Introduction

Political theory might explore public forms of grieving, allowing “we the people” to confront, integrate, but also move on from loss.

– J. Peter Euben, Platonic Noise

The dead are alive in the American polity. This is a book about their political participation. Although this participation takes many forms – from the Founding Fathers’ embrace of the Roman Republic to the rituals of Memorial Day and the political Right’s veneration of Ronald Reagan – the focus here is on the role of the dead in the years since the planes.¹ The aim is not to replicate the now voluminous research on the ways in which the sudden deaths of nearly 3,000 people shaped the politics of the period – although it will inevitably offer some such analysis – but rather to use these years as a starting point for thinking critically about the relationship between death, democracy, and public mourning. As such, the book might be seen as yet another contribution to the already considerable cross- and multidisciplinary literature on memory, mourning, and politics, much of it written in what Art Spiegelman memorably called “the shadow of no towers.”² While the book draws on and is indebted to much

¹ The “the planes” formulation is adapted from Don DeLillo’s novel Falling Man (New York: Scribner, 2007).
Introduction

of this previous literature, what separates it is the attempt to deploy public mourning both as an analytical lens through which to view the shortcomings of American democracy and as a tool for addressing the same. For although some have argued that the recent turn to mourning is evidence of a deflationary tendency or a defeatist tone in political thought – that the politics of mourning all too quickly becomes the mourning of politics⁵ – this work is both diagnostic and ambitiously prescriptive. It belongs to a tradition of political theory identified by Hanna Pitkin concerned with those “features of our lives which might be different if we chose to change them.”⁴ Offering some rereadings of a number of overworked texts, it aims to be a book both of and about political theory – one that draws on a particular set of literatures to think critically about the contemporary polity. Its only justification is the plausibility of its arguments. While acknowledging that mourning often constitutes a problematic form of political activity that can undermine democracy, the book nevertheless argues that it can also serve as an important mode of critical-theoretical reflection and a rich resource for democratic innovation, education, and resilience. Even if, it argues, the politics of mourning inevitably becomes the mourning of politics, the consequences of this transformation depend crucially on the form these lamentations take.

The central diagnostic claim of the book is that the stories a polity tells about the dead help shape political outcomes of the living. Its central prescriptive claim is that the democratic polity should tell the mourning stories most conducive to its political well-being. Toward establishing these claims, the book offers a typology of public mourning drawn largely from Athenian but also from American – and pre-American – history that it employs as a lens through which to examine a number of recent moments of public loss. It seeks to show not only how our public mourning practices currently shape politics and the political but also the ways in which it might be employed to shape our future outcomes. This understanding of “politics” and “the political” is drawn from the work of Chantal Mouffe. “[B]y ‘the political,’” she writes, “I mean the dimension of antagonism which I take to be constitutive of human societies,

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while by ‘politics’ I mean the set of practices and institutions through which an order is created, organizing human coexistence in the context of conflictuality provided by the political.”

Thus, the book is concerned with how – in Josiah Ober’s words – we might “go on together” as a democratic polity in the face of loss.

Democracy is not, of course, the only system in which the dead remain politically active. Nevertheless, the long-standing relationship between democracy and public mourning and the role the latter played in the founding of the former suggest that paying close attention to America’s rituals of loss might offer a valuable source of insight into the problems of the contemporary polity and a potentially fecund resource for democratic revitalization.

Mourning, Grief, and Democracy
Nicole Loraux’s observation that the funeral oration invented Athens as much as Athens invented the funeral oration suggests the considerable importance that rituals of public loss played in the founding of democracy. In the most famous example of the genre – Pericles’ funeral oration to the Athenians – the speaker pays little attention to the dead, focusing instead on the virtues of the city. As Thucydides recounts in his History of the Peloponnesian War, the ceremonies for those killed in the first year of the war with Sparta were necessarily public. After two days set aside for private offerings, the dead became the property of the city. A funeral procession with ten wooden coffins – one for each tribe of Athens – and an empty bier for the missing led to the public burial place, “in the most beautiful quarter outside the city walls.” There, speaking from a high platform, the orator addressed the crowd. In his speech, Pericles praises Athens for placing political power “in the hands not of a minority but of the whole people,” proudly noting “that everyone is equal before the law” and that “in positions of public responsibility, what counts is not membership of a particular class, but the actual ability which the man

Introduction

possesses.” Additionally he points to the city’s openness to foreigners, its practice of deliberating before action, its commitment to upholding laws, its military prowess, and its friendly relations with other city-states. “Taking everything together,” Pericles boasts, “… I declare that our city is an education to Greece.” As such, the oration was less a lament for the fallen than an occasion for the speaker to offer an idealized vision of the city – a storehouse of myths – that sought to bind the polity together in the face of mass death. In this, the Ancient oration was predicated on an understanding of mourning that differs quite considerably from that underpinning the work of many of the more recent theorists of loss.

Ever since the publication of the essay “Mourning and Melancholia” in 1917, Western understandings of loss have largely been shaped by the work of Sigmund Freud. For Freud, mourning was a mental process of working through grief in order to relinquish attachment to the lost love-object. Only when this working through had been completed and the patient had been able to invest her attachment elsewhere could she be said to have returned to psychic health. Subsequent work on mourning – public and personal – has wrestled with Freud’s legacy, embracing it, adapting it, or seeking alternative psychoanalytic accounts that nevertheless define themselves in opposition to his approach. Such theories have profitably been employed in political thought and analysis by a diverse array of thinkers. Here, however, the work of Freud and the other psychoanalytic theorists is bracketed in favor of a – potentially more illuminating – account of public mourning suggested by the Greeks. This is not to dismiss the psychoanalytic or its insights – not least because the approach outlined here might be fruitfully employed as a complement to it – but simply to recover an older set of public responses to loss that might be thought to provide a similarly or even more useful way of understanding the politics of mourning. It is a tradition that relies less on claims about private motivations and/or mental states writ large than it does on the observable actions of public political actors. Given the enormity

10 Ibid., 145.
11 Ibid., 147.
13 For example, both Judith Butler and Bonnie Honig make considerable use of the work of Freud, Melanie Klein, and Donald Winnicott in their work on mourning and politics. See also David McIvor, “Bringing Ourselves to Grief: Judith Butler and the Politics of Mourning,” Political Theory, 40(4), 2012: 409–436.
14 Even its claims about the necessity of cultivating a particular ethos of mourning are claims about an ethos that is expressed in action.
of the literature on psychoanalysis and loss, it is a methodological choice best justified by the value of the insights that follow.

Public mourning is here defined as the attempt to employ grief for political ends, where grief is understood as the expression of “deep emotional anguish, usually about death and loss.” As such, the analysis does not rest on a distinction between rationality and emotion but rather on a distinction between democratically productive and unproductive mobilizations of grief. It is a distinction that goes back to the Ancients. For the Greeks, concerns about the relationship between grief and politics were concerns about the potentially negative impact of the former on the latter. In *The Republic*, Socrates identifies the problems posed to the *polis* by laments for the dead, arguing that witnessing the grief of others corrupts the judgment of the good citizen. Likewise, in *The Laws*, Plato forbids both dirges and public displays of grief, permitting only private mourning and nighttime processions lest these displays of emotion damage the city. Nevertheless, for the Greeks it was not grief per se that was the problem but rather the manner in which it was expressed. Indeed, the Greek concern with undue public expressions of grief was part of a larger concern with hubris, or excess, and with their broader commitment to moderation. Democracy was considered to be especially susceptible to such hubris because it requires a particular mode of engagement – one promoting productive discussion, good judgment, and careful deliberation among its citizens – that is threatened by powerful emotions.

In the Greek world, the excessive expression of grief in mourning was inevitably associated with women, and the city’s rituals of public loss were developed precisely to limit the danger that such emotion was thought to pose to the polity. In the city of Ceos, for example, the women who laid out and prepared the body for burial were considered contaminated and kept apart from those who attended at the graveside. The latter were expected to depart before the men lest the unbridled emotions of their laments

19 See, for example, William E. Connolly, *Pluralism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005); Mouffe, *On the Political*. 
were permitted to have the last word over the ceremonies.\textsuperscript{20} As Loraux observes, \textit{oikeîon pénthos} – the private mourning of the household – was subordinated to the public mourning of the formal procession. “This is,” she argues, “… the civic way of assigning limits to the loss of self … The reasoning is that the \textit{oikeîon pénthos} must not contaminate the city, just as more generally, funeral rites should not intrude on the political institutions’ operations. When this happens … it is a sure sign of problems for the city.”\textsuperscript{21} The danger is, she writes, that the emotions provoked by loss can all too easily become \textit{álaston pénthos} – mourning without end – or “unforgettable grief.”\textsuperscript{22} When grief cannot be forgotten, she continues, it becomes an indelible anger, “the ultimate justification for revenge, for the spirit of vendetta, for all the horrors of retaliation against earlier horrors,” or what the Greeks called \textit{mênis}.\textsuperscript{23} Eroding all considerations of reciprocity, justice, and even self-interest in favor of its own singular perspective, the grief-wrath of \textit{mênis} is, Loraux observes, the “worst enemy of [democratic] politics.”\textsuperscript{24} Although such \textit{mênis} was inextricably associated with women, the association was itself part of the city’s broader ideological construction of gender and a further way in which public manifestations of private grief were regulated in the \textit{polis}. The suggestion that a man was acting like a female in the face of loss was a common insult, and Greek drama is replete with negative parallels between male and female grief.\textsuperscript{25} The failure of – the albeit predemocratic – Achilles to moderate his despair over the death of Patroclus was, moreover, seen to be the immediate cause of his downfall and a lesson to Greek men about the dangers of failing to regulate their own responses to loss. As such, men too were understood to be susceptible to hubris in mourning.\textsuperscript{26} Indeed, many scholars see the reforms of mourning practices


\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 26.

\textsuperscript{22} The translation is from Athena Athanasiou and Elena Tzlepis, “Mourning (as) Woman: Event, Catachresis, and ‘That Other Face of Discourse’” in \textit{Rewriting Difference: Luce Irigaray and ‘the Greeks’} edited by Elena Tzlepis (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010), 110. Corinne Pache translates the term from Loraux’s French as “mourning that cannot forget.” Loraux, \textit{Mothers in Mourning}, 54.

\textsuperscript{23} Loraux, \textit{Mother in Mourning}, xii.

\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., 98.

\textsuperscript{25} Although she denies that tears are necessarily evidence feminization in Greek tragedy, Ann Suter provides a nice list of male characters who understand their own tears in this way. Ann Suter, “Tragic Tears and Gender” in \textit{Tears in the Graeco-Roman World}, edited by Thorsten Fogen, (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 71).

enacted by Solon the Lawgiver in the sixth century BCE aimed at reining in such excesses – among both men and women – as a necessary precursor to the emergence of the democratic city.

Olga Taxidou, for example, argues that Solon’s legislative innovations – aimed at curbing aristocratic excess – ritualized responses to loss, helping diminish the power of the aristocracy by reducing their opportunities for lavish displays of wealth.\textsuperscript{27} Similarly, Gail Holst-Warhaft notes that Solon’s rituals served to undermine the cycles of vengeance – emerging from clan strife – for which funerals were often a locus.\textsuperscript{28} Drawing a distinction between Homeric and democratic modes of mourning, Bonnie Honig argues that Solon’s reforms helped turn the former into the latter.\textsuperscript{29} Whereas Homeric mourning focused on the uniqueness of the individual and was marked by breast beating, face clawing, and loud lamentation – by both men and women – democratic mourning sought to restrain such displays, turning the focus of the dirges away from the loss of the individual and toward the collective good of the city. The overall impact of these reforms was to reduce the power of the aristocracy in a way that helped precipitate popular rule.\textsuperscript{30} Thus, public mourning was not only a cornerstone of democracy’s founding but also a central part of its ongoing practice.

BEARING GIFTS, OR THE PAST IMPERFECT

It would, of course, be fallacious to suggest that just because rituals of mourning were of great importance to the founding and functioning of early democracy, they are necessarily imbued with the same significance in the contemporary polity: that categories drawn from an Ancient participatory democracy might be applied unproblematically to our present system of government. For this reason, it is necessary to say a word or two about method. The approach here will be to eschew what Honig calls classicism – a method predicated on the assumption that the classical captures the universal and is thus applicable to diverse audiences across space and time – and to embrace what she labels classicization: an


\textsuperscript{30} Honig, \textit{Antigone, Interrupted}, 100.
Introduction

engagement with the present that turns to previous circumstances, texts, and images for “analogies that might illuminate our condition or even mirror our circumstances.” The proof of the methodological pudding is, of course, in the analytical eating, and as the conclusions of the book cannot be shown in advance, it might be useful to point to two instances of our recent responses to loss that suggest the continued relevance of the Ancients as both an analytical framework and a prescriptive foundation for considering contemporary democratic politics. In the first instance, Greek concern about the dangers of grief in politics is employed as a lens to show how contemporary democratic deliberation can be undermined by rhetorical strategies that consciously or unconsciously employ loss for specific political ends. In the second, the potential for public mourning to be employed as a tool for addressing the shortcomings of contemporary democratic practice is suggested by a consideration of the parallels between American rituals of loss and those central to the Greek theatrical festival, the Great Dionysia.

On June 6, 2006, the conservative commentator Ann Coulter appeared on NBC’s The Today Show to promote her book Godless: The Church of Liberalism. In it she argued that a group of widows – nicknamed the Jersey Girls after the Tom Waits song popularized by Bruce Springsteen – who campaigned for a national commission to investigate the 2001 terrorist attacks that killed their husbands had illegitimately inserted grief into the democratic process. “They were using their grief to make a political point while preventing anyone from responding … Because then if we respond,” Coulter observed on the show, “… [we] are questioning their authenticity.” As Loraux points out, the Greeks believed democratic politics was threatened by the excessive “pleasure of tears,” that which “the afflicted can find in weeping for himself or a loved one.”

The swift and bipartisan backlash to Coulter’s remarks suggested that she had indeed identified something important about the way in which grief can undermine democratic deliberation. “Perhaps her book should have been called *Heartless,*” observed Hillary Clinton. “As someone who considers herself right of center,” *Boston Globe* columnist Cathy Young declared, “it makes me ashamed to be on the same side.” In almost every instance, Coulter’s critics responded with moralizing, ad hominem attacks best evidenced by an editorial in *The Philadelphia Inquirer* entitled “Ann Coulter Rips the ‘Jersey Girls’; Consider the Source.” That little to no attempt was made to engage with the substance of Coulter’s critique—no real discussion of her claim that injecting grief into public discussion was an illegitimate form of political engagement—suggests, perhaps, the problems that grief continues to pose for democratic politics.

In the first instance, the sententious response to Coulter points to the way in which those who experience grief in the contemporary political are often granted a moral authority that appears to trump politics even as it serves political ends. Coulter’s comments were, of course, deliberately provocative, but they merely revealed rather than precipitated the grief-induced descent of politics into morality. Indeed, the Coulter controversy was not the only instance in which grief appeared to trump democratic politics in the years following the planes. Writing in 2005 about the failed attempts of the so-called peace mom Cindy Sheehan whose son Casey had been killed in Iraq—to speak to President Bush at his ranch in Crawford, Texas, *New York Times* columnist Maureen Dowd declared that the Commander-in-Chief failed to “understand that the moral authority of parents who bury children killed in Iraq is...”

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37 Although John Tierney of *The New York Times* did acknowledge that Coulter had raised a genuine issue of concern, his was a minority voice. John Tierney, “Mourning in America,” *The New York Times,* 06/10/06. Coulter’s history of controversial claims no doubt mediated the extent to which her claims were given a fair hearing; nevertheless, the general point stands. www.nytimes.com/2006/06/10/opinion/10tierney.html?_r=0. Accessed Nov. 25, 2013.
absolute.”38 A mother in mourning, Sheehan was hailed as a latter-day Antigone, her worldview apparently legitimated by her son’s death, even as her “absolute moral authority” may have led some of her supporters to overlook the more troubling aspects of her political views.39 Similarly, even the very modest attempts to place the 2001 attacks in a historical context at the National Memorial in New York City – with a proposed museum that situated them within a decidedly Hegelian narrative about the unfolding of American freedom – were abandoned on the grounds that they “might include exhibits critical of America that would pain families.”40 In each instance, the insertion of grief into democratic politics appeared to elevate certain people and issues above the political fray. Paradoxically, however, these same people and issues continued to be subjects of a political debate, but one refracted through a prism of disavowal. For although some of Coulter’s comments about the Jersey Girls were focused on the manner in which they made their claims, her broader concerns were clearly substantial and partisan.

“These self-obsessed women” observed Coulter, “… acted as if the terrorist attacks happened only to them. The whole nation was wounded, all of our lives reduced. But they believed the entire country was required to marinate in their exquisite personal agony. Apparently, denouncing [President] Bush was an important part of their closure process.”41 As she further noted, some of the widows had been highly critical of the Bush administration, and one – Kristen Breitweiser – appeared in a


41 Coulter, Godless, 103.