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SWALLOWING SEPIA: THE SKIN, THE STOMACH AND THE SQUID IN CATHERINE BELL'S *FELT IS THE PAST TENSE OF FEEL*

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Abstract

Psychoanalytic discourse has long interpreted the consumption of edible substance as a psychological symptom of bereavement. Hungarian psychoanalysts Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok hold that ingestion might signify a pathological response to death through which a bereaved subject attempts to mourn their loss by integrating their lost loved one into themselves in the form of food. If this is the case, to what extent can ingestion aid, or inhibit, a reconciliation of the experience of loss? Sigmund Freud's studies of 'primitive' clansmen led him to propose that their ritual feasting upon a totem animal demonstrates a desire to reinforce the clan's connection with an ancient ancestor. How are we to understand these ritual eating habits within the context of an individual grieving process? And how might these psychoanalytic theories of ingestion be enriched by introducing an awareness of the functioning of the gastrointestinal organs? These theoretical structures provide an intriguing lens through which to contemplate Catherine Bell's 2006 performance *Felt is the Past Tense of Feel*. In this article I will shed light on Bell's ingestion (and subsequent regurgitation) of a squid's ink as a device to mourn, and mediate, her father's death. By tracing the trajectory of the ingested substance from the artist's mouth, into her stomach and onto her skin, I will give flesh to the ways in which mourning might work throughout the human body.

Key Words: Psychoanalysis, Performance Art, Ingestion, Mourning, Melancholia

A woman sits, before the lens of a video camera, surrounded by a pile of freshly killed squid. On a stage painted entirely in black her bleached hair and pale skin stand in striking contrast to the surrounding darkness. She is dressed in a formal suit that belonged to her father and which she has covered entirely in a shade of pale pink felt that resembles her skin. She picks up the lifeless bodies of the squid one by one and, drawing her face close to their beaks, she sucks out the sepia from their still active ink sacs. Her arms, bent at the elbow, come together to clasp the squid above her head, in a composition mirroring the rhombus-like shape of the squid's mantle. Manipulating the carcasses, sometimes with one hand sometimes with both, she ingests the viscous black ink into her mouth only to spit it out over herself. Beginning at her bare feet, she works progressively up the axis of her body to regurgitate the ink so that she drenches her entire form, until finally she wrings the creatures with her hands allowing the ink to spill directly over her face.

This is a description of Catherine Bell's 2006 performance *Felt is the Past Tense of Feel* in which she stages a sacrificial ritual utilising forty dead squid. The performance (enacted almost a year after the death of her father) is an attempt by the artist to re-stage her experience of his death and what she terms, 'the traumatic memories of my father's bodily deterioration.'¹

In the text that follows I will illuminate Bell's somatic action. Beginning with an elaboration upon the totem meal, I will recount the tale of how the artist assigns the squid as a

paternal totem to reinforce her identification with her father. Next, I will examine the role of the mouth in the process of mourning. Psychoanalytic models of incorporation and introjection will here provide the framework for my reading of Bell's gesture of swallowing as a physical and psychological response to death. I will punctuate this analysis with a biological study of the digestive system. By situating the psychoanalytic motif of the crypt within the stomach, rather than the psyche, I hope to further flesh out Bell's material gesture as it is realised within her bodily frame. I will end on a tangential note by turning away from the gastrointestinal regions to take a closer look at the artist's external surface, to think through how grief might be inscribed on the outer body.

Towards a Psychoanalysis of the Totem Meal

In *Totem and Taboo* Freud endeavours to interweave the field of psychoanalysis and the anthropological study of totemism by teasing out the similarities between the interactions of neurotic children and of 'primitive' men, towards animals.² Freud observes an affinity between the child's tendency to identify with a totem animal and primitive clansmen who engaged in the ritual sacrifice of animals in order to assure their identification with a totemic deity. Within his discourse Freud demonstrates that the relation between animals and children has the potential to become disturbed, giving rise to a variety of neuroses. These neuroses can be manifested, either as an intense over-identification with a particular animal, or as an animal phobia in which the child's emotions towards their father become transferred onto an animal substitute. Echoing the primitive belief of the totem animal as the 'common ancestor' of the totemic clan, Freud unfurls his psychoanalytic deduction that the totem is not only the embodiment of the clan's revered god but always also a paternal surrogate.³ In a corresponding articulation Bell has remarked that the pile of dead cephalopods 'act as substitutes for my terminally ill father.'⁴

The sacrifice of animals is believed to be the oldest form of sacrificial ritual and it is only through killing and devouring the animal's substance that the 'sacred cement be procured which creates or keeps alive a living bond of union between the worshippers and their god.'⁵ This 'bond of union', then, is inscribed through a consumption of the flesh and/or fluids of the animal, which is the conduit for the sacred life of the totemic god. Within totemic clans, kinship is dependent on an understanding of a 'common substance' in which all members of the clan share.⁶ This in turn is hinged upon the belief that we are not merely constituted of the mother's substance, 'having been born of her and having been nourished by her milk,' but that we are also constituted of the various material substances that we consume as food.⁷ As Freud notes, 'the participation in the same substance establishes a sacred bond between those who consume it.'⁸ As such, this system rests on a literal notion of blood-kinship in which inter-subjective relations are forged through a mutual ingestion of the same substance. It is the *physical process* of consumption, then, which inscribes this connection within the totem meal. Citing the Bedouin peoples as an example, Freud has alleged that one who eats the food or drinks the milk offered by the Bedouin establishes a temporary union in which one becomes identified with, and receives the protection of, one's host for as long as the food remains within the body.⁹ Thus it is owing to the principles of the digestive process (in other words, that the food will be excreted from our bodies) that the consumption of the mutual substance must be re-enacted in order for the union to be sustained.

A critical aspect of Bell's performance is the appointment of the squid as a totem for the dying body of her father. This substitutive gesture resonates with the neurotic child's tendency to cast an animal in the paternal role. In Freud's model of neurosis the animal is presented as merely a screen onto which the ambivalent feelings of the child are projected.¹⁰ In contrast the specificity of the animal is foregrounded in Bell's work, and it is the squid's

morphology that provides the momentum for her performance. In an emotive and illuminating passage the artist reflects upon her experience of witnessing her father on his death bed:

His legs seeping salty liquid, his body attached to plastic tubes that draped from him like tentacles, the nurses probing him with sharp suckers to relinquish phlegm from his throat, his tortured gasps for air, septic gurgling and laboured choking on his own bodily juices.¹¹

Through a puppeteering of the squid's bodies Bell ensures that she is anatomically equated with this recollection of her father's degenerating body: entangled with tentacle-like medical appendages, respiring with great difficulty and choking on bitter fluids. As a testament to the belief in the revival of ancestral bonds, through the substance of the totem, Bell presents a ritual in which she ingests the squid's ink in an attempt to assure her affiliation with her deceased father. In doing so the artist breathes life into the primitive notion of 'blood-kinship as identity of substance.'¹² The substance through which their kinship is imprinted is the black solution of the totem animal which she extracts using her mouth and hands. This solution is simultaneously the symbolic vehicle of the father's life and the somatic material of his illness. As Bell recounts, 'he was bringing up black bile, coughing that up, and for me that was like the squid, as soon as you squeeze it the black will come out.'¹³ Thus she imbues her ritual ingestion of the squid ink with 'a conviction that they were of one substance' as though to stress her physiological inheritance from the paternal body within the rubric of the totem meal.¹⁴

The Mouth in Mourning

Surfacing out of Freud's concept of melancholia (as an unconscious, pathological form of mourning) the psychoanalytic discourse of Abraham and Torok unfolds a multifaceted model of melancholia that is punctuated with metaphors of ingestion. They call attention to the ways in which the ingestion of edible substance constitutes a melancholic symptom through which the bereaved endeavours to consume their lost loved one 'in the form of imaginary or real nourishment.'¹⁵ They argue that melancholia relies upon a complete denial of loss, whereby the subject refuses to consciously confront the episode that instigated their trauma. Within this structure of denial it is not possible for the melancholic to communicate their loss to others, and so they turn from one form of oral expression (speech), to another (the ingestion of food). Thus the trauma that cannot be voiced by language is instead rehearsed through the consumption of substance.

To avoid having to admit our loss to ourselves, or to others, 'we fantasize swallowing (or having swallowed) that which has been lost, as if it were some kind of thing.'¹⁶ Abraham and Torok elucidate:

The words that cannot be uttered, the scenes 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.¹⁷

In this way the object of loss is projected onto a material substance which is "swallowed" without being digested', whereupon it becomes encrusted within the psyche as an obstruction that haunts the body from within.¹⁸ This swallowed substance does not inhabit the body in a state of diffusion, rather its location can be isolated to a territory of the psyche which

Abraham and Torok have named the ‘crypt’.¹⁹ Elissa Marder notes that ‘even if the other is “ingested” through the mouth, it does not remain there, but must be secreted into the radical “elsewhere” of the crypt.’²⁰ In Abraham and Torok’s schema the crypt is the part of the psyche where the lost love object can be harboured, and which bears ‘silent witness to an unspeakable loss.’²¹ Thus the psychic structure of the crypt is characterised by its ability to preserve the deceased whilst enabling the melancholic subject to avoid having to consciously confront their trauma.

According to this scenario, Bell’s chaotic feasting might signify a denial of the loss of her father, and a renunciation of all memory of the traumatic scene. This would indicate a woman in the throes of a pathological mourning, who drinks the squid’s fluids in an attempt to keep her lost love inside herself as an unspoken intestinal or psychological secret, never to be digested, never to be confronted. Speaking of her endeavour to explore melancholia via an ingestion of the animal’s fluid, Bell elucidates: ‘that for me is like the clinging on to the father and wanting to make that lost love object part of your body.’²²

Abraham and Torok contrast the melancholic’s refusal to mourn, the process they refer to as ‘incorporation’, with the course of successful mourning – the process they call ‘introjection’.²³ Within their model, introjection is contrary to incorporation, in which the subject swallows the deceased (in the form of food) because they are unable to comprehend, or *swallow*, their loss. While incorporation is ‘unmediated, instantaneous,’ and ‘sometimes hallucinatory’, introjection is ‘slow, laborious, mediated’, and above all, ‘effective.’²⁴ At the culmination of introjection the object of loss is ‘successfully consumed’ in order to become a fully integrated part of the subject.²⁵ Thus, in an instance of ‘normal’ mourning, the loved one is confronted as dead before being slowly assimilated, or *digested*, into the psyche of the mourner. Meanwhile melancholia, marked as it is by a denial of loss, always entails an ‘undead and unmourned other’ who is imagined to be ingested so that they can be sheltered and kept alive within an internal psychic repository.²⁶

By gradually saturating her body with the squid’s ink, Bell’s ritual of mourning is played out as an incremental, material procedure. Unlike the melancholic gesture of incorporation which is unspoken, immediate and imaginary, Bell’s enactment is protracted and above all, palpable. It is also mediated through *other* bodies. Though her interaction with the squid does not boil down to a spoken exchange, it nevertheless entails a shared ‘oral moment’.²⁷ In my reading, Bell’s performance does not amount to a suppression of mourning that would establish a vault of inexpressible memories within her psyche. For Bell, the ingestion of substance is a matter of reiterating her father’s death, rather than denying the occurrence of the trauma. By the same token, her description of the work as ‘an opportunity to publicly grieve and display emotion’ seems to underscore it as an effect of successful mourning.²⁸ On the other hand, her somatic gesture of regurgitation tells of a deceased father that remains undigested (if not unmourned). She enacts a desire to swallow her lost love object, as if he were an edible thing, but her failure to keep him down belies the true course of a melancholic incarceration.

In so-called normal mourning the subject must first comprehend their loss before fully integrating the deceased into their living body. In contrast, pathological mourning involves a subject who refuses both to accept their loss and to assimilate their lost loved one in order to internalise the living-dead within a psychic tomb. Thus mourning is judged successful when the deceased ‘becomes an integral part of the “me” who mourns’, just as it is deemed a failure when the loved one remains sealed off from the mourning “me” and kept as a ‘foreigner inside itself’.²⁹ Throughout his introduction to *The Wolf Man’s Magic Word*, Jacques Derrida questions the clear line that Abraham and Torok draw between incorporation and introjection in order to suggest that the two terms are rather more entwined.³⁰ If this strict edge was first loosened at the hands of Derrida, ‘through an essential and irreducible ambiguity’, then Bell’s

(ink-stained) fingers further fray the seam.³¹ By disrupting the assimilative process of digestion – which is understood to be at the heart of a successful introjection – the artist rehearses both mourning and melancholia in the same breath.

For Derrida, the fantasy of incorporation entails ‘eating the object (through the mouth or otherwise) in order *not* to introject it, in order to vomit it, in a way, into the inside’.³² This inside for Derrida is situated as the crypt, unfurled within his discourse as ‘the hard cyst of an “artificial unconscious”’.³³ By extension, the melancholic tendency to psychically encrypt via oral ingestion always amounts to an internal act of vomiting, which preserves the object whole and in one place. In a similar vein, Bell’s performance of regurgitation resists a complete integration so as to keep the ingested substance relatively intact and appended to her skin. However the absorbency of her felt surface does not immediately fix and encrust the ink; it remains fluid, unlike the ‘hard cyst’ of the crypt. As such, Bell’s father does not become sealed within her body as an inviolable vessel in which he must ‘occupy his place as dead, not to budge from it’.³⁴ Nor is his substance fully assimilated into, or on top of, her body, whereupon it becomes indistinguishable from her and thus impossible to locate. By regurgitating onto her external form, the artist elevates the texture of her suit as a surface that seeks not to digest but simply to harbour the ink as a ‘foreigner’ inside herself. The black droplets that take the place of his body are partially ingested to stain her mouth and the walls of her digestive tract before being regurgitated and subsequently sponged up by the pale fibres of her suit. By this skilful choreography of (dis)colouration she reveals herself and her father, at the close of her performance, to be intricately entangled, yet still differentiated. She does not swallow the father whole ‘as a full-fledged person, complete with its own topography’.³⁵ Rather, Bell ingests her father’s form translated into liquid ink so that he becomes inscribed in ripples onto, and inside, the landscape of her own body.

The Crypt of the Stomach

According to the biomedical researcher Michael D. Gershon, the gut is the only site at which substance can be fully assimilated into the body; he writes, ‘the body proper stops at the wall of the gut. Nothing is truly in us until it crosses that boundary and is absorbed’.³⁶ This conception of the gut (as the primary point of access into the body) affirms the primitive belief in the effects of the totem meal, which enables the clansmen to become one with the substance of the animal and thus with the sacred life of the father which is ensconced within its flesh. I will try to show, however, that the gut also muddies the distinction between incorporation and introjection by identifying oral ingestion as the archetypal mechanism for a successful integration of the object and experience of loss.

The enteric nervous system is the name given to the network of neurons that control the visceral functions of the gut. This system of nerves operates primarily below the threshold of consciousness to govern the autonomous functions of the gastrointestinal organs, such as swallowing, salivation and digestion. Gershon has observed that this complex network has a remarkable capacity to coordinate reflexes independently of the brain and spinal cord. He notes: ‘the enteric nervous system is thus an independent site of neural integration and processing’.³⁷ Within the field of psychosomatic discourse, gastric disturbances have often been attributed to unconscious emotional stimuli. Gershon has remarked upon this affiliation between the psyche and the stomach, stating: ‘intolerable feelings that cannot be expressed, or even consciously thought, become internalised and find expression in enteric havoc’.³⁸ Guided by this thinking, the stomach can be imagined as a kind of crypt: ‘the crypt is always an internalisation’.³⁹ As such, the organ would enable the melancholic to swallow their incommunicable memories and sequester them within an interior container, not of the psyche, but of the gut, where they can be submerged below the level of consciousness. Gershon has also illuminated the function of the stomach as a temporary storage vessel for food prior to its

absorption and ultimate evacuation from the body. He writes, ‘the stomach is more than a digestive organ. It has an extraordinary ability to expand and act as a reservoir’.⁴⁰ Owing, then, to its double-meaning as a cryptic container and an instrument of digestion, the stomach can be read as an accessory in both incorporation *and* introjection.

Although Gershon has demonstrated that the gut performs a temporary ‘storage function’ for the body, ingested substances cannot remain inside their stomachal container eternally.⁴¹ By giving flesh to such feats of mourning, we have strayed from the imaginary scene of the crypt into the corporeal terrain of the gut, wherein we must obey the rules of its autonomic functioning. In the process of digestion, ingested matter is ‘pulverized, sterilized, and partly digested’ within the stomach and then ‘dribbled out’ into the body itself, before any undigested materials are excreted.⁴² Thus the stomach that is filled must always eventually be emptied, whereupon its contents are fragmented and disseminated within, and without, the limits of the body. By bringing up the animal’s fluid so that her exterior is visibly wetted by it, Bell serves to externalise this digestive process, gesturing towards what Charles Darwin refers to as ‘extra-stomachal digestion’.⁴³ The artist prioritises the fabric of her exterior, over the inner walls of her digestive channels, thus giving rise to an inclusion of edible matter that does not culminate in a complete assimilation of substance. The meticulous furnishing of her costume in felt – a fabric that can retain many times its own weight in fluid – alludes to her outer surface as a receptacle. She explains: ‘I knew that it wouldn’t repel the ink’.⁴⁴ Expounding on the significance of her felt-covered clothing, Bell states: ‘I wanted the suit to become a repository’.⁴⁵ This reveals the artist’s desire to safeguard the ink from the leaky, ephemeral vessel of the stomach in order to keep it from being ‘dribbled out’ – to be excreted, or dissolved inside her body.

Recounting her oral gesture, Bell explains, ‘people say you’ve got to suck up your emotion and not let it out, so the action seemed to relate to that repression of emotion’.⁴⁶ Thus, if sucking and swallowing are methods of internalisation through which her grief remains incarcerated inside her body, then her spitting out becomes a device for unleashing the inexpressible substance of her emotion. The act of regurgitation enables Bell to wear the ink upon her surface rather than swallowing it into herself, whereupon it threatens to be subliminally ensnared within a gastrointestinal crypt. Unlike the unconscious terrain of the stomach, the skin ‘cannot reject any vibro-tactile or electro-tactile sign: it can neither close like the eyes or the mouth, nor be stopped up like the ears and nose’.⁴⁷ Thus the ink is not permitted to take root within the unthinking tomb of a digestive unconscious, but instead left to flower upon the sensate texture of her skin.

Inscribing On, and Beyond, the Skin

Didier Anzieu has richly articulated his concept of the three-fold function of the skin as an envelope that contains the self, a protective barrier against the outside world and a medium of communication. This last function underlines a correlation between the skin and the mouth in which both organs are described as instruments for ‘establishing signifying relations’.⁴⁸ Unlike the mouth, however, the skin achieves its communicative function by presenting itself as an ‘inscribing surface’ for the tactile impressions of others.⁴⁹ Anzieu has brought forward the oft-quoted illustration of the mystic writing-pad – introduced in Freud’s 1925 short essay *A Note upon the “Mystic-Writing-Pad”* – in order to shed light on the skin as a surface to be written on.⁵⁰

The writing apparatus of Freud’s essay title consists of a slab of wax covered with a double-layered transparency. This transparency comprises one sheet of celluloid and one sheet of translucent waxed paper, which are both fixed to the slab at their top edge. The purpose of the celluloid is to protect the underlying waxed paper from the process of writing, since direct inscription onto the paper’s vulnerable surface would cause it to tear. When a

stylus is used to write upon the top layer, the paper underneath is pressed onto the wax slab, registering on the celluloid as dark writing on an otherwise pale surface. Freud presents this device as a model for comprehending the structure of the psyche: ‘the perceptual apparatus of our mind consists of two layers, of an external protective shield against stimuli whose task it is to diminish the strength of excitations coming in, and of a surface behind it which receives the stimuli’.⁵¹

Similarly the physical structure of the skin is formed of two primary layers: the protective outer layer of the epidermis and the sensitive underlying dermis. Following this line of thought, Bell’s performance reveals that she is highly attuned to the skin’s intimate connection with the brain. She describes the surface of her clothing as a receptacle for ‘that grief, which was the ink’.⁵² This highlights Bell’s use of squid ink as an embodiment not only of the substance of her father, but also of the psychically-active solution of her anguish. Her articulation that the ink ‘was corrosive’ and that ‘it actually stung the skin’, is symptomatic of her attention to the materiality of her emotions, and seems to express that her skin is receptive to stimuli of a psychological, as well as physical, nature.⁵³

Bell’s costume alludes to Joseph Beuys’ use of felt as a material that symbolises protection and insulation.⁵⁴ However, felt is also intensely absorbent: when asked if the ink had soaked through the felt to touch her skin underneath the artist commented: ‘it did, it went right through’.⁵⁵ In Freud’s mystic writing-pad, marks are produced indirectly by way of the pressure that is conducted between the stratified layers.⁵⁶ In a resounding gesture, the staining of Bell’s skin is mediated through a layer of protective, yet permeable, felt. Bell’s outermost surface guards against the full impact of the ink whilst also siphoning impressions through to her vulnerable skin, which receives and registers the inky marks. Thus Bell’s intervening felt layer is deployed as a buffer which tempers the physical and psychological effects of the squid’s ink so that it can be felt indirectly: by way of osmosis. This writing action is performed as ‘a flicker between surfaces’ wherein the skin, like the wax slab, preserves a trace of its tactile inscription long after the outer layers have been peeled away.⁵⁷ As Bell notes: ‘it stained me for months’.⁵⁸

Cephalopods (such as squid) are particularly attentive to the communicative function of the skin. They are capable of imparting information, not only by emitting clouds of sepia, but also by changing their skin-colour through a process of ‘epidermal painting’.⁵⁹ As Vilém Flusser and Louis Bec explain:

[The cephalopod] is equipped with chromatophores that enable the animal to alter its colouration entirely or in part. These discolourations are not only reactions to outside stimuli but also expressions of what is taking place within the body, and the meaning of these chromatic expressions is understood by others. The discolouration of the skin is an intraspecific code: cephalopods “speak” by changing the colour of their skin.⁶⁰

The squid, then, expresses and mediates its inward condition by writing, not on an inanimate plane, but upon its own skin. This enables information to be ingrained within the squid’s flesh rather than consigned to the ‘unreliable impermanence’ of inert materials.⁶¹ Here Flusser and Bec are not claiming that the squid’s physical discolouration is irreversible or permanently visible. They simply posit that by expressing information from within the contours of its body, the creature is better able to preserve the data within its memory. They write: ‘how foolish can humans be to entrust their acquired information to lifeless objects such as paper or stone?’⁶²

Flusser and Bec elaborate upon the human tendency to engrave our memories onto inanimate materials: ‘when we aspire to render the unspoken speakable and the unheard

audible – we do so as functions of artificial memory, as functions of lifeless objects.’⁶³ They coin the term ‘(in)form’ to describe the action of moulding objects according to one’s memories.⁶⁴ By this token Bell invests the felt suit with the substance of her emotion so that she might sculpt the inanimate surface into a memorial of her grief. While she employs a lifeless terrain of ‘artificial memory’ to sponge up the greater part of the ink, she also subjects her underlying flesh to a process of staining. This translates the substance – which is at once an incarnation of her grief and of her father’s form – onto her body and into her memory.

For Bell, the sensual materiality of the squid’s form calls to mind ‘entrails or intestines.’⁶⁵ As a consequence, the squid becomes a totem, conjuring up the artist’s memory of her father’s physical deterioration (with visible ‘tentacles’, ‘suckers’ and ‘bodily juices’). In my reading, however, the squid’s visceral mass is also an embodiment of the ‘many-foldedness’ of the skin itself.⁶⁶ Cephalopods are ‘slimy, soft, slow animals’, yet they are also highly ‘dentated’ creatures, ‘absolutely strewn with teeth’.⁶⁷ Hence the sensory qualities of firm and fluid coalesce within their flesh in a striking reverberation of the material process of writing:

Writing instantiates a play between hard and soft, durable and malleable, mineral and organic. When the stylus writes in the soft clay, it is hard to its soft. But when the clay bakes hard, it arrests the nervous fluidity of the writing hand. This commerce of hard and soft is accompanied and interpreted by an exchange between wet and dry.⁶⁸

The texture of the artist’s felt suit resonates with the soft flesh of the squid, while the viscous ink, although discharged in a state of liquidity, threatens to bake hard onto the surface of her body. By mediating her internal condition through staining upon the flesh, rather than via a verbal exchange, the artist encodes her grief into the sinuous language of the squid. Hence the loss that cannot be spoken is instead sounded out through fleshly discolouration. In keeping with the creature’s epidermal inscriptions, the artist writes upon her own skin and suit in order to impress her memories, in sepia, upon her (many-layered) exterior. In this manner, the squid resembles her father but it also foretells a body that is (in)formed through grief: as a multiplicity of ‘skins’ on which to feel, so as not to forget.

Concluding Notes

As I have sought to draw out in this article, Bell revives the totemic ritual, both by ingesting the mutual substance of the totem and by ornamenting herself in the likeness of her father’s hospitalised body, so as to enhance their ancestral connection. This ritual is stimulated by the experience of watching her father die and at the same time represents her endeavour to reiterate the traumatic scene. Her ceremonial performance is not reduced to an act of digestion in which the edible substance is internally dispersed and subsequently excreted, from the artist’s body. Moreover it cannot be aligned with an introjection that fully integrates the memories of loss along with the loved one that has been wrenched away. But nor is Bell’s loss swallowed and siphoned internally to form a cryptic clot within her psychic or gastric unconscious, like a pearl inside an oyster.⁶⁴ Rather, her double action of ingestion and regurgitation initiates a direct traffic between her gastric passages and the surface of her skin, which serves to externalise the process of food absorption as ‘extra-stomachal’ action. In doing so she takes her cue from the oozing form of the cephalopod to express both memory and material as part of her own anatomy, as a form of commemorative inscription.

The skilful manoeuvring between outside and inside in Bell’s work marks the dovetailing of incorporation and introjection. It is in this sense that she gestures towards the many shades of ambiguity that exist in between states of mourning and melancholia. Rendering her emotions as bodily actions and elevating the stomach and skin as sites of emotional activity

further mats together the psychic and somatic body. Thus, as I have tried to examine, Bell's performance embodies an attempt to implicate the different surfaces of the body in biological and psychological action: from the depths of her stomach, right through to the tenderness of her bare skin.

Notes

- ¹ Catherine Bell, 'Catherine E. Bell', in *Australian Video Art Archive*, 2006, <<http://www.videoartarchive.org.au/cbell/feel.html>> [accessed 6 Jan 2014].
- ² Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 2001).
- ³ Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, p. 147-153.
- ⁴ Catherine Bell, 'Performing Animality: Swimming with Eels and Squid Ink Erasure' (paper presented at the *Tier-Werden, Mensch-Werden Symposium, Berlin, Germany*, May 9-10, 2009), p. 3.
- ⁵ Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, p. 159.
- ⁶ Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, p. 157.
- ⁷ Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, p. 157.
- ⁸ Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, p. 159.
- ⁹ Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, p. 156.
- ¹⁰ Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, p.148-150.
- ¹¹ Bell, 'Catherine E. Bell'.
- ¹² Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, p. 160.
- ¹³ Catherine Bell, quoted in Steve Baker, *Artist/Animal*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), p. 130.
- ¹⁴ Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, p. 157.
- ¹⁵ Abraham, Nicolas and Torok, Maria, *The Shell and the Kernel* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 127.
- ¹⁶ Abraham and Torok, *Shell*, p. 126.
- ¹⁷ Abraham and Torok, *Shell*, p. 130.
- ¹⁸ Elissa Marder, *The Mother in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction: Psychoanalysis, Photography, Deconstruction* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), p. 30
- ¹⁹ Abraham and Torok, *Shell*, p. 130.
- ²⁰ Marder, *Mother*, pp. 30-31.
- ²¹ Marder, *Mother*, p. 30.
- ²² Bell, quoted in Baker, *Artist/Animal*, p. 131.
- ²³ Abraham and Torok, *Shell*, p.127-128.
- ²⁴ Jacques Derrida, 'Fors', in *The Wolf Man's Magic Word*, Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), pp. xi-xlvi (p. xvii).
- ²⁵ Marder, *Mother*, p. 42.
- ²⁶ Marder, *Mother*, p. 54.
- ²⁷ Derrida, 'Fors', p. xxxvii.
- ²⁸ Bell, quoted in Baker, *Artist/Animal*, p. 122.
- ²⁹ Marder, *Mother*, p. 42. Derrida, 'Fors', p. xvii.
- ³⁰ Derrida, 'Fors', p. xvii.
- ³¹ Derrida, 'Fors', p. xvii.
- ³² Derrida, 'Fors', p. xxxviii.
- ³³ Derrida, 'Fors', p. xix.
- ³⁴ Derrida, 'Fors', p. xxxviii.
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***Cover Image and Thumbnail:** Catherine Bell, *Felt is the Past Tense of Feel* (2006) Performance stills. Courtesy of the artist and Sutton Gallery, Melbourne. Photos Christian Capurro.

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Biography

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