

# What the Experience of Transience Tells Us About the Afterlife

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**Abstract:** Sigmund Freud's reflections on transience left him surprised that someone could revolt against the process of mourning. In Jonathan Lear's interpretation of transience, the revolt is not simply a passing struggle of the mind, but a response to a difficulty of reality, that is, an existential struggle. Central to the experience of transience, according to Lear, is the disbelief in the existence of an afterlife. How might we understand the idea of an afterlife philosophically? I first consider three different philosophical conceptions of the afterlife that—in different ways—underline the relation between collective memory and the process of mourning. These reflections make it clearer which aspects of the afterlife play a role in the existential struggle that Lear describes. However, a further analysis of the temporality at stake in the denial of an afterlife is needed. I therefore look at two psychoanalytic interpretations of the refusal to mourn. The first considers the refusal to mourn as a way to deny change. The second interpretation sees the refusal as a realisation of meaninglessness that prevents the flow of time. I end the paper by arguing that the afterlife can be understood as a practice of articulation, which allows a shared time to flow. Such a practice will commit us anew to a shared world in which we survive with the wounding difficulties of reality.

**Keywords:** Melancholia, Nostalgia, Collective memory, Articulation, Grief, Hope

## 1. The Experience of Transience

During a walk with two companions, a friend and a young poet, in a delightful, summerly landscape, Sigmund Freud was struck by the young poet's inability to enjoy the beauty of the surroundings (Freud 1916). What spoils the enjoyment of beauty for the poet is the overwhelming feeling of transience. Freud reflects on this melancholic reaction to change. Not only is the experience of beauty overshadowed by concerns about the future; it seems that the experience of

transience affects the poet's perception and mood more broadly. The experience of transience quickly globalises, it seems. The enjoyable moments in life no longer provide any relief or pleasure; they are taken hostage by the thought of an impending end. The certainty of the imagined end transforms the present into a hostile and inescapable place; it deprives the present of its meaningfulness. The pleasurable moments of life evaporate as the experience of an imminent cultural devastation leaves the melancholic person in a timeless void: Nothing meaningful can come to happen—a fact of which we are reminded by the experience of transience.

We know that Freud understood mourning as a healthy activity and as a process that at some point shall come to an end, once our libido has found a new object (1917). In the experience of transience, however, Freud saw *a revolt* (*Auflehnung*) against this very healthy activity itself.

The proneness to decay of all that is beautiful and perfect can, as we know, give rise to two different impulses of the mind. The one leads to aching despondency felt by the young poet, while the other leads to rebellion against the fact asserted. No! it is impossible that all this loveliness of Nature and Art, of the world of our sensations and of the world outside, will really fade away into nothing. It would be too senseless and too presumptuous to believe it. Somehow or other this loveliness must be able to persist and to escape all the powers of destruction. (Freud 1915, 305)

What spoils their enjoyment [the young poet and Freud's tacit friend's, LRI] of beauty must have been a revolt in their minds against mourning. The idea that all this beauty was transient was giving these two sensitive minds a foretaste of mourning over its decease; and, since the mind instinctively recoils from anything that is painful, they felt their enjoyment of beauty interfered with by the thoughts of its transience. (Ibid., 306)

Jonathan Lear calls this revolt "a spoiling activity" (Lear 2018, 1203): "In response to present beauty, their [the young poet and Freud's friend, LRI] imaginations leapt ahead to a future time when that beauty was no more and then that thought was used to shut down any enjoyment they might otherwise have experienced." Lear wonders how the revolt against mourning could be seen as a subconscious attack on the poet's own capacity to take pleasure in the present. Instead of seeing the transience experience as following the melancholic inference that 'all things beautiful and the meaning of everything we care for shall come to an end; therefore, nothing can be really meaningful or enjoyable', Lear suggests that the experience of transience can be understood as an anxious disruption. The self-disruption is an attack on the possibility to take pleasure in something that shall eventually pass (Ibid., 1204.) So, if transience is not a melancholic inference to meaninglessness, it is an anxious disruption of one's capacity to take pleasure in

the present. However, Lear does not want to conclude anything too rapidly; he wants to dwell on the idea that someone can revolt against mourning, for what could that even mean? Rather than transience being a passing struggle of the mind, or it being an anxious disruption of one's capacity to take pleasure in something we shall soon come to lose, Lear suggests that the experience of transience might be a response to an existential difficulty of reality itself:

The transience of the entire natural scene along with the transience of all human splendour and beauty that humans have or will create deprives us of confidence in an afterlife—in Scheffler's sense. That is, it deprives us of a sense of continuity after our own death: that life will continue on with one's loved ones living meaningful and happy lives and others living according to ideals or carrying out projects that have mattered to one. Confidence in an afterlife helps us as we mourn the death of others and as we face the prospect of our own death. It helps us to think that our loved ones live in our memories—and that their project will continue into the future via shared commitments to important values. The poet's revolt against mourning, I suspect, is grounded in a radicalization of this conception of an afterlife. (Ibid, 1204–5)

The experience of transience deprives us of a sense of continuity after our own death, according to Lear. Transience is a response to the thought of discontinuity: If we cannot think of meaningful forms of cultural preservation and collective memory of shared past life, it affects our engagement in this very life. The sense that 'it will all be for nothing' discourages the creation of something meaningful that shall last. Therefore, Lear's claim is that the concept of an afterlife offers solace for the survivors of loss; when we mourn the death of others or when we face our own death, it involves the active belief in an afterlife that enables a trans-temporal continuing bond between the realms of the dead and the living. The confidence, as Lear writes, in the afterlife secures the meaningfulness of our present interpersonal and cultural engagement. The possible perspective held by the poet entails a dreadful radicalisation of this conception of the afterlife. According to Lear, this radicalisation has two dimensions: "First, the conception of an afterlife is expanded outward from the continuation of human projects to include a person's being able to see herself (and her loved ones) continuing on in the cycles, beauty, and expanse of nature. [. . .] Second, the poet insists that belief in an afterlife—even in this straightforward sense—is an illusion." (Ibid., 1205) Our normal understanding of mourning as a painful, but healthy, response to the death of others and the loss of what we care for is, in the eyes of Freud's companion, a cover-up of the truth. A revolt against mourning, on the other hand, is a revolt against not facing the truth, namely that "Death, for the poet, is a difficulty of reality: It is that before which the mind—through suffering, disorientation, fear and trembling,

wounding, anxiety, and, perhaps, through laughter—recognizes its fundamental inability to comprehend.” (Ibid., 1206) In the eyes of the poet, the hallmark of human health is truthfulness, as Lear writes (Ibid.), it is not recovery from grief. To recover from grief would imply forgetting about the practical suffering of knowing that we will lose who we love and what we care for. The practical incomprehensibility that strikes us when we lose a loved one or when we are faced with possible cultural or even environmental devastation is a difficulty of reality, which—seen from a melancholic point of view—cannot be turned into something comprehensible. The revolt consists precisely in denying the work of grief: We cannot let the process of grief *transform* the difficulty of reality into something understandable and liveable. Any idea of continuity or commitment to a shared future would flatten and deflate the urgency of this revolting experience that there is *no hope* for an afterlife.

When we grieve and mourn, what happens is that we transform the incomprehensible difficulty of reality. Lear wants to question how we actually live with the incomprehensibility instead of ridding ourselves of the experience of it as quickly as possible. The Freudian *Trauerarbeit* is exactly the work on turning something incomprehensible into a form of world-building sense, into a liveable future, into a practical reality. According to Lear, Freud overlooks the possible interpretation of the revolt against mourning; namely, that the experience of transience “wounds some with the experience of the inadequacy of the human mind to make sense of reality.” (Ibid., 1207) That is, revolting against mourning is understood as something different than just a passing state we shall overcome; rather, it is a real struggle with being alive and not knowing how to lose (Kristeva 1989, 5); an existential struggle with reality. Is it possible to understand what Julia Kristeva refers to as the radical, sullen atheism of the melancholic person (Ibid.) as a *revolt against the idea of an afterlife*? Rather than seeing in the experience of transience a nostalgic moment of longing for a past that cannot remain present or a longing that finds comfort only in the past, might we view the experience as a refusal to mourn the fact that the world we live in and care for is a world of change? If we take this question as our starting point, what does it mean to revolt against the afterlife? Can we accept the idea that the afterlife might not make sense to a melancholic or nostalgic mind? In which way does the thought of an afterlife make sense to a grieving, non-melancholic, non-nostalgic person?

## 2. Philosophical Conceptions of the Afterlife

In Søren Kierkegaard’s *Works of Love*, we find a chapter teaching us the importance of *remembering one dead*, as Kierkegaard phrases it (Kierkegaard 2009). One way to understand what Kierkegaard means when he says that to remember

one dead is a *work of love* is to see what he calls *works of love* as forms of intersubjective commitment. Surely, I can remember my grandmother, my close friend, my mother, but how do such acts of remembering form a bond of commitment? To remember one dead is not a duty commanded by anyone, nor is it something we are obliged to do. Rather, we might say that forms of what we can refer to as ancestral memory contain a specific way for us to conceive of the afterlife. In what follows, I will question the role of memory for the way we conceptualise the afterlife, namely as a practice of hope.

For Kierkegaard, the work of love in remembering one dead does not just consist in a conservative lesson that by remembering our predecessors we come to honour a tradition, as we participate in preserving the bonds to our ancestors. For Kierkegaard, remembering *one* dead is a practice, a way in which we live, and learn to live a meaningful life (Ibid., 328, 329)—despite the difficulty of reality that we will suffer losses and live with psychic wounds. The act of remembering one dead is a work of love in which a promise is kept, we might say. Not in the sense of a one-time transaction, but as a responsive act of keeping a bond with the deceased. The incomprehensibility of the death of a loved one continues to make a claim on us, as it were, and as we respond to the claim of this incomprehensibility, we remain engaged in an asymmetric, trans-temporal bond. The responsive act, moreover, consists in a practiced *commitment* to the future world in which we survive with this pain of losing a loved one. The structure of a promise, therefore, is characterised by the praxis of responding to the absence of the deceased. By responding to this absence again and again, we articulate some of the ways in which this pain remains active in our lives. As we respond to it, we participate in a reengaging movement over time that constitutes the sense we make of the world (Ingerslev 2020, 2022a). The struggle of this articulation is an existential mode in which we learn to survive absence. The afterlife can thus be conceived of as the life we continue to commit ourselves to in the act of remembering one dead; we re-commit to a shared life with others as we articulate our losses.

For Samuel Scheffler (2016), the thought of an afterlife guards our values and constitutes their continuation. The afterlife is not a social or religious imaginary of the promised place our loved ones go to when they die. Rather, and more concretely, it is a condition for human valuing. Scheffler imagines a scenario in which the world will be completely destroyed thirty years after our own death. The thought experiment is meant to show how a belief in the continuation of what we care for matters for our lived engagement in the present. Scheffler wants to prompt the idea that confidence in an afterlife secures the meaningfulness of our present interpersonal and cultural engagement. The continuing preservation of shared ideas and values, so he argues, is a condition for interpersonal and cultural valuing in the first place. Our responses to the doomsday scenario are

meant to show how we care not only for our own lives and values, but also how we care immensely about what happens to the shared life of others after we die (Ibid., 19ff.). The idea of no afterlife, that is, of a complete destruction of our world after we die, would render not only our present projects and our endeavours in research and art meaningless (Ibid., 24, 27), it would also influence negatively on our ideas of leisure time and play (Ibid., 56–7).

So if by the afterlife we mean the continuation of human life on earth after our own deaths, then it seems difficult to avoid the conclusion that, in some significant respects, the existence of the afterlife matters more to us than our own continued existence. It matters more to us because it is a condition of other things mattering to us. Without confidence in the existence of the afterlife, many of the things in our own lives that now matter to us would cease to do so or would come to matter less. (Ibid., 26)

Not only does the doomsday scenario point to the conditions of how something come to matter to us, it also shows that valuing is a diachronic phenomenon that plays a stabilizing role in our lives (Ibid., 61): “in the sense that, in valuing something, one does not merely manifest an occurrent preference about how things go on in the future. Instead, *one acquires a stake in how things go*, in whether what one values is realized or achieved or sustained.” (Ibid., 60–1, my italics, LRI) What Scheffler calls the collective afterlife is therefore the idea that we have a stake in how things go, and that the survival and continued flourishing of our social worlds is what I wish to preserve when I value things and life forms in the present (Ibid., 69, ff.). The thought of an afterlife, then, is not only motivated individually, but also collectively in terms of shared ideals and values. Scheffler’s compelling idea that preservation of values matters to their current importance is one way to conceive of the afterlife philosophically. However, the strong hypothesis that such conviction of preservation is a universal condition of present valuing deserves a discussion of its own which I cannot take up here. Suffice it to say, that the endurance and continuity of our shared values matter for how we are engaged in realising them in the present.

In Hans Ruin’s work on collective memory, we find an interpretation of the afterlife that resonates with Scheffler’s (2018). Ruin considers the Heideggerian idea of ‘being-with’ and re-interprets it as an existential mode, which extends beyond the living. Intersubjectivity has an ancestral dimension to it, according to Ruin. He argues that thinking about the afterlife is a way for a community to heal its losses by committing to shared ideals (Ibid., 55). That is, not only the values we would like to preserve matter for our collective identities. Moreover, the history we share sometimes needs to be healed and to be appropriated in new way, because it has caused damage and harm. The process of ancestral being-with is thus a question of how we heal and continue to heal our historical

communities. Being-with-the-dead is thus an existential life form, lived as inheritance and history (Ibid., 61). Ancestral being-with forms a social, ontological reality in its own right (Ibid., 59), that is, a spectral community that allows us to think of cross-temporal reality where we exist in a mode of shared vulnerability (Ibid., 61). To think of a shared vulnerability might allow us a different approach to Kristeva's idea that the melancholic person does not know how to lose. Existing with the knowledge of having to lose what one loves makes shared vulnerability an existential way of conceiving of the afterlife. For Ruin, being-with-the-dead is an existential mode that reveals "the possibility of collective life over and beyond individual loss and a barren soil of death, a rebirth that also keeps the dead with it in 'memory' [Ruin refers to Marcel Mauss' text "In Memoriam" (1925, in *L'année sociologique*, vol.1: 7–29) that contains a series of obituaries] of their lives and in continuation of their work and thus in their continued presence." (Ruin 2018, 55) To commit oneself to a continuation of a collective memory is a way to heal the bond with our loved ones after their death. "In this moment of grief over lives, loves, and friendships that have been lost, there seems to be no other discourse available than this commitment to its continuation." (Ibid., 56) As argued by Scheffler, the afterlife is a condition for the continuation of what we hold dear: "Thereby the loving can indeed continue to be with the dead across this limit, as the community heals itself in order to prevail across finitude." (Ruin 2018, 59)

Memory and commemoration of our ancestors is thus a way in which we exist intersubjectively and a way in which what matters to us is trans-generationally constituted. When Kierkegaard tells us to go practice the work of love in remembering one dead, it is thus a plea for existential healing that takes place through shared vulnerability. Kierkegaard's lesson that we should practice, as a work of love, remembering one dead translates into recent philosophical attempts to conceive of the afterlife as constituted by collective memory and as guarded by how we conceive of the continued commitment to shared values. In this way, the work of love consist in a societal commitment. It is for the community of those who survive the death of others that the thought of the afterlife is a world-building practice. As we grieve, we re-learn the world, as Attig argues (2011), by practicing the hope of an afterlife.

### **3. Preventing the Loss—Psychoanalytic Interpretations**

The revolt against mourning is an activity that has its roots in *denying* not only the positive, healthy, and world-building mode of grieving. What is further denied is the afterlife itself; that is, the thought of the continuation of what matters to us, and the condition for collective memory in a broader sense. The thought of the afterlife commits us to the practice of remembering our lost loved

ones so that what we find valuable and what we care for continues to matter and be of value after our deaths. To deny the afterlife this role is what Lear terms living with the practical incomprehensibility of death, that is, a wounding difficulty of reality. In what follows, I will first look at two psychoanalytic interpretations of the refusal to mourn. Further, I will address the objection that the attempt to conceive of the afterlife as part of the process of articulating one's loss for the future worlds to come remains at the level of delusion in the grief-process, as Freud described it.

If we focus on the melancholic aspect of the experience of transience as being a particular temporal one, I think we can add nuance to the idea of a revolt against mourning. First, we might think of the experience as a way to deny change, namely as a way of incorporating a non-changing state so that we are not forced to deal with the loss. Second, we might think of the experience as an inability to remember that change has already occurred and that the loss has already taken place. In the latter case, I believe Donald Winnicott's idea of fear of breakdown (1974) is helpful. It seems that the fear of breakdown not only interrupts the present experience, as we saw with Freud's companion; it turns the present itself into a chrono-phobic and unliveable place. Because the present confirms that change is happening, the melancholic or nostalgic person wants to escape it. Whereas Lear's focus is on the practical incomprehensibility as one we live with and do not overcome, a reading that explores the temporal impossibility at stake in transience will allow us to discover a devastating lack of hope experienced as part of the temporality involved in experiences of transience. This lack of hope is exactly what fixates the present as unliveable.

Let us look at the first interpretation. The revolt against mourning is a revolt motivated by not knowing how to lose, as Kristeva phrased it, what we love:

What is more, the disenchantment that I experience here and now, cruel as it may be, appears, under scrutiny, to awaken echoes of old traumas, to which I realize I have never been able to resign myself. I can thus discover antecedents to my current breakdown in a loss, death, or grief over someone or something that I once loved. The disappearance of that essential being continues to deprive me of what is most worthwhile in me; I live it as a wound or deprivation, discovering just the same that my grief is but the deferment of the hatred or desire for ascendancy that I nurture with respect to the one who betrayed or abandoned me. My depression points to my not knowing how to lose—I have perhaps been unable to find a valid compensation for the loss? It follows that any loss entails the loss of my being—and of Being itself. The depressed person is a radical, sullen atheist. (Kristeva 1989, 5).

The question is, whether we can prevent the loss from happening by incorporating our lost object? The psychoanalytical interpretation of melancholia



offered by Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok suggests that incorporation is a way in which an agent can refuse to mourn (1994). By taking his or her loved one in, incorporating him or her, the melancholic person builds an inner crypt as a means to denying change and loss. Abraham and Torok explain how, in the psychoanalytic tradition, the term incorporation is ambiguous and referred to in different ways (Ibid., 110–116). As the authors describe it, incorporation has the following meaning in psychoanalysis and designates a mode in which a loss is denied:

Introducing all or a part of a love object or a thing into one's own body, possessing, expelling or alternately acquiring, keeping, losing it—here are varieties of fantasy indicating, in the typical forms of possession or feigned dispossession, a basic intrapsychic situation: the situation created by the reality of a loss sustained by the psyche. If accepted and worked through, the loss would require major readjustment. But the fantasy of incorporation merely simulates profound psychic transformation through magic; it does so by implementing literally something that has only figurative meaning. So in order to “swallow” a loss, we fantasize swallowing (or having swallowed) that which has been lost, as if it were some kind of thing. (Ibid., 126)

What is important here is the idea that part of the process of *incorporation* consists in *refusing to mourn*. Identifying with the other and the attempt to incorporate the other can *prevent* us from realizing the loss we are suffering (Ibid., 130). According to Abraham and Torok, “[w]hen, in the form of imaginary or real nourishment, we ingest the love-object we miss, this means that we refuse to mourn and that we shun the consequences of mourning even though our psyche is fully bereaved.” (Ibid., 127) That is, when we take the deceased or otherwise lost object in, we can seemingly prevent the loss. Whether by carrying on an inner dialogue with the deceased, by repeating habitual patterns or invented rituals, or by consulting a specific moral code tied to the deceased person; some aspects of incorporation can prevent us from realising the loss of a loved one, and incorporation understood in this way can eventually cancel out the death of the other. Because of this de-metaphorization—that is, of taking the figurative term literally, and of objectifying the loved object—“the magical cure by way of incorporation exempts the subject from the painful process of recognizing the loss.” (Ibid., 126–127)

The original experience of absence, viewed psychoanalytically, is tied to the absence or separation from the care-taking other (see also Winnicott 2005, 1958), which gives rise to articulation. The infant learns to cope with separation by articulating the felt absence of the caregiving (m)other/milk; the empty mouth is the experience of absence that allows for articulation. The articulation of absence is thus a transformative experience that allows the infant to gain *a world*:

The absence of objects and the empty mouth are transformed into words. So the wants of the original oral vacancy are remedied by being turned into verbal relationships with the speaking community at large. Introjecting a desire, a pain, a situation means channelling them through language into a communion of empty mouths . . . Since language acts and makes up for absence by representing, by giving figurative shape to presence, it can only be comprehended or shared in a 'community of empty mouths'. (Abraham and Torok 1994, 128)

Importantly, absence here is something we learn to experience and this absence is tied to an experience of sense as world-building. The original experience of separation and absence is tied to an experience of intersubjectivity and to language; to channel one's psychic pain through language is to commit oneself to others and thus to participate to a shared world. The articulation of psychic pain is thus world-directed and world-building. The shared community of empty mouths is a speaking community built on the condition of original mourning. The shared vulnerability is structured as articulation and language; it is through the experienced separation from—and absence of—the loved and lost other that we gain access to a shared world. The lived articulation of the experience of absence *commits us anew* to the world. Whereas incorporation is tied to refusing-to-mourn, the process just described is that of *introjection*, where articulation can be described as a wanting-to-mourn. As we grieve the absence of the object lost, we gain a world. We might say that in order to survive absence, we must learn to engage with the afterlife as a mode of collective memory. To survive with one's traumas and losses through introjection is tied to a continuing confrontation with the afterlife where we re-learn the world and commit ourselves to continue living with and for others (see also Ingerslev 2018, 2020).

Without articulation, however, the loss is silenced and denied. By incorporating the lost object, an intra psychic tomb or crypt is built:

Without the escape-route of somehow conveying our refusal to mourn, we are reduced to a radical denial of loss, to pretending that we had absolutely nothing to lose. There can be no thought of speaking to someone else about our grief under these circumstances. The words that cannot be recalled, the tears that cannot be shed—everything will be swallowed along with the trauma that led to the loss. Swallowed and preserved. Inexpressible mourning erects a secret tomb inside the subject. Reconstituted from the memories of words, scenes, and affects, the objectal correlative of the loss is buried alive in the crypt as a full-fledged person, complete with its own topography. The crypt also includes the actual or supposed traumas that made introjection impracticable. (Abraham and Torok 1994, 130)

Is it possible to understand the revolt against mourning as rooted in such a crypt that prevents future losses from happening? Might we see in Freud's companion,

not only someone who revolts against the passing of time, but as someone who acts out in order to prevent it from passing? Is the nostalgic root of transience an attempt to stop the flow of time? If time were to pass, Freud's nostalgic companion would have to mourn this passing of time, to bid the present experience of beauty adieu, and to accept his loss. Is it the case, that when the poet revolts against mourning, he revolts against the very articulation of his loss, and instead he insists on the traumatic silence of not returning to the world? We might say that the revolt against mourning reveals one central aspect of the afterlife, namely that it is tied to articulation and memory. Articulation of one's loss would confirm the change of time; it would confirm the coming of a future. We might even say that articulation is tied to a practice of hope. I will return to this claim in section 4. In order to prevent the loss, however, the inner crypt silences the loss; it enables us to keep the otherwise lost object in a vault designed to resist the passing of time.

A second way to interpret the temporality of the revolt against mourning is to consider Winnicott's idea of a fear of breakdown (1974). Can we *prevent* the loss from happening by anxiously fearing a breakdown? What if indeed that experience of transience is the melancholic person's way to *prevent an experience* from happening which has already occurred but which is too painful to be integrated into the person's conscious life? Has the loss already occurred but in such a traumatizing way that it *cannot* be remembered? This is Winnicott's seminal idea (1974).

Winnicott investigates how the fear of a breakdown to come might be rooted in an actual breakdown that has already happened to the patient when he or she was too premature to integrate the traumatizing experiences. That is, traumatisation at an early age can result in these experiences not being fully experienced. And as the traumatic events have not been fully experienced, they cannot be recalled either. According to Winnicott, "clinical fear of breakdown is *the fear of a breakdown that has already been experienced.*" (Ibid., 103) so that the "ego integration is not able to encompass something. The ego is too immature to gather all the phenomena into the area of personal omnipotence" (Ibid., 104). If we ask why this is so, why the patient "go[es] on being worried by this that belongs to the past? The answer must be that the original experience of agony cannot get into the past tense." (Ibid.) Articulation, we might say, cannot take place, as the subject was not fully there to experience what happened in the past. Looking at the reversed temporality here, we see how the future becomes *threatening* because of something that cannot be remembered or even be experienced in the past tense. "The patient must go on looking for the past detail which is *not yet experienced.* This search takes the form of a looking for this detail in the future" (Ibid.).

For Winnicott, the experience feared in the present tense can be found by way of clinical work: “The patient needs to ‘remember’ this but it is not possible to remember something that has not yet happened, and this thing of the past has not happened yet because the patient was not there for it to happen to. The only way to ‘remember’ in this case is for the patient to experience this past thing for the first time in the present, that is, in transference.” (Ibid., 104) Here it is important to emphasise the following: the point is not that of a re-traumatisation through integration of what has happened; “the whole point of going through an experience that would have remained unlived is not to *integrate* it but to get *out* of it,” as Dorothee Legrand writes (2020, 109). That is, by way of experiencing a fear through which one has lived but cannot remember, one can come to survive an earlier experience of annihilation, and thereby life itself is enabled again (Winnicott 1974, 105).

From a different poet’s position, longing for the ease of death might entail first coming to remember having already ‘died’ experientially at an earlier point of time in his life. “When Keats was ‘half in love with easeful death’ he was, [. . .] longing for the ease that would come if he could ‘remember’ having died; but to remember he must first experience death now.” (Ibid.) That is, the fear of death is a fear that has occurred earlier in one’s life when one has experientially ‘died’, but this infantile death does not exist as a memory. Legrand calls this a paradoxical memory: “a memory of what is impossible to remember and what brings the subject to experience for the first time a past that was never lived in the present. The memory is not here the trace of a past experience but an inaugural experience: for the first time, one experiences what has already happened, the infantile void, the anterior death, the discontinuation of one’s being” (Legrand 2020, 109, see also 110). To recall that of which one has no memory is not to try to invent or construct a memory. To recall the annihilation of memory is to survive the experiential death one has suffered: “Death, looked at in this way as something that happened to the patient but which the patient was not mature enough to experience, has the meaning of annihilation. It is like this, that a pattern developed in which the continuity of being was interrupted by the patient’s infantile reactions to impingement, these being environmental factors that were allowed to impinge by failures of the facilitating environment” (Winnicott 1974, 105).

Without going into the early life experiences of Freud’s companion, and without considering the clinical situation in which the fear of breakdown occurs, we might think of the experience of transience by way of Winnicott’s suggested temporality, namely that of fearing something that has already happened. Maybe the breakdown has already occurred? Maybe the experience of a devastating loss has happened at a point of time when it could not be integrated in a person’s psychic life? Maybe the annihilation of all things beautiful has happened in the

past so that the revolt against mourning is a revolt against having to remember? When the past is too painful to be remembered, then the thought of the continuation of collective memory more broadly, can come to have no true value. If instead we *deny* the possibility of any meaningful future by anxiously fearing its breakdown, we will not have to remember and there will be no past to be preserved. This is another way to deny the afterlife of humanity in Scheffler's and Kierkegaard's sense of the term. Upon experiencing transient beauty, the melancholic person experiences a pain that invades the present and turns it into something that *shall not* be remembered. The present itself resists full experience, it has already lost its meaning, it is already being forgotten; there are no values to be preserved, an empty afterlife is already taking place. Is this a denial of loss? Yes, in a more profound sense, because it seems that articulation itself becomes impossible. What happens in the present, potentially enjoyable moment cannot be remembered due to a timelessness deeper than the fact of transience. The future itself becomes impossible, because nothing stands out as memorable; moreover, every moment slides into oblivion, as memory itself is being denied.

The two different psychoanalytical interpretations just offered of the revolt against mourning make it possible to distinguish between two temporal aspects related to the afterlife. Abraham and Torok allow us to understand *the crypt* as a way of preventing the loss by *keeping the past*. Winnicott's idea of the temporal deferral at stake in the fear of breakdown allow us to understand the refusal to mourn as *an annihilation of memory itself*. When a deeper form of traumatized memory prevents any enjoyable moment from being preserved, the present is lived in the light of a breakdown that has already occurred. The future then becomes feared and impossible because nothing memorable can come to happen. In this way, the afterlife is already lived as empty and without meaning because every present moment sinks into oblivion and prevents articulation. For someone experiencing transience in this melancholic way, time itself seems to have stopped. There is no future to hope for, and the present is a *claustrum* that keeps dissolving into nothingness.

The experiences of transience—whether rooted in nostalgia or in melancholia—has little to do with sentimental time travelling and longing for a past that cannot become present, and it is not simply one of many forms of affective responses to change. If we understand nostalgia and forms of melancholia as ways to refuse to mourn, what is refused, are the aspects of an afterlife, that is, of survival and collective memory, which allow us to practice a form of world-building hope. This hope seems impossible in the nostalgic experience of pain. Whereas articulation was an option in the first interpretation of transience, it seems that the melancholic person in the second interpretation is stuck in a timeless voice where a constant present allows for no memory and no hope.

#### 4. Acting Under the Premise of Having to Lose—the Articulation of Hope

So far, I have investigated the experience of transience in order to ask how to conceive philosophically of the afterlife. Freud was surprised how someone could revolt against mourning, whereas Lear interpreted the revolt as a response to a practical incomprehensibility and not simply as a passing struggle of the mind. In order to understand the idea of such a difficulty, I looked at philosophical interpretations of the afterlife and collective memory. These philosophical conceptions of the afterlife underlined the continuation of an ancestral bond and the preservation of values as ways that commit us to a shared world and allow us to engage in world-building practices of sense. If someone who experiences transience would deem this kind of afterlife an illusion, the revolt and the refusal to mourn can be interpreted, on the one hand, as a denial of change, and on the other, as a way of living in a post-apocalyptic scenario where the afterlife has proven empty.

In what remains of the paper, I want to focus on the relation between articulation and hope. What seemed blocked and impossible in the second interpretation of the revolt against mourning was articulation and the belief in a meaningful future. What kind of silence is blocking both hope and articulation? What kind of survival enables the articulation of hope?

As argued by anthropologist Cheryl Mattingly (2010), hope unfolds as a spontaneous practice as well as an intersubjective movement. It is not that we *decide* to hope because of hopelessness. Rather, hope is a paradoxical practice that commits us to the world despite the losses we will suffer. Existential hope consists in an interpersonal practice, rather than one person's sole surrender or compliance to a given situation (Mattingly 2010). That is, when we hope, we find ourselves taking up a situation that we are not in control of and that we experience ourselves not being not being sufficient to handle (Steinbock 2018, 167, 171). We can say that hope is a practice of collective commitment to something-we-know-not-what. The collective aspect of this kind of hope consists in its direction. In relying on others and on something I-do-not-know-what-is, the articulation of my loss carries me back into an intersubjectively shared world. Even when no-sense, non-sharing, and separation is the premise of hope, it is acting under this premise, which carries us back to the world. Hope of this kind commits us to a community despite the given practical incomprehensibilities we live with, we might say. To continue to act under the premise of having to lose is to commit to something we-know-not-what, which ties us to the world. Hope in this case is the modus of grief where we commit to sense not yet being given.

What does it mean that hope is a practice? If we were to accept that hope takes on propositional content, we would *know* what we hope for: I hope for better times, I hope for you to get well soon; I hope for the war to end. In these examples,

we know for *what* we hope. Hope of this kind concerns a wish that involves the state of the world changing for the better. If we follow Mattingly, however, we must say that when hope becomes a practice, we do not know what we hope for, and our hope does not take on a propositional content. Hope is rather the way in which we uphold or reinterpret the world so that sense can come. We engage in and take up situations we do not master. We engage in doings and praxes that might not have any meaning in the moment, but are *constitutive of meaning to come*. In practicing hope in this way, we respond to loss and absence by creatively giving birth to a world we already inhabit and, thereby, we re-creatively survive (Legrand 2019). Surviving the deceased other or surviving cultural devastation reveals how we remain responsible for a sense to come and for a community to come. We are the ones living after the death of the other and all the other others. We bear witness to their absence as we do to possible forms of cultural devastation. We are the ones who remember and carry forth their world; the world of those who died is our world. The afterlife as such is thus always collective. The afterlife matters for us, as we live in a temporality constituted by loss. Living a collective afterlife is not only a remarkable anthropological fact; it is an existential commitment to the world as one we share. As Nicolas de Warren writes, “[t]he after-life of departed souls is carried within us, the living, and thus given to the departed in our responsibility for the dead, but only because the departed have already borne us while alive, in carrying us to the world and beyond ourselves.” (de Warren 2017, 214) This means, “[w]hen seen through the prism of mourning and remembrance, our living present becomes revealed as inhabited by ghosts of the dead. The after-life is in fact all around us. We are surrounded by the after-life of Others in rituals of mourning, places of remembrance, cherished photos, and those unseen words softly spoken to the departed in the silent hour of our deepest sorrow.” (Ibid., 215) The afterlife, however, is not just by accident or by sheer anthropological fact all around us. It is all around us, as just argued, as a hope we keep practicing, as a worldly commitment we keep articulating, namely to the continuation of our world of shared values and collective memory. Essentially, surviving the death of others constitutes our shared vulnerability as we keep being engaged in an existential hope. Hope understood in this way does not consist in a set of happy beliefs that things will someday be better; rather, it takes on the life form of an active response to loss and to losing. The articulation of hope as a response to absence and loss entails a world-building commitment with and for others. The intersubjective core that makes existential hope possible ties us to the world in our shared vulnerability. For this particular reason, namely that we articulate our losses and thereby come to survive with others, the afterlife does not consist in a defensive fantasy or an even deeper illusion. The afterlife conceived of in this

particular way consists in a commitment to the articulation of loss, which is a constitutive element of the memory of a community.

To sum up, the analysis of transience revealed two forms of temporal despair. The first form of despair was the attempt to keep the past untouched; the second consisted in a lived timelessness. The temporality of existential hope, by contrast, allows a time of being-with (ancestral) others to flow such that a shared past can be experienced in times to come. To put it differently, the past we carry with us commits us to possibility of future memories: "Memory' thus becomes a name not just for an inner trace of the other in the self but also for the possibility of subjectivity as such. It is by being outside itself, in a continued relation to what is other than oneself that human existence is what it is" (Ruin 2018, 18).

## 5. Holding on to Life—Concluding Remarks

In this paper, I have argued that the experience of transience tells us something important about the afterlife. First of all, it tells us of a kind of reversed temporality where the afterlife is constituted by our value-preserving and shared practice of holding on to life before death; as we remember our deceased loved ones we hold on to life while carrying the deceased other(s) with us (Derrida 2001, 110). Each time is unique, as Derrida says (2004); we lose a world, and as we articulate this unique and singular loss, we commit to re-learning the world by practicing an existential hope. Holding on to life in this particular sense means surviving in a world-building manner (Ingerslev 2022a). Second, we saw in the analysis of the experience of transience how the articulation of our losses commits us to an intersubjective world. The shared vulnerability of *having to lose* who and what we care for is not overcome by happy beliefs about the future. The commitment to articulation of loss is a constitutive element of the memory of a community. Remembering one dead is not reducible to a narrative act or unified by a narrative process (Ingerslev 2022b); it is a work of love practiced with and among others in the world. Further, it should of course be noted that remembering one dead is not always an easy thing to do; it might be traumatic and tormenting. It seems that an important part of mourning can be *not* wanting to be reminded how painful interpersonal relations can be. Still, when we channel our pain through articulation with and for others, we mourn our losses in a practice of hope.

Lear's point was exactly to show how a painful, practical incomprehensibility should not be reduced to a passing struggle of the mind. We cannot simply convince ourselves that the afterlife is a good thing in which we should all be engaged as a hopeful practice. The analysis of transience indeed showed that, for some people, neither hope nor articulation is possible when suffering from nostalgic or melancholic pain. When time has stopped its flow, transience is more



than just a struggle of the mind. Whereas Lear argued that the difficulty of reality could be a wounding part of life, the present paper wanted to shed further light on this wounding experience at stake in transience by showing how it can be understood as a breakdown of the intersubjective articulation of hope. The revolt against mourning can be tied to a breakdown in communication that prevents us from sharing our pain. The refusal to mourn can isolate us in a pain that seems impossible to integrate as part of this world. According to the analysis provided in this paper, the experience of transience therefore tells us more than the incomprehensibility of death, wounding, and devastation. It tells us about the fabric of the world we care for. When, in times of danger, war, sickness, and the awaiting of death, we do hold on to life, it is because of this fabric: The idea of the collective afterlife ties a trans-temporal bond between our shared presence and our ancestral memories to come.

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