The Happy Melancholic

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ABSTRACT
In this paper, I sketch a theoretical portrait of the happy melancholic. If melancholia is the disposition conditioned by the exposure to the void wrought by modernity's destructive tendencies, the happy melancholic is a subjective figure who avoids melancholic self-destruction through objectifying the void. Drawing on Agamben's early interpretation of the phantasm in his approach to Freud's essay on "Mourning and Melancholia", and Benjamin's interpretation of Baudelaire, I argue that Baudelaire, that prince of melancholics, with the notion of spleen, finds a fitting phantasm for the void of the subject. Spleen becomes the poetic operation that produces a subject separated from itself. Situated within the conflicting tendencies toward composition and decomposition, ideality and dissolution, the happiness of the melancholic lies, paradoxically, in becoming deader than the dead, a corpse picked clean—bone.

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> ...there was something in this ruthless melancholy that incapacitated him, drugged him, defeated him, that tightened his throat, so that frankly, those first two or three hours of the hard-core gig at the Central club in Almássy Square simply offered him no refuge at all.[1]

The books that we need, to paraphrase Kafka[2], remain those that bring us to a standstill, impregnating us with a mute obstacle, whose immobility cannot be grasped nor evaded, and whose apprehension comes at the cost of breaking the subject in two. Such broken subjects enter "the melancholy realm of eternal drizzle," a parallel world divested of hope, neither above nor below, but at the absent center of the world in which we live. The light that is shed from this center is black; the gaze illuminated by this black sun is melancholic.

Gérard de Nerval—to whom we owe the image of a black sun—remarks almost humorously, '"[Melancholic hypochondria] is a terrible affliction—it makes one see things as they are."'[3] In the melancholic's suffering, the cruelty of the real, to adopt Rosset's formula, asserts itself irremediably. The real, without ornament, stripped of sense, indigestible

1 Laszlo Krasznahorkai, *War & War*, trans. George Szirtes (New York: A New Directions Book, 2006)

2 "The books we need are of the kind that act upon us like a misfortune, that make us suffer like the death of someone we love more than ourselves, that make us feel as if we were on the verge of suicide or lost in a forest remote from all human adaptation. A book should serve as the axe for the frozen sea within us." Franz Kafka. *Letters to Friends, Family, and Editors*. (New York: Shocken Books, 1977), 16.

3 As quoted by Clément Rosset, *Joyful Cruelty: Toward a Philosophy of the Real*, ed. and trans. David F. Bell (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 76.

(*crudus*).[4] That which is laid bare in melancholia, this mute and oppressive obstacle, the *thing*, marks the separation of *objects* from their meaning. The melancholic inhabits an in-between state, where meaning as such is withdrawn. Signification becomes merely ornamental and language loses its grip on the real. Finding nothing in the world to activate its energies, the melancholic suffers from world-weariness*, taedium vitae* or *ennui*—all of that which Baudelaire, the prince of melancholics, will transform into Spleen.

The pathetic heroism of the melancholic lies in this subject's attempt to assume the void and melancholia is the pathos of the subject's disjunction: the peculiar feeling of the *becoming object* of the subject. Absorbed by the void, the melancholic adopts the posture of the brooder whose contemplative gaze falls on *things* whose shear indifference solicits no concern.[5] Compelled by the negativity of its own affect, the melancholic enters a circuit that passes from absence to absence: from a world deprived of substance to a subject lacking integrity to the null void that would seem to be their neutral and impartial sovereign.

To sketch the theoretical portrait of the melancholic, requires tracing the structural space of the void's migration: from the object to the subject to the void in culture that marks their vertiginous superimposition. One might expect the portrait to be gloomy. Morbidity has been one of the melancholic's most persistent features. Yet, the image that I would like to here invoke is that of a happy melancholic. A strange breed modeled more on the laughing than the weeping philosopher. The physiognomy of the melancholic may indeed be redolent with doom, but it shoulders this burden with an elegant nonchalance, finding a fitting phantasm for the dereliction of things.

Melancholia is the affective registration of the dereliction of things. By the dereliction of things, I mean the generalized rupture between objects and their significations that is inscribed into the heart of things with the commodity form. Benjamin writes, "The devaluation of the world of things in allegory is surpassed within the world of things itself by the commodity."[6] If Baroque culture situated the void in the world—devaluating the world through its separation of things from their significations, modernity is the devaluation of spirit, of subjectivity, configuring a world which offers its subjects "no refuge at all." The subject is offered no refuge since transcendence is inscribed into the world of things itself as the very operation that devalues them. Heaven becomes hell; one's salvation becomes bound to this world of things, whose transcendent promise is belied as a perpetual damnation. The Baroque allegory of the world's mortal insignificance becomes crushingly literal, since through the social necessity of their exchange things themselves seem to perform their own evacuation and the void that is left is offered to the subject as the sole means of its salvation. As commodities, this void is effectively inscribed into things themselves, since as commodities they internalize through the function of exchange a relation to that which they are not and their value is the concealed expression of this negation. Incarnating the abstraction of their own value, commodities are constitutively outside of themselves. The thing can only proffer its own abstraction, its separation from itself, its own void, as the promise of a value that is structurally unattainable for a subject that is nonetheless socially committed to its reproduction. In this respect, melancholia registers affectively the thing's separation from itself, its abstraction, marking the subject with the void of its significance.

Melancholia is the disposition due to the exposure to the void: the event of this crushing abstraction. The danger of this disposition consists in the melancholic's peculiar response to this dereliction: to counter the void with the void, abstraction with abstraction.

Such a response seems to be profoundly empty to such a degree that the melancholic would appear to succumb to that most Romantic of affects, despair, finding itself overwhelmed by its inability to make sense, which is to say, to differentiate, to hold apart, to parse, in short, the ability to maintain the difference between the sign and its signification. Suicide is the persistent danger that afflicts this disposition of the mind: the desire heroically exemplified by Hölderlin's Empedocles, to merge with the abyss, to plunge into the volcano, to disappear without a trace.[7] This is what links melancholia to depression. And for less heroic subjects, there is perhaps a fate worse than death, which Kristeva describes as a feeling of being dead without necessarily wanting to die. Suicide seems unnecessary, beside the point, since one feels already dead. This state of absolute apathy, of near total dissociation from things, the world, the self, places the melancholic into a null, empty, hollow space, which Kristeva describes, following the speech of her patient, Helen, as "an absolute, mineral, astral numbness, which was nevertheless accompanied by the impression, also an almost physical one, that this 'being dead,' physical and sensory as it might be, was also a thought nebula, an amorphous imagination, a muddled representation of some implacable helplessness.

4 "*Cruor*, from which *crudelis* (cruel) as well *crudus* (not digested, indigestible) are derived, designates torn and bloody flesh, that is, the thing itself stripped of all its ornaments and ordinary external accoutrements, in this case skin, and thus reduced to its unique reality, as bloody as it is indigestible. Thus reality is cruel—and indigestible—as soon as one removes from it everything which is not reality in order to consider it in itself" (ibid., 76).

5 See Walter Benjamin's suggestive reading of Dürer's *Melencolia I* offered in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (New York: Verso, 1998) that draws on and radicalizes the scholarly work of Saxl and Panofsky.

6 Walter Benjamin. "Central Park" in *The Writer of Modern Life: Essays on Charles Baudelaire*, ed. Michael W. Jennings and trans. Howard Eiland, Edmund Jephcott, Rodney Livingston, and Harry Zohn. (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), 138. Hereafter cited as Central Park.

7 This fantasy is belied by the volcano spitting forth Empedocles' bronzed sandal.

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The reality and fiction of death's being. Cadaverization and artifice."[8] Overwhelmed with the loss of its subjectivity, its inability to differentiate itself from the void whose function places the subject into meaningful relation with things, the depressed melancholic succumbs. It succumbs to its own failure, to its own inability, to allude to Deleuze, to make a difference that makes a difference. One void comes crashing into the next.

The melancholic suffers what Fitzgerald describes as a "blow from within". This is not necessarily a dramatic blow, "the big sudden blows that come, or seem to come, from outside—the ones you remember and blame things on and, in moments of weakness, tell your friends about." He continues, "There is another sort of blow that comes from within—that you don't feel till it's too late to do anything about it, until you realize with finality that in some regard you will never be as good a man again."[9] The melancholic is the one who cracks, or perhaps, the appropriate metaphor is that of a puncture, a slow wheezing leak that saps the subject of its vitality: *every act of life from the morning tooth-brush to the friend at dinner becomes an effort.*[10]

In this case, worse than suicide is the hardening that takes place, the cynicism that Fitzgerald describes with a self-punishing lucidity. The cultivation of a voice calculated to "show no ring of conviction except the conviction of the person" one is talking to...

> "And a smile—
> ah, I would get me a smile. I'm still working on that smile. It is to combine the best qualities of a hotel manager, an experienced old social weasel, a head-master on visitor's day, a colored elevator man, a pansy pulling a profile, a producer getting stuff at half its market value, a trained nurse coming on a new job, a body-vender in her first rotogravure, a hopeful extra swept near the camera, a ballet dancer with an infected toe, and of course the great beam of loving kindness common to all those from Washington to Beverly Hills who must exist by virtue of the contorted pan.[11]

Cynicism in the end is nothing more than a will to correctness. The concluding line of *The Crack-Up* that devastates: "I will try to be a correct animal though, and if you throw me a bone with enough meat on it I may even lick your hand."[12]

8 Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York, Columbia University Press, 1989), 72-73. Hereon cited as Black Sun.

9 F. Scott Fitzgerald, "The Crack-Up" in *On Booze*. (New York: New Directions, 1945), 11.

10 The Crack-Up, 15.

11 The Crack-Up, 29.

12 The Crack-Up, 32.

If these responses—suicide, dissociation, and cynicism—each mark a kind of terminal misery, what they share is the melancholic's incapacity to differentiate void from void, *a becoming melancholic about melancholy*. The problem thus becomes: how to avoid not identifying with the object of one's horror, the loss that threatens to engulf one's whole being? How to be evacuated without feeling utterly vacuous? How to prevent the melancholic's "self-immolation" from becoming "sodden-dark"? How to be open to the dereliction of things, to the demolition of their substance wrought by Capital, without being destroyed by it: a suicide or an empty shell of a person?

The formulation, doubtless, shares much with Deleuze's formulation: "how are we to stay at the surface without staying on the shore?"[13] Just as Deleuze speaks of the possibility of becoming a little schizophrenic, a little alcoholic, etc., knowing full well of the ridiculousness of such propositions, can we speak of becoming a little melancholic, just enough to evacuate the world of its formal stability without becoming vacuous? If melancholia is the affective registration of the void's event, the problem concerns how to maintain a relation to it without being pathologically crippled by it? How to differentiate the void as event from *the place of the void* that swallows it? This distinction between the event and its place is nothing else than the effort of thought to differentiate itself from the feeling that engenders it. Thus the act of this separation is nothing less than the attempt to objectify the void, to gain the requisite distance so that the thinker is not crushed under its weight.

The act of separation is the indispensible function of the imagination. It is the phantasms that serves to separate the event of the void from its place. The melancholic's relation to the phantasm is the subject of Agamben's recondite analysis in one of his earliest books, *Stanzas: On Word and Phantasm in Western Culture*. The problem that lies at the heart of this book—inventively taking up a legacy indebted as much to Martin Heidegger as to Walter Benjamin—concerns the manner in which the melancholic through his imagination internalizes a relation to the void, joyously occupying the null center of a parallel world, closer to the real because phantasmatic, illuminating the present through its radiant darkness. This image of radiant darkness, of a black sun, cuts to the heart of the "immobile dialectic" that structures the melancholic's relation to the void. The phantasm provides the subject with an image of its own deformation, making an object, so to speak, of its own dis-junction. The phantasm is the disjunctive synthesis of two voids.

Agamben recasts the problem as it is posed by Freud in "Mourning and Melancholia" in terms informed by the Medieval and Renaissance conception of black bile (*melaina chole*), the melancholic humor. Situat-

13 Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, trans. Mark Lester and ed. Constantin V. Boundas (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 158.

ing Freud within the intellectual landscape of the Renaissance enables Agamben to draw out a latent theory of the imagination, and thus of the phantasm, implied, but for the most part undeveloped, within Freud's psychoanalytic thought. Although at times obscure, this allows Agamben to extract a dialectical theory of the melancholic subject's imaginary relation to the real. The image (the phantasm) that defines melancholic desire (and hence its relation to itself and its world) does not play a mediating role, but marks, rather, the site of a violent disjunction between desire (*eros*) and its "object". This gap between desire and itself defines the place (*topos*) of the image as the null space *between* the real and the unreal. Agamben thus defines culture as the space of this disjunction: "The topology of the unreal that melancholy designs in its immobile dialectic is, at the same time, a topology of culture."[14]

The phantasm then carves out a hollow space that makes possible an appropriation of absence itself (the void) in the form of an object. Following intuitions of Hölderlin and Rilke, whose epigraphs serve to frame the discussion of melancholia[15], Agamben conceives of loss as the completion or affirmation of that which is possessed, such that one possesses something only insofar as one loses it (whether the loss be actual or potential). Loss then expresses a joy in having lost, since loss is its condition of possibility. In this respect, melancholia has nothing to do with a nostalgic fixation on the past. On the contrary, the melancholic's fixation on negativity is the condition for having done with possession, a condition for finding a certain joy inseparable from pain in dispossession.

The crux of Agamben's reading can be most clearly discerned in his reading of Freud's essay, "On Mourning and Melancholia." Following the work of Karl Abraham, Freud begins by marking a similarity between mourning and melancholia—the fact that like the aggrieved, the melancholic suffers from "a profoundly painful dejection, abrogation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity."[16] However, whereas mourning always concerns the loss of a determinate object, whether real (a loved one or object) or ideal (a notion), melancholia is *at a loss*, so to speak, as to *what* it is that has been lost. Since *what* is lost is not given in melancholia, but remains unconscious, the loss, Freud argues, is a relation to an object that has been *introjected* and thus appears as a lack in the subject. As Freud puts it, the "loss of the object"

14 Giorgio Agamben. *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture*, translated by Ronald L. Martinez (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 26. Hereafter cited as *Stanzas*.

15 The epigraphs run as follows. Rilke: "Now loss, cruel as it may be, cannot do anything against possession: it completes it, if you wish, it affirms it. It is not, at bottom, but a second acquisition—this time wholly internal—and equally intense." Hölderlin: "Many attempted in vain to say the most joyful things joyfully; here, finally, they are expressed in mourning" (*Stanzas*, 1).

16 Sigmund Freud. "Mourning and Melancholia" in *General Psychological Theory: Papers on Metapsychology*, ed. Philip Rieff (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991), 163. Hereafter cited as MM.

becomes "transformed into a loss in the ego."[17] And it is this emptying out of the subject—"an impoverishment of [the melancholic's] ego on a grand scale"[18]—that accounts for the self-loathing of the melancholic: the key symptom that does not appear in grief. "In grief the world becomes poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself."[19]

This lack in the ego, Agamben stresses, is a relation to a loss that is original and not derivative, as it is the case in mourning. In melancholia, the loss that precedes the loss of an object and thus the withdrawal of the libido itself is "the original datum." Unlike mourning that responds to the event of a lost object, melancholia responds to the event of loss as such: an absence that cannot be made present. What has been lost is something that precedes the very constitution of the subject (as a relation to objects) and whose absence is irreparable. As such, "melancholia offers the paradox of an intention to mourn that precedes and anticipates the loss of the object."[20] In Agamben's interpretation, melancholia is the ontological ground of mourning. There is some-thing that obtrudes in melancholia—a symptom—that cannot be derived from the subject's relation to objects. It is not the object, but the subject's *relation to* the object that is exposed in melancholia. That which makes itself felt in melancholia, is rather a relation to that which is non-objective *in* the subject: the feeling of absence as such.

The subject relates to this space through a lack, a difference, that is felt and precedes the difference between the subject and the object—what Heidegger would no doubt call the ontological difference. Strangely, melancholia makes possible mourning in a situation where there is nothing to be mourned, since there is no object that has been lost. Drawing on his reading of *acedia*, Agamben thus concludes, "that the withdrawal of melancholic libido has no other purpose than to make viable an appropriation in a situation in which none is really possible. From this point of view, melancholy would be not so much be the regressive reaction to the loss of the love object as the imaginative capacity to make an unobtainable object appear as if it were lost."[21] The imagination is that which makes the negative manifest *as if it were* an object.

By drawing out the latent ontological background of Agamben's interpretation, we can see that the imagination is the faculty that places the subject into a relation with that which is not. Something new can come into being only if it appears as something already lost. Melancholia

17 MM, 168.

18 MM, 164.

19 MM, 164.

20 *Stanzas*, 20.

21 *Stanzas*, 20.

is the creative genius of making *nothing* appear. Melancholia is the appropriation of negativity. The object that melancholia bestows with funereal trappings is the *nothing* as such: the void. The void has to appear as if it were lost in order to be found and the image is the site of this paradoxical reversal. This structure belies the perversity of the imagination that relates nothing to something in order making something out of nothing. The nothing names a loss that cannot be lost because it is possessed as loss. Vice-versa it cannot be possessed because as a possession of loss, it is dispossessed of possession. This demented and maniacal reversal, this turning within the void, which can be thought only at the risk of reducing thought to this kind of non-sense, secures for the nothing an *absolute* place.

The fact that the void can appear only as *that which it is not* entails that it can only lay claim to a simulated existence. The nothing, the void, is defined as the existence of the unreal, the very place where *that which is not* can come into being. The peculiar labor of the imagination, then, consists in inscribing negativity into reality: seizing the void. That which is lost and, at the same, found, through the very appropriation of loss, is the phantasm: "The imaginary loss that so obsessively occupies the melancholic tendency has no real object, because its funereal strategy is directed to the impossible capture of the phantasm."[22] The phantasm here is not an image *of* something, but precisely the imprint of an absence which can only have a simulated presence. Conversely, the presence of the phantasm merely attests to an absence. By means of the phantasm, the "real loses its reality so that what is unreal may become real."[23] This gap, this disjunction within the phantasm itself, is that which brings the melancholic to a standstill at the same time as it makes novelty real. Melancholia is the sickness born of creativity whose emblem is Dürer's Melancholic angel.

The phantasm, as it is here conceived, does not play a mediating role. It is not a synthesis of presence and absence unless one is to speak of a disjunctive synthesis. The phantasm provides a minimal consistency to the void (absence) necessary for sustaining the subject's attachment to the reality of objects. Yet, at the same time, the grip that this reality has on the subject, its power to convict, is loosened. The subject is neither wholly withdrawn from reality (schizophrenia), nor convinced by its normative appeal. The phantasm's fiction serves to divide the subject without necessitating its destruction. The subject is disjunctively synthesized through its phantasmatic objectification. Put differently the phantasm is the objectification of the split in the subject. The melancholic "*identification* of the ego with the abandoned object,"[24] to quote Freud, is in fact an attachment to the phantasm that presents a (subjective) loss in objective form. The phantasm is the objectifcation of an absence, the void's phantasmagorical presence. The reflexive nature of melancholia consists in the subject's becoming object—a will toward self-objectification. It is this morose attachment to its own absence that becomes the melancholic's dearest, most prized possession—the paradoxical possession through its objectification of its own dispossession. The melancholic is an absentee subject, the phantasm, the placeholder of its void.

The phantasm is neither a delusion, nor is it an illusion. It neither suppresses nor conceals reality. Rather it exhibits reality's deformation. It perverts reality in the Freudian sense that it neither negates (*Verneinung*) nor affirms the given. It is rather a disavowal (*Verleugnung*) of reality. The melancholic becomes a fetishist. Agamben, like Kristeva, links the structure of melancholia to fetishism. For Freud, the fetish relates to the child's own encounter with its own lack, namely the anxiety of castration, and its revelation of insufficiency. Confronted with the revelation of the void, the fetishist disavows it. The disavowal of the void entails attaching it to something, an object, that neither fills it in, takes its place, nor reproduces it. Paradoxically, the fetish presents an absence. The fetish becomes a sign of the void *and* of its absence. The fetish binds the void to an object through localizing their disjunction, immobilizing it. The fetish, like the melancholic phantasm, is a disjunctive synthesis. Agamben can thus maintain: "Similarly, in melancholia the object is neither appropriated nor lost, but both possessed and lost at the same time. And as the fetish is at once the sign of something and its absence, and owes to this contradiction its own phantomatic status, so the object of the melancholic project is at once real and unreal, incorporated and lost, affirmed and denied."[25] Both the fetish and the phantasm mark an objectification of a splitting that is internalized by the sign that refers the subject to its own incompleteness (its not wholeness).

Kristeva develops this aspect of the melancholic fetish at length. "Everywhere denial [*Verleugnung*] effects splittings and devitalizes representations and behaviours as well."[26] The melancholic maintains the sign's division and evacuates its meaning. This evacuation becomes an image of the subject's own splitting that distances the subject from meaning by distancing the sign from its signification.[27] This what Benja-

22 *Stanzas*, 25.

23 *Stanzas*, 25.

24 MM, 168.

25 *Stanzas*, 21.

26 *Black Sun*, 47.

27 Kristeva writes, "depressed [or melancholic] persons do not forget how to use signs. They keep them, but the signs seem absurd, delayed, ready to be extinguished, because of the splitting that affects them. For instead of bonding the affect caused by loss [as is the case in mourning], the

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min had already identified as the "[m]ajesty of the allegorical intention: to destroy the organic and the living—to eradicate semblance [*Schein*]"[28] In the fetish, the phantasm is mobilized against *Schein*, for what appears is the relation to that which is not, as if the *act* of appearing served to evacuate the appearance itself. The melancholic phantasm immobilizes this act, as if the subject encountered a kink in reality that brought it to a standstill by shocking it with an image of itself. Culture is the place where the melancholic encounters its own absence. This epiphany of the void, the no-man's-land staked out by the phantasm's objective seizure of the subject's absence.

The phantasmatic seizure of the void's event as objectification of the subject's dissolution becomes with Baudelaire a condition of artistic practice.

Spleen is the phantasmatic foundation of his poetic enterprise. Spleen functions as an intoxicant. By allowing himself to imbibe liberally, he establishes a certain stability to his practice, as if drinking himself sober. For spleen is a phantasm that brings focus to a sensibility that is otherwise woefully manic, lending to his rage the lucidity requisite "to break into the world, to lay waste its harmonious structures."[29] By making his melancholia a poetic constant, Baudelaire makes the objectification of the void the center of his reflexive labor.

Traversing the landscape of melancholia, Baudelaire consigns his subjectivity to the spleen, to that melancholic organ that sends "gross fumes into the brain, and so *per consequens* [consequently] disturbing the soul, and all the faculties of it."[30] The focal image of his enterprise, spleen is at once object and subject of Baudelaire's poetry: that which speaks in the subject and that about which the subject speaks. As speaking and spoken, spleen is an image that marks a space between the subject and object, the collision, so to speak, of their respective voids. Spleen as poetic utterance—posited as the object seized and laid bare by the word—is no longer simply an expressive lament (a confession of world weariness), but, qua spleen, it actively marks the distance of the subject from itself, creating that necessary hollow where the subject can announce its own absence.

This is perhaps what Benjamin means when he writes, "The decisively new ferment that enters the *taedium vitae* and turns it into spleen is

depressed sign disowns that affect as well as the signifier, thus admitting that the depressed subject has remained prisoner of the nonlost object (the Thing)." (*Black Sun*, 47).

28 Central Park, 147.

29 Benjamin's full statement runs as follows: "The Baudelairian allegory—unlike the Baroque allegory—bears traces of the rage needed to break into the world, to lay waste its harmonious structures" (Central Park, 149).

30 Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, ed. Holbrook Jackson (New York: New York Review of Books, 2001), 250.

self-estrangement. In Baudelaire's melancholy [*Trauen*], all that is left of the infinite regress of reflection—which in Romanticism playfully expanded the space of life into ever-wider circles and reduced it within ever narrower frames—is the 'somber and lucid *tête-à-tête*' of the subject with itself."[31] In turning back on itself, the I encounters its own radical dissociation. Baudelaire strips or lays bare the Romantic reflexive operation, shifting the accent from the identity to the non-identity of the I. Through the spleen's disjunctive synthesis, the I enters into a relation with itself, but it encounters its "self" as a non-identity, for its very identity consists in spleen. If spleen conditions the subject's objectification, then its separation from itself, from the life within, becomes that which is most native to it, that which is most its own; its very impropriety becomes that which is most proper to it. What speaks in the poem and what is spoken is alienation: a lyrical I estranged from itself.

Spleen provides Baudelaire with an image of the I that decomposes in its composition, a snapshot of the I's objectification. Through a poetic image, spleen, the I is placed into an ex-centric relation with itself by its identification with the object, the spleen (at once affect and organ), that tempers it. Spleen is the organ, the poetic machine within the body of the text, that produces the I as atra-bilious. Objectified in the spleen, the I is produced as estranged; rather than resolving, it dissolves the consistency of the I, making the moment of enunciation, the saying of *I*, the enunciation of a part, the spleen, that dissolves the whole. This contradiction serves to divide the I as if forcing it to coincide with its own disjunction. The I manages to stage itself through the poem only as dis-junct, dis-integrated. Through this process of identification with the spleen, the I becomes a place holder of its own absence: "I am a graveyard that the moon abhors/where long worms like regrets come out to feed/ most ravenously on me dearest dead./ I am an old boudoir where a rack of gowns,/ perfumed by withered roses, rots to dust..."[32]

As Baudelaire opens his last, unfinished, project for an autobiographical poem, *My Heart Laid Bare*, "Of the vaporization and centralization of the self. Everything is here." The withdrawal into the I is the condition of its vaporization. The construction of the poem enacts this dual operation: centralization and vaporization. The poem is the condition for the emergence of an I that is vapor, a sensible mist or the mist of a sensibility that engulfs the language of the poem, giving it atmosphere. Yet, this ideality of vaporization is always placed into relation with a counter image that decomposes the ideal. Spleen and Ideal has to be read as an immobile dialectic in which the idealization of spleen is offset by the spleenification of the ideal.

31 Central Park, 137.

32 Charles Baudelaire, "Spleen (II)" in *Flowers of Evil*, trans. Richard Howard (Boston: Dvid R. Godine, 1982), 75. Hereon cited as Flowers of Evil.

In the first poem of *Paris Spleen*, "The Stranger," this "enigmatic man" without father, mother, brother or sister, without family or country, this figure without origin or place is the I that loves and hates: an I that could love beauty, hates gold, but above all loves the clouds, "the clouds that pass...up there...up there...the wonderful clouds".[33] A formulation that drifts like the image it invokes. The clouds in their billowing drift is the very phantasm of elegant deformation. If this is the extremity of the idealization of spleen, (idealization of deformation), the logic of Baudelaire's practice is to produce a kink in the ideal: "their nebulous shapes become/ a splendid hearse for my dreams,/ their red glow the reflection/ of the Hell where my heart's at home."[34] The cloud become hearse is the vehicle that carries the corpse to its tomb. The corpse is the cloud's violation (the spleenification of the ideal). The rotting corpse as that eminently inelegant reminder of what awaits the substrate of all human ideals. And Baudelaire's dandyism proscribes that he is to become an elegant corpse, a rotting ideal.[35]

The corpse provides the I with the image of an identity that coincides with its most radical decomposition. The poetic image occasions the seizure of a subjective destitution as radical as irreparable: "My soul is cracked, and when in distress/ it tries to sing the chilly nights away,/ how often its enfeebled voice suggests/ the gasping of a wounded soldier left/ beside a lake of blood, who, pinned beneath/ a pile of dead men, struggles, stares and dies."[36] And yet, it is precisely in this seizure that the happiness of the melancholic lies.

The fantasy of the melancholic is to be a happy corpse. As Baudelaire asserts in The Happy Corpse[37], this most bleak and humorous of poems, for a corpse to be happy it is not sufficient for the body to be consigned to the grave, deprived of life and lying in wait of the officialdom of mourning. The happiness of the corpse does not lie in death, but in digestion. It is when the corpse is ingested, by those "scions of decay," those "feasting philosophers," the earth worm, that it is happy. Only when reduced to bone, picked clean by contracted crows, does it rest content. It is only when reduced to its skeletal architecture that it can sleep in

33 Charles Baudelaire. "The Stranger" in *Paris Spleen*, trans. Louise Varèse (New Directions, 1970), 1.

34 "Sympathetic Horror" in Flowers of Evil, 79.

35 "The condition of success of this sacrificial task is that the artist should take to its extreme consequences the principle of loss and self-dispossession. Rimbaud's programmatic exclamation "I is an other" (*je est un autre*) must be taken literally: the redemption of objects is impossible except by virtue of becoming an object. As the work of art must destroy and alienate itself to become an absolute commodity, so the dandy-artist must become a living corpse, constantly tending toward an *other*, a creature essentially nonhuman and antihuman" (*Stanzas*, 50).

36 "The Cracked Bell" in *Flowers of Evil*, 74.

37 "The Happy Corpse" in *Flowers of Evil*, 72-73.

peace, "like a shark in the cradling wave." This would be the fantasy of a "soulless body deader than the dead." A body deprived of soul longs to be restored to the inorganic, insensate matter. To be deader than the dead is to be extinct, a bone awaiting fossilization. In short, the melancholic desire to be an object whose psychic life has been effaced, subtracted irreparably from the very vicissitudes of sensate flesh that provide the conditions and thus torments of psychic life. "From the perspective of spleen," it is not simply "the buried man," as Benjamin suggests, that "is the "transcendental subject" of historical consciousness," it is the corpse picked clean.[38] It is not in awaiting, but being deprived of a second life that melancholic locates its joy and this is what binds the melancholic to evil.

To see the corpse from the inside[39] is to become the impersonator of bone, the mask of a fossilized presence. The subject is inserted into culture only through the maximization of its distance from the organic. Culture thus becomes a space that is beyond decay, since it marks that which cannot die. If the happiness of the melancholic lies in its phantasmatic identification with its own extinction, this is because at this hyperbolic extreme that which is most heavy becomes bearably light and the void that crushes becomes the void whose phantasmatic seizure marks this thinking animal's commitment to a culture that praises something other than stupefaction.

38 "From the perspective of spleen, the buried man is the 'transcendental subject' of historical consciousness" (Central Park, 138).

39 "Baroque allegory sees the corpse only from the outside. Baudelaire sees it from within" (Central Park, 163).

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