freud postulates it, arose as a conservative resistance to the rise of consciousness in matter: “In this way the first instinct came into being: the instinct to return to the inanimate state” (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 38). It is at the level of inanimate things that, “losing personality,” Mrs. Ramsay finds rest. For although we perform our lives at the surface, she meditates, “beneath it is all dark, it is all spreading, it is unfathomably deep” (73). This may seem like a description of the Freudian unconscious, but it owes more to a Freudian anteaconsciousness, for its spreading is so extensive that it can come to the surface in lives entirely different from the one beneath which it is currently sensed: “There were all the places she had not seen; the Indian plains; she felt herself pushing aside the thick leather curtain of a church in Rome” (73). Mrs. Ramsay’s own life is at such moments a matter of indifference to her. And this indifference is significant for Woolf. In her essay “On Being Ill” she finds in the indifference to self that often accompanies an illness a foretaste of eternity, but an eternity experienced without the tediousness of personality.

This indifference to self is also characteristic of things, as expressed in Wislawa Szymborska’s “View with a Grain of Sand,” a devastating litany that concludes as follows:

The window has a wonderful view of a lake,  
But the view doesn’t view itself.  
It exists in this world  
Colorless, shapeless,  
Soundless, odourless, and painless.

The lake’s floor exists floorlessly,  
And its shore exists shorelessly.  
Its water feels itself neither wet nor dry  
And its waves to themselves are neither singular nor plural.  
They splash deaf to their own noise  
On pebbles neither large nor small.

And all this beneath a sky by nature skyless  
In which the sun sets without setting at all  
And hides without hiding behind an unminding cloud.  
The wind ruffles it, its only reason being  
That it blows.  
A second passes.  
A second second.  
A third.  
But they’re three seconds only for us.

Time has passed like a courier with urgent news.  
But that’s just our simile.  
The character is invented, his haste is make-believe,  
His news inhuman. (185–86)<sup>1</sup>

If Szymborska’s title is a reference to Blake’s desire, in “Auguries of Innocence,” to see “a world in a grain of sand,” that world is one in which at the heart of objects is something “inhuman,” alien, other. Yet at the heart of what we call the human is something no less inhuman, which Mrs. Ramsay figures as a “wedge-shaped core of darkness.” There may be a drive, a desire for this darkness—but it is always accompanied by a sense of loss. In Freud’s terms, there is a loss in the very evolution of consciousness, which splits in two what was once one and thus evokes a kind of nostalgia for the prior state. The drive toward this state is enacted at intervals, but it can never find more than momentary rest: “One group of instincts [the death drive] moves forward so as to reach the final aim of life as quickly as possible; but when a particular stage in the advance has been reached, the other group [the life instincts] jerks back to a certain point to make a fresh start and so prolong the journey” (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 40–41). Thus the death drive repeatedly enacts a dynamic of loss.

What is lost is not the object but our own prior state of objecthood, and perception can only stress the ways in which this is so. Any object, intensely perceived, calls out the “interchangeable instruments” of our sense organs, as Merleau-Ponty asserts. But in the very fact of their interchangeableness these sense organs betray a shortfall, a falling short of full comprehension. Sight, touch, hearing, smell, taste—none of these is comprehensive in itself; each uses its own language of sense to speak of the object. How these languages are connected we cannot fully understand; the very body that, according to Merleau-Ponty, is constituted by acts of perception is constituted as multiple. If the quest of our senses has no resting point or center, then the body that perception

constitutes is not so “precise and identifiable” as Merleau-Ponty at first asserted. His discussion of “The Thing and the Natural World” indeed ends with this sentence: “I know myself only in my inherence in time and in the world, that is, I know myself only in ambiguity” (*Phenomenology* 345). The ambiguity of perception that is carried into our sense of self should logically be carried over into objects as well, yet this is not our experience. It is not objects that are ambiguous but our perceptions of them; nor are objects troubled by their own ambiguity, as Szymborska points out. Objects have a “Perfectness,” as Dickinson calls it—a vivid and indifferent presence that sets off by contrast the perceiver’s amorphous being, along with the very opposite of indifference: a kind of longing toward something that continuously recedes into dimensions of loss.

The distinction I am making is in many ways like Sartre’s distinction, in *Being and Nothingness*, between the *en-soi* and the *pour-soi*. The *en-soi*, or in-itself, is to be identified with the object—not, to be sure, the object of a subject, or the object of anything else, including itself. Were the object to be an object *to itself* it would immediately be riven: the moment of self-presence ironically becomes a moment of division into reflecting and reflected, a mirroring that finds no rest. This mirroring is in fact characteristic of the *pour-soi*, or for-itself: “The law of being of the *for-itself*,” Sartre says, “is to be itself in the form of presence to itself” (77). This may at first seem to be a plenitude, but “actually presence *to* always implies duality, at least a virtual separation. . . . If being is present to itself, it is because it is not wholly itself” (77). What is being spoken of here is consciousness, or rather self-consciousness. But a consciousness that is only conscious of itself is an empty cycle. For consciousness to have being it must apprehend that which is outside itself; its being must be being-in-the-world. Thus the object, as in Merleau-Ponty, is necessary in order for the subject to be constituted—perhaps not so much now as a body that speaks a multiple language of the senses, but as a conscious self that becomes aware of its consciousness by contrast with that which is not conscious; as Sartre puts it, “The for-itself constitutes itself as *not being the thing*” (174). And symmetrically: “The thing, before all comparison, before all construction, is that which is present to consciousness as *not being* conscious” (174). This would seem to set up a mutual dependence, but the object’s indifference makes the dependence entirely o-urs. The object will not yield to us its secrets; it has no secrets to yield. Or so Sartre asserts:

The in-itself has nothing secret; it is *solid* (*massif*). In a sense we can designate it as a synthesis. But it is the most indissoluble of all: the synthesis of itself with itself.

The result is evidently that being [that is, the object’s being] is isolated in its being and that it does not enter into any connection with what is not itself. . . . It knows

no otherness; it never posits itself as *other-than-another-being*. It can support no connection with the other. (lxvi)

The “other” is of course us, the subjects who seek to apprehend an object’s being, and who realize at some level that that connection can never be made. Yet the very moment when this lack of connection is realized creates an emotional connection. This emotional connection is very different from those produced by the narratives with which we overlay the indifferent object, and which make us feel, like Mrs. Ramsay, that objects understand us, in a sense are us. The connection of which I am speaking is at the same time a sense of sundering, of loss at the very moment of apprehension. And the emotion that it produces is melancholy.

Philosophical implications such as these underlie a typically idiomatic poem by Frank O’Hara, his “Interior (with Jane)”:

The eagerness of objects to  
be what we are afraid to do

cannot help but move us Is  
this willingness to be a motive

in us what we reject? The  
really stupid things, I mean

a can of coffee, a 35¢ ear  
ring, a handful of hair, what

do these things do to us? We  
come into the room, the windows

are empty, the sun is weak  
and slippery on the ice And a

sob comes, simply because it is  
coldest of the things we know (55)

“Jane” is O’Hara’s friend Jane Freilicher, a painter of still lifes and interiors. The poem was originally subtitled “About Jane,” but then incorporated her as a kind of object among other objects, playing on a common format for titling canvases. At the start of the poem O’Hara declares objects to be not indifferent but

eager. We would expect this sort of aspiration or desire to be characteristic of the *pour-soi* rather than the contained *en-soi*. But matters quickly become more complex. For the eagerness of the objects is to *be* something, whereas we only *do* something—or rather, we are “afraid” to do it. Here we might usefully turn ↗ not to Sartre but to Freud, who helps us to see the object as an outward projection of what is repressed in our own “interior.” This dynamic of objects “moves” us, in contrast to the objects themselves, which are unmoved movers. Being moved, of course, implies that emotion traverses certain interior distances, that it is, in a literal sense of the word, unsettled: emotion as the psychic equivalent of motion in the material world. This may explain Sartre’s curious assertion that motion is a “‘malady of being’ with the for-itself as a more profound malady pushed to nihilation” (621). In this case the emotion is away from its objects: we *reject* their eagerness, their willingness “to be a motive.” This last word again echoes motion through its root, but couples it with “to be.” The object has become a paradoxical nexus of being and doing, inertia and motion. But all of this reflects an interior that is ours, not that of the object: “Being-in-itself,” says Sartre, “has no *within* which is opposed to a *without*” (lxvi).

Is it, then, ourselves that we reject, or at least the part that we are “afraid” of? O’Hara doesn’t give us answers—only examples of “really stupid things” that nevertheless raise again the question “what / do these things do to us?” And then a final more extended example: an interior on a winter afternoon filled with, perhaps, Dickinson’s “certain slant of light.” Empty windows, weak sun on ice—to which we respond with something that approaches the wintry feel of the scene, a sob, “simply because it is / coldest of the things we know.” We “know” it because it belongs to our own interior, is part of the emotional furniture of our souls, of their familiar motions and emotions. But the interior that is outside of us, the room composed of commonplace, “really stupid things” is less well known. In contrast to “the things we know,” the things we do not know are material objects that are beyond us, both physically and metaphysically. Even Freud admitted an equivalence between these two types of interior. The unconscious, he says in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, “is as much unknown to us as is the reality of the external world” (613). The sob, then, is a brief rupture of the commonplace by the melancholy that is always implicit in these things. And here Freilicher’s own diagnosis of O’Hara may be pertinent: “She thinks of me as melancholy” (“To Jane” 183).

### *The Psychology of Melancholy*

O’Hara’s melancholy must be distinguished from other versions, such as clinical depression, that may also be called by that name. In particular it must be

distinguished from the version described by Freud in his “Mourning and Melancholia.” Freud stresses at the outset that he has confined himself to only one kind of melancholia: he will not claim that his conclusions are valid for all cases, but only for “a small group of them” (243). The essay that follows this disclaimer has proven to be enormously suggestive. However, there is no reason to confine its implications to the strict letter of Freud’s analysis, which approaches melancholia through a contrast with the dynamics of mourning. Mourning is undertaken in order-to-come-to-terms with a loss; but in melancholy, Freud argues, a certain internalization of the lost object (here a person, a love object) that is part of normal mourning goes awry when the object is the focus of deep and intense ambivalences. That object has now become internalized, identified with one’s self; consequently, the hatred that is part of one’s emotions toward it is directed toward one’s self as well. The depression and self-loathing that follow characterize the state Freud calls melancholy.

This analysis is founded on a dynamics of identification, defined by Freud in “Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego” as “the earliest expression of an emotional tie with another person” (105). However, such a tie presupposes a prior sense that there is something that can be so tied to another person—that is, the sense of one’s own material personhood, or *identity*—“the condition or fact that a person or thing is itself and not something else” (*OED* definition 2). Despite the similarity of the terms, and of the projects they name—the formation of “self”—identification and identity proceed by opposing dynamics. Identification is a project of psychological unification: one identifies *with* another. To the degree that one does this, “*I* is another,” in Rimbaud’s phrase, and the project of unification paradoxically results in a splitting. Identity, in contrast, is a separating out, an attempt to distinguish one’s own existence from other existences in the world. This attempt, too, can never be wholly successful: what is “me” is always tacitly defined against what is “not-me” (as in the observations above on *pour-soi* and *en-soi*, conscious defined against not-conscious) and thus depends on the other. Moreover, as Merleau-Ponty has indicated, the phenomenological sense of one’s body as an entity “in the world” depends on the body’s being situated among that world’s objects, and on its responses to them. The body itself is manifested as such an object, however exceptional one would wish that object to be. Identity, then, involves a sense of corporeal unity that must precede the psychological unity that is identification; yet at the same time corporeal unity is founded on a separation from the object and a consequent sense of loss, a sense that generally remains at the level of the unconscious. This, I would argue, is the source of a version of melancholia that is different from Freud’s. One can describe it, however, by reading the psychoanalytic term *object* not as Freud uses it—to refer to a person that

is the object of emotion—but to refer to a material thing, or rather the entire class of material things in relation to which identity is constituted. In melancholy “the shadow of the object,” Freud says, falls upon the ego (“Mourning” 249). And the melancholiac is characterized by “an extraordinary diminution in his self-regard, an impoverishment of his ego on a grand scale” (246). Less grand, more subtle, is the sense of impoverishment suffered by the subject’s alienation from the objects that are the very coordinates of that subject’s being in the world. The penumbral disquiet of this version of melancholy is very different from the noisy “self-reproaches and self-revilings” (244) of Freud’s patients.

The Lacanian “Thing,” as well, hovers between a psychoanalysis of identification and one of identity. Lacan’s term extends the significance of one that Freud uses in a section of his *Project for a Scientific Psychology* in which he speaks about messages received from the perception of another person. Of these messages, some can be identified with the perceiver’s own experiences, and in effect say, “This person is like me”; others, such as the person’s unique facial configuration, convey the opposite message. This part of the perception “makes an impression by its constant structure and stays together as a thing [*als Ding*]” (330). As opposed to subjective identifications with the other, this Thing is the objective sundering of identification; its “structure” is that of the object as *other than* the subject. The Thing is thus, Lacan says, “by its very nature alien, *Fremde* . . . strange and even hostile on occasion” (*Seminar VII* 52). It must be stressed that although the object is perceived as alien, the Thing is not that object but that perception; the Thing is a psychic state, and is in us, not in the world—though it is the discovery of the world, the world as other than us, that gives rise to that state. We try to cover over this discovery with various strategies of control: intellectual systems or, most commonly, the numbing force of habit. Still there persists an underlying sense of the lost object, or rather the loss associated with the constitution of the object as separate from the subject. This sense of a primal loss, this Thing in us, precedes any later losses of real and particular objects. Even an object that is physically in our possession is in this primal sense already sundered from us, and so lost even in the holding of it. This is not a loss that can be mourned, that can be gotten past so one can live one’s life: it *is* that life. Whatever substitutions are attempted for the lost object, whatever strategies to make us once again one with the world, an undertone of melancholy persists.

This persistence of melancholy may be related to Freud’s original distinction between mourning and melancholy: the work of mourning concludes after a reasonable amount of time, whereas melancholia, though it may conclude,

does so only after an extraordinary prolongation. According to Freud, this prolongation is due to a fundamental ambivalence toward the lost object. However, as Giorgio Agamben has suggested in *Stanzas*, what may be at work here is a different kind of psychological economics, one that intertwines possession and loss. The process of mourning kills the object a second time in accepting its loss; melancholy, in contrast, refusing to come to terms with the loss of the object, refuses to give it up. The “it” may indeed refer to something that goes beyond the ostensible occasion for mourning to a more primal loss. The “it” may be the Thing; and if this is so, no mourning can heal the wound. Moreover, the refusal to give “it” up asserts a sense of past possession in the very heart of loss: no loss without prior possession. To lose one’s emotional investment is to lose the last remnant of a sense of possession. Thus for Agamben the vagueness of the object that has been lost is significant:

Although mourning follows a loss that has really occurred, in melancholia not only is it unclear what object has been lost, it is uncertain that one can speak of a loss at all. “It must be admitted,” Freud writes, with a certain discomfort, “that a loss has indeed occurred, without its being known what has been lost.” . . . If we wish to maintain the analogy with mourning, we ought to say that melancholia offers the paradox of an intention to mourn that precedes and anticipates the loss of the object. . . . From this point of view, melancholy would be not so much the regressive reaction to the loss of the love object as the imaginative capacity to make an unobtainable object appear as if lost. (20)

If in this formulation “lost” implies prior possession, “unobtainable” implies a simultaneous sense of lack, for which prolongation is a symptom: prolonging expresses longing. *On Longing*, Susan Stewart calls her pioneering study of the relations between narrative and physical objects. However, she considers the nature of that longing not through any sustained analysis but only in a brief prefatory meditation on the word’s multiple meanings. By whatever word one calls it, such a longing is implicit in the subject’s dynamic with the object.

**READ TO HERE**

*Art and Longing*

That longing can be expressed and intensified by the “imaginative capacity” for loss to which Agamben refers, a capacity that informs the creative work of artists. “There is no imagination,” Julia Kristeva declares, “that is not, overtly or secretly, melancholy” (*Black Sun* 6). For her, this melancholy is linked to an apprehension of the Thing. The artist’s imagination, though, goes further than

a vague apprehension; it creates the means whereby one draws nearer to the Thing, sensed now not only within one's self, but within a finite, though complex, artifact:

Art seems to point to a few devices that bypass complacency and . . . secure for the artist and the connoisseur a sublimatory hold over the lost Thing. First by means of a prosody, the language beyond language that inserts into the sign the rhythm and alliterations of semiotic processes. Also by means of the polyvalence of sign and symbol, which unsettles naming and, by building up a plurality of connotations around the sign, affords the subject a chance to imagine the nonmeaning, or the true meaning, of the Thing. (*Black Sun* 97)

The apposition here of "nonmeaning" and "true meaning" is intriguing. Is the true meaning of the Thing, paradoxically, its nonmeaning? Or is this a way of questioning the "complacency" that attaches to the very idea of meaning? Here we may be on ground similar to that of philosophy before it becomes solidified into system: the unmaking of meaning is philosophy's first step, as it is that of art.<sup>2</sup>

So, for instance, we have Tennyson's bafflement before a commonplace object, physically finite, metaphysically infinite:

Flower in the crannied wall,  
I pluck you out of the crannies,  
I hold you here, root and all, in my hand,  
Little flower—but if I could understand  
What you are, root and all, and all in all,  
I should know what God and man is. (2:693)

The flower, emblem of beauty, has at this moment become sublime: vast in its implications, terrifying in its mysteriousness. Such moments are crucial for the genesis of art, though Tennyson's art here is not fully realized. Rather than evoke the flower's strangeness by the "semiotic" techniques recommended by Kristeva, he flatly asserts the inadequacy of ideas to things: the poem's subject is not the flower but Tennyson's inability to understand it. A very different poem would have resulted had Tennyson, like Keats, attempted to enter imaginatively into the flower as it exists beyond the explanatory systems that overlie it. Estrangement in such a poem would not be something to be deplored, but a positive imaginative aid.<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, other poems by Tennyson often link strangeness to sadness—sadness as a tool for achieving poetic insight. In "Mariana," for instance, we are

told "the broken sheds looked sad and strange" (1:187). A stanza of "Tears, Idle Tears" dwells on the same link:

Ah, sad and strange as in dark summer dawns  
The earliest pipe of half-awakened birds  
To dying ears, when unto dying eyes  
The casement slowly grows a glimmering square;  
So sad, so strange, the days that are no more. (2:232)

And that "no more" is itself apostrophized in a poem that strikes some familiar chords:

OH sad *No More!* Oh sweet *No More!*  
Oh strange *No More!*  
By a mossed brookbank on a stone  
I smelt a wildweed-flower alone;  
There was a ringing in my ears,  
And both my eyes gushed out with tears.  
Surely all pleasant things had gone before,  
Lowburied fathomdeep beneath with thee, NO MORE! (1:175)

Sad, strange, but also sweet is the emotion of melancholy here cultivated. Loss is celebrated as much as it is mourned; the poet's tears are displayed like a badge. There is a certain disingenuousness, then, when Tennyson begins a poem with "Tears, idle tears, I know not what they mean." In that poem the quality of a lost past is described through the present image of the window—an image whose distinctive quality derives from the subject position of its dying perceiver: the commonplace takes on a strange intensity from being perceived under the aspect of loss. For a poet like Tennyson loss produces gain: had Hallam not died, it would have been necessary to find another beloved to lose.

Thus melancholy is often the very thing (or Thing) that poets strive to impart to their readers; we recall Kristeva's observation that art "affords the subject a chance to imagine the nonmeaning, or the true meaning, of the Thing." But this is not done for the kind of therapeutic reasons that Kristeva on the whole seems to favor. In *Black Sun* she speaks of literature's effectiveness as a "therapeutic device" involving "catharsis" (24), of "a (for the time being) conquered depression" to which poetry bears witness (65), of art as a Hegelian *Aufhebung*, "nonmeaning and meaning, positive burst integrating its potential nothingness" (207) within itself (and why not the other way around, since this formulation clearly assigns to potential nothingness the role of that which is integrated by

the positive?). To be sure, Kristeva as psychoanalyst is rightly interested in the uses to which art can be put as part of her clients' treatment, and she is certainly aware of the ambiguous, multivalent relations between art and the Thing. Nevertheless, her fundamental position is that given in her essay "The Melancholy Imaginary": "If loss, mourning, absence set the imaginary act in motion and permanently fuel it as much as they menace and undermine it, it is also undeniable that the fetish of the work of art is erected in disavowal of this mobilizing affliction" (105). This undeniable, I feel, must be denied. While art may serve Kristeva's purposes for the clinical depressive, for her more general category of the "connoisseur" it serves a more general purpose. A melancholy imaginary engenders a melancholy representation. Through strangeness, such representation approaches a metaphysical sadness that is deliberately cultivated. It offers an antidote to normalcy, the norm, the disease that is called meaning. That disease need not be terminal. Melancholy representation opens new vistas beyond meaning's authoritative last word. It can often do this by viewing the world under the aspect of "last things" and so seeing it for the first time, as a dying person might be born into new perceptions.

This is an apocalyptic art: its revelations are inextricably linked to destruction and loss. The very dynamic of representation involves loss, an absent object preceding its replication in the medium. If this object is not always physical—for art's object may be a concept of the work to be executed—it is no less lost in the process of the very labor by which it is found, transformed into a concrete representation. The melancholy object of art, then, signifies in more than one way. Art perceives and attempts to represent an object that must always to some degree be lost in perception and lost again in representation. And this entails a melancholy, "overtly or secretly" (Kristeva, *Black Sun* 6). Yet at the same time this melancholy is not just the price of the process: it may be the very goal of the process, its object. In relation to Dürer's *Melancholia I*, Agamben asserts that "the troubling alienation of the most familiar objects is the price paid by the melancholic to the powers that are custodians of the inaccessible" (26). But I have been arguing that the alienation of familiar objects, their strangeness and hence sadness, can often be the aim of art. The sadness is, to be sure, linked with a sense of the inaccessible. Melancholy representation, however, does not pretend to give us access, only to awake our longing toward what must always remain inaccessible, in the world and in us. It is this longing that so much art contains—not that toward which we long. Melancholy representation expresses the psychological Thing that is the very dynamic of longing, and that can be evoked by the most commonplace physical things. That new and peculiar thing-in-the-world that is a work of art occupies a liminal position, with the containing strategies of its medium disposed in such a way

that we are constantly aware of what must escape any containment. This awareness must be that of artists as well: even at their most jubilant moments of inspiration, their muse is melancholy.

### *A Collection of Ideas*

It should now be apparent that the melancholy with which I am concerned in this book is not that of objects, but of the *representations* by which they are always necessarily mediated, whether by the systems of art or of perception. In a move that is parallel to the body's use of multiple senses to apprehend an object, I use examples from various modes of artistic representation. For each of these modes I have tried to do justice to its richness and its ultimate inadequacy; this trajectory is characteristic of both individual analyses and the structure of the book as a whole. Part I, "Representation," is devoted to literature, painting, and sculpture, and demonstrates the ways that each of these modes enacts a shortfall in its depiction of objects. Part II, "Possession," analyzes artistic representations of control over objects, a sought-for control that may take various forms: ownership and collecting, classifying (in museums, encyclopedias, dictionaries), and descriptive listing as a literary still life. Part III, "Dispossession," is about the aftermath of this unsuccessful project of control. It examines what is left over—debris and waste—and asks what art can make of these. What emerges is not an art that reassembles but one that questions what it means to assemble in the first place: a deconstructive art, if you will. Included in this catalog of waste is that ultimate still life, the cadaver, where the subject-object dichotomy receives its final ironic reconciliation.

Taken as a whole, this book is a collection of ideas, and it displays the symptoms of all collections. It has been, for several years now, an obsession; it is arranged according to certain patterns that have emerged out of its first principles of selection and have in turn revised these principles; it is bounded by limits and is in a certain sense incomplete, impossible to complete. This is so not so much because of the collector's psychology, which I will be examining later, as it is because of the wide-ranging implications of the problem of objects, implications that no one approach can claim to contain fully. For the sake of focus, I have had to leave much out; for instance, I have usually preferred to introduce my readers to unfamiliar or underanalyzed work rather than to go over ground that has already been well covered by others.

This volume is not a historical study, but I draw most of my examples from the modern and postmodern periods. This is undoubtedly because these are periods of intense self-consciousness about representation. The artistic expressions of this self-consciousness can be exuberant enough, but this exuberance



is twinned with melancholy, a melancholy that often has the physical object as its focus. Douglas Mao, in *Solid Objects*, has extensively analyzed the role of physical objects in modernism; as for postmodernism, its “post” both separates and connects the later period to the earlier one. Bill Brown speaks of a post-modernity that has “too little sense of things” (*Sense* 19). But the sense of things in each era is a matter not of more or less, but of difference. So in postmodernism we have not the epiphanic object favored by the modernists but rather, perhaps, what Stanley Corngold has called “the melancholy object of consumption.” This is a melancholy evoked by manufactured desires, a void that objects claim to fill, and finally a melancholy that is itself reified and commodified by the depression industry. Yet the object of consumption is often packaged and sold as an epiphany. An Omaha steak will, in the words of its promotional material, be added to the “treasure-house of experiences you never forget” (22). This is a commodified version of Mrs. Ramsay’s *Boeuf en daube*: “It partook, she felt, carefully helping Mr. Bankes to a specially tender piece, of eternity” (Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 121)—the “it” is grammatically and conceptually vague.

The presentation of objects as epiphanic reflects a continuing need to feel that they are, or once were, that to us. It is a nostalgia that each era tends to feel for an earlier one, seen as an imaginary Eden of objects. So in Elizabeth Bishop’s “Crusoe in England” Crusoe mourns the loss of an intimate relationship:

The knife there on the shelf—  
It reeked of meaning, like a crucifix.  
It lived. How many years did I  
Beg it, implore it, not to break?  
I knew each nick and scratch by heart,  
The bluish blade, the broken tip,  
The lines of wood-grain on the handle . . .  
Now it won't look at me at all.  
The living soul has dribbled away.  
My eyes rest on it and pass on. (*Complete Poems* 166)

Crusoe’s story is thus not a simple panegyric to capitalist enterprise, as has often been asserted; here it seems to enact a nostalgic return to a precapitalist intimacy with things. Yet it is only in such a nostalgic return that this intimacy occurs. For the knife is a tool, and at an earlier time it would not “look” at the person wielding it but rather be caught up in the drive toward fulfilling that person’s aims; nor would the person’s eyes be focused on the thing as such but on the task to be accomplished. These tasks have now become alienated in their turn with the rise of specialized production, so that Crusoe can write, as an

earlier generation could not, “’tis a little wonderful, and what I believe few People have thought much upon, (*viz.*) the strange multitude of little Things necessary in the Providing, Producing, Curing, Dressing, Making and Finishing this one Article of Bread” (Defoe 93). The lengthy description that follows would not likely seem “wonderful” to those for whom bread making was a necessary task to be gotten through, and a tool not something that will look at you, or something at which you look, except in the most fleeting way. Seldom do objects become still lifes, stilled long enough to be meditated upon—at which point they may offer comfort or disturbance, depending on the orientation of the one meditating.

The meditation that is this book is oriented toward the melancholy aspect of things, an aspect that has been considered only intermittently. My approach does not claim to be definitive any more than my book claims to be exhaustive. The nature of objects is too protean to be circumscribed by any one approach. This is the source of the exhilaration that may accompany the study of objects—and also its ultimate source of melancholy.