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Politics and Melancholia: Introduction

Justin Clemens
Dominiek Hoens

At first sight, politics and melancholia can only appear as an odd couple. Whereas the realm of politics evokes enthusiastic activity and strategic interests, melancholia is generally associated with passive contemplation and a lack of worldly engagement. If politics connotes vital, future-oriented struggles over the divisions of the community, melancholia suggests individual incapacitation, even dissolution, by predatory hangovers from the past. Hence, if one were to identify a relation between both terms it would seem to be an inversely proportional one: an increase of politics would be concomitant with a decline of melancholia, and *vice versa*.

Such an opposition is at once supported and complicated by the astonishingly extensive modern scholarship regarding the history of melancholia, which ranges across the fields of philosophy, literature, art and medicine. As Giorgio Agamben points out in an important study of the condition, the ancient analyses of the operations and implications of black bile – which find a *locus classicus* in the Aristotelian *Problemata*, whose author invokes *hoi melancholikai* – come to be associated by the Middle Ages not only with philosophy, poetry and arts, but with a moral malady as well.¹

We subsequently discover periodic plagues of melancholia troubling the history of Western life, attested to by all sorts of evidence, not least that provided by the most outstanding creative types, Albrecht Dürer and William Shakespeare among them. As J. L. Koerner proposes of Dürer's own famous image of *Melencolia I*, in the wake of such eminent commentators as Saxl and Panofsky, Warburg, and Walter Benjamin:

Melencolia seems designed to generate multiple and contradictory readings, to clue its viewers to an endless exegetical labour until, exhausted in the end, they discover their own portrait in Dürer's sleepless, inactive personification of melancholy. Interpreting the engraving itself becomes a detour to self-reflection, just as all the arts and sciences whose tools clutter the print's foreground finally return their practitioners to the state of a mind absorbed in itself.²

Multiple, contradictory, sleepless, inactive: when attempting to address melancholia, the oxymorons seem to concatenate inexorably, and, in this concatenation, further disseminate and compound the condition itself. Melancholia is as *catching* as it is *caught*; it is as if its

1 See Agamben 1993, *passim*.

2 Koerner 1997, p. 23. As Koerner continues: 'the account [by Panofsky and Saxl] of the 1514 engraving as a self-portrait is illuminating, for it is consistent with a notion of melancholy as the dangerous foregrounding of self. Dürer's pensive angel, assuming a posture of inwardness that she shares with the artist in the *Self-Portrait* in Erlangen, provides the occasion wherein, exemplarily, the historiography of art can link the visual image to the person of the artist,' p. 27. See also Benjamin 2015, pp. 55-94.

putative analysts and epidemiologists render themselves susceptible to melancholia's multifarious blandishments in their very approach.

If *Romeo and Juliet* famously begins with its eponymous male protagonist suffering a flagrant and parodic bout of melancholia – to the extent that he becomes the butt of diegetic humour from characters such as Mercutio – it is undoubtedly Hamlet who provides one of the greatest early modern figures of (perhaps simulated) melancholy. As Hamlet complains to his mother:

‘Seems, madam? Nay, it is. I know not “seems.”
’Tis not alone my inky cloak, good mother,
Nor customary suits of solemn black,
Nor windy suspiration of forc’d breath,
No, nor the fruitful river in the eye,
Nor the dejected ‘haviour of the visage,
Together with all forms, moods, shapes of grief,
That can denote me truly. These indeed seem,
For they are actions that a man might play;
But I have that within which passes show,
These but the trappings and the suits of woe.’³

While putting on a show that both truly expresses and truly dissimulates the metamorphic disorder beneath, the Prince of Denmark maniacally asserts the withdrawal of the real of melancholia beyond any possible figure of action in the world. Yet we all know what happens when the madman's mask of melancholia finally falls: the escalating execution of foes, friends, and family, up to the fall of the state itself.

Such a violent and paradoxical assertion of the inassertability of the inwardness conjured by the melancholic sufferer returns, moreover, in its multiple avatars.

It is surely the abiding paradoxes of such a condition that have led to melancholia's astonishing efflorescence today as a crucial category for much self-consciously critical philosophy. Let us give a few significant indications. As Julia Kristeva puts it in her own famous study of the condition: ‘there is no imagination that is not, overtly or secretly, melancholy.’⁴ Slavoj Žižek, while denouncing the garden-variety cultural studies valorisation of ‘melancholia’ over ‘mourning,’ can still end up affirming that ‘melancholy (disappointment at all positive, observable objects, none of which can satisfy our desire) effectively is the beginning of philosophy.’⁵ Judith Butler proposes ‘gender as a kind of melancholy,

3 Shakespeare, 1.2.76-86.

4 Kristeva 1989, p. 6.

5 Žižek 2000, p. 660. See also Žižek 2001, esp. pp. 141-148.

or as one of melancholy's effects.’⁶ Ranjana Khanna notes that ‘one of the reasons psychoanalytically conceived melancholia is a compelling rubric for an analysis of postcoloniality is that it is anti-identitarian while compelled by a situation and is affective without sentimentality. It is also highly self-critical.’⁷ The reader will immediately note that all of these accounts, whatever their differences, suggest that melancholia, in its apparent detachment from all existing objects through its unreasonable refusal to mourn the lost, thereby offers precisely a radical chance not only for personal, but also for political renewal.

Under such descriptions, politics and melancholia would find their attenuated and antagonistic articulation regarding the point of *the sense of the world*: politics being a communal practice that strives to effect another sense of the world or even create another world, characterized by affects of enthusiasm; melancholia would be a form of individual inaction correlated with a suspension of any sense of world, and characterized by singular affects of anhedonia and despair. Yet at the same time, melancholia becomes at once an essential goad and a threat to political activism, as well as a reminder to politics of the perils of totalisation, that actualization can undermine its own *raison d'être*, and that the claims of temporality cannot simply be effaced by the passing of the past. Both politics and melancholia would therefore also engage – if through irreducible operations – a kind of torsion of depersonalization, politics exceeding the will from above, as it were, and melancholia evacuating the will from below.

Yet can this contemporary critical concordance regarding the paradoxical import of melancholia for politics be persuasively sustained? After all, we are experiencing something perhaps unheralded in previous forms of political governance and medical diagnosis. Politics proper seems to have become the object of a deracinated, privatized corporate technocracy, for which communal action does not designate a project or program founded on a struggle over social divisions and distributions, but only for ‘sustainable’ ‘profitability’ under conditions of ‘global’ ‘competitiveness,’ which simultaneously requires an extraordinary security and surveillance apparatus. To give some key indicators of the former, it will hopefully suffice here to list a variety of recent geopolitical events: the causation of the financial sector with regards to the Global Financial Crisis of 2008, and its ongoing effects; the replacement of elected governments in Italy and Greece with interim placeholders; the recent signing of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), and the ongoing discussions regarding the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP). Examples could easily be multiplied.

6 Butler 1997, p. 132.

7 Khanna 2013, p. 257.

Despite, then, the intermediate and brief period of 'Third Way' handling of the opposition between left and right, the latter has now dissolved into an anti-politics that qualifies itself as the management of societal problems and public debts. Much of contemporary politics presents itself as post-ideological and therefore as realistic, and, as far as clearly identifiable problems are concerned, pragmatic. A remarkable feature of this realistic view consists in the Cartesian doubt as to whether society actually exists or should rather be treated as an idealistic, unreal abstraction. The British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, one of the great nominalist prophets of the new order, was herself in no doubt as to the real of the situation. As she notoriously asserted in an interview with – of all media – *Women's Own* magazine: 'there's no such thing as society. There are individual men and women and there are families.' Society does not exist, in fact, it is only a *flatus vocis*; the only real and effective existents are individuals. To the extent that these individuals are more than productive units, they can function as reproductive units, that is, 'families.'

This form of radical doubt brackets the traditional realm of politics, i.e. society, only to find the indubitable reality of the individual. As this individual reality can only be discerned through this self-destructive move of politics, the latter should not bother the former. In this respect, politics and the individual should peacefully co-exist, as two domains whose intersection should be kept as minimal as possible. Politics should guarantee the freedom of the individual, which is first and foremost the freedom to experience one's individual life as devoid of any political dimension.

For the North American context, Adam Curtis' documentary *The Century of the Self* (2002) has convincingly depicted the evolution of how a large group of socially aware and politically active citizens turned into self-expressive individuals mainly preoccupied with creating (mental) spaces onto which society or the state can have no grasp.⁸ This change in attitude did not lead to the demand for a different politics but rather simply less of it. Change should not pass through or be realized by the political domain, but effected by the individual, starting with himself: if you want to change the world, change yourself. Today we witness the effects of these concomitant tendencies towards depoliticization, individualization and personal responsabilization, and one of the main ones is depression and related mood disorders.⁹

So at the same time as political economy is transformed into a

8 For a similar argument, which also takes into account the French context of the depression epidemic, see Ehrenberg 2010.

9 According to the World Health Organization, depression is the leading cause of disability worldwide, currently affecting not less than 350 million people: see <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs369/>.

real-time global techno-economy, melancholia is replaced by allegedly neurological diagnoses of 'depression,' and its treatment almost entirely exhausted by psychopharmacology. It remains extremely doubtful whether this renomination itself constitutes any kind of advance, or should rather be considered a disavowed *asylum ignorantiae*, a name that essays to supplant paradox by vacuity. As David Healy remarks in one of his groundbreaking studies:

There has been astonishing progress in the neurosciences but little or no progress in understanding depression. The fact that the SSRIs are no more effective than other antidepressants questions the idea that depression is the kind of target that a specific magic bullet will someday hit dead centre. The fact that both specific norepinephrine reuptake inhibitors and specific 5HT reuptake inhibitors may cure it points strongly to the fact that it is simply not a single neurotransmitter disorder.¹⁰

This collection, however, is not on depression as an effect or symptom of depoliticization, but on melancholia.¹¹ Melancholia may belong to the same semantic field as depression or, qua pathology, even be identical to it – Freud's description in his seminal 1917 essay on melancholia neither includes nor excludes features absent from contemporary depression – yet the former notion has a longer and more varied history than the latter. As Jennifer Radden remarks: 'Clinical depression as it is understood today bears similarities to the melancholy and melancholic states of earlier times. But the addition of this later writing on clinical depression must not be taken to suggest any unproblematic continuity between these two bodies of writing, nor an unproblematic identity between these two similar but perhaps not equivalent conditions.'¹² The very use of the word 'melancholia' is therefore meant to take a critical distance from the connotations of the category of depression, which is a term borrowed from the economic field and allegedly first used in a technical sense by the Swiss psychiatrist Adolf Meyer in the early twentieth century.¹³ Depression is not only a mental disease symptomatic of our times, but also an adequate reflection of them: the individual suffering with himself and with a loss of world,

10 D. Healy, *The Anti-Depressant Era* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 174.

11 For a short but illuminating essay on the connection between depoliticization and depression see Mark Fisher 2009.

12 Radden 2000, p. xi. See also Radden 2003.

13 See Styron 1992. This 'memoir of his nervous illness,' titled after a line in John Milton's *Paradise Lost* by the author of *Sophie's Choice*, is of interest in the current context for a number of reasons.

treated by medical experts as a decontextualized mood disorder, that is the mere *negative* of the happy, successful hedonist or, indeed, of the normalizing figure of the 'resilient individual' that now proliferates across all sectors of life.

In contrast to this, melancholia does not solely put the emphasis on what is dysfunctional or debilitating about depressive feelings such as lack of self-esteem, loss of interest, etc., but leaves room to explore, perhaps even establish, a more complex relation to the social and political conditions within which it arises. Depression appears as a vicious circle in which fundamental features of the disease, such as loss of valuable social relations and engagements, are considered the desired result of its treatment, to be the healthy yet asocial individual. In contrast, melancholia can be considered as a contemplative distance, a break with the present precisely needed to engage with the conditions within which it occurs.

Yet to say this is also to point to a new twist in the ancient quarrel between politics and melancholia. If we began by indicating a fundamental non-relation between the two, before offering a brief summary of some of their characteristic features that might complicate this non-relation without undue reduction, we have also (very sketchily) delineated a new situation – our own – which is characterized by a kind of double dissolution. On the one hand, we are attesting to a global de-politicization; on the other, to a global de-melancholization. The former bespeaks a new dominance of technical financial management; the latter denotes a new dominance of the acephalic character of the depressed person. We are therefore suggesting that this emergent dispensation of corporate management and privatized depression only sustains the ancient antagonism between politics and melancholia *at the cost of the loss of the significance of both*. In other words, the near-total vitiation of the relative autonomy of variant localities by a kind of financial and technical deterritorialization – that is simultaneously also a reterritorialization according to new abstract economic operations – entails both a general decrease in politics *and* a decrease in melancholia.

Yet it is also precisely this possible supersession of the complex non-relation between politics and melancholia that perhaps unexpectedly reopens the question of this non-relation today. In this respect, we repeat the Freudian distinction between a 'good' and 'bad' mourning here as the difference between depression and melancholia. If Freud considered melancholia as a failed mourning – because its triggering loss is unconscious which makes the required work of mourning impossible – our suggestion is to consider melancholia as an antidote to the current understanding of depression as a mere dysfunctionality to be treated by antidepressants. In doing so, we are expressly interested in the world-destroying and world-creating potentials of melancholia – indeed, in a sense, following 'the loss of the world itself' that the current situation

perhaps presents us with.¹⁴

This, however, should not inevitably lead to the conclusion that melancholia is, as Byron put it, "the telescope of truth." When taking into account the texts contributed to this issue, one can only notice the different interpretations given to melancholia, in some cases based on detailed attempts at turning it into a clearly delineated notion. Moreover, besides the different approaches, one can discern different appreciations, positive and negative, from sentimentality and fetishistic disavowal to, indeed, melancholia as that equally fearful and much needed gift.

The first text included in this collection deals with an almost emblematic author when it comes to study melancholia and politics: Walter Benjamin. In his short but often cited ninth thesis on the concept of history Benjamin, inspired by Paul Klee's painting *Angelus Novus*, evokes 'the angel of history.' Sami Khatib – critical of fashionable readings that either emphasize the melancholic messianistic hope evoked by this angelic image or consider it as an expression of Benjamin's melancholic disposition – presents a close reading fuelled by Freud, Lacan and Agamben. If one can read Benjamin through a melancholic lens, the importance of his work does reside in neither an apology for a fixation on a lost object, nor the 'perverse' hope in a messianic end to history. Taking up the Lacanian distinction between vision and the gaze, Khatib argues that what the angel sees cannot coincide with what causes his desire to see. A mere melancholic reading ends up confusing (empirical) loss with (structural) lack, and hence as an implicit argument to passively await an impending final catastrophe undoing lack (and loss for that matter). Khatib exposes a different reading, without altogether dismissing melancholy as myopic. Precisely because melancholy is concerned with lack and temporality, it may open up onto a politics that is based on the insight that history is incomplete and demands political action.¹⁵

From Khatib's analysis of Benjamin, Rebecca Comay returns us to a moment that she exposes as crucial to philosophical modernity: the hypochondria of Immanuel Kant. There are few things in life, Freud once noted, as costly as sickness and stupidity. There are also few things at once more intimate and elusive than sickness. As Comay puts it, the suffering of illness 'forces a sociability that it simultaneously pre-empts,' putting into question the terms under which it might receive ethical or political acknowledgement. The problems such suffering in principle poses to any potential conceptual epidemiology are ratched-up to unprecedented extremity by the phenomenon of hypochondria. At once patent yet unverifiable, beyond truth and illusion, hypochondria

14 Recalling Marguerite Duras's notorious statement "*que le monde aille à sa perte, c'est la seule politique*." See Duras 1977, p. 25 and 1990, p. 30.

15 Which echoes the conclusion of Mladek and Edmondson's article on left melancholy (2009).

nonetheless comes time-stamped with and as Enlightenment, one of the great European biomedical products of the eighteenth century. Yet hypochondria is also surprisingly funny: as the ancient humoral theories of melancholia give way to new neurological explanations, the hypochondriac becomes a privileged butt of humour. Who, given this situation, could be a more appropriate figure of the hypochondriacal antinomies than Immanuel Kant himself? In the third of the essays that comprise the *Conflict of the Faculties* – part of Kant's famous 'senilia' – the philosopher expressly confronts medicine with philosophy. Yet to consider the body at once proposes mereological, spatial, temporal, aspectual, modal, and aetiological aporias to philosophy. Indeed, in its delocalized corrosion of the vital distinction between quality and quantity, the operations of hypochondria not only rapidly start to resemble the strange homelessness of philosophy itself, but threaten to drown the inquirer 'in an ocean of liar's paradoxes.' For Comay, what is 'so unnerving for the hypochondriac is not so much the obtuseness of the body but rather its uncanny intelligence.' In following this line, Comay essays to evade those so-familiar critiques of the dialectic of Enlightenment – which see reason's attempts to curb the brutality of the body inexorably result in ever-more dramatic scenes of brutality – in order to return to Kantian hypochondria the paradox of the stupefying resilience of the indecently-aged, which 'testifies to an insistent, unapologetic undeadness at the heart of life itself.'

Such an undeadness at the heart of life continues to offer a rebuke to the institutions that seek to foreclose it. Friedrich Nietzsche once invoked the ancient injunction to 'mate with the dead'; melancholia instead proposes that we 'mate with the undead.' In his contribution Marc De Kesel argues that modern politics is inevitably melancholic, for it devotes itself to a cause that has no base in being. The break of modernity consists in a break from onto-theology which, on a political plane, leads to the insight that the realm of politics is based on neither a divine order nor a natural plan, but on human will. Through a detailed discussion of Fénelon's advice to Philip V and Pascal's *Discourse on the Condition of the Great*, De Kesel shows how both authors were aware of the contingency of royal power – the king possesses power without having it –, yet came to diverging conclusions. Despite this difference, De Kesel shows how melancholy is structurally part of the reflection on politics, from the 17th century up to Slavoj Žižek: the cause is not to be considered as what can get accidentally lost – and therefore mourned – but as lacking any substantial being. In this respect the modern political subject can only be melancholic, having lost what it never had.

In his text, Karel Vanhaesebrouck takes inspiration from the same historical period, the baroque, in order to sketch a dark yet vivid painting of a world not only dominated by, but ultimately reducible to mere representations. The play and spectacular display of images provokes

the quest for an ultimate reality, which is discovered as the human body. This body is vulnerable and mortal, and the pleasures it produces hardly suffice to veil a fundamental dissatisfaction. For the baroque libertine, e.g., the great English poet John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester, sexual enjoyment in particular provides the ambivalent trace of a missing enjoyment. This godforsaken universe – lacking order or the promise of a better world *jenseits* – needs theatre, not only as *divertissement*, not only to stage illusory worlds, but also as a means to bring to the fore *the illusion of any illusion*. Here Vanhaesebrouck argues that we are not beyond or past this set of interrelated problems and – via a discussion of contemporary artists such as Ken Russell, Anish Kapoor and the work of the Belgian theatre company Abattoir Fermé – that baroque is the new black.

Although Lieven De Cauter starts his discussion of the topic with a quote from another seventeenth century source. the opening lines of Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*, the issue at stake is different. Inspired by Walter Benjamin, De Cauter sketches the cultural vicissitudes of melancholy and pays attention to the severing of the bond between the two poles of depression and mania, of decay and geniality. In Romanticism, melancholy consists mainly in a feeling of loss and nostalgia may be the more appropriate term. This nostalgia, however, should not only be understood as a reactionary tendency to return to an earlier state, as it can also take on an utopian dimension and be as such directed to the future. Nonetheless, the critique of modernity seems to prefer the depressive side of melancholy to the detriment of its 'manic' or active aspect. Against this background the author understands our current post-historical melancholy as a result of the end of history-as-progress. This melancholy is not the sadness of an idle, somehow 'unprogressive' Sunday afternoon, but the effect of the experience that progress turns against itself because of ecological limitations. Not one, but a combination of catastrophes are awaiting us or are already taking place. In conclusion De Cauter explores this predominant mood and discerns a space for possible (counter-)action.

Also taking up the challenge of contemporary action, Klaas Tindemans discusses the link between politics and melancholia by means of a series of concrete cases. Precisely because moderns considered melancholy as an obstacle to a progress-oriented project, melancholy became the antipole of political activity. Yet, starting from Théroigne de Méricourt and ending with Wilfried Martens (the late Belgian prime minister and former president of the European People's Party), Tindemans explores the different ways in which the noonday demon inserted itself in political life. Théroigne de Méricourt is an exemplary case for the pathologization of revolutionary fervour, whilst Abraham Lincoln testifies to a melancholy that does not exclude the execution of political power. This tension, however, gets resolved as soon as politics neither excludes

nor includes personal melancholy, but turns melancholic itself – examples here are Pierre Bérégovoy and Gordon Brown. The culminating or at least most recent point in this history consists in a loss of both melancholy and politics: whereas the melancholic does not know *what* but still knows *that* something has been lost, contemporary politicians are unable to acknowledge any loss at all. This has hardly anything to do with their personal particularities, but with, as Tindemans argues, a general crisis which consists in the inability of connecting the present with a past and a future on a political plane.

Perhaps unexpectedly, it is precisely with respect to such a crisis situation of ‘presentist’ disconnection that Jon Roffe examines what Gilles Deleuze has to offer to the thought of the relation between melancholia and politics today. Deleuze has a well-known animus against psychoanalysis: psychosis over neurosis is the formula. Whereas neurotics are whiny and go to psychoanalysis because they want to be loved, the psychotic out for a walk extracts and binds the heterogeneity of the world according to a process of impersonal desire. Melancholia, hence, would unsurprisingly be absent from the list of Deleuze’s desiderata as a paradigmatic concept of object-loss and time-capture. Yet there is indeed a concept of melancholia to be reconstructed from Deleuze’s work in the wake of Lacan, especially given the peculiar interstitial nature of melancholy, which seems to partake of neurotic, psychotic and perverse elements simultaneously and irreducibly. In *Difference and Repetition* (1968), Deleuze takes up Lacan in considering the object a virtual ‘shred of the pure past.’ In doing so, he reconfigures this virtuality not only as a constitutive subjective element, but more significantly as an objective problematic, at once undetermined and insistent. By *Anti-Oedipus*, co-written with Felix Guattari, Deleuze’s anti-psychoanalytic position may seem to have hardened into a mode of extreme rejection. Yet this is not the case, as Roffe argues. Rather, if a critique, it is also an extension of a trajectory from Freud through Klein and Lacan. By their direct investment of the social field by desire, Deleuze and Guattari at once show how traditional psychoanalysis is necessarily limited to conceiving Oedipus as a crisis and a structure – and nothing more besides – and that desire needs to be thought as a delirium which lacks nothing. So: whence melancholia? Although neither of Deleuze’s *Cinema* books mention melancholia by name, they construct a schema from which a functionally-comparable and compatible concept can emerge. For Deleuze, cinema is marked by four features: its inhuman production, its sensory-motor-system (SMS) reception, its disruptiveness, and its creativity. In short, cinema becomes a mass-producer of problematic objects which serve to disrupt existing SMS filters in order that we can literally plug ourselves back into a kind of belief in the world. On this basis, Roffe even argues that the apparent neglect, critique or absence of melancholia from Deleuze is not a sign of

its irrelevance or noxiousness, but, on the contrary, of its *unprecedented generalization*. The new world heralded by Deleuze is, in the end, nothing but *this* world itself, the world of schizoid connections.

If the melancholic temperament has since antiquity often been considered related to the imagination of the creator of works of art, the same courtesy diagnosis has not usually been extended to the translators of such works. Perhaps the reasons are obvious: the translator is not a creator, but a kind of degraded duplicator; to the extent that his or her imagination is at stake at all, it is in a strictly derivative role; as a piece of writing, the translation itself finds itself in the situation of having to be supplemented by explanatory notes. Yet in another sense, the relation between melancholia and translation couldn’t be more marked: every translation is by definition indexed to a prior original, which it defectively repeats, but would be literally nothing without. We could go further, along lines suggested by Walter Benjamin: every translation gestures towards the lost Adamic tongue, and thus, in its own necessarily weakened fashion, towards the messianic reconciliation of all languages, the *Reine Sprache* of a suprahistorical kinship. Here Sigi Jöttkandt takes up the divided works of Vladimir Nabokov, who was writing *Pale Fire* at the same time as he was translating Pushkin’s *Eugene Onegin*. The first-named work was highly celebrated; the indifferent reception of the second was in fact a cause of a very public falling-out between Nabokov and Edmund White. Yet Nabokov’s two works are densely imbricated, expressly staging the intense convolutions of energetic melancholic operations. Jöttkandt notes Nabokov’s characteristic work of doubling, at the levels of style, allusion, and theme, which emit seductive clouds of black bile. Nabokov shuttles between creation and translation, even as the creation is itself divided by its intertextual references to Shakespeare and Middleton’s problem play *Timon of Athens*, and as the translation turns about a ciphered recreation of Nabokov’s own pre-Revolutionary aristocratic memories. Jöttkandt, citing Carol Jacobs, speaks of the melancholic ‘teratogenesis’ of such reproductions – a teratogenesis in which the singularity of the lost object is dissimulated in the outrageous patency of Nabokovian style.

If it is often acknowledged that art undoes the laws upon which it relies, what of the law *per se*? So Peter Goodrich asks: Is the law itself of an atrabilious temperament? Can it cause or curb or even cure the disease of which it is itself one of the most aggressive symptoms? An imbalance of the black bile of ancient European medicine may well enervate or paralyze, but it might just as well inspire a singular diagram of homeopathy to be delivered by the law. The period now often referred to, for variously historical and anti-historical reasons, as Early Modern Europe (that is, the sixteenth- and seventeenth-centuries) is witness to a particularly intense experience of sovereign melancholy in its art and philosophy – as in its law-making and law-breaking. As Goodrich notes,

‘the figure of the melancholic is that of an escaping lawyer.’ The situation is perhaps at its most evident extremity in England, where the Common Law is acknowledged to lack precisely what it needs: a *Digest*, whether of a Justinian or a Gratian. Lacking a digest, the law has literally become indigestible. The common lawyers who gorge on their four cases daily are emblematic gluttons of singularities. The more they consume, the more ravenous they become, as their very diet refuses the bitter pill of a properly satiating commonality. So this law-that-lacks-law, that is, its own unity and universality despite its nominal commonness, provokes what Goodrich aptly names *corpus envy*. If the sovereign lacks, he thereby calls for a fellow or fallow phallic nomothete to reinstitute or reconstitute the law. But what comes instead of our desired-for institutor of law are merely further collectors, whose attempts at collection only prove further recollections – recollections of what-never-was. Such recollection, moreover, only repeats the dispersion: the white light of law cannot be found in any of its black letters. An enigma returns at the source from which the collectors ever further descend. The law may well be an ass – but it is also an arse, insofar as it can only rest, *must* rest, upon its gaping fundamentals. Like Dante the Pilgrim, the English lawyers must seek egress if not redress from the inferno at the end of the colon. But there’s no getting to the bottom of it. The foul smells that attend such ancient profundity are the last will and testament of the law’s indigestible indigestion. Saturn the pedophage or infantester becomes the very emblem of the inexorable rot of time at the core of the law.

A father-castrating child-eater may not immediately present himself as a formula for true happiness, but the classical world was in no doubt: Saturn’s was a golden age. As Hesiod sings in *Works and Days*:

First of all the immortals who dwell in Olympian homes
brought into being the golden race of mortal men.
These belonged to the time when Kronos ruled over heaven,
and they lived like gods without any care in their hearts,
free and apart from labour and misery.¹⁶

So, with our final essay by Alexi Kukuljevic, the circuitousness of melancholia receives perhaps the unkindest cut of all: happiness. As ‘the affective registration of the dereliction of things,’ melancholia has also always been held to have some privileged relation to the revelation of the truth of existence. In its ambit, objects are separated from things, subjects become objects, being is infested by phantasms, and the natural sweetness of life becomes unbearable misery. Taking up Giorgio

16 Hesiod 1983, p. 101. Ovid is obviously another source, e.g., ‘*Aurea prima sata est aetas, quae vindice nullo, sponte sua, sine lege fidem rectumque colebat*’ (Golden was that first age, which, with no one to compel, without a law, of its own will, kept faith and did the right) Ovid 2004, pp. 8/9.

Agamben’s analyses in *Stanzas*, Kukuljevic shows how the appropriation of originary negativity by melancholia is operative in Charles Baudelaire’s poetry of spleen. The bilious and intoxicating fumes of spleen corrode the subject and its place, swirling into the bronchial crevices of its Romantic lungs, until the melancholic literally coughs him- or herself up as a graveyard where the long worms feed. As Kukuljevic concludes: ‘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.’ History as a graveyard of enthusiasms or as the triumph of perfected iniquity may roil the beautiful soul, but induces the melancholic to a protracted and painful disentangling of the bonds between life and joy.

If melancholia, which contemplates the end of time itself from within the passing of time and gathers up in order to strew around its own living death its disparate inheritances which have lost all reason but their facticity, still inhabits the conceptual closures of reflexivity, critique, and activity which today remain in force without sense, this is because it constitutes a signature of a bond between thinking and undeath. As a vector of life, melancholia marks the paradox of the undead; as a vector of truth, melancholia refuses not to attend to the impasses in and of the real; as a vector of action, melancholia ratchets-up the incapacity of action to a violent lassitude. This current collection offers a variety of means by which to articulate melancholia’s claims with those of politics.

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Volume 3 /
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Melancholia and Destruction: Brushing Walter Benjamin's "Angel of History" Against the Grain

Sami Khatib

ABSTRACT

In his famous ninth Thesis "On the Concept of History" (1940), Walter Benjamin introduces the "Angel of History" by referring to Paul Klee's watercolored drawing "Angelus Novus" (1920). The gaze of this angel has often been associated with Benjamin's allegedly melancholic yearning for the restoration of a lost and catastrophically crushed past. Challenging mainstream interpretations of this allegory, Giorgio Agamben asked a simple question: what if the 'Angel of History' could close his wings and had his will? Against the grain of melancholic messianisms, Agamben invites us to see the "Angel of History" in a different light. Relying on Freud and Lacan, this paper discusses the split image of Benjamin's "Angel of History" torn between vision and gaze, melancholia and destruction.

for Oxana Timofeeva

*Tactics of attrition are what you enjoyed
Sitting at the chess table in the pear tree's shade.
The enemy who drove you from your books
Will not be worn down by the likes of us.
Brecht on Benjamin¹*

I.

In his classic article *Mourning and Melancholia* from 1917, Freud compared melancholy to mourning, exposing their antithetical features. Whereas "mourning is regularly the reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction", melancholia is "a pathological disposition,"² for it fails to do the work of mourning, to withdraw libidinal energy from the lost object and to finally move on to another object. In this way, the melancholic remains fixated to the lost object, internalizes it and identifies herself with the desired yet impossible object. This pathology is complicated by the fact that "the patient cannot consciously perceive what he has lost either."³ Therefore, as Freud concludes, "melancholia is in some way related to an object-loss which is withdrawn from consciousness, in contradistinction to mourning, in which there is nothing about the loss

1 Brecht, quoted in Benjamin 1998a, p. XVIII. Brecht wrote this poem in 1941. It is not only a reflection on learning about the sad news that his friend had died (Benjamin killed himself in late September 1940 while trying to escape Vichy France), but also a reference to Benjamin's tactic of playing chess with Brecht. For a detailed account on Brecht and Benjamin as chess players see McGettigan 2010, pp. 62-64.

2 Freud, SE 14, p. 243.

3 Freud, SE 14, p. 245.

that is unconscious.”⁴ Although melancholy borrows some features from mourning, they relate to each other in an antithetical way. Whereas the work of mourning takes time to painfully part from its loved object, melancholy remains attached to the loss without being able to redirect libidinal energy to a new loved object. In this way, the predicates of mourning and melancholy form a chiasmus. During the work of mourning, the mourner is *conscious* about her lost object. The melancholic, on the contrary, is narcissistically conscious only about her loss, yet has *no consciousness* of her lost object. Therefore, melancholy cannot let go the lost object; rather, it internalizes, swallows it. As a result, melancholy fetishizes the loss itself up to the degree of identification without knowing exactly what has been lost. “In this way an object-loss was transformed into an ego-loss and the conflict between the ego and the loved person into a cleavage between the critical activity of the ego and the ego as altered by identification.”⁵ This alteration through identification is not triggered by the lost object but by the loss itself. But what is a loss without its object? What is the spectral nature of “the *shadow* of the object” that “fell upon the ego”⁶?

From his reading of Freud, Giorgio Agamben drew the conclusion that melancholy is a strategy of the psyche to avoid the chance of a real loss because the object has never been possessed in the first place and, therefore, there is nothing really to lose.⁷ In the case of melancholy, libido preemptively stages a loss before anything in the object could have been possessed in order to remain faithful and fixated to the desired object. In this way, melancholy produces a pseudo-loss, a fantasy, an imaginary negative object-relation, masking the real absence of any possible object, and thereby allowing for the detached cultivation of loss (as narcissistic faithfulness vis-à-vis the phantasmatically lost object).

Referring to Agamben, Rebecca Comay concludes that “[m]elancholia would thus be a way of staging a dispossession of that which was never one’s own to lose in the first place – and thus, precisely by *occluding structural lack as determinate loss*, would exemplify the strictly perverse effort to assert a *relation with the non-relational*.”⁸ This perverse reading brings melancholy close to fetishism – “the compensatory construction of imaginary unities in response to a traumatic loss (‘castration’) which structurally can be neither fully acknowledged nor denied.”⁹ Agreeing with Agamben’s parallelization of fetishism and melancholy, Comay, however,

4 Freud, SE 14, p. 245.

5 Freud, SE 14, p. 249.

6 Freud, SE 14, p. 259.

7 Agamben 1993, pp. 19-21.

8 Comay 2005, p. 89, emphasis mine.

9 Comay 2005, p. 90.

asks: “Could perversion be the mark of the subject’s impossible relationship to a loss which is ultimately not its own to acknowledge in the first place – but so too, equally, the index of a certain promise?”¹⁰ And if so, could we ask if there is a promise of melancholy that exceeds the horizon of perversion by presenting its inner contradictions in order to overcome the fantasy of melancholy altogether – by exiting fantasy through traversing it? What kind of present can let go of the “melancholic fixation on the past” and “explode the nostalgia to which it simultaneously seems committed, just as the perverse temporality of suspense or ‘lingering’ may undermine its own implicit consecration of an embalmed or reified present.”¹¹ This question seems paradoxical at first glance: “how might fixation yield a form of rupture?”¹² The possibility of rupture – the undoing of melancholic fixation in order to set free the fixated and the fixator – would assume that the fantasy of loss can be overcome or, rather, interrupted by acknowledging structural lack. As we will see, history is ontologically incomplete, it even lacks the lost object. In other words, a non-fetishistic concept of history that frees itself of melancholic fixation has to let go the fantasy of loss (of the past as some primordial unity, completeness or meaning). Is there a non-fetishistic promise of melancholia beyond fetishization, perversion, and internalization? These questions are posed most astutely in the work of Walter Benjamin.

II.

In 1920 Paul Klee drew a strange figure called *Angelus Novus*. 20 years later, after the Hitler-Stalin-Pact at the beginning of World War II, Benjamin referred to Klee’s peculiar oil transfer drawing with watercolor. In his last text, the “Theses On the Concept of History,” Benjamin introduced the now famous “Angel of History,” an allegorized condensation of his reflections on historiography, Marxism and messianicity.

There is a picture by Klee called *Angelus Novus*. It shows an angel who seems about to move away from something he stares at. His eyes are wide, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how the angel of history must look. His face is turned toward the past. Where a chain of events appears before *us*, *he* sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise and has got caught in his wings; it is so strong that the angel can no longer close them. This storm drives him irresistibly into the future,

10 Comay 2005, p. 90.

11 Comay 2005, p. 95.

12 Comay 2005, p. 95.

to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows toward the sky. What we call progress is *this* storm.¹³

The angel and his gaze have often been read as an emblem of Benjamin's own "messianic" concept of history and his allegedly melancholic yearning for the restoration of a lost and catastrophically crushed past. This personification, however, misses the strategic function that Benjamin gave this allegory in the context of his Theses. To begin with, the figure of the angel neither represents Benjamin himself nor contains the abbreviated essence of his concept of history. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, angels are messengers, neither fully human beings nor divine entities, living in the interstices of historical immanence and eternal transcendence. Benjamin's clearly emphasizes the difference of our *historical* perspective vis-à-vis the angel's view ("a chain of events appears before *us*, *he* sees one single catastrophe"). In the original draft copy typescript Benjamin marked this difference even by using spaced out font.¹⁴ As I will argue in this paper, the entire argument on the angel's gaze hinges on this difference. The angel's perspective on history differs from ours and is thus not to be conflated with the one of history's oppressed or a properly messianic perspective. The angel is able to "see" something that is accessible to him only. To be sure, the angel's gaze is not neutral – there is a desire inscribed in his gaze: "The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed." His wish is intensive but impotent: the mighty storm of extensive history (which we call "progress") blows him towards the future. Let us postpone for a moment the question of the texture of this storm. Instead I suggest to distinguish between the angel's field of vision – non-linear history as catastrophic "pile of debris" – and his gaze upon the past.

According to Lacan we have to distinguish between gaze and vision. The angel of history clearly displays this split: what he sees is not "in" his gaze. "The split between gaze and vision will enable us [...] to add the scopoc drive to the list of the drives."¹⁵ And, as Lacan adds, this peculiar scopoc drive is attached to the "object petit a," the unattainable object cause of desire: "*The objet a in the field of the visible is the gaze.*"¹⁶ If we transpose this split to Benjamin's take on Klee's *Angelus Novus* as the "Angel of History," the angel's gaze needs to be distinguished from what he actually sees. Moreover, the angel's gaze is not only punctuated by his desire ("awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed") but *is* itself the unattainable object of desire (immortality and wholeness). We

13 Benjamin 2003, p. 392.

14 Benjamin 2010, p. 35.

15 Lacan 1978, p. 78.

16 Lacan 1978, p. 105.

cannot see what the *Angelus Novus* is looking at. It is precisely this feature that renders Klee's watercolor a possible allegory of the split in the field of *historical* vision. Benjamin writes that the angel stares at something, eyes widely open. It seems the angel is disturbed by something that has no stable place – something that is moving while he is being moved – something that has no clear boundaries, trajectory or place. We only know he cannot rest on his forced journey departing from a primordial past (paradise) bound to the future. However, if we look closely at the original drawing, we can detect a torsion in the field of the angel's vision, a divergent strabismus in his left eye. If, according to Lacan, the gaze never coincides with the subject's eye and, to this extent, expresses the subject's split nature itself,¹⁷ the gaze presents the objective, that is desubjectified dimension of seeing. Klee's angel articulates this "objective" dimension. What turns the *Angelus Novus* into Benjamin's "Angel of History" is not so much his wings but the torsion within his field of vision, articulating the split of the angel's "subjective" eye and his "objective" gaze. The object of his gaze cannot be "seen" – it is the unattainable object of desire, the primordial mythic state of paradise "before" humanity's fall into history.

If we read the "Angel of History" as a melancholic figure, the split in the angel's field of vision gets lost. Identifying his gaze and the latter's attachment to the object cause of his redemptive desire (unfractured wholeness and post-/pre-historical immortality) leads to the identification with an impossible, that is unattainable object. Melancholy can be regarded as a fetishistic subjectification and economization of undoing the split between eye and gaze. We will later return to this aspect. For the moment, it is worth noting that it is exactly a melancholic reading and, furthermore, the identification of Benjamin with the angel's allegedly melancholic gaze that has become a major source of Benjamin's popularity, triggering sentimental "Benjaminiana" and neutralizing the political thrust of his reflections on history.

III.

Challenging mainstream interpretations of the "Angel of History," Agamben asked a simple question: what if the angel could close his wings and had his will? Against the grain of melancholic readings and their handy appropriations in contemporary humanities and art discourses, Agamben invites us to see the angel in a different light.

Those who see the angel of history in Benjamin's Ninth Thesis ["On

17 In *Seminar XI* (1964), Lacan famously wrote: "*You never look at me from the place from which I see you. Conversely, what I look at is never what I wish to see*" (Lacan 1978, p. 103). As Dylan Evans comments: "When the subject looks at an object, the object is always already gazing back at the subject, but from a point at which the subject cannot see it. This split between the eye and the gaze is nothing other than the subjective division itself, expressed in the field of vision" (Evans 1996, p. 73).

the Concept of History,” S.K.] as a melancholic figure would therefore most likely be horrified to witness what would happen if the angel, instead of being driven forward by the winds of progress, paused to accomplish his work. Here Benjamin’s intention is not very different from the one Marx expressed in a phrase that exerted a profound influence on Benjamin. In the introduction to the *Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*, considering the fact that in the course of history every event tends to be represented as a comedy, Marx asks: “Why does history take this course?” Marx answers: “So that humanity may happily [*heiter*] separate itself from its past.”¹⁸

Following Agamben’s reading, humanity’s *heitere*, cheerful or happy, separation from the past is forestalled by the storm of history as progress. Trying and failing to defy the powerful storm of historical time (what we call “storm”), the angel still wants us take leave of our past cheerfully. History’s debris remains catastrophic only if we keep on moving as things are. As Benjamin noted in the *Arcades Project*: “The concept of progress must be grounded in the idea of catastrophe. That things are ‘status quo’ is the catastrophe. It is not an ever-present possibility but what in each case is given.”¹⁹ This post-catastrophic, if not post-apocalyptic condition also applies to the angel. Strangely reminiscent of Hegel’s “Owl of Minerva,” yet with a completely different conclusion, Benjamin admits that philosophy of history is always too late. Moreover, the angel never takes his flight, the storm of history is too powerful and his wings are already caught in the uneven, ever recurring status quo of catastrophe. Only a messianic standstill of history would allow the angel to close his wings and bring history to its messianic end. In contrast to eschatological concepts of history, however, Benjamin’s peculiar take on the Jewish and Christian motif of the messianic does not rely on the binary of either historical flatness (linear, fractured, future-directed, irreversible) or eschatological fullness (univocal, whole, eternal, circular). Rather, extensive history is only historical in the strict sense if punctuated by sparks of intensive messianicity – *historical* time is time “shot through with splinters of messianic time.”²⁰ Without this messianic tension history is not historical but “homogeneous, empty time.”²¹ In this sense, history is ontologically incomplete – it lacks its messianic completion, fulfillment and end. And it is only this structural lack that makes history “historical.” History as incomplete is bound to messianic redemption precisely for being unredeemed. The same structure

18 Agamben 1999, p. 154. Benjamin quotes the same passage from Marx (cf. Marx 1843) in the Konvolute of his *Arcades Project*, Benjamin 1999a, p. 467 (N 5a,2).

19 Benjamin 1999a, p. 473 (N 9a, 1).

20 Benjamin 2003, p. 397 (thesis A).

21 Benjamin 2003, p. 397 (thesis B).

holds true for the angel’s wings: authentically historical time, punctuated by messianic splinters, only emerges from the tension between the angel’s impossible desire (closing the wings, end of history, standstill) and the storm of history that moves him irresistibly towards the future. With regard to Agamben’s Marxian reading, a happy separation from the past would first necessitate a full realization and ‘working-through’ of this tension, rather than internalizing it as loss. Put differently, a melancholic reading of the unsublatable tension between the angel’s desire and his catastrophic vision would revert to a flat non-historical concept of history, fetishizing loss over structural lack.

This antagonistic tension is expressed by the split of angel’s vision. His “object-driven” gaze does not coincide with his subjective vision which fixates on history’s debris. Rather, it bears witness to an objective yearning that exceeds subjective melancholic fixation. However, taking Agamben’s reference to Marx seriously and confronting it with Lacan, the angel’s redemptive desire is impossible – it can only be addressed indirectly by confronting the impossibility of his desire with the political present. In other words, the angel’s redemptive desire corresponds to political action, that is, the destruction of ruling class’s history, the interruption of history as catastrophic status quo. Political action is thus the only (possible) answer to the (impossible) will of the angel to close his wings and to allow us to take leave of our past in a happy and truly reconciled way. This structure of correspondence, however, is asymmetric and non-linear. There is no direct translation, no equivalence. We cannot close the angel’s entangled wings on his behalf. We cannot reconcile the angel’s desire for redemptive stasis with the revolutionary-destructive will to “to blast open the continuum of history.”²² The split in the angel’s field of vision poses a problem that is either acknowledged politically and acted out historically or pathologically glossed over by identifying vision and gaze, internalizing the impossible object of desire as loss. Political action is the only “analytic,” that is non-pathological way of confronting the impossibility of undoing the split of the angel’s vision and acknowledging the unattainability of his object of desire. As we shall see, accepting this impasse does not lead to apolitical quietism but to a political ‘work of mourning’ which is, at the same time, an intervention in the concept of history, changing the parameters of historical vision. Such a changing, however, cannot indulge in its own melancholic fixation to the “Angel of History” and the latter’s identification with Benjamin’s allegedly melancholic character.

IV.

Not surprisingly, Agamben’s Marxian interpretation of Benjamin’s angel is at odds with most conventional readings. The “Angel of History” has mostly been taken as an emblem of Benjamin’s melancholic messian-

22 Benjamin, 2003, p. 396 (thesis XVI).

ism and, moreover, as a token of Benjamin's own melancholic personality. Suffice to say, before challenging these interpretations we need to rid ourselves of our own affective investment in the figure of the angel as an icon of contemporary "left-wing melancholy." Already 20 years ago the art historian Otto Karl Werckmeister sardonically noted:

Thus Paul Klee's watercolor *Angelus Novus* of 1920 has become, on Benjamin's rather than Klee's terms, a composite literary icon for left-wing intellectuals with uncertain political aspirations. Benjamin's interpretation of a "modern" artwork as a mirror of autobiographical self-assurance and as a fantasy of political dissent has been turned into a foundational text for a theoretically abbreviated and metaphorically stylized alternative historical idea bent on reflecting on its own inconclusiveness. As an icon of the left, *Angelus Novus* has seemed to hold out an elusive formula for making sense of the senseless, for reversing the irreversible, while being subject to a kind of political brooding all the more protracted the less promising the prospects for political practice appear to be. Thus Benjamin's suggestive visual allegory has become a meditative image – an *Andachtsbild* – for a dissident mentality vacillating between historical abstraction and political projection, between despondency and defiance, between assault and retreat. The image keeps the aggressive tension inherent in such a mentality in abeyance so that the tension stays put within the politically disenfranchised, and hence ideologically overcharged, realm of culture. For this perpetual holding pattern Benjamin's own notion of a dialectics at a standstill offers its own tailor-made philosophical validation.²³

Indeed, Benjamin's omnipresence in contemporary art and critical theory discourses has transformed his writings into a perpetuum mobile, instantly capable of producing relevance, meaning and authority for seemingly anyone who invokes his name. While Werckmeister aptly criticizes the use and abuse of the "Angel of History" as an *Andachtsbild*, meditative image, for left intellectuals, it was Benjamin himself who argued against a melancholic detachment from actual politics. In his short piece "Left-wing Melancholy" from 1931, a polemical review on left-leaning activist authors in Weimar Germany, he fiercely criticized

the attitude to which there is no longer, in general, any corresponding political action. It is not to the left of this or that tendency, but simply to the left of what is in general possible. For from the beginning all it has in mind is to enjoy itself in a negativistic quiet. The metamorphosis of political struggle from a compulsory decision into an object of

23 Werckmeister 1996, p. 242.

pleasure, from a means of production into an article of consumption that is this literature's latest hit.²⁴

Benjamin defines left-wing melancholy as a pseudo-radical attitude that does not intervene in the political conditions of the possible. Being "left of what is in general possible" leads to negativistic quiet because the political struggle for new possibilities has been given up *before* anything could have been lost in this struggle. Understood in this way, left-wing melancholy is a kind of preemptive strike against the possibility of a real loss – a political defeat after having been engaged in a struggle. In 1940, however, one could argue that Benjamin himself is in a position of those left-wing radicals that he had criticized during the last years of the Weimar Republic. While being exiled in France, he never fully succeeded in becoming actively engaged in the political struggle against fascism. His critical attempts to present himself as a "strategist on the literary struggle,"²⁵ waging class struggle on the field of literary criticism, only let to small-scale victories in the course of a large-scale defeat.

In 1940, Benjamin is defeated by both the victorious course of fascism and by having been denied a greater role in the antifascist struggle during his exile in Paris. Without going into detail of the difficulties that hampered his role as a leading political figure among German radical-leftist exiles, in early 1940, when writing the Theses, Benjamin seems to look like a left-wing melancholic himself mourning the loss of a political struggle that he had not even possessed in the first place. This is *one* way to read the Theses and today the main body of Benjamin scholarship provides us with more or less refined facets of this image. To be sure, it is possible to counter this image with Benjamin's own criticism of left-wing melancholy. However, in the context of the Theses, I propose to take the charge seriously and dwell on the question whether there is also a non-perverse reading of melancholy – a promise of undoing melancholic fixation by traversing the fantasy of loss in order to exit it.

If such a reading is possible, it first needs to estrange, denaturalize its object of inquiry. As Ilit Ferber rightly notes: "[T]here is the natural, almost instinctive, attraction to Benjamin's own melancholic disposition (to date, most of the scholarly work exploring this 'melancholic connection' has been preoccupied with this aspect)."²⁶ This tendency toward psychologization can rely on the image circulated by one of Benjamin's closest friends and sharpest readers, Gershom Scholem. For Scholem, Benjamin's version of Klee's *Angelus Novus* was "basically a melancholy figure, wrecked by the immanence of history, because the latter can only

24 Benjamin 1999b, p. 425.

25 Benjamin 1996, p. 460.

26 Ferber 2013, p. 17.

be overcome by a leap that does not save the past of history in an ‘eternal image’, but rather in a leap leading out of the historical continuum into the ‘time of now’, whether the latter is revolutionary or messianic.”²⁷

Without challenging this interpretation directly,²⁸ it is worth noting Scholem is right to highlight the importance of the *Angelus Novus* not only in the context of the Theses but also in Benjamin’s entire oeuvre and life. Bought in Munich in 1921, Klee’s watercolor remained with Benjamin for most of his unsteady life.²⁹ After his death in 1940, the *Angelus Novus* was passed on to Scholem. Scholem’s widow eventually gave it to the Israel Museum in Jerusalem where it is still stored and exhibited. In 1921, Benjamin and Scholem even wrote a draft proposal for a never realized political journal, named after the angel, *Angelus Novus*. Inspired by the Talmudic tale according to which “angels – who are born anew every instant in countless numbers – are created in order to perish and to vanish into the void, once they have sung their hymn in the presence of God,”³⁰ the journal was intended to explicate the political meaning of *Aktualität* – a central term of Benjamin’s later Marxist period in the context of the *Arcades Project*. For *Aktualität* denotes both modal actuality and untimely contemporaneity.

The same passage will also return in the autobiographic sketch “Agesilaus Santander” written on Ibiza in summer 1933. The two slightly different versions of this piece make a reference to the “New Angel,” drawing a different picture, revealing a more destructive face of the angel. Benjamin writes in the second version that the *Angelus Novus*, the “New Angel,” presents himself as such an angel of actuality – angels “whose only task before they return to the void is to appear before His throne for a moment and sing His praises.”³¹ Having denied the angel to sing his hymn for a while – in 1933 after the Nazis took power Benjamin could not return to his apartment in Berlin where the *Angelus Novus* still hang on the wall³² – the angel has sent “his feminine aspect after the masculine one reproduced in the picture.”³³ The physiognomy of this angel reveals a different meaning

27 Scholem 1976, p. 234f.

28 For a convincingly argued critique of Scholem’s image of Benjamin see Agamben 1999.

29 Werckmeister 1981, p. 103–112.

30 Benjamin 1996, p. 296.

31 Benjamin 1999b, p. 714.

32 Cf. Scholem 1976, pp. 209f.

33 Benjamin 1999b, p. 715. Without discussing the theological implications of Benjamin’s reference to a “feminine aspect” of the masculine angel (at length discussed in Scholem’s and later Agamben’s readings of this passage), the biographical circumstances have been unraveled by more recent Benjamin scholarship. On Ibiza Benjamin fell in love with the Dutch painter Anne Marie Blaupot ten Cate. Today, in light of the discovered correspondence between her and Benjamin (documented in Luhr 2000, pp. 129–173), we can take it for granted that Blaupot ten Cate is the female

of the seemingly melancholic figure mentioned in the later Theses. In 1933, the now exiled Benjamin writes:

But the angel resembles everything from which I have had to part: the people, and especially the things. He dwells in the things I no longer possess. [...] Indeed, the angel may have been attracted by a person who gives but who goes away empty-handed himself. For he, too, has claws and pointed, razor-sharp pinions, and makes no attempt to fall upon whomever he has his eye on. He looks him steadily in the eye, for a long time, and then retreats – in a series of spasms, but inexorably. Why? To draw him after himself on that road to the future along which he came, and which he knows he has chosen out of his sight.”³⁴

At first glance, this angel looks like a melancholic figure of loss (“the angel resembles everything from which I [Benjamin] have had to part”). However, instead of fetishizing an unconscious loss, Benjamin consciously admits that he has already parted from the people and things he sorely misses in exile. Again, Benjamin’s angel becomes the screen of the split in the field of vision. The angel looks the mourner who has already parted from the loved object, “steadily in the eye.” He does not return Benjamin’s gaze upon the lost object. Rather, he actively draws him away from these objects of desire, dragging him “on that road to the future along which he [the angel, S.K.] came.” If the angel represents the dimension of loss and, to this extent, the desire for an unattainable object, the angel’s gaze cannot coincide with Benjamin’s own vision. Rather, the angel looks at him, the one who has already mourned loss and who “goes away empty-handed,” “steadily in the eye, for a long time, and then retreats – in a series of spasms, but inexorably.” In other words, the angel’s fixating eye on the mourner’s eye articulates the “objective” dimension of the gaze bound to the impossible object of desire vis-à-vis the mourner’s subjective eye. The angel takes out the gaze of Benjamin’s eye by looking into his eye. Moreover, the angel steals away the gaze leaving Benjamin’s vision “empty-handed.” This privative extraction is expressed by the angel’s appearance. In contrast to what we see in Klee’s watercolor, here the angel “has claws and pointed, razor-sharp pinions.” These features enable the angel to almost surgically extract the gaze from the mourner’s eye – by just looking into the mourner’s eye, stealing his gaze away.

The privative function of the angel is acknowledged by Benjamin. Instead of disavowing the objective split of gaze and eye by means of melan-

reference of Benjamin’s enigmatic sketch. In the initial German publication of “Agesilaus Santander” Benjamin’s German editor Rolf Tiedemann referred to her only as a Dutch painter and translator (Tiedemann in Benjamin 1985, p. 809). Benjamin’s love for her remained unanswered during his lifetime.

34 Benjamin 1999b, p. 715.

cholic identification of the subject with the lost object, he even affirms and radicalizes the destructive aspects of loss. Two years before “Agesilaus Santander,” in 1931 he mentioned Klee’s angel in his essay on Karl Kraus.

The average European has not succeeded in uniting his life with technology, because he has clung to the fetish of creative existence. One must have followed Loos in his struggle with the dragon “ornament,” heard the stellar Esperanto of Scheerbart’s creations, or seen Klee’s *New Angel* (who preferred to free men by taking from them, rather than make them happy by giving to them) to understand a humanity that proves itself by destruction.³⁵

The coupling of happiness and destruction, liberation and taking-away follows Benjamin’s ultra-modernist communist strategy of the early 1930s, radicalizing the implosion of the bourgeois-liberal universe of humanism. Explicitly referring to Klee, he even calls for a “new, positive concept of barbarism,”³⁶ announcing a new life-form, neither derived from a nostalgic past nor a prophetic future but from the poor now and the “dirty diapers of the present.”³⁷ In accordance with the Brechtian maxim “Don’t start from the good old things but the bad new ones,”³⁸ figures like the new barbarian, Klee’s “New Angel” and Kraus’s *Unmensch*, the “monster” or “Un-Human,” articulate a post-humanist experience of impoverishment, proletarianization, and capitalist privation that old humanism can no longer account for. With regard to Freud’s pathologization of melancholy, one could argue that these figures of destructive privation present the truly post-melancholic answer to melancholic faithfulness towards the lost object. Instead of fetishizing the ruins of “good old” humanism, they undertake the only possible form of the latter’s dialectical rescue: They let go the old by destroying the decaying carcass of humanism, taking leave of their past cheerfully. In these destructive figures “mankind is preparing to outlive culture, if need be. And the main thing is that it does so with a laugh. This laughter may occasionally sound barbaric. Well and good.”³⁹ In 1940, however, nothing seems “well and good.” The barbarism of fascism has revealed itself as the true heir of humanist culture. However, we cannot fail to also detect the destructive reverse side of Klee’s *Angelus Novus* in Benjamin’s ninth Thesis “On the Concept of History.”⁴⁰

35 Benjamin 1999b, p. 456.

36 Benjamin 1999b, p. 732.

37 Benjamin 1999b, p. 733.

38 Benjamin 1998a, p. 121.

39 Benjamin 1999b, p. 735.

40 In terms of the Theses, there is a clear link to Benjamin’s short piece on the “Destructive

One could add further philological material and philosophical arguments to counter the conventional melancholic reading of the “Angel of History” by following the latter’s destructive aspect. However, in our context, I suggest to go one step back and revisit the common hypothesis according to which Benjamin’s allegory could function as a melancholic emblem of Benjamin’s entire oeuvre. In light of the earlier stages and transformations of the angel, we are to question readings that follow a retrospective teleology, taking his last text as a politico-philosophical last will. Without diminishing the importance of Benjamin’s Theses, we should remind ourselves that this text was not intended for publication and was meant only to serve as an epistemo-political draft for a future prologue to his unfinished book on Baudelaire.⁴¹ Instead of reading Benjamin through the narrow perspective of his last text, I argue it is more productive to take into account Benjamin’s own theory of melancholy, outlined in his failed habilitation work on *The Origin of German Trauerspiel* from 1928. From there, we can grasp the contradictory layers that form and inform Benjamin’s take on Klee’s *Angelus Novus*. As we will see, Benjamin’s dialectical concept of melancholy lingers over the polar extremes of happy destruction and melancholic fetishization, political-exoteric struggle and philosophical-esoteric brooding.

V.

Already the pre-Marxist Benjamin was convinced that melancholy, however perverse its structure, contains the promise of its own undermining. As many readers of Benjamin have rightly pointed out, his book on German *Trauerspiel*, literally “Mourning Play,” does not strictly distinguish between mourning, *Trauer*, and melancholy. Benjamin’s account on the Baroque is not so much interested in the work of mourning, *Trauerarbeit*, but demonstrates how early modernity was able to *spielen* (play) with *Trauer* (mourning), turning mourning into the (theatrical) staging ground of what he describes the dialectics of melancholy. In his book on *Trauerspiel*, he writes:

Mourning is the state of mind in which feeling revives the emptied world in the form of a mask, and derives an enigmatic satisfaction in contemplating it. Every feeling is bound to an *a priori* object, and the representation of this object is its phenomenology. Accordingly the theory of mourning, which emerged unmistakably as a *pendant*

Character,” also written in 1931, which shares many features of his concept of positive barbarism from 1933. In the preparatory drafts of the Theses, he defines the “function of political utopia” as “to cast light on the sector of that worthy of destruction,” adding the note “My psychology of the Destructive Character and the proletarian one towards a critique of Blanqui” (Benjamin 1974, p. 1244, trans. mine).

41 See Tiedemann’s commentary to “On the Concept of History” in Benjamin 1974, pp. 1223-1227.

to the theory of tragedy, can only be developed in the description of that world which is revealed under the gaze of melancholy [*Blick des Melancholischen*].⁴²

Ferber comments: “The mourner, in Benjamin’s sense, attempts to revive the lost and emptied world in a manner different from that of Freud’s mourner, who eventually accepts the loss and is willing to part from it. In Benjamin’s alternative the mourner, when attempting to awaken life in what is lost, does so by contemplating a mask, the only material residue of the lost empty world, a basically theatrical gesture.”⁴³ Obviously, Benjamin’s use of terminology differs from Freud’s. Not distinguishing between mourning and melancholy, Benjamin presents mourning not only as a theatrical gesture but as a reaction to an actually emptied world: The early modern world of the Baroque reacts to the rise of natural sciences, experiencing itself deprived of its transcendent-medieval eschatology and trans-historical, theologically guaranteed teleology. What could be read as a reaction to cosmological emptiness, which, at the same time, actively revives the world and creates some sort of contemplative satisfaction for the subject (if not enjoyment), Freud places in the interior melancholic psyche. “In mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself.”⁴⁴ In other words, for the gaze of melancholy world and world history have become the exterior display of inner emptiness. Yet for Benjamin the borders between inside and outside, the interior of the individual psyche and the external stage of world history, are not clearly distinguishable. For Benjamin the melancholic is the figure who is faithful to the initial loss of transcendent meaning without consciously knowing what this loss actually is and from where it originated: Did the emptied object empty the subject or did the subject herself empty the object in the first place? Reading Benjamin with Lacan (and, to this extent, against Benjamin’s line of argument), it is the “gaze of melancholy” that empties the subject’s vision upon the world. The melancholic gaze does not belong to the subject; it never coincides with the subject’s intention and perspective. Worldly emptiness appears as the symptom of the subject’s failed attempt to gain control over her melancholic gaze. One could read Benjamin’s theory of the origin of *Trauerspiel* as a theory of the theatrical mode of unintentionally working through this split, independently of how one regards this working through as successful or ultimately failed.

Without deciding this question, Benjamin’s account on Baroque melancholy proves instructive if read as a theorization of the split nature of the melancholic field of vision. Drawing on medieval astrology and

42 Benjamin 1998b, p. 139, trans. changed, see also Ferber’s comment in Ferber 2013, p. 38.

43 Ferber 2013, p. 38.

44 Freud, SE 14, p. 246.

the doctrine of temperaments, Benjamin develops the dialectics of the melancholic mind torn between phlegmatic *heaviness* of spirit (“acedia”) and contemplative *lightness* of a brilliant mind. For Benjamin, this dialectics was clearly displayed in the ancient-medieval theory of the impact of planet Saturn on human affairs:

Like melancholy, Saturn too, this spirit of contradictions, endows the soul, on the one hand, with sloth and dullness, on the other, with the power of intelligence and contemplation; like melancholy, Saturn also constantly threatens those who are subject to him, however illustrious they may be in and for themselves, with the dangers of depression or manic ecstasy.⁴⁵

Benjamin was well aware of the ancient-medieval fusion of the Greek myth of Kronos (or *Chronos*) with the later theory of Saturn which coalesce in the Baroque figure of the melancholic. The reference to Saturn and saturnine melancholia can also be traced to Benjamin “Angel of History” which does not only refer to Klee’s watercolor but also echoes his biographical sketch “Agesilaus Santander,” mentioned above. In the latter text he writes that the angel took advantage of the fact that he, Benjamin, “was born under the sign of Saturn – the planet of the slowest revolution, the star of hesitation and delay”⁴⁶. Seen from this angle, the fusion of Saturn and Kronos/Chronos can be read as a temporalization of the spatial (or, rather, topological) torsion in the field of melancholic vision. Missing the unattainable object cause of melancholic desire, objectified in the “gaze of melancholy,” the Saturnine subject is always ‘too late’ or ‘too early’ to grasp the lost object, oscillating between depressive belatedness and ecstatic presence of mind.

VI.

Benjamin’s last Theses can be regarded as a materialist account on the dialectical nature of the melancholic mind, expressed by the split in the melancholic field of vision. The “Angel of History” is always too late and too early to close his wings and (re)gain the lost object of history: a primordial past the restitution of which would be true novelty in contrast to the ‘eternal recurrence of the same.’ Traversing the fantasy of the lost object, the Theses call for both a “present which is not a transition, but in which time takes a stand and has come to a standstill,”⁴⁷ and, at the ‘same time’, an interruption of the paralysis of melancholic fixation. To repeat Comay’s question: “What would it mean to ‘traverse the fantasy’ so as to

45 Benjamin 1998b, p. 149.

46 Benjamin 1999b, p. 715.

47 Benjamin 2003, p. 396.

release the present from a reassuring stasis? To negotiate the switching station between the too early and the too late, between fetishistic ‘before’ and melancholic ‘after’, so as to change the terms of both postponement and its obverse?”⁴⁸ Once again, Benjamin’s erratic sketch “Agesilaus Santander” could give us a hint: “He [the angel, S.K.] wants happiness – that is to say, the conflict in which the rapture of the unique, the new, the yet unborn is combined with that bliss of experiencing something once more, of possessing once again, of having lived.”⁴⁹

Already before Benjamin wrote the Theses, he had been engaged in this dialectical twist, either in temporal or spatial terms. His materialist writing of the mid 1930s circled around the problem of how to traverse and, ultimately, exit the fetishistic-melancholic universe of commodified bourgeois culture and its phantasmagorias. In the *Arcades Project* and his studies on *Baudelaire* – texts that were planned and written as projects of the exiled *Institute for Social Research*⁵⁰ – Benjamin persistently raised the question of the possibility, technique and method of a collective awaking from the mythical dream world of capitalism. Rather than engaging in the critico-ideological task of presenting phantasmagorias as the ‘necessarily false’ form of capitalist consciousness, he tried to get hold of them as collective dream and wish images. Instead of perceiving phantasmagorias exclusively as part and parcel of ‘false consciousness’, he was interested in their materiality. Taking them in their sheer material presence as petrified artifacts, phantasmagorias become legible as the material screen of the collective unconscious the content of which are images lingering at the thresholds of myth and awakening. With microscopic precision and meticulous patience, Benjamin traced the exterior of these images in everyday cultural products, architecture, art, and literature of the 19th century. His theory of the “dialectical image” can be summed up as an attempt to exploit the constitutive ambiguity of the specifically commodified dream images in a revolutionary way. As is well known, Benjamin’s close friend Theodor W. Adorno, who also functioned as a mediator between him and the exiled *Institute for Social Research*, was not convinced by this approach. In the first “Exposé” of the *Arcades Project* from 1935, Benjamin presented an outline of his theory of the dialectics of awakening, oscillating between dreaming anticipation and belated realization of dream elements.

The realization of dream elements, in the course of waking up, is the paradigm of dialectical thinking. Thus, dialectical thinking is the organ of historical awakening. Every epoch, in fact, not only dreams the one

48 Comay 2005, p. 96.

49 Benjamin 1999b, p. 715.

50 Parts of Benjamin’s unfinished book on Baudelaire were published in the Institute’s journal, the famous *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, the germ cell of what was later known as Frankfurt School.

to follow but, in dreaming, precipitates its awakening. It bears its end within itself and unfolds it – as Hegel already noticed – by cunning. With the destabilizing of the market economy, we begin to recognize the monuments of the bourgeoisie as ruins even before they have crumbled.⁵¹

It was Benjamin’s deliberate Marxist wager that dialectical images as crystallizations of collective dream images could interrupt the continuity of the dream-filled sleep of capitalism and even anticipate the disintegration of phantasmagoric immanence. This stance earned him the fierce criticism of Adorno. In the now famous “Hornberg letter” from 1935 his friend objected that

If you transpose the dialectical image into consciousness as a ‘dream’, you not only rob the concept of its magic and thereby rather domesticate it, but it is also deprived of precisely that crucial and objective liberating potential [*Schlüsselgewalt*, literally: “power of the keys”] that would legitimate it in materialist terms. The fetish character of the commodity is not a fact of consciousness; it is rather dialectical in character, in the eminent sense that it produces consciousness.⁵²

What triggered Adorno’s disapproval relates to a passage of the 1935 *Arcades Exposé* in which Benjamin scandalously stated: “Ambiguity is the appearance of dialectic in images, the law of dialectics at a standstill. This standstill is utopia and the dialectical image, therefore, dream image. Such an image is afforded by the commodity per se: as fetish.”⁵³ Juxtaposing fetish and the utopian exit from commodity fetishism without further mediation and even assuming that the constitutive ambiguity of dream images could be dialectically accelerated (and thus implying that exploiting dialectical ambiguities of collective images could bypass the quasi-transcendental validity of commodity fetishism) proved to be incompatible with Adorno’s post-Hegelian Marxism. To be sure, in his response Benjamin insisted on the “irruptions of waking consciousness,”⁵⁴ upholding his basic argument. However, in the second half of the 1930s European fascism had already established its power in the domains of the political imaginary, social practice, and state ideology. Independently with whom one sides in the classic debate between Adorno and Benjamin, one cannot fail to recognize that Benjamin’s materialist strategy was dedicated to finding the breakages from where the dreaming immanence of capitalist phantasmagorias could be punctuated and, ultimately, exited. He thought he could trace them by radicalizing the dialectical tensions within the

51 Benjamin 1999a, p. 13.

52 Adorno in Benjamin/Adorno 1999, p. 105.

53 Benjamin 1999a, p. 11.

54 Benjamin in Benjamin/Adorno 1999, p. 119.

world of collective dream images, accelerating threshold experiences in their polar extremes (however “mythical” or “ideological” they may be). “That, of course, can happen only through the awakening of a not-yet-conscious knowledge of what has been.”⁵⁵

Benjamin’s contradictory strategy of anticipating a not-yet-conscious-knowledge of something-that-has-been only makes sense if one keeps in mind that for Benjamin history is ontologically incomplete. *History will have been* – and it is this peculiar form of *futur antérieur* that, in terms of the Theses, provides the structural condition of possibility for both the retroactive redemption of missed chances for happiness in the past⁵⁶ and the anticipating pulling of the “emergency brake”⁵⁷ of the catastrophically racing train of capitalist modernity. As Comay succinctly put it: “This defines the peculiar temporality of Benjamin’s messianism – the rescuing of a past futurity and the retroactive stimulation of a ‘not yet’ forever to come.”⁵⁸ It all hinges, however, on how we read this temporal paradox. The idea of messianic time might be a traversing of the phantasms of historical consciousness, ever oscillating between a fetishistic “before” and a melancholic “after.” Such circular traversing in the name of the “Angel of History” could go on forever – unless messianic fantasy rids itself of its own phantasmatic investment into the past. The self-voiding of messianic fantasy is not to be found in melancholic brooding, esoteric wisdom, or theological investigation. Only politics could offer the cure in which the work of mourning takes on a constructive shape. In other words, only the coincidence of political construction with messianic destruction provides a possible way out of the circular movement from ‘not yet’ to ‘too late’. As Benjamin wrote in the alternative version of Thesis 17: “For the revolutionary thinker, the peculiar revolutionary chance offered by every historical moment gets its warrant from the political situation. But it is equally grounded, for this thinker, in the right of entry which the historical moment enjoys vis-à-vis a quite distinct chamber of the past, one which up to that point has been closed and locked. The entrance into this chamber coincides in a strict sense with political action, and it is by means of such entry that political action, however destructive, reveals itself as messianic.”⁵⁹

55 Benjamin 1999a, p. 458 (N I,9).

56 Cf. the second Thesis “On the Concept of History”: “the image of happiness we cherish is thoroughly colored by the time to which the course of our own existence has assigned us. There is happiness – such as could arouse envy in us – only in the air we have breathed, among people we could have talked to, women who could have given themselves to us. In other words, the idea of happiness is indissolubly bound up with the idea of redemption” (Benjamin 2003, p. 389).

57 Benjamin 2003, p. 402.

58 Comay 2005, p. 101.

59 Benjamin 2003, p. 402.

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Hypochondria and Its Discon- tents, or, the Geriatric Sublime

Rebecca Comay

ABSTRACT

In the third *Conflict of the Faculties*, virtually the last text published within his own lifetime, Immanuel Kant runs through a somewhat ridiculous catalogue of (his own) hypochondriac afflictions and offers a panoply of philosophical prescriptions for alleviating these — the “power of the mind to master its morbid (or sickly) feelings by sheer resolution.” Some readers seize on this scenario as an unwitting parody of Kant’s own transcendental project: the comedy seems to stage an empirical dress rehearsal of the systematic opposition between the empirical and the transcendental and suggests the structural contamination of the very ideal of purity by the pathology it wants to master. A well-trodden dialectical approach, from Hegel and Nietzsche through Freud and Adorno, discerns in this tizzy of stage-management the perfect case history of the dialectic of enlightenment, ascetic ideology, or the return of the repressed: the very success of the will would be the measure of its failure, the obsession with pathology the ultimate pathology — the return of mythic nature in the most strenuous efforts to control it. This dialectical approach is compelling but it underplays both the perversity of the scenario and its strange theatricality. It also overlooks the startling practical implications — at once biopolitical, ideological, economic, institutional, and aesthetic — of Kant’s peculiar experiment. A strange note on which to end a treatise dedicated to the pedagogical imperatives of the Prussian state.

Sickness, like many other kinds of suffering, is one area in which the usual vocabulary for discussing illusion and reality seems to falter, along with other dualisms often associated with this pair: mind and body, artificial and natural, fiction and fact, inside and outside, ideology and whatever the opposite might be. Suffering — not only the pain of others but even one’s own — is at once irrefragable and elusive, both infallible and unverifiable, both irrefutably immediate and yet, like most things, a historical artifact, burdened with its own specific set of protocols, susceptible to cultural variation, social negotiation, political contestation. For this reason it is where the boundaries of private and public, self and others, can become particularly confusing. Hume observed that the very experiences that most singularize us are the site of our greatest porosity to others. Suffering at once draws us inward, tears us away from the world, refuses community and communication, and at the same time demands an acknowledgement, a witnessing, that it systematically seems to repel. It forces a sociability that it simultaneously preempts.

All this can put pressure on any ethical or political project that stakes its claims on the normative authority and self-evidence of compassion, empathy, and identification. Suffering exacts a demand for recognition, a claim to validation or legitimation, even as the received terms of recognition are systematically put into question.

The exorbitance of this demand can provoke discomfiting reactions. We can be repelled, we can feel icily indifferent, we can feel triumphant, we can swell with newfound purpose. We can be mean-spirited and disbelieving, we can be infuriatingly calm, cloyingly engaged, secretly envious and competitive. And we can extract moral gratification from the excellence of our own compassion. But above all, we have an amazing ability to ignore suffering that happens to occur anywhere further away than, say, our own backyard, even while the proximity of suffering can get under our skin like a infectious disease.

Hypochondria, or what goes by this name, is an interesting case in all these regards and it's surprising to me that it has attracted so little philosophical attention. It's intriguing for several reasons. First: because of its peculiar epistemological situation. The incontrovertibility of the hypochondriac's distress clashes with its peculiar unverifiability: it is impossible to refute and equally impossible to account for. This antinomy finds expression in the invalid's ever-escalating demand for the impossible — simultaneous confirmation and refutation from the outside world. My ailment needs to be corroborated, my worst certainties disproved. Second, and relatedly: because it troubles the dualism of truth and illusion. Like ideology, hypochondria is impervious to rational argument (it even thrives on it) and tends to feed on preemptive countermeasures; fussing about illness can provoke the illness it fears and sometimes worse ones.

Third: because its constructedness is so palpable. Like almost everything, hypochondria, both the name and the thing, is a historical artifact, a product of the eighteenth century, coming into prominence as the humoral theory of black bile gives way to neurological theories of nerves and vapours, and medieval melancholia to the twin pathologies of hypochondria and hysteria. This historicity is typically corroborated by markers of nation, class, or gender — the “English malady,” a badge of gentlemanly refinement and privilege — but these markers are never stable, if only because the disease is from the outset on the verge of assuming epidemic proportions. No sooner is it identified than hypochondria will overflow national boundaries, along with distinctions of class, gender and culture, an expansion connected to the rise of capitalism. As the book trade swells, literacy soars, and luxury goods proliferate, illness, and even the very worrying about it, becomes another upscale commodity on the consumer market.

Fourth and almost finally: hypochondria is puzzling because it produces such a peculiar cocktail of emotions in both sufferer and observer — entitlement, grandiosity, resentment, on the one hand, irritation, suspicion, boredom, on the other — and guilt and shame all around for such endlessly unattractive demands and reactions.

But strangest of all: because it makes us laugh. Why is hypochondria the subject of so many comedies, skits, satires, droll memoirs and

wry confessions — what's so funny? Laughter itself is a complicated event, hard to suppress and almost impossible to feign, and, like illness in at least this one respect, it has a contagious and involuntary aspect which can take us to the edges of our comfort zone. We laugh at Molière's *malade imaginaire*; we smile indulgently at Proust's Aunt Léonie; we gossip, at least in Canada, about Glenn Gould's gloves and overcoat, but it's sometimes hard not to feel a flinch of shame. The unease isn't necessarily because of the wince of recognition we may be harboring but because the impulse to laugh forces us to face questions about the extent of our own *Schadenfreude* — a sour, “devilish” emotion, Kant called it. There's nothing funnier than unhappiness, says Beckett's Nell, and this too makes us laugh, but it's unclear just why we give ourselves permission *here* and not *there*, why we get to ridicule *this* particular kind of suffering, and not, say, the suffering of a dying person, a wounded or abused or tortured person. There is something profoundly important in maintaining these distinctions even if we may have a philosophical stake in blurring them. These boundary issues raise interesting questions about protocols of legitimation and normativity, and touch a neuralgic kernel at the heart of our ethical investments.

I said a moment ago that there were no philosophical treatments (in both senses) of hypochondria. But that's not exactly true. It was always floating around the edges of German idealism and romanticism. In what follows I want to turn to one of the more peculiar texts from this epoch. You may wonder whether it's philosophy at all. Its genre is also a little unclear — chapter, essay, letter, memoir, advice column, memorandum, notes to servant, notes to publisher, note to self...

Towards the end of his writing life, in the last of the three essays of the *Conflict of the Faculties*, Kant takes up a topic that has never ceased to preoccupy him. The title announces the “power of the mind to master its morbid (or sickly) feelings by sheer resolution, or mere intention” [*von der Macht des Gemüths durch den bloßem Vorsatz seiner krankhaften Gefühle Meister zu sein*].¹ The issue of power and mastery is a pressing one and speaks to both transcendental and worldly concerns. It pertains not only to the mind struggling with its own corporeality but also to philosophy as a discipline as it grapples with its own tenuous institutional embodiment.

Having set up a series of competitions between the “lower faculty” of philosophy and the various “higher faculties” of the university — law,

1 Kant 1996a, p. 313. Citations to Kant will refer to existing English translations where available, occasionally modified, supplying the corresponding pagination of the Akademie edition of *Kants gesammelte Schriften* 1960 for easier reference. Here at 7:97.

theology, medicine — Kant sets out to reverse the prevailing academic hierarchy. He announces the conceptual privilege of philosophy over the vocational or professional disciplines. This advantage is grounded on the distinction between autonomous and instrumental rationality, between a self-authorizing mode of thinking and one tethered to the techno-bureaucratic constraints of church, state and market, and there's an immediate institutional agenda. Kant has been unsuccessfully campaigning for years to secure for philosophy an exemption from state censorship and from the exigencies of utility, expediency, or profit, even if the price of this freedom might be a concession to marginalization or trivialization— a retreat into irrelevance, unintelligibility and numbing tedium. As Kant himself is the first to point out, and the question cannot fail to resonate today, no one really reads or bothers with philosophy anyway, so what's the problem?²

The third chapter is at once the most marginal to the book and arguably the most central. It's evidently so peripheral to the main argument that Kant didn't even bother writing a proper chapter or anything remotely resembling one, awkwardly stitching in a previously published scrap sitting in his drawer in order to flesh out the book's announced tripartite structure. The argument is rambling and disjointed, the topics ranging from the most grandiose to the most inconsequential, from ponderings on the meaning of life to fussing about correct bath temperature and best choice of font size. Some readers have been tempted to consign this essay to that ever-swelling portion of the Kantian corpus known ominously as the *senilia* (by analogy with the *juvenilia*).

It's central because it speaks to the core problematic of the critical project. The disciplinary advantage of philosophy over medicine corresponds to the critical supremacy of mind over body, spirit over matter, freedom over nature — a victory all the more uncertain in that Kant will never cease reminding us that the connection between these two domains must remain inscrutable. As the third essay proceeds Kant's own determination to master hypochondria through an act of resolute decision is accompanied by a growing irresolution regarding etiology, diagnosis, prognosis, and cure. By the end of the essay, Kant will have put into question not only the efficacy but also the ultimate point of treatment.

You don't have to go sailing off into the waters of the noumenal to run aground on the shoals of paradox. It's enough to peer into the murky interior of your own body. You can't begin to think about it without ending up drowning in an ocean of confusion. There's a *geometrical* or *mereological* uncertainty between part and whole: I experience a localized irritation as a life-threatening assault on the haleness or wholesomeness, *Heilsamkeit*, of my entire body; or I take my generalized malaise to originate in a specific bodily malfunction. There's a *spatial* uncertainty between inside

2 Kant 1996a, p. 241; Kant 1960, 7:8.

and outside: I mistake an endogenous sensation for an injury coming from the external world; or I mistake an exogenous impression, something I merely read or hear about, or observe in other people, for something arising in my internal sensorium.

There's a *temporal* confusion between past and future: I register every impending disaster as always already accomplished; or I infer from past mishap the certainty of future calamity. There's an *aspectual* confusion between the temporary and the ongoing, between discrete event and chronic condition: I misconstrue a passing distress as the symptom of a permanent and incurable affliction; or I take a stable state of affairs to be the harbinger of imminent disaster. There's a *modal* confusion between the categories of possibility, actuality and necessity: I take the possibility of illness as proof of its inevitability; or I misconstrue the inevitability of my own senescence as a contingency that I can and ought somehow to parry.

There's an *etiological* slippage between cause and effect, between pathogen and symptom, between the occasion of illness and its consequence. This circularity was well-rehearsed in the eighteenth century imaginary: hypochondria is both caused by luxurious life-style and produces unhealthy cravings for rich food; indolence makes you tired and lazy; boredom makes you bored and boring. All this contributes to hypochondria's reputation as an endlessly recursive or self-reproducing disease but also to its peculiar infallibility: hypochondria has a performative ability to ratify its own testimony, to convert anxious foreboding into self-fulfilling prophecy. Illusion of this sort has the uncanny ability to prove itself true: anxiety generates what it dreads, the fear of falling makes you fall. (Among Kant's many compelling thought experiments: walk along a board lying on the ground. Now stretch that board across a yawning precipice and try doing it again.³)

The preoccupation with health also induces some elementary category confusions. Above all it blurs the line between *quality* and *quantity*: it confounds the difference between longevity and vitality, between living long and living well. The condition at once exaggerates suffering and inexplicably seeks to prolong this misery by turning life itself into an endlessly mortifying ritual of self-management. Kant's hypochondriac presents the conundrum posed by Voltaire in *Candide*: the worse the life, the more we cling to it — “we caress the serpent that devours us.” Or, as Woody Allen puts it in *Annie Hall*: “the food is terrible at this restaurant — and such small portions!” And we keep going back for more.

Is hypochondria a mental phantasm or a physical malaise? Is it a propensity to imaginary illness, which produces delusory bodily sensa-

3 Kant 2007, p. 62n; Kant 1960, 7:169n. The *Anthropology* lectures were published roughly at the same time as the *Conflict*, and are useful for filling in the picture.

tions, or is it an abdominal compression, which stimulates ideational distortions? The affliction has the curious character of being at once localized and diffuse — both digestive constriction and vaporous expansion — both somewhere very specific and nowhere in particular. The unstable locus of the illness strangely parallels the uncertain location of philosophy as a discipline, its slightly eccentric or ectopic position within the university, and recalls Schelling's challenge to the very idea of disciplinary containment: how can something like philosophy, which (like God or the soul) is everything and everywhere, be anything or anywhere in particular, for example, confined to a department or relegated to a faculty where it could either serve or assume jurisdiction over the other faculties or disciplines?⁴

Are my pathological feelings, *krankhafte Gefühle*, illusory feelings of sickness or genuinely sick feelings, a cognitive disorder or an affective distemper, an imaginary illness or an actual illness of the imagination? Hypochondria wrecks the usual protocols of falsifiability and verifiability on which scientific rationality depends. Morbid feelings about the body both reflect and generate somatic morbidities that systematically blur the line between health and sickness even as they typically misconstrue the significance of this distinction by producing the tormenting and in every way pathogenic phantasm of an unattainable bodily perfection.

Because health, like existence, is not a possible object of cognition, we can never decisively determine if we are healthy (the very need to pose the question already suggests that something's not quite working), and every attempt to answer it not only inevitably begs the question but opens up a raft of new pathologies that extend from the individual to the collective body, and can even toxically blur the distinction between these. Not only does every investigation invariably distort its object — under the glare of observation, says Kant, every subject becomes both impresario and actor⁵ — but it introduces its own specific pathologies and perversities that threaten both to undermine the integrity of the individual and to erode the sinews of the body politic.

An overdose of introspection can in itself lead to gloominess, religious fanaticism and madness. And at a biopolitical register, adds Kant, this can lead to dangerous fantasies of a hyperbolic self-reliance that is always on the verge of veering into “illuminism and terrorism.”⁶ By instilling in the invalid the illusion of self-diagnosis and the ever spiraling

4 Schelling 1966, p. 79.

5 Kant 2007, p. 21; Kant 1960, 7:132.

6 Kant 2007, p.22; Kant 1960, 7: 133.

temptations of self-mastery, hypochondria challenges the professional authority not only of medicine, still in its infancy as a secular vocation, but of the institutional and political framework that sustains this, both within the university and beyond. It brings into focus the crisis of investiture that threatens to undermine the charismatic authority of the master on every possible front.⁷

Hypochondria both illuminates and complicates the fraught set of social relations between patient and doctor in the modern age. It casts light on the tangled web of patronage and prestige in which everyone seems to find themselves suddenly playing all the roles at once — every doctor simultaneously priest, traveling salesman, and servant; every patient simultaneously supplicant, client, and patron. By “everyone” I don't really mean *everyone*, of course — just the educated middle class who have presumptively assumed this role as they stake out the path of universal human *Bildung*.

On the one hand the doctor confronts the nightmare of the all-knowing patient: an explosion of newspapers, self-help manuals, sentimental novels, patent medicine, wellness regimes, holiday spas, gymnastic regimens, and home remedies has produced the torments of the educated imagination — the invalid who's read all about every possible disease, who already knows everything anyway, and yet who nonetheless needs you, if only to confirm their own infallible diagnosis, to ratify their suffering, but at the same time to alleviate their terror. While the patient, in turn, confronts the nightmare of a doctor *who's supposed to know*, whose very job is to know, but who obviously doesn't get it, can't possibly appreciate the gravity of the condition, and is destined eventually to disappoint, betray, and abandon. This paradox marks a crisis of legitimation at the very origin of the modern university.⁸

7 To speak Lacanian: hypochondria stages the quarter turn in one direction, from the “discourse of the master” to the “discourse of the university” – from the performative force of sovereign power to the prestige of disinterested expertise. This is precisely the phantasm of pure theory that sustains the modern university project. But hypochondria simultaneously stages a quarter turn in exactly the opposite direction, from the “discourse of the master” to the “discourse of the hysteric.” The latter unsettles theoretical conviction regarding not only the specific authority of the master but of every master discourse, including, therefore, that of the university itself. See Lacan 1999.

8 The contradictory position of the doctor also crystallizes the antinomy of the modern university as such. At the very moment that the university is becoming most indispensable as a state institution, it begins to appear most superfluous. (This paradox is not unconnected to the rise of literacy and the explosion of the publication industry in the late eighteenth century). In this culture of self-reliance and accessibility all the “businessmen” are at risk of becoming redundant, which means that the university as a whole — the “factory” producing them — is at risk. The educated invalid can't stop diagnosing himself, rendering the doctor superfluous; the soul-searching congregant discovers the grounds of religious practice within himself, rendering the clergyman superfluous; while over in France, the revolutionary citizen has just taken the law into his own hands, rendering the sovereign authority of the king himself, and the lawyers who represent him, null and void. See also note 16 below.

We are already drowning in an ocean of liar's paradoxes: either the hypochondriac is right, in which case he can at least take hypochondria off the list of things to worry about, or he's wrong, in which case he really does have something to worry about. Anxiety is an affliction about which one has every reason to be anxious. Like insomnia, hypochondria is burdened by a recursive, performative circularity, a tendency to metastasize into ever-expanding circuits of uncertainty, and to collapse under the tautological pressure of its own conviction. It stages the intractable antinomy between skepticism and dogmatism that fuels the entire critical project. It demonstrates (as Hegel will never tire of pointing out) how doubt itself can be in one and the same respect both excessive and insufficient.

Hypochondria thus unfailingly reproduces what it dreads. And it can be aggravated by every effort to manage it insofar as treatment requires precisely the kind of vigilance, the obsessive self-monitoring, which is one of the essential hallmarks of the disease. Treatment thus proves to be either ineffective or redundant if not even counterproductive. "Sheer resolution" will have no purchase for the hypochondriac, who by definition either lacks all power of resolution or whose very determination to fix things is just the shadow syndrome of the disease itself. The "panacea" (that's Kant's own word: *Universalmittel*)⁹ will be available only to either those who abuse it or those who have no need of it anyway — an illustration of the supplementary logic of the *pharmakon* at its most obtuse. Indeed the effort to discharge the symptom might even irreversibly exacerbate it, as Kant himself discovers the hard way, when an overly strenuous effort to divert his attention from a debilitating head cold caused a "brain cramp" which ended up, he complains, permanently impairing his ability to maintain the sequence and coherence of conversation, narrative, and argument — in short the consistency and intelligibility of thinking itself. Directed against the compression that is both occasion and analogue of hypochondriacal affliction, the pressure of the will had inflicted a permanent derangement of Kant's own inner sense — the temporal *Zeitfolge*, the irreversible succession of before and after — on which the very unity of consciousness, and perhaps not only consciousness, depends. "[T]he result of this pathological condition is that when the time comes for me to connect [my thoughts] I must suddenly ask...now where was I? where did I start from?... It is a most disagreeable feeling,"¹⁰ I'll come back to this.

Whatever else he is doing in these peculiar pages, virtually the last ones published in his lifetime, Kant is also unmistakably scripting the mise-en-scène of his own final act, an elaborate theatrical production

9 Kant 1996a, p. 313; Kant 1960, 7: 98.

10 Kant 1996a, p. 325; Kant 1960, 7:113.

with a large supporting cast and crew in which Kant will play all the main roles himself — playwright, director, stage manager, star, spectator, and eventually even stage prop. After a stroke leaves him speechless he will become a waxwork effigy, wheeled out at meal times so he can preside mutely at the dinner table; in the end Kant will live on if only to witness his own absence from the life he's crafted.

The scenario is well-known through De Quincey's exuberant description, freely lifted from the memoirs of Kant's disciples, but with many helpful details supplied by Kant himself (the question of authorship is getting blurry by this point) — the servants all lined up at their stations, the coffee-urn always at the ready, the dinner guests at their places, the topics of conversation selected as carefully as the three-course menu. The schedule is organized from dawn to midnight and observed with military precision: the wake up call at 4:55, the mid-day lunch party, the post-prandial stroll through town (that's the walk made legendary through Heine's witticism about all the housewives of Königsberg setting their clocks every afternoon to the exact timing of the professor's beat). A session of "thinking" is scheduled for 6:00 p.m. sharp. There's an impressive gymnastic maneuver at midnight, when Kant tucks himself into bed (there's a strict sequence to be followed: right arm, left arm, left leg, right leg, you might not want to try this), swaddled in his blankets as tightly as a mummy in its wrappings, or like a silkworm in its cocoon, quips De Quincey.¹¹

Even the so-called autonomic nervous system is brought under control as Kant learns to regulate his digestion, body temperature, sleeping, breathing. The tips and tricks proliferate, a panoply of prescriptions administered to regulate the metabolic transactions of daily life. Don't breathe through your mouth: you'll waste saliva (which also means, in theory, that you shouldn't talk while breathing either, or breathe while talking, which could be a problem in practice, but at least you can take a cue from Rousseau and take your walks solitary). But don't eat alone: you might end up thinking, which will interfere with your digestion. Have guests around, but always the right number, and always be sure to calibrate the intellectual level of the conversation so that it's not too boring but not too arousing; a certain amount of laughter is a good idea, it stimulates the digestion, so assign it to the third course (news of the day is

11 All details in this paragraph and the following two are drawn from De Quincey 1880. (Many of these details correspond to specific recommendations offered by Kant himself in the *Anthropology* and the *Conflict*.) As noted, De Quincey's text is a wickedly free translation of the at least superficially more reverential memoirs by Borowski, Jachmann, and Wasianski 1974. See particularly Wasianski's account at pp. 213–295. For excellent readings of De Quincey's use of these memoirs, as well as of Kant's own essay, see Clark 2003, pp. 261–287 and O'Quinn 1997, pp. 261–286. See also the illuminating discussion by Susan Meld Shell, *The Embodiment of Reason: Kant on Spirit, Generation, and Community* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996) and Andrew Cutrofello, *Discipline and Critique: Kant, Poststructuralism, and the Problem of Resistance* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1994)."

assigned to the first course; (moderately) lively debate to the second); no dinner music, no party games, not too many women, it goes without saying; and definitely leave philosophy off the list of dinner party topics. And another thing: don't try not to think at the same time as walking; so much multitasking might cause the system to short-circuit. Oh, and one more thing: don't forget the gadget. There's an intriguing device, apparently designed by Kant himself, a kind of portable thermostat involving pulleys, ratchets, secret pockets with hidden cables for adjusting the height of your stockings so they don't cling or bunch and mess up the homeostasis of your body temperature.

The domestic regime expands until both culture and nature are brought in line, the garden becoming scenery, the birds providing the sound effects, even the planetary rhythms adjusted to fit Kant's schedule. A letter is dispatched to the warden of the local prison complaining about the noisy hymn singing; the music is distracting the man from his writing. Another neighbor's tree is chopped down because it obstructs the view from Kant's study. The songbirds cooperate by moving their nest closer to his window so he can work to the accompaniment of their chirping. His friends figure out a way to speed up the seasons: Kant wants to celebrate his birthday, and he wants to do it *now*, and everyone is getting worried anyway that he won't make it to his 80th, so they fudge the date, just a bit, so that in the last year of Kant's life April arrives in February. That's one way of cheating death: if you can't forestall the event, at least manipulate the calendar so you get to enjoy the after-party.

These are just a few of the fun facts that you too can read all about when you need a break from slogging through the first *Critique*. Some readers seize on this scenario as a kind of involuntary parody of the transcendental project itself, the wild proliferation of details confirming Hegel's point about the ineluctable complicity between formalism and empiricism — a flood of trivia rushing in to fill the vacuum of the critical-transcendental apparatus. The comedy seems to stage at the level of appearances the critical distinction between the phenomenal and the noumenal: it presents an empirical dress rehearsal of the systematic opposition between the empirical and the transcendental and suggests the structural contamination of the very ideal of purity by the pathology it wants to master. A well-trodden dialectical approach, from Hegel and Nietzsche through Freud and Adorno, discerns in such a tizzy of stage-management the perfect case history of the dialectic of enlightenment, ascetic ideology, or the return of the repressed: the very success of the will would be the measure of its failure, the obsession with pathology the ultimate pathology — the return of mythic nature in the most strenuous efforts to control, discharge, or mortify it. (Needless to say, there are also some notable privileges of class and gender.)

This dialectical approach is compelling, I guess, but it's not the tack I want to pursue here, if only because it underplays both the perversity

of the scenario and its strange theatricality. The rub is not just that the body poses a recalcitrant limit to the will's power, or that freedom draws its energy precisely from this resistance. (Which was of course more or less Kant's own point when he spoke of duty's need for a permanent whetstone — the inextirpable or "radical" human tendency towards evil — on which to hone its edge.) It's not just about the standard contradiction of mind-body dualism — the mind pitted against the stupidity of the body and becoming thuggish in this pitting, to vulgarize the argument of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. What's unnerving for the hypochondriac is not so much the obtuseness of the body but rather its uncanny intelligence. Oracular in its pronouncements, brimming with secrets that it won't divulge but can't stop hinting of, constantly emitting messages that both demand and elude interpretation, its tattered surface a field of illegible inscriptions, the body seems to have a preternatural agency and intelligence, in the face of which it's the mind itself that starts to become increasingly stupid and reactive. Perpetually circling around itself, the mind starts to resemble the Cartesian body — a machine running on empty, its initiative stripped down to repetitive, automatic insistence, all agency reduced to the "empty freedom of a turnspit."¹²

In fact the body seems to be able to understand the mind far more effortlessly than the mind understands the body and certainly than the mind understands itself. Whereas reason finds itself everywhere bashing against its own limits, forced at every pass into paroxysms of contradiction — it is unable either to avoid or to tolerate its own dialectical illusions — the hypochondriac body seems to effortlessly give voice not only to the dissonant panoply of its own sensations but to the aporia of its own porous and ever-shifting boundaries. The membrane between inside and outside is effortlessly breached, every internal organ a conduit to every other and to the outside world, the entire surface of the body a gigantic orifice for receiving and transmitting. This boundary crossing continues even after death. The corpse, notes De Quincey, manages to feed upon its own internal organs, the insides turning into their own outsides as the frontier between life and death is continually blurred.¹³

But all this stage-management makes inscrutable the distinction between the regime of the will and the regimen of technical reason; between the disciplining of the mind through sheer resolve or *Vorsatz* and the manipulation of the body through drugs or surgery; between freedom and mechanism; between "critical" and "dogmatic living." This last dichotomy had been introduced in Kant's earlier "Enlightenment" essay, where one of the symptoms of self-inflicted infancy or tutelage (*Unmün-*

12 Cf Kant 1996b, p. 217; Kant 1960, 5:97.

13 De Quincey is describing Kant in his essay on Coleridge, cited by Clark 2003.

digkeit) was said to be an excessive attachment to the paternal authority of the preacher, the lawyer, the doctor, the lawyer¹⁴ — the “businessmen” turned out in the “factory” of the modern university.¹⁵ Who needs businessmen when self-care has itself become a full-time business? But all this busyness challenges the notion of a strictly philosophical regime; it disarms the conflict between philosophy and medicine that was the supposed topic of Kant’s entire essay.¹⁶

But this is because the real battle surely lies elsewhere. If Kant is staging a non-existent conflict between philosophy and medicine, this is in order to prolong the far more intractable battle, left still unfinished in the first *Conflict of the Faculties*, and creeping back in again at the edges of the second, between philosophy and theology. The tripartite organization of the book is in this respect misleading: it might tempt us to assume that the three “higher faculties” are more or less equivalent in respect to their institutional heteronomy, as if philosophy is fighting a three-headed Cerberus, but this would underestimate the deconstructive force of Kant’s intervention. It is a question not only of reversing the hierarchy between higher and lower faculties but also of destabilizing the integrity of the original terms. The “higher” triumvirate itself is internally riven, its own internal boundaries fuzzy, each profession infringing on and solicited by every other — doctors facing malpractice suits, doctors providing less-than-expert witness in law courts, clerics leaning into medics — all scrambling for resources, prestige and power.

In the end religion will have been philosophy’s only real adversary. Kant’s ultimate target is not the medical doctors but rather the practitioners of “moral medicine” — the Pietists, the Moravians — who in their eagerness to extract theological meaning from physical suffering make the fatal inference from bodily affliction to moral evil — the semantic

14 Kant 1996b, p. 17; Kant 1960 8:35; c.f., Kant 1996b, p. 21; Kant 1960 8:41.

15 The industrial metaphor is Kant’s own. See Kant 1996a, p. 247 (“like a factory, so to speak”); Kant 1960 7: 17 (“*gleichsam fabrikmäßig*”). On the professional classes as businessmen see Kant 1996a, p. 248; Kant 1960 7:19 (and *passim*). As Kant will point out, the “businessmen” churned out by the higher faculties in the *Conflict* have a vested interest in prolonging such attachment: the professionals *need* to maintain a steady supply of sinners, criminals, and invalids on which to ply their trade. Things must be as bad as possible so that the professionals can come along to fix them — a politically ambiguous situation, as Kant is the first to point out. The businessmen need to be needed — up to a point. The threat of imminent crisis simultaneously reinforces the paternal authority of government and, by inducing instability, sows the seeds of economic insecurity and civil unrest. See Kant, ““On the common saying: That may be correct in theory, but it is of no use in practice” (1793), in Kant 1996a, p. 291; Kant 1960, 8:290f. See also note 9 above. I address this issue of disinvestiture in a forthcoming essay.

16 This also complicates Kant’s already complicated negotiations with the state authorities. In taking over the role of the doctors, the philosopher substitutes for the vigilance of external censors the self-imposed activity of internal surveillance.

slide from *malum* (as pain) to *malum* (as evil), an ambiguity coded in the Latin which continues to clog Kant’s text as an undigested medieval remnant.¹⁷ Illness, in a pre-modern universe, is both symptom of and punishment for a spiritual degradation that requires ever-increasing doses of supernatural ministration. The suffering of the body is scant preparation for the spiritual agonies awaiting the beleaguered penitent — the torments of self-scrutiny, forced confession, and a repentance that keeps energizing itself by feeding on its own insufficiency. My penitence provokes the anguishing second-degree reflection that I am not adequate to the grief I suffer or that this grief itself is somehow inauthentic or insufficient. I suffer over the fact that I’m not suffering enough, or in the right way, or at the right time, or with the right words or gestures, and this reflexive torment in turn provokes the suspicion that I’m secretly mollifying myself with all this anguish. This circle of self-punishment eventually drives me to the point that I need to call in an outsider, a big Other who will be able to guide my spiritual practice, to intercede on my behalf, and eventually to do my suffering for me — a delegation of responsibility that only compounds my guilt and further tightens the addictive spiral.¹⁸ Kant’s objection to Pietism anticipates Hegel’s objection to Kant himself (and of course Nietzsche’s objection to all of Christianity). In other words: the Reformation remains an unfinished project.¹⁹

Kant describes the continuous prayer practice of the Moravians as a kind of artificial life support without which faith would atrophy and die.²⁰ He’s referring to the practice of continuous worship, the popular devotional practice institutionalized by Nikolaus von Zinzendorf as the Protestant successor to the *laus perennis* of earlier monastic orders. A collective prayer vigil was started in 1727, in the aptly named town of Herrnhut (“on watch for the Lord”) in Saxony, with hourly intersessions that would continue uninterrupted for 100 years. (You can still encounter remnants of this practice in evangelical churches scattered across the world — all-night prayer houses in Kansas City,²¹ a plethora of online congregations manned continuously around the clock,²² One of these virtual communi-

17 cf Kant 1996b, p. 187; Kant 1960, 5:59f.

18 Kant 1996a, pp. 277-279; Kant 1960, 7:55f.

19 For further reflections on this performative circularity in relation to the recursive structure of lament see Comay 2014.

20 Kant 1996a, p. 278 ; Kant 1960, 7: 56 ; see also Kant 1996c, p. 209; Kant 1960, 6:195

21 <http://www.ihopkc.org/>

22 <http://www.ihopkc.org/prayerroom/about-the-prayer-room/>

ties is called “24-7 Ibiza.”²³) Like a flickering flame, like life itself, any interruption to the flow of prayer would sever the spiritual bond between human and divine and extinguish the fragile spiritual lifeline from which alone redemption issues.

And behind the unending struggle with religion lurks philosophy’s own battle with itself — morality’s unending struggle with its own lingering scrupulosity. To fight that battle, to purge suffering of the last, most stubborn vestige of theological investment, might require not only borrowing the arsenal of medical science but administering to philosophy a dose of unapologetic banality: a drop of utilitarianism, a spoonful of behaviorism, a tincture of positivism, or something even stupider. Kant speaks of a “diet with respect to thinking.”²⁴

At one point in his essay Kant recommends as part of the regimen the practice of “philosophizing without being a philosopher.”²⁵ The formula recalls the celebrated invocation, in the first *Critique*, of “philosophizing without philosophy.” You cannot learn *philosophy as such* but only *how to philosophize*. More precisely, you can learn only *to philosophize* — that you must philosophize. (Phrased even more precisely, and Derrida has explored the multiple scansions of this sentence: you can only *learn to philosophize*.)²⁶ This performative surplus of act over object had supplied modernist pedagogy with its founding principle. Philosophy is neither a set of thematic doctrines nor a technical gadget to be mastered; it consists rather in the incessant inaugural gesture — the act of pure initiative — that defines the “discipline” of critique as such.²⁷ Philosophizing without either philosophy or philosophers turns out to be both a way of prolonging life so you reach old age and something to do when and if you

23 <https://www.24-7prayer.com/247ibiza>

24 Kant 1996a, p. 322; Kant 1960, 7:109.

25 “*das Philosophieren, ohne darum eine Philosoph zu sein*,” in Kant 1996a, p. 317; Kant 1960, 7:102.

26 “*Man kann... niemals aber Philosophie... sondern... nur philosophieren Lernen*.” Kant 1998, p. 694 (A837/B866); Kant 1960, 3: 541f. The phrase is repeated nearly exactly in the following paragraph: “*Man kann nur philosophieren lernen*...” (loc. cit.) On the different possible scansions of the phrase, see Derrida 2004.

27 See Farshid Baghai’s splendid PhD dissertation, “The Epigenesis of Pure Reason: Systematicity in Kant’s Critical Philosophy,” University of Toronto. 2013.

eventually get there — a suspension of conceptual labour and agency in which thinking evacuates itself of its last shred of metaphysical substantiality. The philosophizing of the elderly manages to suspend the positivity of both the object and equally the subject of philosophy. Senility brings the critical purge to its completion.

The “without” also of course echoes the “sickliness without sickness” [*immer kränkeln, nie krank werden*] that Kant had introduced a little earlier in the essay when describing the self-prolonging logic of hypochondria.²⁸ The repetition once again underscores the circularity of disease and cure. But the formula is also too reminiscent of all those other Kantian “withouts” not to make us jump. Most notably, it recalls the purposiveness without purpose, *Zweckmäßigkeit ohne Zweck*, that had defined the experience of aesthetic judgment in the third *Critique*.²⁹ In the *Critique of Judgment* the spectacle of the well-proportioned human body had posed a challenge to Kant’s aesthetic regime: the seemingly incontrovertible appeal of the body beautiful threatened to present an exception to the experience of pure disinterested pleasure. Given that the reflective judgment of beauty is by definition independent of every concept — the beauty of the object is vagabond or “vague”: like *hypochondria vaga*, beauty wanders, it is untethered from every normative concept — it had seemed to follow by Kant’s own standards that the human body, no matter how perfect, even especially the more perfect, would be disqualified as an object of pure reflective judgment. Unwilling to go through with this, Kant had admitted the human body by way of a subterfuge linked to man’s exceptional creaturely status. Moral purpose is “stuck” or adheres to the human body — or rather, the body adheres to its ideal: it inherently adheres — by virtue of the idea of humanity that organizes and exhibits its moral destination to the rational viewing public. In other words: we get to keep enjoying all those Greek statues while claiming a respectable modicum of aesthetic disinterest.³⁰

In the *Conflict of the Faculties* Kant drops this subterfuge. The aged body — the body that has outlived its moral purpose, that has been unpeeled or unstuck from its own concept — can be appreciated with a pleasure previously restricted, in the *Critique of Judgment*, to arabesques and wallpaper. This is precisely what Kant himself is beginning to think about when he gets to the end of the essay and brings himself to raise the obvious question: And what’s the point of all this extra living? “So the art of prolonging human life consists of this: that in the end one is tolerated among the living only because of the animal functions one performs —

28 Kant 1996a, p. 315; Kant 1960, 7:100.

29 Kant 2000, pp. 21f; Kant 1960 Ak 5:219f (and *passim*). Cf *Gesetzmäßigkeit ohne Gesetz at Kant* 2000, p. 125; Kant 1960 5:241

30 Kant 2000, pp. 116-120; Kant 1960, 5:231-236.

not a particularly amusing situation..." "But in this respect I myself am guilty," continues Kant, with a perverse glee:

For why am I not willing to make way for younger people who are struggling upward, and why do I curtail the enjoyment of life I am used to just to stay alive? Why do I prolong a feeble life to an extraordinary age by self-denial, and by my example confuse the obituary list, which is based on the average of those who are more frail by nature and calculated on their life expectancy? Why submit to my own firm resolution what we used to call fate (to which we submitted humbly and piously) — a resolution which in any case will hardly be adopted as a universal rule or regimen by which reason exercises direct healing power, and which will never replace the prescriptions the pharmacist dispenses?³¹

Kant here contemplates the spectacle of the superannuated citizen: unfit for procreation, for civil service, for edification of the young, and incapable equally of moral self-improvement or cognitive enhancement. There's an ambiguous value attached to the very old. Despite what everyone says, the elderly are appreciated not out of compassion, not because their frailty evinces solicitude, not out of veneration for their wisdom or authority, not out of respect for the sanctity of life or for the dignity of humanity, but rather... just because they're old. The numbers simply add up — which is to say that they actually don't add up at all.

The duty of honoring old age, in other words, is not really based on the consideration that age, because of its frailty, can rightly claim from youth; for weakness is no reason for being entitled to respect. Old age, therefore, claims to be considered something meritorious besides, since reverence is due it. And the reason for this is not that in attaining the age of Nestor one has acquired, by varied and long experience, wisdom for guiding the young; it is only that a man who has *survived so long* — that is, has *succeeded so long* in eluding mortality, the most humiliating sentence that can be passed on a rational being ("you are dust and will return to dust") — has to this extent won immortality, so to speak. This is the reason why old people should be honored... — simply because they have *preserved their lives so long*..."³²

The sheer lifespan of the aged presents an affront to instrumental reason: their survival thwarts the rationality of the cameral state, chal-

31 Kant 1996a, p. 326; Kant 1960, 7:114.

32 Kant 1996a, p. 315; Kant 1960, 7: 99. Emphases mine.

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lenges the economy, messes up the actuarial calculations based on statistics (the invention of life insurance dates approximately from this epoch), and interferes with the efficiencies of the governmental regime. Their useless longevity thwarts moral rationality as well. The very existence of the elderly resists the teleology of moral and ethical *Bildung*, interrupts the providential course of history, and clutters the institutional space of the university in which these various entelechies are supposed to unfold. Unproductive, incorrigible, the elderly have somehow outwitted history; they've defied the divine verdict passed on man with the expulsion from Eden; they have purged time itself of consistency and moral consequence. Their vegetative persistence, an empty, aimless conatus, puts out of play both the biopolitical requirements of the modern state and the moral purpose once glued to the human body like a price tag. A strange image with which to end a treatise dedicated to the pedagogical imperatives of the Prussian state.

There's a strange disenchanted sublimity — counter-purposiveness all the way down. This is no longer about the conversion of frailty into strength according to the slave logic of the loser wins. There is no question of extracting moral triumph from the encounter with mortality. Precisely the opposite is the case: in its useless decrepitude the body has become the site of a peculiar indestructibility. Pried away from every aim or purpose, living on beyond its allotted lifespan, the geriatric body testifies to an insistent, unapologetic undeadness at the heart of life itself.

And what is the old person to do with all this extra time? It's not exactly that he squanders it or simply whiles it away in boredom. He meticulously *marks* time, but in such a way as to sabotage the whole temporal regime. In the closing pages of the essay Kant introduces the striking figure of the "very old man" who occupies himself by setting all the clocks in the room to strike "one after the other, never at the same time" (*immer nach einander, keine mit der andern zugleich*).³³ In this repetitive pulsation of the moment the progressive continuum of inner sense, of universal history, of moral destiny, and of the scene of pedagogy is simultaneously acknowledged, parodied, and disrupted.³⁴

33 Kant 1996a, p. 317; Kant 1960, 7:102.

34 Thanks to Cary Fagan, Bob Gibbs and Frank Ruda for comments.

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Hypochondria and Its Discontents

Controlled Melancholy: How to Purely Love Political Power

Marc De Kesel

ABSTRACT

Put on the throne by the vicissitudes of history, the Spanish king Philip V, youngest grandson of the French king Louis XIV, never stopped feeling that throne to be not his and to be himself a “usurper”. And all the comments of his former preceptor and teacher, François de Fénelon, reacting on the impasse Philip has arrived at, advise a kind of melancholic attitude as the best way to deal with the situation. A lot of Fénelon’s analyses can be read as application of his mystical theory of *Pur Amour* (Pure Love) to the domain of politics. After describing the Spanish king’s melancholic character and the melancholic situation he is in, the article explores Fénelon’s comments and advices. The question imposing itself here is whether this advice does not come down to a practice of ‘controlled melancholy’. Or does it conceal a theory of the act similar to the one Žižek will formulate three centuries later? Controlled melancholy or revolutionary act? A reflection on a ‘political’ fragment in Pascal will help to orientate this dilemma – a dilemma, which in a way summarizes the problem modernity’s politics still has to face nowadays.

*

‘For you have but mistook me all this while:
I live with bread like you, feel want,
Taste grief, need friends – subjected thus,
How can you say to me, I am a king?’
William Shakespeare, *Richard II*, 3, 2

In his essay, “Melancholy and the Act”, Slavoj Žižek criticizes the common understanding of the psychoanalytical definition of melancholy.¹ Whereas mourning slowly ‘consumes’ the lost object and at the end enables overcoming its loss, melancholy allows the lost object to keep on haunting. This is what the usual interpretation states. The melancholic feels and behaves in such a way that the lost object remains so to speak saved from its loss. Or, in Hegelian terms, he refuses to ‘sublate’ the negative that traumatizes him. This is why the anti-Hegelian mood of postmodernity rejects mourning – for it does sublate the negative – and prefers the melancholic position which acknowledges the negative, i.e. the lost object.²

Žižek criticizes this kind of postmodern preference. By privileging melancholy over mourning (i.e. keeping the reference to the object, despite its condition of being lost), postmodernism remains blind for the fact that

1 Žižek 2001, pp. 141-189.

2 Žižek 2001, p. 143.

the object *always already* has been lost (as Lacan states).³ By doing so, it speaks in favour of an attachment to that very object. In the name of that object, the attachment allows the claim of a proper, untouchable identity. Here, against its own intuitions, modernity falls in the trap of what Adorno has called the “jargon of authenticity”, a discourse claiming the possibility of a fixed identity – thus denying the ‘difference’ and ‘lack’ any identity is founded in.⁴ By preferring melancholy to mourning, postmodernity promotes in the end moral cultural conservatism, nationalism and other kind of right-wing identity policy.

Žižek puts forward a more correct understanding of melancholy. If, in the eyes of the melancholic, the object is present, it is *present in its very absence*. In Graham Green’s novel *The End of the Affair*, so Žižek explains, the object lost is not a phenomenon occurring *after* the wife’s decease. The lost object is there when the wife is still alive, but not at home, and the husband gnawed by suspicions about where she is, why she is late (is she with her lover?). Once the wife is dead it is her overwhelming *presence* that the apartment devoid of her flaunts: ‘Because she’s always away, she’s never away. You see she’s never anywhere else. She’s not having lunch with anybody, she’s not in the cinema with you. There’s nowhere for her to be but at home’. Is this not the very logic of melancholic identification in which the object is overpresent in its very unconditional and irretrievable loss?⁵

Žižek quotes Giorgio Agamben who claims that melancholy is not so much a failed mourning as “the paradox of an intention to mourn that precedes and anticipates the loss of the object”. And Žižek comments:

That is the melancholic’s stratagem: *the only way to possess an object which we never had, which was lost from the very outset, is to treat an object that we still fully possess as if this object is already lost*.⁶

Possessing an object, you never *really* have it, and you treat it as if it was always already lost: is this definition of melancholy not applicable to the field of the political as well, more precisely to the way one possesses political power? To possess power and to have to treat it as if it is not yours: is this melancholic state (in the Žižekian sense) not simply the condition of any man of power, regardless whether he is an antique emperor, a medieval king or the prime minister in a modern democracy? Is, then, the melancholic mood the condition of political power?

3 Lacan 1992, p. 52. Lacan supposes this to be a genuine Freudian thesis, which it is not; see: De Kesel 2009, pp. 87-88; Fink 1996, p. 93.

4 Adorno 1973.

5 Žižek 2001, pp. 143-144; Žižek quotes from Green 1975, p. 169.

6 Žižek 2001: 146; Žižek’s italics.

If this suggestion makes sense, than power implies a kind of melancholy, at least formally. On the place of power, one always already has to mourn over the loss of that power, without being able to ‘accomplish’ that mourning, which is to say that one has to stick to one’s power in an explicit melancholic way. Melancholy not only supposes the psychological condition of power, but even to the ethical attitude required by it.

This article reflects upon a man of power from early modern times, who was not only a genuinely melancholic person, but to whom a ‘melancholic’ attitude explicitly was advised with regard to dealing with his political power. Put on the throne by the vicissitudes of history, the Spanish king Philip V, youngest grandson of the French king Louis XIV, never stopped feeling that throne to be not his and to be himself a “usurper”. And all the comments of his former preceptor and teacher, François de Fénelon, reacting on the impasse Philip has arrived at, advice a kind of melancholic attitude as the best way to deal with the situation. A lot of Fénelon’s analyses can be read as application of his mystical theory of the *Pur Amour* (Pure Love) to the domain of politics.

After describing the Spanish king’s melancholic character and the melancholic situation he is in, the article explores Fénelon’s comments and advices.⁷ The question imposing itself here is whether these advices do not come down to a practice of ‘controlled melancholy’. Or do they conceal a theory of the act similar to the one Žižek will formulate three centuries later? Controlled melancholy or revolutionary act? A reflection on a ‘political’ fragment in Pascal will help to orientate us in this dilemma – a dilemma, which in a way summarizes the problem modernity’s politics still has face nowadays.

Philip V

Philip V, king of Spain from 1700 till 1748 was born in the bosom of the French royal family, as the second son of the ‘Dauphin’, the brother of Louis XIV, and he was only indirectly linked to the Spanish royal family as the great grandson of Philip IV, who had been king of Spain from 1621 till 1640. In 1700, Philip, the seventeen years old Duke of Anjou, was indicated as the heir of the Spanish king Charles II, who died childless. This made him ruler of Spain (including the Spanish Territories: Spanish America, the Spanish Netherlands and parts of Italy). Only shortly for his death, Charles II had changed his mind, annulling a former testament that respected the equilibrium in Europe.⁸ And certainly since Louis XIV refused

7 For the development of my argument I rely heavily on the French Fénelon scholar Jacques Lebrun (Lebrun 2009).

8 The former testament indicated the German Prince Elector Leopold of Bavaria (of the Habsburg House, the house of Charles himself). The reason why Charles changed his mind was his fear for a weak king, unable to keep the Spanish territories united in one strong kingdom. Having his

to delete the new Spanish king from the list of possible heirs of the French throne, that equilibrium was now definitely disturbed, since a 'vassal' and heir of the throne of the most powerful man in the Western world now became king of the gigantic Spanish empire. No wonder that occurred what everyone feared: England, Holland and Austria started what would become known as the War of the Spanish Succession. When Philip's older brother, the Dauphin, died and Philip himself became the first in line for the French throne, the allies were even more motivated to continue waging war. The war lasted more than a decade, and brought France a whole series of economic depressions, a starving population, and an almost bankrupted state.

In the midst of all this was Philip whose melancholic nature prevented him from feeling comfortable in his position of power.⁹ In the first years of his reign, he was supported – and even forced – by his grandfather to hold that throne. But when the war turned out to be disastrous for France and the allies required the immediate abdication of the ruling Spanish king, Louis XIV tried – without saying it in so many words – to push Philip in the direction of abdication. And even when Philip refused, he kept on being considered as just a pawn in the political game of Louis XIV. The allies negotiated with Louis XIV, not with Philip: in their minds it was clear that, if the grandfather would agree with the abdication, the grandson would obey immediately. To save the last remnants of self-respect, Philip now had to resist what he always wanted: abdication. He only felt able to fulfil that wish when he did what his grandfather had been unable to do: putting his *own* son on the throne – which he did in January 1724. However, fate was against him: after only a few months on the throne, his son died, and Philip was forced, so to say, to abdicate from his abdication and to become king again for another few decades.¹⁰ An unhappy nature like his needs less to become deeply melancholic. Although we have no direct sources about it, it is very probable that the king must have been very sensitive for Fénelon's ideas concerning the difficult situation his kingship was in.

Fénelon

François de Fénelon knew the young Spanish king very well. As priest connected to the French Court in Versailles, he had been responsible for the

grandfather behind him, the Duke of Anjou was supposed to guarantee that.

9 The duke of Saint-Simon, author of thousands of pages direct report of the time of Louis XIV and 'la Régence' after him, gives a penetrating portrait of Philip. See: *Memoires of Louis XIV*, by the Duke the Saint-Simon, Volume VIII, Chapter CX, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/3875/3875-h/3875-h.htm#link2HCH0055> ; original text: Saint-Simon 1958, p. 1079-1081.

10 This is, so to say, Philip V of Spain "reigned twice": see Kamen 2001.

education of the young Duke of Anjou.¹¹To that responsibility we owe one of Fénelon's most famous books, *The Adventures of Telemachus*, admired in the next century by almost all French Enlightenment writers. Fénelon's reflections on the son of Ulysses waiting for his father and preparing himself to become once his successor, was in fact conceived as a kind of educational guideline for the one who, after Louis XIV, might become the king of France.

At the time the Duke of Anjou became king of Spain, his relation with Fénelon was no longer what it used to be. In the midst of the nineties of the seventieth century, the "*Quérelle du quiétisme*" – a public debate at the Versailles Court and in Paris on Fénelon's thesis of 'pure love' – had ended with the condemnation of some of Fénelon's doctrinal theses and in 1697, Louis XIV had banished him from the Versailles Court by nominating him archbishop of Cambrai (in Northern France). So, since then, Fénelon followed the politics of his country from a distance, which is not to say that his interest in it had diminished. On the contrary, Fénelon, a genuine writer, never stopped expressing his political opinions by means of letters to numerous persons in the heart of Versailles' political battles, by reflections and dissertations, even by a "letter to Louis XVI" (which remained unsent). It was his way to continue his political commitment to Versailles.¹²

Immediately after the Duke of Anjou had accepted the Spanish kingship, without – important addition – renouncing the claim on the French throne, a league of European nations declared war against France. Already in the same year, 1701, Fénelon writes his first "Memory on the means to prevent the war of Spanish Succession".¹³ It is a plea for peace, for maintaining Europe's equilibrium, and consequently for negotiations instead of violence and war. The *Mémoire* is not without criticism denouncing the absence of a clear goal and strategy on the side of France, but neither the King nor his decision to put his grandson on the Spanish throne are hinted at directly. "France" is Fénelon's main concern. Inspired by God's goodness, France and its king can generously support Spain by providing a good leadership for its people by means of one of the 'sons of France', the Duke of Anjou, but it should not "needlessly sacrifice" itself for that foreign country. His second *Mémoire* (early 1702), written after Louis XIV's recognition of James III as king of England (against William III, the 'president' of the Dutch Republic of the Low Lands, who had become king of England in the Glorious Revolution, 1688), expresses

11 On September 3, 1789, the Duke of Beauvillier and 'abbé' Fénelon were sworn in as "précepteur" of the grand-son of Louis XIV; Melchior-Bonnet 2008, p. 107.

12 "Few priests and spiritual men were so engaged in the political debates of their time", Melchior-Bonnet writes about Fénelon (Melchior-Bonnet 2008: 319).

13 "Mémoire sur les moyens de prévenir la guerre de la Succession d'Espagne", in: Fénelon 1997, pp. 1013-1027. For the entire collection of Fénelon's writings on that war, see: Fénelon 1971, pp. 149-181. For the first "Mémoire", see Fénelon 1971, pp. 149-156.

Fénelon's unchanged position.¹⁴

Things do not change until 1710, when France looks back on more than a year of humiliating military defeats and an increasing demoralisation of both the troupes and the population threatened by famine. The allies have conquered back all cities recently occupied by France and require the immediate abdication of Philip V from the Spanish throne. They address their requests not directly to Philip but to Louis XIV, adding that, if his grandson will not listen to his grandfather, the latter has to wage war against his grandson.

In this context Fénelon writes a few more *Mémoires* on the political situation of the French state after ten years of war. It is in those *Mémoires* that one can read Fénelon advising Philip V to abdicate from the Spanish throne. Those reflections bring the author to the conclusion that power requires an attitude of what one may call 'controlled melancholic'.

3. Royal sacrifice

Why Philip V has to abdicate? The answer is simple: his position as king of Spain is the cause of a war that lasts for more than a decade and is ruining the entire French nation. This opinion is not Fénelon's alone. The allies share it, as well as many members of the French court. Even the French king seems to be not entirely against it. Philip's abdication would solve the entire problem at once.

What is interesting in Fénelon's *Mémoires*, however, is that this opinion leads the author to a profound reflection on what it means to be king as well as to perform political acts. Classic medieval logic underlies his reflection. Yet, an opening to modern logic of power is made, precisely where he reflects on Philip V and the abdication the allies (and Fénelon as well) ask from him.

Relocated to Cambray, Fénelon is no longer allowed to intervene openly in political discussions. This is why he writes in private and addresses the political *Mémoires* to one of his nobleman friends: the Duke of Chevreuse. In a reaction to one of Fénelon's *Mémoires* (one that has been lost), Chevreuse defends the then classical argument: since Philip is a descendant from the two Spanish royal families of Castile and Aragon who started the *Reconquista*, and since he is indicated by the last Spanish king as heir of his throne, he cannot be forced to abdicate his power, even not by Europe's most powerful man, who is his grandfather.¹⁵ He can only do it out of free will. No other reason than his own sovereign freedom is valid here.

Fénelon clearly disagrees with this argument. In a way, he is

14 Fénelon 1997, pp. 1028-1033.

15 Fénelon 1997, p. 1059.

more realistic than Chevreuse, since he pays more attention to the concrete political situation, which tells him that Philip is obviously a pawn in a broader game. According to Fénelon, the question is not only what it means to be king of a nation, but also what it means to be king *among kings*. For Philip is not simply king because his father or grandfather was; he is *actively made* king of a foreign nation by a foreign king. His position of king depends entirely on other kings, which *via negativa* is also made clear by the fact that other kings (or dukes, or presidents of a Republic as were the Dutch leaders) deny his kingship and wage war against him. His kingship is rooted in what other kings say about it.

Here, one can notice the principle of equality slightly penetrating the old feudal discourse of legitimate power. Kings are equal with respect to one another, and when other kings do not accept your kingship, when this refusal threatens the people whose king you are, then you lose the legitimacy of your kingship and have to abandon it. This argument is the background of Fénelon's line of reasoning and it shows a first emergence of modernity in the political discourse of the early eighteenth century.

But, of course, Fénelon himself does not put the problem in these very words. The grammar in which he puts it is still highly dutiable to the feudal logic, although it takes into account the reality of the situation. Why then, according to Fénelon, Philip has been nominated king of Spain? Not simply because he is an ascendant of the Spanish house. Fénelon understands very well Charles II's concern, which is to avoid the disintegration ("démembrement")¹⁶ of the Spanish empire. Spain, the empire "where the sun never sets", needed a strong king or one supported by another strong king. This is what Ludwig of Bavaria, the heir indicated in Charles II's first testament, could not guarantee. And this is what Philip of Anjou was exactly able to do, since the strongest man of Western Europe, his grandfather, stood behind him. The disintegration of the *Spanish Empire* did not take place.

However, what did take place was the disintegration of *Europe*, and from the very first moment, Fénelon was aware of that. Yet, during the entire period of war, it never came to his mind to blame his king for that, although the latter knew from the beginning that the European leaders would not accept Spain to be ruled by someone who could at the same time become king of France. It was Louis XIV's decision to put Philip on the Spanish throne that had destabilized Europe as it was settled since the Peace of Westphalia (1648). Fénelon was fully aware of that, but none of his analyses go in that direction. Louis XIV seems to be untouchable for him.¹⁷

16 "... empêcher le démembrement de la monarchie espagole", Fénelon 1997, p. 1013.

17 It is only *here* that Louis XIV appears to be untouchable to Fénelon. A few years earlier, he had severely criticized his King, especially for the wars he continued to wage during "more than twenty years" – wars he waged because of his thirst for honour and his addiction to flattery. See his

This is not to say, however, that according to Fénelon, his king does not have to accept the abdication of his grandson from the Spanish throne. Fénelon is even so clever to find a way in which Louis XIV's can do this even without giving way to his royal honour. In his third *Mémoire* he writes:

The unique glory that the French people may wish to the king is that, in this extreme situation, he turns his courage against himself, and that he generously makes a sacrifice in order to save the kingdom that God has given him. He does not even have the right to take risks in this, because he has received it from God not in order to expose it to its enemies as something he can deal with as he pleases, but in order to govern it as a father and to transfer it, as a precious deposit, to his posterity.¹⁸

The king can make a “sacrifice”, he can “turn his courage against himself”. It is Fénelon's expression to say that he can undo his decision to put his grandson on the Spanish throne. And why can he do this without dishonouring his kingship? Because his kingdom is not simply his: it has been *given* to him. In the next *Mémoire*, he is even clearer about it:

... the king is not free to put France at risk for the personal interest of his princes-grandsons, juniors of the royal family. He is the legitimate king of his kingdom, but only for his life, he got the usufruct of it but not the ownership, it is not at his disposal, he is only its deposit- or, he has no right neither to expose the nation to foreign domination nor to expose the royal house to lose entirely or partially the crown that belongs to him.¹⁹

It is not the person of the king that counts. Precisely not. He has to sacrifice what is personal to him in favour of the defence of his cause. Despite the extraordinary character of Fénelon's request (the king must revoke his decision and bring about the abdication of his grandson), it is based on an entirely valid and traditional logic: the one of the medieval “two bodies” theory, as famously explained by Kantorowicz.²⁰ As royal body, the king is eternal, his power untouchable and his decisions un-

famous *Letter to Louis XIV*, most probably to be dated December 1793 (Fénelon 1983, pp. 541-551). The real addressee is not the King (who never received the letter), but most probably his ‘unofficial wife’, Madame de Maintenon, in order to provide her with arguments in case she would have the opportunity to influence the King in the right direction (interpretation of Jean Orcibal, see: Fénelon 1983, pp. 1409-1410).

18 Fénelon 1997, p. 1038 (my translation, MDK).

19 Fénelon 1997, p. 1051 (my translation, MDK).

20 Kantorowicz 1997.

changeable. But his personal body is not. To that body belong his personal interests, and those may not be taken into account when the royal body is in danger. Louis XIV's sacrifice Fénelon pleads for exemplifies this. The cause of the French nation requires the sacrifice of the king's personal interest of having his grandson on the Spanish throne.

The sacrifice required from Philip is of a different type than Louis XIV's. According to Fénelon, Philip's kingship is not a completely genuine one. It has not been given by God. Philip is only asked to do a job that first has been predicted to someone else. Although God's grace is not absent, his kingship is nonetheless the result of contingency. This is to say that, for Fénelon, the distance between king Philip's royal body and his personal one is larger than in the case of Louis XIV. The latter unites the two bodies in one human being; Philip does not, according to Fénelon. The royal body Philip is united with is the French royal body, and to the Spanish royal body Philip is only *lent*. This is why Fénelon never doubted that Philip is legitimately able to abdicate from that throne. His ultimate loyalty is not to the Spanish people, but to the French throne. For the same reason, his ultimate sacrifice cannot be meant to be in favour of the people whose king he is, but he has to sacrifice himself in favour of the French nation. If Louis XIV has to make a sacrifice, as Fénelon pleads for, if he has to approve the abdication of his grandson, it is to deliver the latter from the sacrifice his (Spanish) people could require from him.²¹ The sacrifice Philip has to make is in favour of France.

4. Royal abdication

In the background of Fénelon's argumentation, there is yet another logic which differs from the one of the king's two bodies theory. That logic, too, is profoundly religious, but contrary to the former, it is already penetrated by *modern* premises. Implicitly, it operates at the background of almost every page in Fénelon. At the end of the fifth *Mémoire*, it comes to the foreground more obviously. In the first years of the war, he might have had some hesitations, the author admits, but now

I see nothing that allows any doubt about the prince being obliged to renounce his right – be it good or bad – on Spain in order to save France, given the fact that we are in a situation of ultimate extremity. Rather than dishonour the prince, this voluntary disposition would be through him a heroic act of religion, of courage, of gratitude to the king and Monseigneur the Dauphin, of passion for France and its House. It would even be unforgivable to refuse this sacrifice. It is not a matter of ruining Spain, for leaving it, he will leave the country as complete and peaceful as he has received it. The depot he has been given will lack nothing. He will but sacrifice his personal grandeur. So, does he not have to prefer, to his personal

21
Lebrun 2006, p. 213.

grandeur, the grandeur of both his fathers and his benefactors to whom he owes it, along with the salvation of entire France that seems to depend on that sacrifice?²²

The heroism, requested from the “prince” (i.e. the Spanish king, Philip V), is called an “act of religion”. According to Jacques Lebrun, this is more than a detail.²³ It indicates that, according to Fénelon, the ultimate reason why Philip has to abdicate is not merely political, but ‘spiritual’ as well. In the end, the advices he presents to Philip illustrate a typically Fénelonian spirituality: a mental state and attitude required by the one who, in his love for God, wants to go that path until its ultimate state, until it is ‘*pur amour*’, ‘pure love’.

Let us first recall what is said in the quote. Philip has to become a “prince” again and to renounce his right on the Spanish throne, this “right – be it good or bad – on Spain” (“son droit bon ou mauvais sur l’Espagne”). Even if he has the right to remain king of Spain, he has to abandon it. This is due to the “situation of ultimate extremity”. Which is not to say that he has no choice. On the contrary, he has to do it fully *voluntarily* (his “disposition” is “voluntary”). Even if his grandfather, the French king, and his father “Monseigneur the Dauphin” would not ask him to abdicate, or even if they would ask it for wrong reasons, he nonetheless should abandon his kingship: *voluntarily*. This is the way to show his real “gratitude” to his father and grandfather, his real “passion for France and its House”.

A “situation of ultimate extremity” that nonetheless appeals to radical freedom, a freedom that cannot but result in an “act” sacrificing all that one is, oneself, one’s “personal grandeur” – this being precisely the highest grandeur one can get: the “act” Fénelon asks from Philip is indeed an act of *pure love*.

What is *pure love*, according to Fénelon who coined the term? It is the final phase in the mystical way to God, the phase in which the mystic’s love for God reaches its ultimate shape. This requires a “situation of ultimate extremity”, which Fénelon often evokes with the following hypothetical situation. Suppose that God has condemned you from the beginning of time and that this divine decision is irrevocable (a pure hypothesis, Fénelon emphasises, for thinking that way is as such already sinful): is there any reason left then to love God? At first sight, that “extreme situation” renders love for God senseless, for the loving believer is condemned anyway, whatever he or she does. Fénelon’s conclusion, however, is the opposite: If God will give me nothing in turn for the love I give him, and if, in that condition, I nonetheless do give love to him, then *and only then*, my love is pure, unconditioned, *pur amour*. If I love God for the beatitude he promises, my love for him makes sense, of course, but it is not entirely

22 Fénelon 1997, p. 1073; my translation, MDK.

23 I follow his arguments in: Lebrun 2006, p. 231-235.

pure. Really pure is my love only if I love him without receiving anything back from him, even if I got a hell of eternal pain in return.
This paradigm seems to underlie Fénelon’s reflections about royal power. In *Télémaque*, in a passage evocating the position and function of the king, he writes:

It is not for himself that the gods have made him king; he is only king to be the man of his people: it is to his people he has to give his affection, his time, and he is only worth to his kingship to the extend he *forgets himself* and *sacrifices himself* to the public good.²⁴

Lebrun quotes this sentence and is responsible for the italics.²⁵ For in those words lays the difference with the old legitimization of kingship. The medieval king, too, has to sacrifice himself for his people (“the kingdom is not there for the sake of the king; the king is there for the sake of the kingdom”, Thomas Aquinas writes)²⁶, but he did not necessarily have to *forget* himself. He was the representative of God for his people, and he represented his people to God. His sacrifice for his people glorified his people but himself as well. His people’s glory was visible in the glory of their king. The direct link between *natura* and *supranatura*, between man and God, as supposed in medieval logic, allowed the royal glory to be the visible face of God’s blessing addressed to the king’s people.

Modernity can be defined as the cutting of that link: nature was considered independently from its divine creator. And if one wanted to connect nature to God and his *supranatura*, this was solely possible on the base of one’s own natural, free will. He could *choose* to belief in God, just like he was free to choose *not* to believe in him.

Despite its content, which shows no real difference with medieval spirituality, the one Fénelon defends differs decisively from it on a *formal* level. What, more precisely, does differ is the position of the *subject* in his relation to God. In the Middle Ages, the human subject defined himself as dependent from God. Since modernity, i.e. since the rise of the Cartesian subject, man is *free* in his relation to God. Fénelon’s spirituality is profoundly modern in the sense that he puts that freedom in the very heart of genuine religiosity. Even if God will not glorify me when I love him with the purest intentions I am capable of, even if God will leave my adoration for him without any reward, even then my love for him depends solely on myself. It is me who decides to love him, whatever he does. And, of course, I am totally dependent on my creator and would be nothing without him, but even if I know he had decided to reduce me to nothing and to destroy

24 Fénelon 2006, p. 59; my translation, MDK.

25 Lebrun 2009, p. 233.

26 “Regnum non est propter regem, sed rex propter regnum”, quoted in Lebrun 2009, p. 233.

me forever, I nonetheless am able to love him; or, what is more: *only then* – only in that “extreme situation” – can I prove that what I feel and do for him is *pure love*.

In a way, the Fénelonian ‘*experimentum mentis*’ of the *pur amour* is a religious translation of that other *experimentum mentis* founding modernity: the Cartesian doubt. The latter puts forward human consciousness as the grounding platform for our relation to the world. The former puts forward the human will as the ground for our relation to the world’s creator. The underlying paradox of Fénelon’s *experimentum* is that, in order to prove that God is the grounding principle of my existence, I deliberately accept the possibility of my eternal destruction by him. And the heart of that paradox is that it supposes my freedom, my independence from God, whatever he decides with regard to me.

This abysmal subjective position is assumed by Fénelon’s demand to Philip V, king of Spain. In the extreme situation he is in (together with war waging Europe), his royal honour requires the radical position of a modern religious subject. To acknowledge his kingship, he has to forget himself as king.

It is true that Fénelon does not dare to address that request to Louis XIV. He still thinks his *own* king within the framework of medieval logic: the sacrifice he asks of him, is one that visibly glorifies his kingship, his nation and God. According to Fénelon, the king of France is indissolubly connected to his nation. He fully takes for granted the king’s dictum: “L’État, c’est moi” (“The state, that’s me”), without reading this “moi” in the radical sacrificial way as he understands it in his writing on the spirituality and mysticism of his day.

The case of the Duke of Anjou becoming king of Spain seems to have inspired Fénelon to apply his mystical theory to an issue that at first sight has not much to do with it: royal power. The melancholic mood of the Duke may have given him hope to see his theory confirmed in reality. He must have presumed that Philip was able to sacrifice himself without any return, without a nation that assumes this sacrifice as its glory, without a God guaranteeing him the sense of his sacrifice. According to Fénelon, it was precisely in that absence of any guarantee where the greatness, the honour of Philip’s act, lays. A “religious” greatness, we know now: “Rather than dishonour the prince, this voluntary disposition would be through him a heroic act of religion.”²⁷ In the eyes of Fénelon, Philip’s act should have been religiously heroic because the actor would have sacrificed even his heroism, his honour or any other personal positive effect.

In terms of the conceptual difference between mourning and melancholy, one can define the attitude Louis XIV should have, according to Fénelon, as mourning. The French king, too, has to sacrifice himself for his nation, but his sacrificial labour is not without positive result. In it, the

²⁷ Fénelon 1997, p. 1073; my translation, MDK.

loss is sublated and constitutes the greatness of both the nation and his king. However, what Philip is asked to do is an act, not of mourning, but of melancholy: an act unable to sublimate its loss. Lebrun describes this act as a “destruction” [“anéantissement”] that occurs “within the voluntary act itself in which man, in an extreme situation, is able to exercise his will and disappear in his act”.²⁸

An act in which the very subject of that act disappears: it is the definition of the “act” as we find it all over the place in Žižek.²⁹ Even the feature of changing the coordinates of the situation in which the act intervenes fits with the request addressed to Philip: his abdication would change at once all the coordinates of war waging Europe and bring again peace.³⁰ Like Žižek emphasises, such an act requires a self-sacrifice that does not appropriate the loss of the act’s very subject. The subject must disappear in its very act. And, embracing the desired ‘object’ it wants to establish, the act at the same time confirms that object in what it really is: a radical lack. Consequently, a real act supposes a truly *melancholic* disposition.

Fénelon asks from Philip such an act, and he asks it *solely* from Philip. Fénelon has still in mind an extraordinary, “extreme” situation – France on the edge of being ruined – as a necessary condition for an act like that. Yet, in fact, what he thinks through is the way *any* king at *any time* should relate to that power. Philip’s extreme situation reveals the situation a man of power in general is in: by taking that power, he at the same time has to abdicate it. Exercising power over the people is to sacrifice yourself in that power, to exercise it without the slightest benefit for yourself – in Fénelonian terms: to *purely* love the power. And, not unlike Žižek will develop centuries later, that love is only possible in an act, an inherently extreme, self-sacrificing act.

Of course, it is incorrect to read in Fénelon a defence for *revolutionary* politics. No doubt his political position was extremely conservative. Nonetheless, his reflections on the desirability of Philip V’s abdication brought him to a theory of power which inscribes abdication in the very center of power. Being in power, the ruler is always in the position that power is not his and that he can give it away and/or must give himself away. Being the subject of power, the ruler has to sacrifice himself precisely in his position of being the subject of power. Or to put it in terms Claude Lefort would have used: occupying the place of power, one has to acknowledge that that place is in fact empty, that it is not one’s own, that

²⁸ Lebrun 2006, p. 233-234.

²⁹ “... an act of negativity, ‘cleanse the plate’, draw the line, exempt myself, step out of the symbolic in a ‘suicidal’ gesture of a radical act – what Freud called the ‘death drive’ and what German Idealism called ‘radical negativity’”; in: Žižek 2000, p. 149; 2005, p. 140; 2008, p. 304-3011.

³⁰ “An act proper is not just a strategic intervention into a situation, bound by its conditions – it retroactively creates its own conditions.” Žižek 2008, p. 311.

one just occupies it – and consequently just occupies it *temporarily*.
The clearest way to acknowledge the emptiness, on which power is based, is the revolutionary act as such – an act changing the very coordinates of the situation that made this act possible. Fénelon’s reflections conceal a theory of the revolutionary act as base of political power. The generations after him, whose reflections will give birth to the French Revolution (Voltaire and Rousseau among others), rejected the Christian mysticism Fénelon defended, but they all appreciated him – or at least the “myth” they created about him³¹ – because of his *Télémaque* and the political dimension of his entire oeuvre.³² In both his plea for such an act and for a melancholic – even ‘abdicalional’ – position towards power, they must have heard modernity’s call for a new revolutionary base of politics and its power.

5. A King’s Double-Sided Thought

A few decades before the turbulent times that forced Fénelon to write his *Mémoires*, another monument of French seventeenth century thought, Blaise Pascal, has reflected upon the same topic. The first of his *Three discourses on the condition of the great* (i.e. of the noblemen, the men of power) starts with a story that has much in common with the one of Philip Duke of Anjou, be it that his act goes in the other direction: instead of abdication, accepting the power.

A man is cast by a storm onto an unknown island, whose inhabitants were at a loss to find their king, who had gone missing. Bearing a great resemblance, both in face and physique, to this lost king, he was taken for him, and recognized as such by all the people of the island. At first, this man was unsure what action to take, but he eventually resolved to give himself over to his good fortune. He accepted all the respect and honors that the people sought to give him and he allowed himself to be treated as a king. But as he could not forget his natural condition, he was aware, at the same time that he received these honors, that he was not the king that this people sought, and that this kingdom did not belong to him. In this way, his thought had a double aspect: one by which he acted as a king, the other by which he recognized his true state, and that it was merely chance that had put him in the position where he was. He hid this latter thought and made manifest the other. It was by the former that he dealt with the people, and by the

31 Hogu 1920: 4-15.
32 Riley 2001, pp. 78-93.

latter that he dealt with himself.³³
Pascal’s king, too, has two bodies, but unlike in medieval times, the one (mortal) is not the incarnation of the other (divine) body. On the contrary: it is mere accident that puts a human body on the royal throne. This, however, is not to say that the one on that throne is there illegally. The king, his power and the entire political order as it is, are entirely legitimate, so Pascal argues, but that legitimacy is based on pure contingency. That “the great” possess the power to which the lower people are subjected, is right in his eyes, but they must admit that their power is “the result of an infinite string of contingencies”. Addressing himself to “the great”, Pascal writes:

... the whole title by which you possess your property is not a title of nature, but of human establishment. Another turn of imagination in those who made the laws would have rendered you poor; and it is nothing but this fortuitous confluence of circumstances – which brought you into this world, with the caprice of laws favourable to you – that puts you in possession of all these goods.³⁴

And what, then, does all this imply for the men of power once they are aware of it? How should they deal with that ‘ideology critical’ knowledge?

What follows from this? That you must have, like this man of which we have spoken, a double-sided thought; and that if you act externally with men according to your rank, you must recognize, by a more hidden, but truer thought, that you have no quality that is naturally above them. If public thought elevates you above the common man, may the other humble you and keep you in perfect equality with all men; for this is your natural state.

The populace that admires you knows not, perhaps, this secret. It believes that nobility is a form of real greatness [*grandeur*] and practically considers the great [*les grands*] as being of a different nature than others. Do not reveal to them this error, if you wish; but do not abuse your superior position with insolence, and above all do not deceive yourself by believing that your being has something higher in it than that of others.³⁵

Here, too, a self-forgetting act is in play, but it is contrary to the one Fénelon discusses. In the last paragraph of Pascal’s first *Discours*, we read:

33 English translation by Samuel Webb; see <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/pascal/1630/three-discourses.htm>; for the original text, see Pascal 1963, p. 366-367 (also for the quotes that follow).
34 Ibidem.
35 Ibidem.

How important this insight is! For all the fits of anger, all the violence and all the vanity of the great comes from the fact that they know not what they are: it being difficult for those who would regard themselves internally as equal to all men, and were persuaded that they had nothing in themselves that merited the little advantages that God had given them above others, to treat them with insolence. One must forget oneself for that, and believe that one has some real excellence above them, in which consists the illusion that I am trying to reveal to you.³⁶

On the level of nature, all men are equal, but in the political situation of the day, some have the luck to possess power. This is what the combination of historical vicissitudes and “the sole will of the legislators” have decided. And those lucky ones, those ‘kings’, how should they deal with it? They should accept this with a “double sided thought”. They must accept that they are ‘kings’, that the power is theirs. *And* they must accept that, as kings, they are equal to their subjects – or that, in terms of Philip V’s melancholic consciousness, they are “usurpers”. And how must this “double-sided thought” be given shape? By keeping silent, certainly to those who are subjected to power. Yet, that silence cannot be the silence of forgetting. The silence they keep must at the same time be a way to remember who they are, remember that they are equal to their subjects and that power is theirs only by accident.

In a way, the attitude Pascal advises to the men of power is as ‘melancholic’ as the one Fénelon advised to Philip. Possessing power, they must realise power is not *really* theirs, that it could be as well *not* theirs and that, consequently, its status is marked by ‘loss’. Unlike Fénelon, however, this insight does not bring about the slightest “act”. On the contrary, they must do nothing. Their melancholy is only a matter of consciousness: their power is marked by fundamental loss, it has no ground and it could as well be the hand of their subjects, but they have to keep that awareness of lack and loss strictly inside the boundaries of their individual consciousness.

6. The melancholic nature of modern political power

What is at stake here, is the subject, and more precisely the *modern* version of it. The medieval version – i.e. the supposed grounding support (*subjectum*) of both world and man’s relation to it (his *being-in-the-world*, Heidegger would say) – was God: the one in whom the ‘facticity’ or ‘givenness’ of the world had its ‘giver’, and who had given us to the world. This is why a nation was given to its king just like a king had to give himself to that nation. The king’s ‘double body’ was the ‘incarnation’ of that gift-giv-

36 Ibidem; Pascal 1963, p. 367.

ing relation. His mortal body was the incarnation of the royal body, which in its turn was the incarnation of the divine *subjectum* in which the entire political order had its ground, its ontological foundation. Here, political power is far from being melancholic by nature: every experience of loss is supposed to be once redeemed by the fullness of a divine presence.

Since modernity, however, the nature of political power is marked by structural melancholy – at least if one defines modernity as the loss of man’s and world’s grounding connection with the ontological *subjectum*, i.e. with the grounding gift that unites man and world, king and people, the ones possessing power and the ones subjected to it. That *subjectum* called God is ‘dead’, and henceforth it is up to us humans, and only to us, to play the role of *subjectum*, i.e. of ‘ground’ and starting point for our relation to the world. This is to say that we have become ‘free subjects’: we relate to the world as if we were free *from* it. So, it is our freedom, our disconnection from the world, which makes the modern subjects we are inherently melancholic – in the Žižekian sense of a loss that always has been present as loss. It reshapes the basic condition of our desire. Playing the role of ‘ground’ without really being or possessing it, the modern subject keeps on longing for that ontological – or, as we have learned to name it, metaphysical – ground, which is and will be only present in its very absence.

Pascal’s *Discourse about the great* illustrates Early Modernity’s discovery that the general loss of metaphysical ground affects political power as well. The nobleman in power is not in that position because of his “nature” but only by accident. According to Pascal, the anxiety felt by modern man when paralyzed by the infinity of the universe – “an infinite sphere, the center of which is everywhere, the circumference nowhere”³⁷ – has its counterpart in the way political power reacts to the discovery of its lack of ground, its radical contingency, its ‘usurpatory’ nature. As is the case in any other reaction of anxiety, the still feudal power of Pascal’s time is paralysed and literally immobilized. The Pascalian politics only makes that anxiety operational. Noticing that nature does not legitimize the existing political inequality of the day, and confronted with the abysmal lie it bases itself on, power’s sole answer is to remain what it is and to lock up this new insight within the closed interiors of consciousness. The man of power has to keep his melancholy controlled in a strictly private way. For Pascal, it is the only way to guarantee the control over all kinds of “insolence” which power can cause. The melancholy characterizing the modern man of power allows him to keep that power and, consequently, to keep the inequality of the existing order, obliging him nonetheless to treat the ones subjected to his power as *if* they are equals – just like he is only allowed to do as *if* he is their master.

37 Pascal, *Pensées*, nr. 199 (Lafuma).

Fénelon's ideas about politics are as 'conservative' as Pascal's. He, too, does not consider any change of the system as such. And yet, the "extreme situation" the politics of his day is in – the Spanish Succession War ending up ruining France – forces him to reconsider the political *subject*. The inherent melancholy of that subject requires an inner distance with relation to the power it is given, not unlike to the way explained in Pascal's text. But instead of keeping itself paralysed in its present condition, the Fénelonian subject is forced to action. In this case, the melancholic condition of power forces a king to abdicate, to leave his throne and to give the power back to the people. Here, controlled melancholy can lead to a situation in which the king proves the honour of his power by giving up that very power. It is true that Fénelon does not recommend this to *all* kings; it is not what royal power should *always* do. But his reflections on one particular case, the one of Philip V of Spain, opens a way of thinking which is new within the political theories of his days. The loss of a 'natural' (ontological) foundation for political power and man's necessity to be himself his own political *subjectum*, forces the power to action in stead of paralysis: this distinguishes Fénelon's from Pascal's political thought.

It is strange to notice that not Pascal's analysis of the *modern* condition the politics of his day was in, but Fénelon's basically *Christian* reflections has brought about the idea of a political 'act.' The ultimate love for God is a love that embraces our annulation by God: only then our love is *pur amour*, which requires a radically free act by the subject. The ultimate power is the one that abdicates all power: this is the *pure* (love of) power, only possible in a similarly radical act.

Pascal's modernity is basically theoretical and, hence, Cartesian. "Larvatus prodeo", Descartes said somewhere: I enter the scene of the world in a hidden way (*larvatus*).³⁸ The same way, the man of power must enter the world, knowing it is not as it looks like but leaving everything untouched. As already noticed, Fénelon's modernity is, unlike Pascal's, a voluntaristic one. Here, the 'Cartesian' subject, escaping the hyperbolic doubt, is the subject of a *will*. Even the certainty of God's condemnation cannot keep the Fénelonian subject from loving God, a love that has the shape of an act, sacrificing in that very act its own subject.

The melancholy about the lost ground for politics finds its Pascalian solution in a radical non-act. The Fénelonian solution, on the contrary, suggests the possibility of a radical act. Yet, even the latter does not change anything in the political framework of his day. Both melancholies legitimize a conservation of the existing system. This is why their melancholy easily risks to turn into cynicism. Both Pascal's advices to keep all political inequality unchanged, as well as Fénelon's act asking a king to abdicate and sacrifice his kingship, does not touch contemporary absolutistic monarchy neither kingship as such.

38 Descartes 1963, p. 45.

The problem of both Pascal and Fénelon is that they take the *existing* subject of politics simply for granted. But if politics has no ground neither in the real nor in God and therefore it is up to us, humans, to be the political subject, then the question is: who is that 'us'. 'Us', 'we': this is what both Pascal and Fénelon do not think through – contrary to their contemporary, Thomas Hobbes for instance. If humans are the subject of politics, then this accounts for *all* humans *equally*. Pascal and Fénelon lack the notion of what a century later will be called the "general will" ("la volonté générale").

So, does this notion of 'general will' contain a remedy against the melancholic nature of the modern political subject? Is a people, acknowledged in being itself the subject/agent of the ruling power, also marked by a melancholic relation to its own power – not possessing it while having it? It absolutely is. The problematic melancholic relation to power noticed by Pascal and Fénelon has basically not changed in the centuries after them. The Fénelonian act has been politically practiced in the most concrete way during the revolutions replacing the *Anciens Régimes* and giving birth to modern societies. Those who took the power in the revolution they gave rise to, have often lost both themselves in it and the revolution itself, in turning it into regimes of 'terror' (remember Robespierre's *Régime de la Terreur*).

And yet, nonetheless, modern societies have emerged from it – societies that acknowledge the melancholy of their relation to power in several ways. First of all, there are ceremonials and other practices that commemorate – seldom without some nostalgia – their 'lost' revolution. But there is also the realm of democratic practices. For what else is democracy than a way of making operational precisely the moment in which the subject of the revolution (i.e. 'us', the people) has lost itself in the very act of revolution? This is the way in which, for instance, Claude Lefort defines democracy: a way of organising the impossibility of the 'general will' to be present with itself and its own will. Or, to put it in Lacanian terms: the subject of democracy is a split subject and democratic politics operationalizes precisely that split. It splits power in legislative, executive and juridical power, each of them independent from the other. It obliges the ruling legislative and executive powers to accept all kinds of 'opposition', constantly criticizing what the government decides and/or realizes. On election day, it splits the totality of the people in an abstract quantity of separate individuals each of them allowed to vote freely the ones he/she prefers as rulers. This dissolved voice of the people articulates its 'impossible' condition, its melancholic longing for its unreachably lost 'self'. Democracy is the organized split between the people and itself. This is why it is inherently melancholic. It is only within the operationalization of that split – and, so to say, with controlled melancholy – that a democratic government is possible. For democracy is not a system in which a people is present to itself but a system in which it can only *desire* to be so; the

entire system organises the people's melancholic relation with its 'self' – acknowledging that 'self' in its very loss.

Within the context of early modern *Ancien Régime*, Pascal and Fénelon, each in his own way, introduced that melancholic split within the center of their reflections on politics. It has not left modern politics since.

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The King is Tired. A Few Notes About Politics, Theatre and Melancholy

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ABSTRACT

This contribution will investigate how baroque theatre, or more precisely baroque theatricality, tried to find a way out of early modern melancholy, as it consistently tried to represent both the instability and the disenchantment of the world. The sovereign, struggling to meet his personal desires with the responsibilities coming with his function, served as a pivotal point in a theatrical culture in which the mere idea of spectacle largely exceeded the confines of the stage. We will thus investigate the theatricality of melancholy, by focusing on the libertine writings of John Wilmot, for whom pornography functioned as an impossible antidote to his own melancholy, but also on more contemporary artefacts such as Vincenzo Consolo's *Lunaria*, Ken Russell's *The Devils* and *Colossus*, a recent play by the Belgian company Abattoir Fermé. Theatrical illusion, as I will argue, functions in all these cases as both a symptom of and an antidote to melancholy.

More than ever, it seems, we live in a world of representations and illusions. Reality seems to be fundamentally unknowable. Still, we work our way through what Guy Debord so aptly describes as the spectacle society, against our better judgment. This fundamental impossibility to get a grip on the theatre we call reality may be at the basis of the present-day pathology par excellence. Spectacle and theatricality feed the illusion that human beings may be able to shirk the last, hard reality of the (suffering, enjoying, decaying) body, but they also brutally confront that same body with its own temporality. This split is not new, but forms the beating heart of our modernity, as we will argue in this contribution.

Baroque and melancholy find one another in a specific historic situation of newly acquired autonomy, but also of increasing confusion and self-questioning. At the end of the Middle Ages the unifying culture that gave a mental cohesion to the entire European continent disappears. The Reformation makes the first cracks in the blazon of religion which up to then had found an unequivocal answer to all questions of life. The colonial discoveries confront the Europeans with an unknown universe that is sometimes frightening, but also fascinates and even eroticizes. There is a quietly growing awareness that Copernicus, that strange bloke, may be right: man is no longer the centre of his own universe, but a minuscule particle in an ever expanding universe, the contours of which he can hardly grasp. After the euphoric self-consciousness of the Renaissance only a gaping dark emptiness remains. Only melancholy seems to provide a way out for brooding man. But what precisely is the relation between melancholy and the disenchantment of the world? And why is the sovereign most susceptible to this mental state? As the temporary representative of God on earth he should know better. And most of all: what can this early-modern wringing teach us about our delightful tinkering in our con-

fusing (post)-ideological world, in which nothing is an illusion anymore and precisely therefore all the more theatre? A few examples of early-modern theatre life, in which the sovereign as well as the libertine play a leading part, will show us how baroque theatricality and melancholy are closely interwoven. Subsequently we will show that not only the baroque shines through in our time, but also that melancholy is an inherent part of that same time.

Melancholy as a baroque pathology

Between 1647 and 1711 the three successive doctors of Louis XIV keep a detailed diary of the physical and psychic condition of their sovereign entitled *Journal de la santé de Louis XIV*. In 1693 Fagon, the last of them, explains why, years earlier when visiting Calais in 1658, the king was troubled with “a permanent loss of bodily fluids”¹: he suffered from melancholy.

There is no doubt that the disposition of the king is that of a hero and a great lord and that this melancholy, which is a constituent element of his blood, influences his health. When this health is disturbed by diseases, melancholy will altogether prevail. The length during which all kinds of diseases manifested themselves and thwarted one another, seems to be a very clear evidence, as was exemplified by his serious illness at Calais, the several outbursts of fever and gout, a tumor and, subsequently, a fistula. M. de Aquin, who first diagnosed an overspill of bile, had to admit that his melancholy, which only became clear languidly, led to a slow process of festering.²

Fagon immediately links heroism and melancholy. Which is nothing new: in his work *On Melancholy* (2010) Aristotle also pointed out that this state of mind could be considered to be a privilege of the great of the earth. Deep waters, profound thoughts, something of the kind. In *La Parole mangée* Louis Marin aptly describes Fagon’s diagnosis as a “portrait pathétique du corps malheureux” of the melancholic king.³ In

1 Giavarina 2003, p. 543. ‘un écoulement continu de matières’

2 Fagon 1862, p. 210. ‘Peut-on douter que le tempérament du roi ne soit celui des héros et des grands hommes et que l’humeur tempérée mélancolique du sang n’en compose le mélange dans sa santé et qu’étant altérée dans ses maladies, l’humeur mélancolique n’y ait toujours prédominée comme on l’a remarqué manifestement par la longueur avec laquelle les plus considérables se sont déchirées et entre autres, sa grande maladie de Calais, les différents mouvements de fièvre et de goutte qui lui sont arrivés, et la tumeur qui a été suivie de la fistule, que M. d’Aquin, contre ce qu’il avait avancé de l’humeur bilieuse excédante, a été obligé d’avouer que l’humeur mélancolique avait produite et rendu si lente à se déclarer, et si difficile à disposer à la suppuration.’

3 Marin 1988, p. 246

the seventeenth century melancholy seems to be typical of the baroque sovereign. As he is not able to reconcile his own passions with his political responsibilities the sovereign becomes a tyrant – he puts himself outside the law and proclaims a state of national emergency⁴ – or he wallows in melancholy (as he lacks the strength to act as a tyrant: ‘Incapable to act and to proclaim the state of exception, the sovereign sinks into depression or dies of incompleteness, suffering from melancholy, the disease which Benjamin identified as typically baroque’).⁵ The early-modern ruler’s melancholy at once opens the door to madness: he does not manage to control his passions and falls prey to his own anger and insanity. The melancholic monarch is a powerless king, who is delirious but nevertheless still represents sovereign power. And early-modern theatre makers eagerly use precisely this doubleness. They confront their spectators with a human being whose power they must trust, but who does not at all control his own impulses, as Walter Benjamin writes in his well-known book about German tragedy: ‘What keeps on fascinating me in the final decline of the king, is the contradiction the historical era goes through, between his impotence, his depravity on the one hand and the absolute faith in the sacro-saint power of his function’.⁶ Thus the theatre king, who invariably looks suspiciously like their own sovereign, becomes an unguided, unpredictable projectile, no longer able to deal with his own power. Consider the personage of Néron in *Britannicus* (1669) by Jean Racine: the person who should use his power to govern his people turns out to be an unpredictable hothead who is prepared to destroy his own power and therefore also his citizens’ empire to satisfy his personal lust. Royal melancholy is therefore always interwoven with the problem of the double body of the king: he is doomed to be the temporary incarnation of an eternal duty (hence “Le roi est mort, vive le Roi”). The baroque sovereign is torn between the eternal statute of his function and the finiteness of the person who must hold the position, namely he himself. Furthermore he does not manage to match the ideal image he has of himself as a ruler to his actual, public image. He is doomed to remain estranged from himself.

For the melancholic or moonstruck prince love always has a pathological side. Melancholy often involves extreme variations of mood, as Kristeva argues in *Soleil Noir*: ‘we will use the notion of melancholy when describing a series of pathological symptoms of inhibition and asymbolism momentarily or chronically taking over an individual, mostly alternat-

4 Vanhaesebrouck 2008, pp. 88-91

5 Jobez 2004, p. 45. Incapable d’agir et de proclamer l’état d’exception le souverain sombre soit dans la dépression et meurt d’incomplétude, souffrant de mélancolie que Benjamin identifie comme une maladie baroque typique

6 Benjamin 1985, p. 74. Ce qui ne cesse de me fasciner dans la chute finale du tyran, c’est la contradiction que l’époque ressent entre l’impuissance, la dépravation de sa personne et la foi absolue dans le pouvoir sacro-saint de sa fonction

ing with a so-called maniacal phase of exaltation'.⁷ At the basis of regal melancholy and therefore of his changes of mood, from contemplative introspection to mania and back, is a deep conflict between his public role and his personal desires and passions – heroism and tragedy go together irreconcilably.

And the tragedy drifts on the imagination of his rival with the woman of his dreams (Néron goes literally mad by imagining how 'his' Junie is cherished by Britannicus). The enamoured melancholic puts himself in a space-time he does not belong in, his dreams feed a slumbering state of being in which the sovereign can shirk the responsibility that oppresses him: he refreshes himself as a spectator of his own phantasm. Melancholy is therefore always theatrical, does always assume a phantasmatic view. The most important cause of melancholy is, in other words, often a love that is not shared and has to find a counterweight in an imagined perception of that desire. That is precisely why there is always a profound discomfort lurking behind the sexual and scatological pranks of early-modern libertines such as John Wilmot, even an abysmal existential fear for the emptiness of one's own existence. Melancholy always stems from a want, as Yves Bonnefoy writes: 'Melancholy is the art of adoring an image of the world of which we know that it is just an image and which prevents us to return to that very same image we desire, true, but without accepting the price to pay'.⁸ And this phantasm precisely holds the toppling point between the early-modern "lunaria" on the one hand and tyrannical rulers on the other hand: the latter realizes his own theatrical phantasm.

The impossibility of pleasure

Early-modern melancholy is, as a theatrical dispositive, closely interwoven with the then historical context, as Christian Biet argues. At the end of the sixteenth and the beginning of the seventeenth century melancholy functions as a necessary antidote against the historical violence of the religious wars. Early-modern man retreats onto himself, distances himself from community life and stages alternative realities for himself. He lives thanks to the phantasmatic detour, which he finds, for instance, in the theatre. This quest, argues Biet, is closely linked to the then popularity of the pastoral, in literature but also in theatre, idyllic love stories of shepherds and shepherdesses who take the spectator away from his

7 Kristeva 1989, pp. 18-19. 'on appellera mélancolie la symptomatologie asilaire d'inhibition et d'asymbolie qui s'installe par moments ou chroniquement chez un individu, en alternance, le plus souvent, avec la phase dite maniaque de l'exaltation'

8 Bonnefoy 2005, p. 15. 'La mélancolie, c'est d'aimer une image du monde dont on sait qu'elle n'est qu'une image, et qu'elle prive donc de ce retour que l'on désire, c'est vrai, mais sans accepter d'en payer le prix'

present, but who, at the same time, offer the possibility to withstand that same present from an ironic distance – because that same spectator really does understand the *campy* representation of reality:

If one takes as a starting point that melancholy is an integral part of the universe of the pastoral and that, in a certain way, that role of the shepherds is to demonstrate that it is possible to get rid off this dark red liquid irrigating our present times (...) to observe it, from far away, lingering in their rural retreat, and to linger in their black humour, one can at that moment consider that sometimes the melancholic experience entails some sort of satirical perspective on the world and/or that melancholy "cures" man from the poetical and political violence, exactly because it is a retreat, a distant meditation.⁹

In other words, the pastoral functions as a sort of therapeutic time space. But precisely this very same pastoral, phantasmatic universe brings the melancholic back to the violence and the anger he tries to flee from.

The melancholic never succeeds in escaping his deeply rooted discomfort. This gnawing discomfort has a simple yet ponderous reason: even if man thinks himself irreplaceable, he is an ephemeron. He flees from his own mortality, tries to escape time slipping by. The melancholic thrives on a vision of eternal pleasure, a general, absolute dissatisfaction, that can never ever be stilled. The wanton behaviour of the libertines is only an attempt to withstand that dissatisfaction, in vain. And the more he looks for pleasure, the greater the disappointment. In the magnificent poem 'The imperfect enjoyment' John Wilmot, the Second Earl of Rochester (1647-1680), describes how his own desire confronts him time and again with his literal and symbolic impotence:

I sigh, alas! and kiss, but cannot swive.
Eager desires confound my first intent,
Succeeding shame does more success prevent,
And rage at last confirms me impotent.¹⁰

The love poems of Wilmot are not about love in the first place, but about

9 Biet 2006, p. 3-4. Si l'on considère que la mélancolie est précisément ancrée dans l'univers de la pastorale, et que, d'une certaine manière, les bergers sont là pour montrer qu'il est possible de s'écarter du liquide vermeil qui irrigue l'Histoire du temps présent (...) pour la regarder, de loin, de leur retraite champêtre, et se complaire dans l'humeur noire qui est alors la leur, on peut alors concevoir que l'expérience mélancolique est parfois une sorte de regard satirique sur le monde, et/ou que la mélancolie « guérit » de la violence poétique et politique par le fait même qu'elle est un écart, une retraite, une méditation distanciée

10 Rochester 1993, pp. 50-51

the immeasurable emptiness that this love entails: '[a]t the centre of Rochester's poems on love ... there is an empty space'.¹¹ The libertine has only one strategy left to confront his own melancholy: he dips his pen into aggressive obscenity which undermines the pornographic pleasure instead of feeding it. Thus John Wilmot writes the scabrous satire *Sodom or the quintessence of debauchery*. In this short satirical play Bolloxian, king of Sodom (and a hardly concealed parody of Charles II), decides that sodomy between men becomes acceptable. Thereupon General Bugger-anthos promptly reports that the new policy is enthusiastically received by the soldiers (as less money goes to prostitutes), but has baleful consequences for the women in the realm who have to resort to dildos and ... dogs. With barely hidden amusement Wilmot has his filthy satire go off the rails: what at first seems playful-erotic becomes abysmal and repulsive. He conscientiously makes the reader the victim of his own erotic thrill.

In his doctoral thesis (2014) Pol Dehert describes how the pornographic theatricality of *Sodom* does not only push Rochester himself (for whom writing is always a form of self-staging) right into the arms of early-modern melancholy, but also the reader (as Rochester wrote *Sodom* as a 'closet drama', i.e. it was meant to be read): in Rochester's hilarious tragedy there is no real pleasure, every ejaculation is premature. At the same time, Dehert argues, *Sodom* is an auto-satire: the play pricks the libertine habitus itself. And that is the true essence of Rochester: he exposes his own libertarianism ("debauchery") and that of his companions as an existential way-out. In other words, *Sodom* is not only a satire, but also, and maybe even in the first place, an auto-satire.

The melancholy of a libertine such as Wilmot is existentially linked to early modernity and is therefore fundamentally baroque. Early-modern man learns that there is no great godly plan: 'Rien de plus triste qu'un Dieu mort', according to Kristeva.¹² The world has lost its charm, history is no longer messianic, it is pointless, empty, because without any God. "After Death nothing is, and nothing Death", as Rochester writes in his translation of Seneca.¹¹ This atheism precisely urges the insatiable appetite of the libertine: 'if God does not exist anymore, only the (sinful) body remains. And that (sinful) body is a mortal body.'¹² Behold the driving wheel of the libertine melancholy: all of a sudden life seems very short (because there is nothing after death) so you have to go for it flat out whenever and wherever you want it, but just because of his unbounded behaviour the libertine will be confronted even more harshly with his own mortality.

11 Thormählen, pp. 82-83.

12 Kristeva 1998, p. 18

Melancholy and spectacle

In his beautiful play *Lunaria* (1988) Vincenzo Consolo poignantly stages the melancholic habitus of the early-modern sovereign and the baroque theatricality as a cause of and an antidote against that same melancholy. His main character *Casimiro*, "vice-king of Sicily", blatantly suffers from melancholy. His wife is all too exuberant, his family is greedy - he is depressed by both. But above all he hates the power he must incarnate. Just like Hamlet he observes the world of shams around him in a lethargic astonishment as he is the only one to see how reality is disintegrating ever more. One night he dreams that the moon falls. Subsequently it really disappears, causing a great panic and even more responsibilities for the sovereign himself: 'the vice-king is almost submerged by a fit of his melancholy but he cannot give in, he has to resist: he cannot abandon his role as a sovereign, certainly not on a moment as gloomy, as disquieting as this, when everybody is petrified by the terror'.¹³ There is not only his overpowering responsibility as a sovereign, he also needs to withstand the typical early-modern, Pascalian cosmic shiver, the realization that one is only part of something that transcends any understanding: 'History is melancholy. There is nothing beyond the Universe, this circle of which the centre is everywhere but its borders nowhere to be found, this immense and balanced anarchy. But if history is melancholy, the boundless, the Eternal are anxiety, vertigo, panic, terror'.¹⁴ In order to withstand this historically determined melancholy early-modern man retires to the theatre, to experience the illusion of a quiet and orderly existence and, at the same time, to enjoy the fact that this illusion is only a sham: 'Against these sentiments we build sets, confined and familiar theatre, foppery, illusions, barriers of fear'.¹⁵ In other words, melancholy and theatre are closely interwoven in early-modern times.

Indeed, theatre becomes the means to fight the fear of the void, the *horror vacui*. The terrifying reality becomes a spectacle in which everything is illusion and role play. In other words: the theatre becomes the means par excellence to let go at this melancholic confusion, precisely by staging it in full regalia. What is real? What is illusion? What can I believe in? The baroque theatre eagerly takes up these questions. And religion becomes part of that grandiose spectacle. It is no coincidence that in the

13 Consolo 1988, p. 31. ' [I]e vice-roi est presque submergé par un accès de sa mélancolie, mais il ne peut céder, il doit résister: impossible d'abandonner son rôle de souverain, surtout en ce moment si sombre, si inquiétant, alors que tous [...] sont pétrifiés par la terreur'

14 Consolo 1988, p. 59. 'L'Histoire est mélancolie. Il n'existe que l'Univers, ce cercle dont le centre est partout et la circonférence nulle part, ce cataclysme incessant et harmonieux, cette immense anarchie équilibrée. Mais si l'histoire est mélancolie, l'Infini, l'Eternel sont anxiété, vertige, panique, terreur'

15 Consolo 1988; p. 59. 'Contre ces sentiments, nous bâtissons les décors, les théâtres finis et familiers, les duperies, les illusions, les barrières de l'angoisse'

seventeenth-century dictionary of Antoine Furetière the notion of illusion is described as 'diabolical' and therefore dangerous. The then theatre greedily leans towards that danger by playing with the question whether what happens on stage can also be real. That is why authors such as Corneille (*L'illusion comique*) or Molière (*L'impromptu de Versailles*) will explicitly thematize theatre itself.

The baroque theatre tries to outplay the existential fear for a reality in which everything is changeable with spectacle and effects, precisely by showing this variability in full regalia. And thus identities are exchanged, men become women or vice versa, designers play with perspectives, craftsmen design 'gloires' or passing clouds and the techniques of the spectacular mystery plays from the Middle Ages are used to astound the spectator with various effects. This spectator perfectly knows that the effects are not real (as he hears the rumbling of the stage pulleys), but, at the same time, he likes to be swept along. This split precisely is the essence of the baroque: to take the spectator up and away in an illusion and, simultaneously, to surprise that same spectator with a number of visible effects. 'It is just like real', he thinks, and at the same time he knows it is not. Everything must be literally filled up. The melancholic emptiness is literally filled with spectacle. And in the middle of all that raging and thundering stands the human body, as the last remains of an authentic presence. The body of the saint, the body of the martyr, of the king, of the criminal, after the execution or on the dissection table in an anatomical theatre. And even that body becomes a spectacle.

Baroque is the new black

We have never been closer to the baroque than today, at a time when reality is still unknowable and further expands, a time when warriors behead journalists and then turn their deed into a media spectacle, a time when fear for the future has become the driving force behind all political actions. Reality is hiding behind an extravagant media spectacle. And we keep on acting, as perfect clowns, in order not to have to confront the large black hole, and thus our own melancholy. Whoever wants to understand our present-day world, in which everything that seemed stable has become fundamentally changeable, will find a mirror in early-modern theatre and understand that our reality, in which everything is representation, is not all that far away from the early-modern crisis.

In *The Devils*, Ken Russell's masterly film from 1971, the Catholic priest Urbain Grandier (Oliver Reed) is accused of witchcraft: an Ursuline convent in Loudun (France) was supposed to be visited by the devil. The sexually frustrated nun Jeanne (Vanessa Redgrave), whose real object of desire is Grandier himself, accuses the priest of being the cause of the diabolic visits. Russell uses this historical fact as a starting point and a perfect excuse to show the sexual escapades of the nuns in his dazzling

cinematographic style. Russell stages their religious mania in a long orgiastic scene that is interrupted by a disguised Louis XIV. He claims to have a holy relic that will promptly chase the devils. The nuns are only too happy to be "cured" by this relic, but are subsequently dumbfounded as they find that Louis' box is empty. Their carefully staged reality turns out to be fiction. With one gesture Louis XIV undoes the spell of the fiction called religion.

A similar game is played in *Colossus* (2014), the more than four hours long baroque total spectacle of the Belgian company Abbatoir Fermé directed by Stef Lernous. For this dashing exploit Lernous and his companions built a dilapidated little theatre, a theatre-in-the-theatre. We find ourselves in a far-away, not clearly defined future, a sort of Mad Max-like post-apocalyptical world in which about everything is a transplant or a mutant, and we meet Onderling (Underling), a slightly overconfident amateur director, and his family (a wilted cleaning lady, a teenage daughter who has just had her consciousness removed and who joins gangbangs as a sort of fitness exercise, and *junior*, an incomprehensibly prattling adolescent zombie). Father Onderling is invited to apply for a job with the Ministry of Restructuring, which really cheers up his wife ("at a ministry appointments do happen"). That ministry, of which nobody really knows what it is there for, is 250 floors underground and can only be reached with a lift that only goes down, never up. Onderling's descent into hell – the selection procedure turns out to be very special indeed – is interrupted by a rather grand interlude in which the collaborators of the ministry themselves become spectators of Onderling's amateur play *Mundus in Dolo*. We are treated to a baroque machine play that holds the middle between a didactic Jesuit drama and an Ed Wood B-film. Onderling's pretentious melodrama is not really successful and the end of his play is the beginning of yet more gargantuan *tableaux*. Only at the very end of the play, when the spectator has gone all pulpy along with Onderling, Lernous reveals the true existential bearing of this total spectacle. Apparently Onderling has meanwhile been crowned king and has slipped into his moonstruck frenzy and the setting around him is completely dismantled, until only a gaping void is left, with the small, naked body of that same underling raving and shivering in the darkness. No more theatre, no more illusion – *Ecce homo*, this is man.

Thus Lernous perfectly grips the essence of early-modern, seventeenth-century existence, but also our own postmodern confusion. Behind the burlesque baroque in which identities are always roles a deeply rooted existential fear is hiding, as if the apocalypse has just happened and is already there again. Behind the spectacle lurks the void. No matter how hard we try to give our world its spectacular charm again, again and again we realize that this enchantment is only an illusion, that what we call desire is only a profound *tristesse* and that there is always disappointment after the high. *Colossus* shows us the deadlock of modernity, the blowhole that also Anish Kapoor reveals in his fascinating *Dark Brother* (2005). The work is

nothing more than a pitch-black surface that is somewhere on the museum floor of the MADRE in Naples. When one bends forward one does not see a surface, but an immeasurable depth. Kapoor does not only play with our view, but also shows us a metaphysical void beyond religious kitsch. ‘I only go down’, says the liftboy in *Colossus* to the main character Onderling, as the ultimate metaphor for his existential melancholy. Therefore: *baroque is the new black*.

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Small Anatomy of Political Melancholy

Lieven De Cauter

'Horried the melancholic sees the earth relapsed into a mere state of Nature. No shimmer of former history surrounds it. No aura'.
(Walter Benjamin)

Psychopolitics

The term *psychopolitics*, coined by Peter Sloterdijk, draws attention to the role of psychological disorders, emotions and affects in politics. It's an important, probably underestimated perspective on 'the political'. A entire cartography is to be made of political affects: rage, naivety, cynicism, honour, pride, cowardice, courage, firmness, perseverance, rebellion. All of them are political affects that in the political transcend the individual and can become mass phenomena that direct the masses (as shown by Sloterdijk in *Zorn und Zeit*¹). In this text we want to reflect on melancholy as a political affect.

Of course this theme of politics and melancholy hasn't been plucked out of the air. After the euphoria of the Arab Spring, there was a deep sadness and a state of confusion. After the revolutionary excitement of Tahrir Square, the Indignados movement and Occupy Wall Street, disillusionment came (the intervention in Libya, the civil war in Syria, the reign of terror of el-Sisi in Egypt, the horror of ISIS, ...). After the manic condition came the depression, after the enthusiasm the dejection.

That much is clear: the theme of 'political melancholy' is highly topical. One could, in the light of the climate catastrophe, even speak of a new 'post-historic melancholy'. But first, what is melancholy?

A bipolar syndrome

Melancholy is not only a morbid gloom of the contemplative mind, but it also contains visions, manic enthusiasm, and ecstasy. The opening lines of Robert Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (2001) [1621] – this interminably long work (three parts, 1382 pages in total²) – contains a clear view

1 Sloterdijk (2006) starts from the concept of 'Thymos' (sense of honour, pride, dignity, indignation, rage), which also plays an important role in Fukuyama's *The end of History and the last Man* (1992). The concept goes back to Plato. In Fukuyama's work the argument goes that dignity is an underestimated political factor, and that the soft revolutions in the Eastern Bloc were founded on it (Václav Havel's citizen movement being the major example of this). Thus, man is more than just economy and Fukuyama's conclusion is of course that this dignity leads to the liberal democracy as the final stage of history. In Sloterdijk's work rage is, in fact, resentment that is brought into action by 'resentment banks' (rather than rage banks). He uses the Christian religious apocalyptic resentment and the violent excesses of communism as major case studies. Also ISIS could serve as an example of this ruthless wrath, this resentment that becomes political. (On the role of anger in politics, see my text 'The Days of Anger: Humiliation, Fear and Dignity in the Middle East', in chapter ten 'Everywhere Tahrir Square! Reflections on the revolution in Egypt' (De Cauter 2012).

2 Like a Renaissance/Baroque *Wunderkammer* wanting to represent the entire world Burton's *anatomy of melancholy* is a book about literally everything, but as a consequence of this enumera-

of what the author means by the anatomy of melancholy. The expression harks back to a legend in which Democritus would have cut open dead animals, in search of the location of downheartedness. *The author's abstract of Melancholy* is a poem which, as the title says, should somewhat summarise the argument. Of course it's not just a scholastic summary, let alone an *executive summary*, rather an evocation in verse, therefore an overture which, like in an opera, represents the main topics of the piece, or even better: a baroque prologue³:

THE AUTHOR'S ABSTRACT OF MELANCHOLY

When I go musing all alone,
Thinking of divers things
When I build castles in the air,
Void of sorrow and void of fear,
Pleasing myself with phantasms sweet
Methinks the time runs very fleet.
All my joys to this are folly,
Naught so sweet as melancholy.

When I lie waking all alone,
Recounting what I have ill done,
My thoughts on me then tyrannise,
Fear and sorrow me surprise,
Whether I tarry still or go,
Methinks the time moves very slow.
All my griefs to this are jolly,
Naught so sad as melancholy.

[...]

I'll not change life with any King,
I ravisht am: can the world bring
More joy, than still to laugh and smile,
In pleasant toys time to beguile?
Do not, O do not trouble me,
So sweet content I feel and see.
All my joys to this are folly,

tion spree and 'name and quotation fetishism' also slightly about nothing. It's a game of questions and petty facts without taking positions. Like a 'wonder chamber': a highly amazing jam-full 'curiosity cabinet'. At the same time an inexhaustible source, a crazy encyclopedia of the world, especially digitally fordable (<https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/10800>).

3 I quote the first and the last two stanza to give an idea, but it would be advisable to read the whole, rather long poem online (see previous footnote), to make the heaving rhythm of heights and depressions fully sink in.

None so divine as melancholy.

I'll change my state with any wretch,
Thou canst from gaol or dunghill fetch;
My pain past cure, another hell,
I may not in this torment dwell!
Now desperate I hate my life,
Lend me a halter or a knife;
All my griefs to this are jolly,
Naught so damn'd as melancholy.

The entire antithetical structure of the poem reminds us of the Shakespearian chiaroscuro, albeit a little less brilliant and poetic. The baroque changes of moods are rather didactic panels. It's more a didactic poem than a lyrical text. If the author is right and this is the summary of the argument concerning 'the anatomy of melancholy', then the diagnosis is clear: melancholy is a syndrome, and what's more, it's a syndrome we know well, until recently one was called 'manic-depressive', at present one is being called 'bipolar' (since the term manic-depressive sounded too stigmatizing). Or more carefully: although melancholy doesn't coincide with the above-mentioned syndrome, it's in any case bipolar.

Indeed, we find this bipolarity in about all diagnoses of morbidity, from Aristotle until now: states of ecstasy and genius alternate with periods of big disconsolateness. Melancholy is a disorder of extremes: overestimation of oneself and despair, enthusiasm and existential or even metaphysical disillusionment.

In Benjamin's famous book about the baroque tragedy, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*⁴, this bipolarity of melancholy is extensively addressed. In the tradition on this theme contemplation and melancholy are, according to him, rightly and deeply connected. Of all contemplative intentions it is the most suitable for mortal creatures, because, according to the theory of temperaments, it goes back to the *humores*, the life blood, and ascends this way 'from the depths of the domain of the created'. Here he touches the motif of connecting the highest (the divine) with the lowest (the natural). This connection is somewhat the alchemy of the melancholy person (for example: the melancholic is looking for the synthesis or short circuit between mysticism and eroticism). Therefore Benjamin chooses for a conception of melancholy which he explicitly calls dialectical. According to Benjamin it's more particularly in Aristotle's thinking – more than in the medieval theory of temperaments – that the concepts of melancholy, genius and madness are connected. What interests Benjamin

4 Benjamin, 1975, p. 318-334 (the so called baroque book was originally published in 1925); my discussion here goes back to my book *De dwerg in de schaakautomaat. Benjamins verborgen leer* (1999), p. 181-183 (English version to be published).

in melancholy is the 'contrast between the most intensive activity of the mind and its deepest decay'. On the one hand the melancholic is, according to the ancient thinkers, gifted with visionary powers, on the other hand he is resentful, vengeful and suffers from fits of rage.

Through the connection in astrology of melancholy with Saturn, this characterisation of extremes gets strengthened according to Benjamin: melancholy refers to slowness and obtuseness, as well as to intelligence and concentration. It unites the highest with the lowest, the divine with the beastly (since Chronos/Saturn is the god of extremes according to Panofsky: the god of the golden age as well as the besmeared and dethroned god). In the Middle Ages melancholy was promoted to be one of the seven cardinal sins: the slowness of the heart, the *acedia* that plagues the monastery cells as a *démon du midi*. The *vita contemplativa* is constantly threatened by it: the devil finds work for idle hands. During the Renaissance the melancholic type became topical again, however without the medieval possession by evil spirits. The depraved was toned down by the theory of genius. Through a spiritual diet, the depraved got conquered and the melancholy person became 'jovial' (being under the influence of loves, Jupiter). But also older characterisations of the melancholy person still have an effect in modern times. Until Kant's thinking, Benjamin indicates with some satisfaction, he is characterised by vengefulness, impulses, appearances, temptations, meaningful dreams, conjectures and miraculous signs. So far for Benjamin.

This bipolarity is also the cause of some sort of vicious circle that characterises melancholy: the *acedia* of the monks, for instance, is caused by reading, but makes reading also impossible (as Agamben indicates briefly in his book *De la très haute pauvreté*⁵). It remains ambiguous, also in pathology: a 'manic' episode doesn't mean that the patient is cheerful all the time. In fact it happens more often that someone in a manic episode is sensitive and easily irritated. However, the manic phase can be really euphoric too. Of course, this big intensity of thought processes can also lead to vehemence, and, as a consequence, to outbursts of anger. For 'The songs of the Dawn Man' mentions 'the braking distance is squared with the thinking speed'.⁶

The Romantic melancholy differs possibly from the baroque melancholy as a result of the fact that one seems to have forgotten the euphoric state, or at least because one separates it from melancholy defined as depressiveness. This way one retains depressive melancholy as the real melancholy. By separating manic melancholy, or better, by separating melancholic mania and presenting it as being alien to melancholy, and as its opposite, melancholy becomes depressive. And with it the manic

5 Agamben, 2011.

6 De Cauter 2000, p. 53.

becomes contradictory, as one feels in the expression 'manic melancholy'. That's strange actually, for the Romantic exaltation is the necessary, almost natural antipode of the Romantic *Weltschmerz*. A topos in itself.

In the poetry by Baudelaire – according to some the pre-eminent (late) Romantic poet that became at the same time one of the founders of Modernism – bipolarity, however, was also one of the central ideas: visions full of flushes of happiness and timeless beauty to then wake up as a slave of time and in the hands of boredom. One finds this chiaroscuro in 'La chambre double', a prose poem from *Le spleen De Paris*, but also in countless poems from *Les Fleurs du mal*, particularly in the cycle 'Spleen et idéal', included in *Les Paradis artificiels*. *Opium et haschisch*, the unrivalled phenomenology of the flush of happiness, this dialectic of elevation and regression, of ecstasy and disgust is described at length.⁷ Baudelaire is without a doubt one of the great masters of Romantic melancholy in its full doubleness of ecstasy and abysmal downheartedness.

In Freud's *Trauer und Melancholie* the separating of the depressive from the manic in melancholy is completed: in Freud's thinking melancholy is only sorrow, without ecstasy, mania or vision. It yields, however, an immortal definition of melancholy. Whereas sorrow or grief have a specific object – it's grief over the loss of something or someone – melancholy doesn't have a specific object: it's grief without object.⁸ This 'objectlessness' is well expressed in the German word *Weltschmerz*: suffering from the world. However, Freud focuses particularly on the pathology of depression and, by his own account, doesn't know what to do with the euphoric, manic moments.⁹

Bipolarity and politics

After our short, all too short outline of the cultural history of melancholy, the question regarding melancholy and politics can be modernised: 'bipolarity and politics'. Hypothesis: politics is structured in a bipolar way. Today victory, tomorrow defeat, today revolution, tomorrow restoration, et cetera. (Which doesn't mean that bipolar personalities are pre-eminent politicians, maybe quite the contrary. To sail the turbulent waves of politics, you'd better be equipped with equanimity and imperturbability, and therefore you'd better be, in terms of the theory of temperaments, phleg-

7 Baudelaire 1972; Baudelaire 1962. See also 'La chambre double': <http://www.poetica.fr/poeme-1446/charles-baudelaire-la-chambre-double/>. Here I provide the beginning and the ending of the widely known prose poem 'Enivrez vous': «Il faut toujours être ivre. Tout est là: c'est l'unique question. (...) pour ne pas être les esclaves martyrisés du Temps, enivrez-vous; enivrez-vous sans cesse! De vin, de poésie, ou de vertu, à votre guise.» (Baudelaire, 1972, p. 1354) (online available at: <http://www.poesie.net/baudel1.htm>).

8 Freud, 1998.

9 Ibid., p. 440.

matic.) Probably – that's our hypothesis – politics will become more bipolar by the day. The more extreme the situation gets, the more melancholy there will be: moments of hope and inconsolableness seem to succeed one another at an ever faster pace. And more and more they collide. There is confusion everywhere. It's no longer possible to draw a clear picture of Syria and Iraq, let alone to form an idea of a 'solution' for global warming, the population explosion or the refugee problem. What we experience this way, is an unprecedented intensification of the political melancholy syndrome, which is, as such, at least as old as modernity and the 'historical consciousness' itself.

Those who reflect on politics and on the battlefield of politics, which is called history, can't but become despondent. Why does history not only make us nostalgic, but also deeply melancholic too? Because history is a history of wars, the history of technique is a history of armaments, the history of the religions is a history of oppression rather than one of enlightenment. Because history is a history of exploitation, a history of cruelties, of abuse of power, an orgy of greed.

In the wake of Walter Benjamin one can possibly situate the starting point of political melancholy in the Baroque: history ceases to be a history of salvation, without God the world is empty and what happens is purposeless. History becomes a natural history and the condition of the world a state of nature: the eternal recurrence of exploitation, injustice, suffering. The world and politics are dominated by the everlasting law of the jungle, the incessant civil war, the war of each against all. This baroque (proto)modern melancholy transformed itself over time, after a long euphoria over 'Progress' in modernity, to postmodern political melancholy, *une sorte de chagrin dans le Zeitgeist*, some sort of grief in the spirit of the age, which was brought to the fore by Jean-François Lyotard as a mourning over the lost modernity: the end of 'grand narratives' about progress and emancipation.¹⁰

Almost without exception scientific reports tell us the same (and they have been doing so for more than 40 years, starting with *The Limits to Growth*, the famous report to the Club of Rome, published in 1972¹¹): progress has become unsustainable, the logic of growth, mobility and consumption, linked to the ongoing demographic explosion, is now colliding with the limits of the planetary ecosystem.

This collision is depicted quite literally in Lars von Trier's film *Melancholia*: the planet Saturn approaches as a threatening, gigantic ball above the horizon and will inevitably crush the earth... In another depiction the radical ecologists of 'The Dark Mountain project' to realize that it is too late to avoid the catastrophe and learn to mourn and deal with

¹⁰ He discusses grief in Lyotard 1986, p. 123 (see also p. 50). The end of 'grand narratives' is constructed in Lyotard 1979.

¹¹ Meadows et al. 1972.

this awareness.¹² Psychopolitics of ecological depression. We seem to relapse into the state of nature. Next to the neoliberal competition as the war of each against all and next to the rising number of civil wars and failing states, there is the global warming as a limit, downfall, turning point, catastrophe.

Excursus on revolutionary nostalgia

The relapse of history into the state of nature is not – or not only – something awaiting us, something that can happen (and that is even imminent at this moment in history), but a different view of that history, a disenchanting view, the view of disenchantment. Benjamin expresses it, with a clear reference to his baroque book, in the essay about Baudelaire, using monumental, mesmerising sentences (which have been accompanying me for years and which also serve as a motto for this essay): 'Horried the melancholic sees the earth relapsed into a mere state of Nature. No shimmer of previous history surrounds it. No aura'¹³ This is an exalted, poetic quotation, but also an overwhelming awareness. However, this quotation contains a dialectical spark too: a craving for previous history. This nostalgia for *Vorgeschichte*, previous history, is the material for a 're-auratisation': the magic of the primitive, the childhood of the author, or the history, even the prehistory of humankind. Behind the sadness about the disenchantment lies a longing for a re-enchantment. We could call this dream the dream of a re-enchantment of the world. According to Michael Löwy, who devoted a whole oeuvre to it, this longing is active in revolutionary Romanticism. One could call it 'melancholic politics' (as opposed to 'political melancholy'). In it nostalgia becomes fertile.

In the collection of essays on the Re-enchantment of the world¹⁴ Michael Löwy argues that a critique of Modernity is implied in Romanticism and that this Romantic critique still affects many leftist thinkers

¹² The Dark Mountain Project is described as follows: "The Dark Mountain Project is a network of writers, artists and thinkers who have stopped believing the stories our civilisation tells itself. We see that the world is entering an age of ecological collapse, material contraction and social and political unravelling, and we want our cultural responses to reflect this reality rather than deriving it." (see: <http://dark-mountain.net/about/the-dark-mountain-project/>). Also worth reading is the Dark Mountain manifesto, see: <http://dark-mountain.net/about/manifesto/> It's also remarkable that they start from a collapse of the normal life through a civil war, general war or natural disaster, which we have called here (and elsewhere in this book, more particularly in the parts about Beirut, the black-out and the theoretical texts of part III) a relapse into the state of nature.

¹³ Mit Schrecken sieht der Schermütige die Erde in einen Bloßen Naturzustand zurückgefallen. Kein Hauch vor Vorgeschichte umwittert sie. Keine Aura.' Walter Benjamin, "Ueber einige Motive bei Baudelaire" (1938), in Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, I, 2, Frankfurt am Main, 1975, p. 643 (my translation).

¹⁴ Löwy 2013. This collection is for the greater part made up of essays by Löwy and Sayre 1992 and 2010.

today. He demonstrates that idealising the past not only can be regressive or reactionary (in 'reactionary Romanticism'), but becomes an opposite of the disenchanted present, and how this becomes a foreshadowing of a different society, in what he calls 'revolutionary Romanticism'. "With Romanticism I don't mean, or at least not exclusively, a literary school from the 19th century, but something much wider and deeper: the big protest movement against the modern capitalist, industrial civilisation, in the name of values from the past, a protest which started in the middle of the 18th century with Jean-Jacques Rousseau and which, throughout the German Frühromantik and after that throughout symbolism and surrealism continues until today. This deals with, as Marx had already pointed out himself, a criticism that accompanies capitalism like a shadow, ever since the day it was born and until the (blessed) day of its death. As a structure of sensitivity, as a way of thinking, as a world view, Romanticism covers all terrains of culture – literature, poetry, art, philosophy, historiography, theology, politics. Torn between nostalgia for the past and the dream of the future it denounces the devastating effects of the bourgeois modernity: the disenchantment of the world, the mechanisation, the objectification, the fact that everything is to be expressed in figures, the disintegration of the human community. Despite a continuous reference to a lost golden age, Romanticism is not necessarily oriented towards a recovery of the past: in the course of its long history Romanticism has known reactionary as much as revolutionary forms."¹⁵

Löwy's attempt to put Romantic melancholy and nostalgia in a positive light, provides an interesting perspective since we're not used to seeing Romanticism as revolutionary and we're even less used to seeing leftist thinkers as Romantics. Nevertheless, many leftist thinkers have Romantic roots. Löwy demonstrates that this is the case for many different authors: Marx, Lukács, Kafka, Rosa Luxemburg, Charles Péguy, Buber, Gustav Landauer, José Maria Mairategui, Benjamin, Adorno and Bloch, Breton and surrealism, up until Guy Debord. Revolutionary Romanticism takes history as a model, an inspiration, as a foreshadowing, as an anticipation of a future different world. The really existing past (whether idealised or not), becomes the proof that a different social order is possible and desirable.

Against the alienation, the chilling atmosphere, the objectification, the automation, the infernal era of industry and machines, the individualisation of modern society, a peaceful archaic community is placed as a counter-image. The antithesis between community and society, between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, coined by the sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies is the leitmotiv in Löwy's texts. In Marx and Engels he puts the emphasis on a quest for models in the past, the old German Mark or village community, or furthermore prehistoric clan structures of *gens* (they

¹⁵ Löwy 2013, p. 173, my translation.

learned about it through the work of Morgan). Marx and Engels were also inspired by the old Russian village communities. In Rosa Luxemburg's writings, the agrarian, primitive communism functions as the opposite of the catastrophes of industrialisation and colonialism, and also as an opposite of linear progress. In Benjamin's work it is the matriarchate of Bachofen. In Mariategui the Inca communities, he even speaks of Inca communism. In the light of these primitive communities (whether medieval or prehistoric) modern society based on private property, appears as a transition period, i.e. between the old communist, agrarian communities and the future communism. All these historic configurations are used as prefigurations of a coming history, of a better society. Often it's also religion that serves as a model for an alternative. In Péguy's thinking the example is medieval Christianity; in Bloch it's mainly the reformation, more particularly anabaptism and Thomas Münzer. In a similar vein Buber, Bloch and Benjamin are deeply inspired by Jewish messianism. Opposed to the 'transcendental homelessness of modern man' (as Lukács put it in *The Theory of the Novel*¹⁶), one warms oneself up through the egalitarian communities or through the religiosity of olden times. Notably the concept of redemption exerted its revolutionary powers in the past. As opposed to the disenchantment of the modern, to put it briefly, the past provides the material for a 're-enchantment of the world'. The past history, the previous history of childhood, of the matriarchate, of primitive people, of old religion, of rural communities, of the Incas, et cetera, is not only a sheer regressive nostalgia, but, according to Löwy, has become, in the work of the above-mentioned authors, a source of inspiration, a foreshadowing of a possible, different history, or even better: it contains elements of utopia.

How do nostalgia and melancholy relate? Homesickness is not wistfulness or melancholy. Melancholy doesn't have an object. It's disconsolate because there is no lost object. Homesickness has an object: one longs to the sense of wellbeing of a home. Therefore, nostalgia has something consoling. Consequently, in nostalgia, melancholy finds an object. One can, possibly (with Löwy's work in the back of our minds¹⁷), as a psychological exercise, distinguish between three kinds of nostalgia: a regressive nostalgia, which only wants to quench its thirst with an idealised past. In political terms this kind of nostalgia can rapidly become reactionary. Then there is the critical nostalgia, which uses the past as the opposite of the present, as an operating base for exerting criticism. It can often be anti-utopian, because it doesn't believe in the future or in a better

¹⁶ Lukács 1980, p. 37. By 'homelessness' Lukács means that in the novel meaningful transcendence disappears and that man, who dissociates himself from the group and his traditions, is in the hands of an empty immanence, an empty world, the novel gives shape to this desperation. Equally strong is the metaphor of the transcendental homeland, modern man appears in the novel as 'transcendentally stateless'.

¹⁷ Löwy distinguishes between reconstructive, reactionary, fascist, resigning, reforming and finally utopian or revolutionary Romanticism (2013, p. 27-28).

world, and instead is disillusioned about the present, or critical of it, and in any case alienated from it. One could also call this reaction conservative (or moderate, also sceptical, sometimes even cynical). Finally there is what one could call 'utopian nostalgia'. This oxymoron properly reflects the tension between past and future. Utopian nostalgia isn't nostalgia in the sense of a reactionary regression, but a search for anticipations of a different, a better world, a more social, common, deeper, richer, juster, more egalitarian social structure. This way we have the three time dimensions together: reactionary nostalgia is oriented to the past, critical nostalgia to the present and utopian nostalgia to the future.

The last-mentioned nostalgia is possibly the euphoric, manic side of political melancholy. I think we see this utopian nostalgia also at work today and I even dare to claim that we sorely need it (I'll return to this matter at the end of the text). But before we look ahead to the future of nostalgia in our psychopolitical explorations, we need to dig deeper into melancholy.

Modern melancholy, and perhaps even all melancholy, stems from overconfidence, the manic phase in which everything is possible, the most reckless inclusive. This *overdrive*, this hyper condition, is followed by depression and *burnout*. In the past *hubris* was overconfidence of the individual human being, now there is a new *hubris*, the *hubris* of the species: the combination of the ongoing demographic explosion, the technological expansion, the economic growth based on planned obsolescence and the mobility society based on fossil fuels, leads to the fact that we're on a collision course with the cosmos.

Post-historic melancholy

The Anthropocene is by now the official name of the geological age in which humankind has become overpowering. This awareness of the all-decisive impact of our species, makes us susceptible to an immense political melancholy. The unsustainability of our world system has become, perhaps for the first time in history, a scientific fact: the survival of humankind (and many other species) is at stake. Philosopher of science Isabelle Stengers calls it in her book *Au temps de catastrophes. Résister à la Barbarie qui vient* somewhat stubbornly and polemically 'the intrusion of Gaia'¹⁸: an entity that is at the same time irritated and completely indifferent (of course the planet itself will survive everything, it will shake us off as it did before with the dinosaurs). The intrusion of Gaia together with Saturn looming on the horizon (von Trier's image) is the disrupting, almost unthinkable, unprecedented situation of our era. It will be extremely difficult to stay below a global warming of 2°C – in itself already problematic enough. With a global increase in temperature of 6°C (which will become

¹⁸ Stengers 2013, p. 33 and following.

inevitable if we don't intervene urgently and radically) nothing is sure anymore, according to scientists. The melancholy this brings about could be called postmodern, even post-historical: postmodern was the end of the idea of progress and emancipation, post-history then is a history after the history as progress. This yields a completely new constellation of political melancholy, an enlargement without equal, a *novum* in human history: the catastrophe is the result of progress itself, of our world system, our world view and our vision on human nature, and especially also of our life pattern.

'Extraction', exploitation through digging in the subsoil, is together with progress and growth the basic gesture of modernity: it's literally and figuratively the engine of that growth and progress. The windmills of Don Quixote had to give way to mine shafts and slag heaps. First there was mining for metals and later also for the exploitation of fossil fuels. No modernity without mining and oil drilling. Naomi Klein calls this syndrome 'extractivism'.¹⁹ She points at Francis Bacon as the 'patron saint' of this conception of the planet as machinery at our disposal, as an object, as a 'resource'. In Bacon own words: 'For you have to follow and as it were hound nature in her wandering and you will be able, when you like, lead her to the same place again...Neither ought a man to make scruple of entering or penetrating into these holes and corners, when the inquisition of truth is his sole object'²⁰ Whether one is merely looking for truth with this penetration of Mother Earth remains, in the light of colonialism and rising capitalism, highly questionable. The macho tone in the metaphor doesn't really point to a disinterested search.

In the sixteenth century there was still a debate about whether one was allowed to drill the soil on ethical-theological grounds. In the first classic work about mining, *De Re Metallica* from 1557, Georgius Agricola (Georg Bauer) brushes aside all possible counter-arguments. The following is a synopsis of his reasoning in Book 1 of his 12 books about mining:

"The arguments range from philosophical objections to gold and silver as being intrinsically worthless, to the danger of mining to its workers and its destruction of the areas in which it is carried out. He argues that without metals, no other activity such as architecture or agriculture are [sic] possible. The dangers to miners are dismissed, noting that most deaths and injuries are caused by carelessness, and other occupations are hazardous too. Clearing woods for fuel is advantageous as the land can be farmed. Mines tend to be in mountains and gloomy valleys with little economic value. The loss of food from the forests destroyed can be replaced by purchase from profits,

¹⁹ Klein 2014, p. 161 and following.

²⁰ Francis Bacon, *De Augmentis Scientiarum*, 1623, cited in Klein, 2014, p. 170. Of course she points to the particular choice of the metaphors.

and metals have been placed underground by God and man is right to extract and use them. Finally, Agricola argues that mining is an honorable and profitable occupation."²¹

One could call this book, which is nearly a century older than *New Atlantis* and other writings by Bacon, the birthplace of a new concept of man: the engineer-entrepreneur, the capitalist subject par excellence. (In the meantime, five centuries later, this concept has been exalted to the educational ideal: if everything is business, and can and has to be conceived of in such a way, the consequence is that each child has to be brought up to be an entrepreneur.²²) The book can also be considered the birthplace of a new world view: the world as an object, as a machine, as a body that is to be exploited and drilled. Many contemporary ecological problems are a direct consequence of Agricola's reasonings. One can even recognize many contemporary landscapes in it. Only look at the Borinage or the Limburg mining area, which are marked forever and are still struggling to recover from the raping of man and nature. The pernicious implications of this modern world view are only now becoming clear. The platonic-christian-cartesian world view (the dualism between body and soul, man as a king of the creation and self-contained solipsistic mastermind of the world of objects) has given modern man a license to not see the big coherent unity of life in the lap of Mother Earth as sacred (this was – totally in line with the colonial mind – dismissed as primitive and animistic), but as rough, inert, available, profitable raw material.

Robert Burton, who was born a year after the publication of this work (and therefore makes the bridge between Agricola and Bacon so to speak), of course mentions this constellation in his book about everything, his *Anatomy of Melancholy*, with which we started this meditation. In part II he wants to explore the air, but also '*the bowels of the earth*', 'the intestines of the earth' (the macho metaphor is firmly-rooted in this world view). And in this exploration, he devotes himself sometimes, as he should, to manic visions:

The whole world belike should be new moulded, when it seemed good to those all-commanding powers, and turned inside out, (...), top to bottom, or bottom to top: or as we turn apples to the fire, move

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Wikipedia, 2015. The first book by Agricola is definitely worth reading, available online: http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/38015?msg=welcome_stranger. The work by Agricola has already figured in my very first essay, in which I tried to show how the machine as a metaphor enables early modernity (Da Vinci etc.) to reify, to manipulate and to colonise the world (De Cauter 1986). In the light of extractivism and the age of extreme energy, extreme extraction, the book by Agricola and the essay have become topical (I hope to elaborate this subject elsewhere).

22
This educational ideal is officially embedded in the 2015 Flemish coalition agreement. Meanwhile the 'entrepreneurship learning pathway' has been introduced at the Department of Architecture at the KULeuven, where I work. It is, according to our politicians to become, the backbone and ultimate aim of education, from Kindergarten to university.

the world upon his centre; that which is under the poles now, should be translated to the equinoctical, and that which is under the torrid zone to the circle arctic and antarctic another while, and so be reciprocally warmed by the sun: or if the worlds be infinite, and every fixed star a sun, with his compassing planets (as Brunus and Campanella conclude) cast three or four worlds into one; or else of one world make three or four new, as it shall seem to them best²³

In short: everything is possible, we can heat up entire parts of the Earth by turning it inside out or upside down and we can even make several worlds. It reminds us of Jules Verne, or the drawings by Granville. In the light of our constellation, this quotation sounds prophetic and highly ominous. That we will need several planets if our ecological footprint keeps on growing as it is doing now, has become some kind of commonplace warning in the meantime. But what this visionary, manic quotation also makes clear is that from the beginning disaster was ingrained in this new world view. That is perhaps the deepest, metaphysical layer of our 'post-modern' political melancholy: there's something fundamentally wrong with our modern attitude towards the world and our behavior towards nature. If one defines romanticism, from a political angle, as the protest against this modern, objectifying, industrial attitude towards nature, as Löwy does, we can now say Romanticism has proved to be right. But it goes beyond Romanticism. This grief stretches back to the Baroque and Renaissance. Even in the famous picture by Dürer melancholy is surrounded by instruments that symbolise mathematics and industry. The depressing alienation is inherent in the objectifying approach of reality: the grief about the absent object (Freud) is the sadness about the disenchanted, devitalised world. A straight line runs from Agricola's mining industry via the vision of Burton and Bacon to the insanity of *geo-engineering*: the tinkering with the climate, for instance by inserting particles in the stratosphere in order to dim the sunlight.²⁴ Modernity: five centuries of being creative with the planet.

The capitalist system cannot and does not want to step out of 'extractivism' and the logic of economic growth, which will prove fatal to us and to many co-inhabitants of the biosphere. Even worse: the solution is always more of the same. At the very same time when we needed a radical change to limit the CO2 emissions, we started to exploit even more polluting and dangerous fossil fuels: shale gas, tar sand oil, deep-water drilling, brown coal. What should have become the age of 'transition', turns out to

23
Burton 2001, p. 40.

24
For more about this, see the chapter 'Dimming the sun: the solution to pollution...is pollution' in Klein 2014, p. 256-290.

be 'the age of the extreme energy.'²⁵
While we should turn to the soft technology of solar and wind energy, and to ecological, local farming, we're switching to extremer forms of extraction. The extractivism of modernity is getting into its highest and most dangerous gear. A wholly new capitalism even came into existence. This kind of capitalism brings about catastrophe, but at the same time it cashes in on it as military-industrial complex: 'disaster capitalism'²⁶. The whole planet, so to speak, is now becoming an extraction zone, from the North Pole to Antarctica²⁷.

Our collective powerlessness is stunning and the time window to prevent the very worst is closing. A collective consciousness and a sense of responsibility are gradually starting to grow, but those in charge are behaving totally irresponsibly, as they are stuck in the logic of accumulation, extraction and growth. All this leads to a psychopolitical identity crisis and an unparalleled political downheartedness.

The new melancholy that takes possession of us can definitely be called post-modern: “*post modernitatem, animal triste*”, after the ruthless rape of Mother Earth, all animals, including humankind, are in a sad condition. But the new melancholy is more than postmodern, it is to be called posthistoric: the history of man itself, that Big Entrepreneur, which is coming to an end as a history of conquest, as a colonisation of the planet, and which may lead to an exodus, a colonisation of space, perhaps rather through technology than through humanity.²⁸Hence all visionary, manic *captains of industry* that see the storm coming, Bill Gates, Elon Musk and Richard Branson, are preparing themselves with might and main for

25 Klein 2005, p. 314.

26 Naomi Klein describes the rise of this 'disaster capitalism' in her book *The Shock Doctrine. The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (2007). She writes the history of this disaster capitalism starting in Chili in the 1970s (Pinochet was assisted by the neoliberal economist Milton Friedman) up till hurricane Katrina in New Orleans and the Green Zone in Baghdad. The shock doctrine is simple, it's about three shocks: 1)a natural disaster, a coup d'état or war, 2) the implementation of a radical neoliberal shock therapy (privatisation, liberalisation and deregulation) and 3) repression for those who protest (electroshocks, from Pinochet to Abu Graib). In *This changes everything* (2014) we see an extractivist industry at work as part of this disaster capitalism.

27 This is extensively described in *This Changes Everything* (2014) (particularly in the chapter 'Beyond extractivism', see also p. 284, p. 310 and the paragraph 'All in the sacrifice zone'. A territory that is branded for exploitation and is ecologically destroyed by it, is called a *sacrifice zone* by Klein, a zone given up for exploitation, and her point is that by means of new techniques they can now be found everywhere. At the same time Naomi Klein also sees a sign of hope in it: because, like in her own country Canada, also more affluent citizens are confronted with it, the protest is getting stronger. She mainly thinks of the tar sand oil wells that threaten to turn big parts of the Alberta province into an apocalyptic moonscape. One can no longer downplay the problem as being far away. The perils with shale gas in The Netherlands and the extraction of gas around the city of Groningen are comparable.

28 Lyotard 1996. He also speaks about this hypothesis for the exodus of the technoscience that took over from man. I discuss this hypothesis in 'Postscript to the future' (De Cauter 2012).

a space exodus.²⁹ Depressiveness is for the stragglers, the *losers*. The exodus is also the horizon in several pieces of Lyotard, in particular the above-mentioned *Postmodern Fables* and *L'inhumain*, but he conceived of that exodus in the light (or rather the darkness) of the death of the sun. It's a horizon that we, unfortunately, have to take seriously. The happy few will skedaddle and the rest of humanity can drop dead on a heated, polluted planet. It's the continuation of the logic of colonisation of the world. The dualisation of the world (between poor and rich people, between *haves* and *have nots*) will, if it comes to that, have become absolute. I am convinced that this 'exodusproject' should be considered not only as mad, but also as criminal.

But one thing is sure, from now on a *different* history starts, *la seconde histoire*, as Stengers calls it: as opposed to the first history of progress.³⁰ However, it is far from certain that this other history will come about, it could also be utter barbarism, the barbarism that is coming (with reference to Stengers), or a relapse into the state of nature (as we called it previously with reference to Benjamin and elsewhere to Hobbes), or even, the end of mammals and higher plant species. Whether what comes will be comparable to the collapse of the Roman Empire (the migration of peoples and the raid of the barbarians then started on an unprecedented scale) or with the disappearance of dinosaurs, remains to be seen.

Or the other way round, alas, it doesn't remain to be seen. The degree of our extreme addiction to fossil fuels, to extractivism, accumulation and growth, will decide about it. Posthistoric melancholy is none other than the disconsolateness, the sorrow over the inevitability of this catastrophe.

Optimistic postscript

For the record: the planet will survive everything. Except for the death of the sun. The intrusion of Gaia and Saturn looming ahead should persuade us to stand up against our unsustainable and therefore criminal world system. But between dream and act, laws and practical objections stand in the way, but also a melancholy³¹, which we have tried to explain here. In that sense, one could say that reconciling ourselves to our melancholy, giving in to our powerlessness, is the worst we could do. But then, what

29 Naomi Klein devotes a whole chapter to Richard Branson, who promised in his 2006 pledge he would do something about the climate change, but in the meantime he has tripled his fleet of Virgin planes and as a result has also tripled the Virgin CO2 emissions. The entrepreneurs won't save the world. Klein also speaks about the exodus plans of these visionaries (see the chapter 'No messiah' in *This Changes Everything*, p. 230-255).

30 Stengers 2013, p. 11-13.

31 Reference to the in Flanders world-famous poem 'The marriage' by Willem Elsschot, written in 1910.

will be the solution?

Stopping to think in terms of solutions is a start, since problem-solving behaviour is the essence of the conception of man, in which the entrepreneur is the highest ideal of subjectivity: the pre-eminent capitalist subject. I believe in the usefulness of 'exercises in speechlessness'.³²

However, that doesn't mean that we have to throw in the towel. Perhaps our cursed bipolarity is here a last dialectical rescue board. For the occasion we could translate my personal mantra 'Pessimism in theory, optimism in practice' (which also occurs in Gramsci: 'pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will'³³) into 'Melancholy in contemplation doesn't necessarily rule out enthusiasm for activist practices'. *Psychopolitics of the urgency*: it's my deep conviction that we will only stand up once we truly realise and recognise that our world system is unsustainable. Only when we know and we're fully aware that our ship will sink, shall we leave it. Unfortunately, it will possibly be too late, as it goes with most ships or shipwrecked persons. 'Now or never' has never sounded as fatal and topical as Now.

We shouldn't be regressively nostalgic, but we urgently need to learn from the ancestors, the first earth dwellers, the animists. Maybe we should even bet on a new revolutionary nostalgia: neo(eco)animism as an alternative to our extractivism? We live in such a way that we are in need of several planets, they live in symbiosis with the universe. In an almost fairy-like report on the victory of the natives over a bauxite mine in India, which was about to destroy their natural habitat, i.e. the Nyamgiri mountains, and which is at the same time their sanctuary, one of the first inhabitants says (in a *videostill*): "*We need the mountain and the mountain needs us*".³⁴

To me this isn't Romantic mysticism, but (albeit vague and illegible) a signpost, a direction indicator to the future. If there is still a future, then it lies there, in this kind of treatment of nature. If we can truly recognize this and act accordingly, we'll already be halfway: "*We need Mother Earth and Mother Earth needs us*" (although the latter is doubtful, Mother

32 As I have already written in my first text about the theme of the catastrophe in my book *The capsular Civilization* (De Cauter 2004). Stengers speaks about an 'expérience de perplexité' (2013, p. 25).

33 Gramsci 1975, p. 175 (note 75). In almost all my recent books the expression appears, starting from *The Capsular Civilization* (2004), also in *De alledaagse apocalyps* (2011) and *Entropic Empire* (2012), there's even a recent interview entitled 'Pessimism in theory, optimism in practice', (in dutch) accessible at: <http://www.sampol.be/index.php/samenleving-en-politiek/zoeken-in-sampol/184-2015/februari-2015/1834-pessimisme-in-de-theorie-optimisme-in-de-praktijk> (also published at Dewereldmorgen.be).

34 An illustration that I found on the internet and that I posted with the publication on my blog 'Lessons in Urgency', of a piece of the Master's degree thesis of an Indian student of mine (Ranjani Balasubramanian, Indian Avatar, the victory of the first dwellers, see: <http://community.dewereldmorgen.be/blog/lievendecauter/2015/02/21/indian-avatar-the-victory-of-the-first-dwellers>, also available in Dutch. Both the text and the illustration are dear to me because they carry hope and are food for thought at the same time.

Earth needs us to save the biosphere, however, the planet itself survives even the most dramatic transformation of the biosphere). If we learned only a little bit from animism, from the idea that nature itself is sacred and that we're entirely part of it, that we're not the master of creation but children of nature, we would be on the right track. And this can become very practical. In *This Changes Everything* Naomi Klein documents pages long how indigenous people, with their old rights to intangibility of their *commons*, their ground, form one of the spearheads in the coalitions against extreme energy and the frenetic extractivism of shale gas, tar sand oil, deep-water drilling, etc.³⁵

Also Stengers bets, in her attempt to formulate a resistance to the coming barbarism in times of catastrophe, on this kind of coalitions where local knowledge is shared and new roads in our thinking are collectively taken. The 'GMO-event' is for her, as it is for the author of this article, in this context of crucial importance.³⁶ They are coalitions of citizens, organic farmers, anarchists, scientists, whistle-blowers, activists, etc, who try to stop the conquest of food monopolies based on patents on GMOs of Monsanto etc., somewhat successfully for the time being: the public opinion is alerted. Everybody who goes deeply into the thinking about the *commons* and participates in 'practices of commoning', digs up an ancient knowledge, an ancient treatment of our environment.³⁷ But that is not regressive or nostalgic: this rediscovery of the commons clearly forms a configuration of emergence with the open source movement (with Linux, GNU, Wikipedia, as most famous examples, but also all networked global activists furnish evidence of this³⁸). Consequently, this rediscovery of the theory and practice of the *commons* is futurist rather than neo-medieval.

In the light of this worldwide rediscovery of the *commons*, there may still be hope. From, but far beyond posthistoric melancholy, utopian nostalgia can become the postmodern, yes even 'metamodern (melancholic) politics' of the future. With the famous words of Hölderlin, perhaps one of the most melancholic minds of modernity (he ended up in madness): '*Wo aber Gefahr ist, wächst das Rettende auch*'.³⁹ Dialectical bipolarity: only when we have sunk deepest, shall we be saved. We don't really

35 Klein 2014, p. 294-419.

36 Stengers 2013, p. 25 and following.

37 For more about that, see the text 'Common places: considerations on the spatial commons: <http://community.dewereldmorgen.be/blogs/lievendecauter/2013/10/14/common-places-preliminary-notes-spatial-commons> (also in a forthcoming book Pascal Gielen (ed.) *Interrupting the City*, Valiz, 2016).

38 David Bollier 2014 pays a lot of attention to the discovery of the digital commons. Also Stengers paid attention to the configuration of the open source movement in informatics. The rediscovery of the commons didn't escape her notice either (2013, p. 71 and further).

39 Famous poem by Friedrich Hölderlin, 'Patmos', online accessible: http://armin-risi.ch/Artikel/Poesie/Hoelderlins_Hymne_Patmos.html#Note1

need to believe in this messianism, in this Kabbalah⁴⁰, as we don't need to convert to animism, but we need to learn from it. And fast.
(*envoi*) May this substandard exercise in speechlessness, this sub-lunary meditation about posthistorical melancholy, be a lesson in urgency.

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40 In the Kabbalah the term Tikkun refers to the turning point when decay is worst and redemption is near. For more about this, see the work of Gershom Scholem. This image is also present in Benjamin's thinking (see De Cauter 1999).

The Failed Politician Melancholia, Crisis and Political Agency

Klaas Tindemans

ABSTRACT

The question at stake in this article is: does melancholia – defined as a structure of feeling, as valid in a given regime of historicity – bridge the gap between individual agency and societal determinism, specifically in the field of politics? The applicability of the very notion of melancholia is a first issue, and leads to an assessment of the impact, in the 17th century and afterwards, of Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* and to an analysis of Émile Durkheim's notion of 'anomy/anomie' as a societal variation on the theme of melancholia. Modern political history has put forward famous cases of 'politic spleen': the French revolutionary feminist Théroigne de Méricourt, the American President Abraham Lincoln are among the most instructive. In the 20th century, when melancholia has become medicalized as a form of psychic or neural trauma, cases such as President John F. Kennedy show both this evolution and the limits of medicalization. In a last chapter, contemporary examples demonstrate a closer relationship between melancholia as a personal condition and a – provisionally re-defined – notion of political sense of loss: the fatal political career of French Prime Minister Pierre Bérégovoy, who committed suicide after an electoral defeat, the hardship of British Prime Minister Gordon Brown, losing crucial elections, and the political career of Belgian Prime Minister Wilfried Martens. Martens didn't fail in his career, but his decisive political shifts reveal remarkable connections between personal loss and ideological degeneration. In a conclusion these intertwinements between personal life and political doubt are put in the context of Durkheim's notion of anomy and the typically modern idea of 'crisis' as a societal condition of existence.

The definitive statement about politics and melancholia is, arguably, Robert Musil's *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* (*The Man without Qualities*). The novel reflects, in its characters, their discourse and their action (or inaction), on the end of a certain Middle-European civilisation and culture as they took shape in continental empires over the course of the centuries. Musil's *Kakanien* – the nickname for the double monarchy of Austria and Hungary (*Kaiserlich und Königlich*) under the last Habsburg emperors – is preparing for a (final?) celebration in 1918: 70 years under Franz-Joseph, parallel to a German celebration of 30 years under Wilhelm II. We know of course why this enterprise was shattered, but through Ulrich, the 'man without qualities', the ironic secretary of the committee preparing the festivities, we, the readers, can witness the degeneration from within. An extract illustrates the mood well. Ulrich has recited a list of proposals under the heading "Back to...!" (faith, baroque, state of nature, Goethe, German law, etc.) to Count Leinsdorf, the initiator of the 'Parallel Action', the double celebration of the emperors. Leinsdorf rejects the irony of this nostalgia – melancholia – among the citizens, but Ulrich continues in the

same mood, until the Count remarks:

“‘Dear Doctor,’ he said, ‘In the history of humankind, there exists no such thing as a voluntary “back to...”!’ This statement was a surprise to Count Leinsdorf himself in the first place, since his intention was to say something entirely different. He was conservative, he was indignant with Ulrich and he would have wanted to remark that the bourgeoisie had despised the universal spirit of the Catholic Church and was now suffering from the consequences. It would also have been self-evident to praise the times of absolute centralism, times when the world was still led by men who were conscious of their responsibility, from universally valid points of view. But suddenly, while looking for his words, it had occurred to him that he would really be unpleasantly surprised to wake up one morning without a hot bath and without railways and that, instead of them, there would only be an imperial herald, driving through the streets. Thus Count Leinsdorf thought: ‘What once was, will never be there in the same way,’ and while thinking this he was very surprised. Because supposing that in history no such thing existed as a voluntary “back to...”!, then humankind is like a man, driven by an uncanny wanderlust, for whom no return exists and no arrival, and this constituted a particularly remarkable condition.”¹

Here, in the character of Count Leinsdorf, Musil projects the very crisis of modernity itself, i.e. the debt of modernity to a history of *Unheimlichkeit*, uncanniness – its own history and its *régime d'historicité*. Its ‘regime of historicity’: how does a given society establish relationships between its past, its present and its future?² Musil’s count embodies the crisis caused by the transformation of these relationships. The aristocratic count, probably closer to Metternich than to Bismarck, suddenly becomes aware of his own contradictions, and they escape him, as a slip of the tongue, as some kind of symptom. And melancholia is suggested in the ‘uncanny wanderlust’ (*unheimlicher Wandertrieb*) – more precisely: ‘wanderdrift’ or ‘wanderdrive’, an attitude the count perceives as an historical and universal parallel of the singular, pathological *fugue*. The fugue is the mental condition where the journey inside the subject, the ego, is materialized in the actual escape from all things normal, in the disappearance, somewhere between impulsive tourism and vagabondage³. So the gap between the desire for (a return to) the past and the satisfaction with the present, as the result of a ‘progressive’ societal attitude, is embodied

1 Musil 1952, p. 239-240 – my translation

2 Hartog 2003

3 Johannisson 2009, p. 221

in the condition of the escapist – arguably a most socially determined variation on the theme of melancholia.

The quote from Musil is an invitation to interesting reflection, or to formulate research questions. One of the most intriguing historical-political questions could be identified in the character of Count Leinsdorf: do political actors shape history, or is it a set of ‘laws of history’, deterministic or not, that govern societal and political transformations over time? This fundamental issue cannot be answered in the form of a relatively short essay, since it immediately confronts us with, among other problems (epistemological and hermeneutical), the same problem of the ‘regimes of historicity’, as François Hartog understands it: reflections on the very idea of historical change and transformation force us to analyse the contingent relationships between past, present and future, the latter being some kind of anthropological ‘baseline’. So in this essay I will try to give some extremely provisional answers to this complex question by means of the concept of ‘melancholia’ – conceived as a ‘structure of feeling’. The latter term was coined by Raymond Williams in order to refine the analysis of the culture in a given period. Culture is, in his ‘totalizing’ point of view, the structure determining the connection between the living expressions of a social experience – seen synchronously – and the remembered and recorded cultures of past periods. Through this connection we can, whether as social-science scholars or as engaged citizens, compare cultures over time. Structures of feelings are then the devices a given culture uses both to assimilate and to resist, on an individual and on a collective level, the apparently deterministic developments of history – accumulation of capital, class struggle, technological innovation. Structures of feelings are selection mechanisms to deal with tradition – of territory, class, gender, ethnicity, etc.⁴ The concept fits nicely with the history of melancholia, since this is one of those rare human experiences where affections, cultural expressions, modes of production and political institutions meet each other clearly – not at first sight, but on closer examination.

Let me rephrase the research question: does melancholia, as a structure of feeling, bridge the gap between individual agency and societal determinism, in the field of politics? To start with, the very notion of melancholia in its applicability to the subject has to be explained, followed by various approaches to ‘political spleen’: historical cases linked to ideological paradigms (the French revolutionary activist Théroigne de Méricourt, the American President Abraham Lincoln); ‘medicalized’ cases, most instructively illustrated by American President John F. Kennedy; contemporary cases of ‘failed politicians’, in various senses (French Prime Minister Pierre Bérégovoy, British Prime Minister Gordon Brown, Belgian Prime Minister Wilfried Martens. In Bérégovoy’s case the failure

4 Williams 1961, p.64-70

was painfully literal: he committed suicide after an electoral defeat. Gordon Brown lost crucial elections. Prime Minister Wilfried Martens cannot be said to have failed, politically, but his memoirs reveal deep melancholia – personal loss, ideological degeneration, rancour.

In my conclusion, I will weigh these stories against a more anonymous and even amorphous notion of melancholia, which could comprise a whole society. The sociologist Émile Durkheim coined the term ‘anomy’ for the state of society where deep social-economic transitions are accompanied by the experience of moral and political lawlessness, as if any previous normativity has lost its meaning and its legitimacy.⁵ A more common term for this phenomenon of melancholia, of indefinite mourning over a former society, is of course ‘crisis’. The idea of crisis as a rupture, as the risk of the order of society collapsing, is a modern one. When a societal order has to find its legitimacy in the rationalization of its own foundations – and this is an elementary feature of Modernity, since God has been silenced by ‘humankind’ – every major re-configuration of the relations between past, present and future are ‘critical’ in many senses: decisive, resistible, traumatizing. In a modern crisis, the distance between the realm of experience and the horizon of expectations has become abyssal.⁶ But in contrast to this philosophical (anthropological) notion of crisis-as-modernity, a different assessment of the phenomenon of ‘crisis’ is imaginable, one closer to contemporary political experience. ‘Crisis’, as a notion referring to the weak foundations of our (capitalist) system of political economy, has become a buzzword since the early 1970s. The gold standard, as the safe haven for monetary stability, has disappeared, the rise in oil prices has created new global dependencies, and other developments in political economy could be cited. The joint advantages of consumerism and the welfare state – the latter closely linked to the former, in order to ensure the legitimacy of them both – were called into question by a political elite that had previously thrived on undisputed consensus, ‘social democracy’ in a large sense.⁷ The crisis took shape in the affirmed primacy of (de-regulated) financial policy, the constraints on trade-unionism, the primacy of law-and-order and the construction of ‘Fortress Europe’ – among many other phenomena. In this sense, ‘crisis’ is an ideological concept, meant to bridge the contradiction between a well-defined political economy – the logic of Capitalism – and de-politicization, in the guise of an officially restored consensus or ‘common sense’.

This essay puts notions of melancholia, in politicians’ behaviour and action, in the context of more abstract ideas of crisis of society as whole. It may result in an amendment – of course not the first one, and

5 Durkheim 1893/1967, p.18

6 Revault d’Allonnes 2012, p.78

7 Hall, et al. 1978/2013, p.300-310

surely not a comprehensive one – to the idea of man-made history, particularly recent political history.

Political melancholia

One of the most pronounced expressions of melancholia – provisionally defined as an attitude, resulting from a shared climate of feelings, emerging in early Modernity – is *A Satyre against Mankind*, a poem by John Wilmot, 2nd Earl of Rochester, who belonged to the famous (and infamous) ‘libertine’ court of the English King Charles II. This dark satirical text, clearly not as a reactionary gesture, subverts one of the foundations of (early) Modernity itself, i.e. the autonomy of reason:

And ‘tis this very reason I despise, / That supernatural gift that
makes a mite /
Think he’s an image of the infinite; / Comparing his short life, void of
all the rest, /
To the eternal, to the ever-blessed. / This busy, pushing stirrer-up of
doubt, /
That frames deep mysteries, then finds them out; /
Filling with frantic crowds of thinking fools / The reverend bedlams,
colleges and schools; /
Born on whose wings each heavy sot can pierce / The limits of the
boundless universe: /
So charming ointments make an old witch fly, / And bear a crippled
carcass through the sky. /
‘Tis the exalted power whose business lies / In nonsense, and im-
possibilities.⁸

This is followed by a rant against philosophers, “who retire to think ‘cause they have nought to do”. And then he continues:

But thoughts are given for action’s government / Where action
ceases, thought’s impertinent: /
Our sphere of action is life’s happiness / And he that thinks beyond
thinks like an ass.

In the more narrative sections of the poem, Rochester compares man and animal, in favour of the animal: it is ‘false reason’ that has corrupted mankind. But this feeling, pervading society, becomes only problematic, or critical, when mankind has to re-define itself, after the departure of God, or after His refusal ever to speak again to His creatures. If early

8 Wilmot, 2nd Earl of Rochester 1993, p. 27

Modernity could be characterized by the quest for the legitimacy of autonomous thinking – the invention of the Cartesian *cogito*, the rejection of classical thought, and the glorification of curiousness⁹, *A Satyre Against Mankind* expresses precisely the opposite attitude, in a discursive form where pain and anger over the loss of metaphysical certainties meet: this is anger about ‘authoritative’ reason. As Pol Dehert remarks in his essay on Rochester¹⁰, Rochester’s poem combines *Klage* (complaint) and *Anklage* (accusation). Sigmund Freud made this distinction in *Trauer und Melancholie*¹¹: melancholia moves back and forth between the dark interiorization of a sense of loss of an unknown object (*Klage*) and the desire to express this impasse in irony, sarcasm and forms of ‘libertine’ behaviour (*Anklage*). In a more general way, the self-inflicted necessity to re-establish the possibility of knowing oneself and the world – after God has been declared ‘indifferent’ – begs its counterpart: the trauma of unknown loss, expressed in emotional ‘deviancy’. The difference between mourning and melancholia, says Freud, is the fact that he who mourns more or less knows the object of his loss, whereas this is not clear for the melancholy man. Or more precisely, the melancholic might have an idea who (and/or what) he has lost, but he does not know what he has lost in them (it). The incapacity to separate these two aspects leads to a decrease and loss of self-regard. Or more precisely – again – melancholia means that one’s image of oneself is profoundly altered.¹² But can you project this psychic development onto a whole society? The very definition of melancholia, whether by Robert Burton in the early 17th century¹³, or by Freud, in the early 20th century, implies a societal embeddedness, because the meaning of those relationships that the ‘patient’ – a cultural term itself – has lost, are culturally *and* politically determined. The emotional value of a human relationship is constituted in a dialectic between the past – the traditions – and the actual experience: which indeed makes melancholia a ‘structure of feeling’. But in order to provide a more precise answer, an answer that could lead to a specific notion of political melancholia, I will shortly digress on to two aspects of Modern melancholia: its affinity with anomia, and its conflict with utopianism.

The concept of ‘anomy’ – or anomia/anomie – is a sociological one, coined by Durkheim to explain certain types of suicide, especially those caused by the acceleration of the social-economic conditions, in the late 19th century. The ‘mode of production’ is not a linear and clear cause of

9
Blumenberg 1988, p. 440-470
10
Dehert 2015, p. 82-83
11
Freud 1946, 4
12
Leader 2008
13
Burton 1621/2001

neurosis, eventually leading to suicide, but the societal environment, with its various dimensions – factory, family, matrimony, etc. – suffers from ‘deregulation’ (*dérèglement*)¹⁴. Anomia is a metropolitan phenomenon and coincides with the capitalist logic of stability followed by crisis, in a circular but also progressive movement: in the ‘revalidation’ after a crisis, society will be better off. Another sociologist, Robert Merton, redefines anomy – ‘anomie’ in his case – as a sense of social loss, not the innate aspect of a character, but an effect of the environment.¹⁵ Anomia becomes tangible in two contradictory structures of feeling.¹⁶ The first is a form of depression in (primarily) professional contexts: isolation, frustration, powerlessness, exclusion and the disappearance/dissolution of shared values. Strategies are developed to tackle this situation: adaptation, by turning to routines and rituals, or encapsulation, social withdrawal as a form of life – eventually leading to suicide. The second and opposite anomic structure of feeling is restless desire, epidemic insatiability: the individual is unable to get out of a spiral of excessive needs – anomy has an apathetic and a manic face. Confronted with anomy as a social pathology, the historical development of melancholy as a psychic and/or medical syndrome becomes clearly problematic. When Durkheim develops the idea that a system of rules and regulations – i.e. law – functions as the nervous system of society¹⁷, he implicitly suggests that nervous disorder is the connecting ‘structure of feeling’ between social and individual appearances of anomy, also in the symptomatic oscillation between hyperactivity and hyper-fatigue. And one could go one step further: anomy, as a result of the connection (or disconnection) between forms of life and modes of production, is not a symptom of capitalism as a societal model, but its very condition. Capitalism – as a specific way to organize the division of labour as a social structure – has to uphold anomic discontent to maintain itself: melancholy becomes a political item.

A different politicization of melancholy is proposed by Wolf Lepenies. He also refers to Merton, who, in his theory of deviance, suggests that one of the earliest described forms of melancholy, namely ‘acedia’ – withdrawal from the world, in a condition of numbness, laziness and apathy, or ‘retreatism’ – should be taken into account by social scientists, thus introducing a structure of feeling as a principle of social order (or disorder).¹⁸ The aforementioned use, by Merton, of the concept of anomia even consolidates this line of thought. Lepenies points to the

14
Durkheim 1897
15
Merton 1938
16
Johannisson 2009, p.291-306
17
Durkheim 1893/1967, p.120
18
Merton 1968, p.243

theological roots of anomy, as a form of tolerated lawlessness or an inner exile in a subculture amidst a hostile, secular world.¹⁹ In this context Robert Burton can call his lifelong project on *An Anatomy of Melancholy* a ‘poetical commonwealth’, a ‘utopia’, albeit a counter-ideal to the egalitarian models of Campanella’s ‘City of the Sun’ or Bacon’s ‘New Atlantis’. More precisely, Burton implicitly criticizes the reduction of models of society and, *a fortiori*, models of state, to theories of power and authority: he refuses to describe the institutions in a precise way, because the basic relation of confidence between subject and state is shattered. In this gap, a different utopian attitude is needed and installed, since the ‘institutional’ utopias – and the more abstract theories of power – clearly condemn melancholia. It is here that a long tradition of interdiction of melancholy in progress-oriented social-political attitudes has its origins, as an aspect of the development of bourgeois society, as for instance Norbert Elias illustrates in his comments on behavioural rules for young men.²⁰ Melancholy, as a structure of feeling and thus as a ‘historicizing’ attitude – actual feelings are traumatically confronted with lost objects in the past – is not an innocent by-product of societal transformations, but on the contrary has a close connection – in a reverse, maybe even subversive way – with the ‘progressive order’ that Modernity gradually establishes, mentally, socially and politically. The utopian idea of progress does not tolerate, at least not at a fundamental level, withdrawal from the labour that has to be invested in this project. This intolerance is not a totalitarian gesture, but is more like a textbook for political behaviour – like Machiavelli’s *The Prince*, but a bourgeois version – and thus for political theatricality.

**The politicians’ melancholia (I):
Théroigne de Méricourt and Abraham Lincoln**

The French Revolution could be considered as the first important ‘material’ rift with the political paradigm of pre-Modernity, as the political result of the 200 years following the ‘Modernisation’ of European societies on a ‘theoretical’ level: Hannah Arendt points to the importance of this revolutionary pathos – also present in the American Revolution – to mark the difference between this type of historical ‘breach’ and a simple *coup d’état*. A claim of novelty and the connection of this novelty with the primacy of freedom as a political goal: these markers are distinctive, even when expressed in such a paradoxical formula as Robespierre’s ‘despotism of freedom’.²¹ One of the lesser-known symbols of this rift, this radicalisation of political novelty in the French Revolution, is Théroigne de

19 Lepenies 1998, p.9-42

20 Elias 1939

21 Arendt 1963/1990, p.29 & 34

Méricourt, a former courtesan of Belgian origin, who became a figurehead of the feminist branch of the revolutionary movement. Women were welcomed in revolutionary ranks, but not on an equal basis and without the prospect of political rights. Nonetheless – or as a reaction – a strong feminist tendency, a ‘warlike feminism’ (*féminisme guerrier*) arose, but most of its leading characters – Olympe de Gouges, Madame Roland, among others – were victims of Robespierre’s terror and guillotined. Théroigne herself escaped execution, and her life took a different but equally tragic turn. After being beaten up by a group of Jacobin extremists – and saved by the popular Jacobin leader Marat himself – she gradually sank into insanity, not before becoming the object of a muckraking campaign from all political sides, royalists and *thermidoriens* included. She was reported to have locked herself up in an illusory world of revolutionary fury, reciting fragments from speeches of Robespierre’s ideologue Saint-Just. She was institutionalized at the mental hospital of *la Salpêtrière*, and over the years she became an icon of a totally different idea of revolutionary fervour: political rebellion as an illness, as a form of hysteria. Jean-Étienne Esquirol and Philippe Pinel, both pioneers of ‘alienism’, the precursor of medical psychiatry, treated her. Although they considered folly as an illness, they opposed any physiological paradigm of diagnosis and they created for their patients a ‘theatrical’ environment aimed at moral transformation. Political activism was one of the causes of this hysteria and, during her detention, Théroigne had to play the symbolic role of revolutionary madness²². This ‘treatment’ left its traces, both in historiography and in the popular imagination, for a long time. Ghosts of Théroigne appear in very different places: in Charles Baudelaire’s *Flowers of Evil* (“Have you seen Théroigne, of the blood-thirsty heart, / As an unshod herd to attack he bestirs, / With cheeks all inflamed, playing up to his part, / As he goes, sword in hand, up the royal stairs?”)²³, and in the digital game *Assassin’s Creed: Unity*.

The demonization of Théroigne exemplifies a ‘reactionary’ connection between political activism and melancholia, in a repulsive medicalized form, although Esquirol, later in his career, distanced himself from the moralism of his master, Pinel. The case of the American president Abraham Lincoln, however, presents the opposite image. In contrast with Élisabeth Roudinesco’s biography of Théroigne de Méricourt, focusing on the construction of the legend and of the ideology of revolution-as-pathology, Joshua Wolf Shenk’s portrait of Lincoln as a melancholy man²⁴ tells the opposite story. He describes the chronic depression of one of the most distinctive Presidents of the United States – his election as such

22 Roudinesco 2010, p.199-237

23 Baudelaire 1861/2015, LIX

24 Shenk 2005

triggered the civil war in 1860 – which contributed both to his singular political attitude and actions and to the *a posteriori* legend of his being a founding father. Lincoln – “I am now the most miserable man”, as he wrote in a letter, also referring to the traumatic feelings of Shakespeare’s deposed *King Richard II* – never made a secret of his condition and it was known by more people than just his intimates. Shenk emphasizes that in mid-19th century America, depression, as a mental condition not univocally medicalized, was not considered to be an insurmountable societal risk. On the contrary, his psychic state perfectly matched the intellectual (and emotional) climate of the U.S. after the religious revival of the Second Awakening. American society experienced a mental rift, which resulted in the particular ‘individualism’ that Alexis deTocqueville observed during his journey. This individualism, in contrast with simple egotism, is structural, says deTocqueville, for a society based on representative democracy and formal egalitarianism²⁵. Politically, Lincoln belonged to the Whigs, named after the homonymous party of ‘enlightened liberals’ in the United Kingdom. Their anti-slavery fraction was eventually to transform into the Republican party. The idea of unlimited upward mobility was dominant in this ideology, and Abraham Lincoln, the self-made man, adopted this self-awareness wholeheartedly. The dark side of this optimism, as an intellectual and political attitude, was the severe condemnation of failure, leaving no middle ground between success and loss. This made Lincoln’s melancholy condition critically precarious: he had deliberately (and repeatedly) put himself in a position where he might lose everything. As a person, Lincoln compensated (or assimilated) this risk with remarkable fatalist philosophical and religious beliefs: non-congregational, theologically liberal, without an overbearing sense of sinfulness and, most importantly, a strong belief in the ‘reign of reason’. It helped him to overcome his ‘blue moods’, although his colleagues were well aware of his almost physical absence in these moments of acute depression – he became extremely secretive, ‘the most shut-mouthed man that ever existed’, in the words of his professional partner, personal friend and (controversial) biographer William Henry Herndon.

In these short portraits, two very different assessments of the relationship between political behaviour and melancholia are made: (radical) political activism as an illness and a deviance –Théroigne de Méricourt – and political activism (on principle) as a traumatic virtue – Abraham Lincoln. Although the conclusions of their contemporaries are contradictory, they frame personal conditions in a larger structure of feeling: hysteria as deviancy, melancholia as virtuousness. Melancholia is seen as a structural element in political culture, even when the result can lead to opposing answers: Théroigne’s exemplary internment versus the creation of Lincoln myth.

25 deTocqueville 1848, III/2-3

The politicians’ melancholia (II): cases of mental illness

It is relatively easy to draw up a list of illnesses, deviances, traumas and (nervous) breakdowns of important politicians through history, and to relate these conditions to crucial historical moments: Woodrow Wilson’s stroke after the Treaty of Versailles, Churchill’s ‘black dog’ – depressive moods – at the outbreak of World War II, John F. Kennedy’s addictions and the Cuban Bay of Pigs debacle. This research has been done by several authors, sometimes with a political agenda²⁶, sometimes from a psychological point of view²⁷– and in both examples the result is ambiguous. Between 1977 and 1979, David Owen served as Foreign Secretary in the British (Labour) Government of Prime Minister James Callaghan. He split from the Labour Party to found the Social Democratic Party in 1981, which would eventually merge with the Liberal (Democratic) Party. He also worked as a peace mediator for several international organizations, e.g. during the Bosnian war. But his primary educational background was medicine: before his political career, he specialized in neurology. In his book, *In Sickness and in Power*, he gives an overview of the problematic health conditions of major European and American leaders during the 20th century – from Teddy Roosevelt to Jacques Chirac – but he focuses on four major cases: the illness of British Prime Minister Anthony Eden during the Suez crisis in 1956, the health of John F. Kennedy, the secret illness (non-Hodgkin lymphoma, a blood cancer) of the Shah of Persia in the years before the Islamic revolution (1979) and the prostate cancer of François Mitterrand, discovered only months after his election as the French President in 1981. These are classic stories, describing both the impact of serious health conditions on political decision-making and the issue of the communication (or lack of it) of the actual medical state to intimates and the general public. Although these cases are described in a relatively pragmatic way, the selection and the analyses themselves point in a specific direction: Owen prepares for the introduction of a specific illness, only present in political (and business) leaders, intoxicated by their experience in power – the ‘hubris syndrome’. In a polemical chapter, he analyses the political attitudes of George W. Bush and, more especially, Tony Blair during the build-up and the execution of the Iraq war in 2003. Apart from his problematic physical health – a heart condition – Blair suffered, in Owen’s view, from a specific form of ‘narcissism’ characterized by a refusal to set limits to one’s ambitions, a disdain for detailed information, a preference for the theatricality of one’s power status – all shored up by a theological sense of calling. This hubris syndrome is not a typical personality syndrome, since, as Owen describes it,

26 Owen 2011

27 Ghaemi 2011

it only develops during the term in office – in the case of Bush and Blair in the aftermath of the attacks of 9/11. The ‘condition’ manifested itself in the organization of their political staff: Blair went as far as to create his own miniature version of the Foreign Office, thus protecting himself from unwelcome advice, and the White House culture under G.W. Bush was of the same kind. In his conclusion, Owen links suggestions about preliminary (mental) health checks on politicians with an extension of the right – only ambiguously accepted by international law – of humanitarian intervention, with military means if necessary. This takes the analysis far beyond the original issue of the relationship between mental health and political prudence, as does the idea of ‘inventing’ a hubris syndrome as a high-political version of Narcissistic Personality Disorder. In a certain way, Owen’s enterprise reminds us more than once of the (ideological) operations of the ‘alienists’ Pinel and Esquival in Théroigne de Méricourt’s case: medicalizing a fundamental political conflict, de-politicizing social action. The suggestion, for instance, that if his Western allies had been informed about the Shah’s blood cancer, this would have prevented the radical irruption of political Islam in Iran, is interesting, but it remains a purely political analysis. In contrast, a case such as Lincoln’s – or Churchill’s, for that matter – demonstrates the singularity of the relationship between ill health and (chronic) depression in particular. The impact of these conditions can hardly become normative, as Owen suggests, since their outcome is unpredictable – as contingent as the outcome of ‘sanity’ in politics. The research by the psychologist Nassir Ghaemi, who is also a believer in a clinical, neurological approach to (political) melancholia, is more subtle. Ghaemi connects major mental conditions to the virtues of leadership: depression with realism and empathy, mania with creativity, hyperthymia with resilience. He demonstrates and illustrates these relationships with historical examples. Rhetorically, he takes Aristotle’s famous dictum about the positive link between genius and melancholia as a starting point:

Why is it that all those who have become eminent in philosophy or politics or poetry or the arts are clearly of an atrabilious temperament, and some of them to such an extent as to be affected by diseases caused by black bile, as is said to have happened to Heracles among the heroes?²⁸

But his rhetorical argument about ‘genius’ quickly shifts to a different ground, when he refuses – correctly, at that point – to reduce the vulnerable field of ‘psychohistory’ to stories of childhood trauma, with the portrait of American President Woodrow Wilson by Sigmund Freud

28 Aristotle 1984, 953a10-14

and diplomat William Bullitt as a notorious example²⁹. Historic psychiatry, Ghaemi claims, looks for four types of evidence: symptoms, genetics, the course of illness, and treatment – the more these elements are found in the sources, the better we can assess the patient, even posthumously. However, most of the case studies rely on ‘classical’ historiographic sources, where the specificity of a clinical history is not always present. Even the well-documented story of Lincoln – thanks to William Herndon – is difficult to translate into a psychological portrait. However, in his (defensible) aversion to naïve psychohistory, Ghaemi risks becoming a victim of ‘presentism’ in his explanations of critical moments in a leader’s mental condition: the incidents of the present moment explain a particular historical turn, not the more comprehensive narrative of both the actual leader – including his clinical records – and the political event. The case of John F. Kennedy illustrates this best³⁰. Kennedy arrived at the White House in January 1961 in an awful physical condition, mostly as a result of his Addison’s disease – a chronic endocrine system disorder in which the adrenal glands do not produce sufficient steroid hormones. Throughout his life he took anabolic steroids to compensate for this condition, which, objectively speaking, made him a drug addict. While building up his political career, Kennedy went from crisis to crisis, more than once received a ‘death sentence’ from his doctors, came alarmingly close to a septic shock and a full coma, and had lasting depressive periods. Biographers characterized his psychological condition as ‘hyperthymia’, which is a non-accepted qualification of a ‘personality disorder’ close to mania. Nevertheless, Ghaemi links the fluctuations in Kennedy’s political record as a President with this hyperthymia – resulting from his endocrine disorder – and, more specifically, with shifts in treatment. In the first half of his presidency, Kennedy, heavily influenced by Max Jacobsen – a steroid and amphetamine dealer, known in socialite circles as ‘Dr. Feelgood’ – behaved as a true addict, and the clumsiness with which he handled the anti-Castro invasion in the Bay of Pigs was attributed to this condition. But his brother Robert Kennedy and the official White House doctor set up a medical *coup d’état*: instead of the dubious concoctions supplied by Jacobsen – who was banned from the White House – the President received a controlled dose of anabolic steroids with a certain state of mania as known side-effect. During this period, until his assassination, he established his reputation: the Berlin speech, the creative handling of the extremely dangerous Cuba crisis, the political recognition of the civil rights movement. Ghaemi speaks of a ‘spectacular psychochemical success’. The question is, however, whether the reduction of political prudence – or, more spectacularly, courage – to specific clinical-psycho-

29 Freud & Bullitt 1967

30 Ghaemi 2011, p.169-186

logical incidents, as in Ghaemi's approach, tells us anything fundamental about the link between mental condition and political success. The implication, for instance, that the disaster of the Munich agreements between Hitler and Chamberlain would have been prevented by Churchill's 'black dog' is highly speculative, as is the 'proof' that Kennedy's steroids – apart from enhancing his sex drive – made him go to extreme limits to tame Khrushchev and Castro. On David Owen's list of political leaders, almost everyone suffers from mood swings or (mild) variations of depression³¹, but he hardly asks if this observation is different from the presence of the same 'symptoms' in the general population, let alone answer it. One might wonder if the understandable fascination of David Owen and Nasir Ghaemi for mentally 'dysfunctional' leaders perhaps has less to do with medical interest, and more with historical, political and even societal concerns: can we, the citizens, afford this risk? "After scrutiny", answers Owen, the diplomat, "We should applaud it as a chance", answers Ghaemi, the psychiatrist. But in the process, the quest for the deeper grounds of psychic instability, medicalized or not, as a 'structure of feeling', as a cultural aspect and thus part of 'a whole way of life'³², disappear silently and anecdotalism – or a strong thesis to be defended – gains ground.

The politicians' melancholia (III): failed politicians

Chris Mullin was for some years a Junior Minister in the government of British Prime Minister Tony Blair. He published his diaries, which are a reader's delight: political diaries are a genre in their own right in the United Kingdom, the most famous (or infamous) being written by failed – or at least minor – politicians, as if their critical (and stylistic) quality were inversely proportional to their political success. In the last pages of his last volume (27 January 2010), Mullin reports a conversation with an embittered colleague, a back-bencher like himself:

““Have you seen this report on inequality?’ A government-sponsored commission had reported that Britain was as class-ridden and unequal today as it had been in 1997. ‘What have we been doing all these years?’ ‘Holding back the tide,’ I ventured.”³³

At first sight, this is just a commonplace expression of frustration from powerless back-benchers, although Mullin, in the next paragraph, sums up the (modest) achievements of the Blair-Brown era. But the quote also exemplifies the 'post-democratic' experience of many contemporary

31 Owen 2011, p.3-106

32 Williams 1958/1990, p.XVIII

33 Mullin 2010, p.416

politicians, which is that even a voluntarist attitude of elected representatives does not succeed in setting the political agenda. This point is made by several political scientists, such as Pierre Rosanvallon, refining the notion of 'de-politicisation'³⁴, Colin Crouch, describing the displacement of power centres to corporations³⁵, and Luc Huyse, reflecting on alternatives in participative democracy³⁶. This feeling of gradual disarmament, of indifference, could be described as a form of melancholy: the loss of an undefinable object – legitimate power – and the impotence to assess in what this loss essentially consists for the mourner – the politician, as it happens, who is reduced to a breakwater, holding back the tide. The concept of the 'failed politician' might be helpful here when developing a more precise notion of political melancholy, in contrast to the ideological and medicalized approaches above. Four portraits will serve this argument, ordered on a scale of 'drama': dramas of failure and, respectively, suicide, impeachment, electoral defeat or mental retreat.

Pierre Bérégovoy, French Prime Minister (1925-1993)

The fate of the French Prime Minister Pierre Bérégovoy is the most tragic of these cases. Bérégovoy had a strong trade-unionist background, and politically he was a pupil of the almost mythical leftist politician Pierre Mendès-France, symbol of moral integrity in politics, advocate of anti-colonialism. In the shadow of the presidential regime of Général de Gaulle in the 1960s, he joined the effort to create a single non-communist socialist party in France: in 1971 the *Parti Socialiste* was created, led by François Mitterrand, a career politician without a socialist pedigree, which made him ideologically ambiguous. Bérégovoy was involved in the difficult negotiations with the *Parti Communiste*, resulting in a common political platform for the 1981 elections, won by Mitterrand. Bérégovoy became secretary-general – chief of staff – at the Élysée, the residence and office of the President of the French Republic. After speculation against the French *franc* or, more precisely, against the left-wing policy – 'Keynesianism in one country' – by the government of Prime Minister Pierre Mauroy (1981-1983), a more centrist course was taken by Mitterrand, and Bérégovoy, now the 'pillar of the Presidency' entered the government as Minister of Social Affairs with an enlarged portfolio. In subsequent governments he became the number two, as Minister of Financial and Economic Affairs, and in 1992 he was appointed Prime Minister, at a moment when the whole Mitterrand establishment was infected by alle-

34 Rosanvallon 2006

35 Crouch 2004

36 Huyse 2014

gations of corruption and similar scandals – including the family of Pierre Bérégovoy himself. During his years in government, he continued to act as the financial brain of the Presidency and of the socialist party, and his pecuniary pragmatism gradually became disconnected from any ethical considerations. Just before the 1993 elections, which were to be a disaster for the left, his dealings were scrutinized by an investigating judge: even without a formal indictment, his reputation was shattered. He killed himself using his bodyguard's gun 1st May 1993 – a very symbolic day. In spite of countless conspiracy theories developed after Bérégovoy's death, and the dubious secrecy surrounding his autopsy – not untypical for the Mitterrand regime – the fact that his death was self-inflicted was confirmed years later by the discovery of a suicide note given to his son-in-law. Mitterrand's bookkeeper was utterly entangled in a web of 'affairism', and "in killing himself, the statesman has effaced the man of weakness" – as Thierry Jean-Pierre, the investigating judge, said³⁷. In what sense has the ill fate of Pierre Bérégovoy anything to do with melancholy? His suicide note cannot be analysed, any reflection is inevitably circumstantial. In this context, the most relevant aspect is the remarkable parallelism between the breakdown of the Mitterrand regime – most conspicuously in its political culture – and the collapse of a failed politician. Bérégovoy suffered from the (paranoid?) impression that he was always Mitterrand's second choice: he had to do his dirty jobs, even when he got finally the highest office. In 1983, as a Minister of Social Affairs, his syndicalist background was useful in quietening those opposing the sudden shift in economic policy from left to centre. And in 1993, the office of the Prime Minister was indeed degraded to the level of dirty jobs. It would be naïve to think that Bérégovoy's depression, eventually triggering his death, was caused by a gradual dilution of what was once an idealistic project: this happens in every political career, and Bérégovoy enjoyed Mitterrand's favours precisely because he was more than pragmatic enough to realize this. But something was lost, however, in political, professional and family relationships – the idea that not everything would go down the slippery slope of *Realpolitik*. The confrontation with the fact that his own family was implicated in corruption seems to have been the straw that broke the camel's back. Distinctions between social spheres – the political arena, the 'safe haven' of family – were blurred and the incapacity to redefine borders, all with their own sets of (informal) rules, proved fatal. Political melancholy surfaces when the personal invades the political or, more precisely, when the assumption, stoical or cynical, of loss of integrity on a political level contaminates the realm of intimacy. Here, the illusion of ethical purity was strengthened as a compensation for political degeneration, a disambiguation with fatal consequences – for the surviving family, of course, but for the political realm as well.

37 Follorou 2008, p.313-320

Gordon Brown, British Prime Minister (1951)

The calvary suffered by Gordon Brown – Chancellor of the Exchequer (1997-2007) and Prime Minister (2007-2010) of the United Kingdom – is only comparable to Bérégovoy's when seen in the broader context of the reconciliation of social democracy with late Capitalist society. The ending is obviously different, as is the configuration of power in the French and British governments. Brown entered politics – he became an MP in 1983, in the 'Falkland' elections – after a short academic career. As a student he was even elected Rector of the University of Edinburgh – a quite exceptional position at the age of 21. During the 'desert years' of New Labour, he was considered as a future leader and worked closely with the Labour Party leader Neil Kinnock, but after the 1992 election – which Labour should have won, as was incisively analysed and dramatized by the playwright David Hare³⁸ – something was broken, as his intimates witnessed. His rather shy character transformed into a complex, brooding person, sometimes described as saturnine³⁹. But these kind of judgments should be treated with care and suspicion. As a Chancellor of the Exchequer in the Blair government, between 1997 and 2007, Brown built iron walls between his circle of close advisers and the Treasury department, which was sometimes seen as a symptom of his alleged misanthropy. But there may be another explanation: Brown was never in charge of large administration departments, but had always cooperated in smaller groups, at university and in the House of Commons. He was obviously afraid of being intimidated by the civil service and of losing power, so he reorganized his administration⁴⁰. He also granted independence to the Bank of England on interest rate policy, taking it away from the government (and the Treasury), although genuine political-economic considerations prevailed in this issue. However, Brown's inner dark side won further prominence after the sudden death of Labour Leader John Smith, his political mentor, in 1994. Although it seemed self-evident to the outside world that Brown would succeed John Smith – he had a strong record as an MP and was Shadow Chancellor – influential circles, led by Peter Mandelson, preferred Tony Blair, a man without any socialist pedigree (like Mitterrand) but attractive to centrist voters. In 'the Granita agreement' – named after a fancy restaurant where they had a short negotiation, nicely romanticized in the clever Stephen Frears film *The Deal*⁴¹ – Blair received Brown's support for the party leadership, but at a serious price. Once in power, the Labour

38 Hare 1993a, p.157-250 & 1993b

39 Keegan 2004, p.22

40 Jenkins 2007, p.254

41 Frears 2003

government would install a ‘bipolar’ leadership, Prime Minister Blair withdrawing completely from the financial-economic policies and giving the Chancellor a strong voice on education and social affairs: Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott would be the referee. Blair promised to resign in favour of Brown after two terms – a promise Blair delayed until after his third election victory in 2005. The Labour Party, after the unexpected and damaging loss of the 1992 elections, agreed on at least one conclusion about its cause. Then, Shadow Chancellor John Smith had defended tax reform, thereby giving the impression that the ‘tax-and-spend’ policy – associated with Labour since the end of the 1960s – would return. In 1997 ‘New’ Labour did everything to prevent this, and Gordon Brown promised to continue the budget policy of his Conservative predecessor for at least three years, a pledge which didn’t allow any major spending plans. Brown held to that promise, as he did regarding continuity in the realm of financial deregulation – starting with independence of the Bank of England. The framework of financial-economic policy also stayed ‘objective’ or ‘data driven’: Brown, a theoretical supporter of a single European currency, refused to consider any purely political argument to give up sterling for the Euro. Brown’s gospel could be summarized as follows: orthodox budget policy in order to enable, in the mid-term, an investment policy – education, healthcare – coupled with a ‘meritocratic’ or ‘voluntarist’ social policy under the heading ‘Welfare to Work’. This political logic could be labelled ‘neoliberalism’ – Jenkins calls Brown, without any reservation, a ‘Thatcherite’⁴² – but it could also be interpreted as the ‘re-enactment’ of the older British dispute between ‘cultural Marxists’ such as William Morris and the Fabian Society. Both tendencies were convinced of the fundamental importance of education and culture – as the embodiment of a ‘whole way of life’ – to major changes in the degenerated industrialist society of high Capitalism, but they disagreed on whether or not the existing institutions were able (or willing) to transform society in more democratic and egalitarian directions⁴³. Ed Balls, a member of the Fabian Society, was Brown’s closest adviser and political ally, and he expressed the ‘reformist’ (or so-called ‘depoliticized’) economic policy – subscribing to the logic of financial Capitalism in order to redirect the budgetary gains obtained to his real political goals – in a famous 1992 discussion paper⁴⁴. In contrast with Tony Blair, a politician without any ideological sensitivity, Brown was a socialist with a tradition – he wrote his PhD thesis about the Scottish Labour Party – and he came close to Fabian moralism: a strong sense of justice and a disdain for conspicuous wealth, combined with industriousness and exactingness. His major

42 Jenkins 2007, 253

43 Williams 1958/1990, p.182-184

44 Keegan 2004, p.131

political success, although not uncontroversial, was the bailout of British banks during the financial crisis of 2008: he set the example for European banking policy, insisting on recapitalization. Brown said that the British banks – which set the benchmarks in innovative financial policy – had arrived at a ‘Capitalism without capital’⁴⁵. It is ironic when a social democrat has to remind the financial sector of the fundamentals of their trade. And subsequently to act as the only ‘real’ capitalist left – the state as the capitalist of last resort. In Gordon Brown’s case, political melancholy could be reduced to his character and its consequences. In 1994, he was said to have changed profoundly. He had, until then, made his reputation with well-documented attacks on the dubious financial policy of the John Major government, but then he lost his best friend, John Smith and he had to downscale his ambitions – allegedly because of loss of support among Labour MPs. He systematically frustrated every tax-and-spend proposal made by his colleagues, which made him unpopular. However, the character issue is only the surface of a much deeper melancholy in contemporary politics, closer to Bérégovoy’s ordeal. The French example dealt mainly with the temptations of (the preservation of) political power and the resulting affairism, eventually blurring the spheres of life, leading to depression, both in private and in public respect. Gordon Brown’s melancholy belongs much more to the political realm itself, being the result of ideological choices in the framework of the de-politicization of economic and social policy. “Welfare to Work” is a fine slogan, but it shows only the surface of a political culture obsessed with benchmarks, targets and other forms of ‘measurability’ as an almost neurotic compensation for the awareness that social democracy had *de facto* merged with late Capitalism. It is not clear though in whom this melancholy resides. Saying that it is the politician’s melancholy means over-psychologising political action and agency, but it is as unclear whether the citizen – in a generic sense – is said to experience this gap between political ambition and societal outcomes as an unidentified loss.

Wilfried Martens, Belgian Prime Minister (1937-2013)

Christian democracy, political scientists say⁴⁶, was the most important ideological innovation to follow the World War II, and it was probably also the most powerful. In the six original members of the European Community, Christian democrat parties were the dominant political formations. Historically, the essential contribution of Christian democracy was the final reconciliation of Christian religion – especially Catholicism – with

45 Keegan 2012, p.69

46 (Müller 2011, 132-143)

an autonomous political and democratic domain. But with regard to the reconciliation of Christian democrat political forces – not to be confused with conservatism in general – with the social-economic constraints of late Capitalism, matters are more ambiguous. This ambiguity is illustrated, in an exemplary way, in the memoirs of Wilfried Martens, Belgian Prime Minister between 1979 and 1992⁴⁷. And it throws an interesting light on political melancholia. Wilfried Martens' family background was one of modest farmers, and he succeeded as one of the few gifted students of his village to go to university, where he obtained a law degree. As a young solicitor, he became politically active, mainly as a spokesman for the (extra-parliamentary) Flemish movement. When he entered 'real' politics, he opted for the power apparatus of the CVP, the 'Christian people's party', and not for the small Volksunie nationalist party. The CVP was the reformed Catholic party, which on the one hand had been a federation of electoral associations, and special interest groups on the other: trade-unions, health insurance cooperatives, syndicates of the self-employed and farmers. After World War II, this diverse representation of a large Catholic 'midfield' transformed into a party with a Christian democrat programme that was close to the established Belgian institutions. With its (centre-) rightist tradition, the Flemish movement was ideologically close to Christian democracy, but at that time parties were organized at a Belgian level, with a dominant Belgian 'unitarism', not only on the French-speaking side. But the main political goal of the nationalists was at that moment – the late 1950s – a transformation of Belgium into a federal state, founded on exclusive language-based territories: to the 'Belgicist' establishment this was dangerous, subversive radicalism. Since Martens' entrance into politics took place in 1960s, he was also sensitive to the societal and political shifts of that era, particularly the politicization of youth culture. As the president of the youth division of the CVP, he confronted the established powers of the party together with a group of ambitious kindred spirits called the 'miracle board' (*wonderbureau*). They made a claim for a 'progressive front' with the socialists, the creation of a pluralist education system and, of course, a clearly federalist reform of the state. But the party officials succeeded in marginalizing them: with one exception, none of this political 'rat pack' was elected in 1971 and Martens changed tactics. He deliberately opted for an accommodation with the party line of the CVP, without – as he asserts – renouncing the radical manifestos of his 'miracle board'⁴⁸. The efforts of the 'miracle board' lacked historical momentum: neither the transition from Catholic conservatism to Christian democracy and from trade-unionist socialism to pluralist social democracy (in the BSP socialist party) were com-

47 Martens 2006

48 Martens 2006, p.86

pleted – did this ever happen, one might ask – and so the momentum was missed. And it left its traces on the political *persona* of Wilfried Martens. Although he had been ideologically associated with the 'labour' wing of the CVP – based upon the strong Christian trade union – he reached the climax of his political career during the 1980s as Belgian Prime Minister, with a centre-right 'austerity' government that had to face economic adversity, budgetary problems, security crises (local terrorism) and Cold War controversies (the missile crisis) In 1981, his party lost the elections (but they remained the largest party in parliament), he dumped his social democrat coalition partner and continued to govern, for seven years, with the Liberal parties. With what might be called a 'Thatcherite' agenda – less confrontational however, but with the same 'There is No Alternative' attitude – Martens was transformed into the figurehead of neoliberal conservatism. When defending his policies, pragmatically and without any ideological or even political-economic framework, rancour often shows through, e.g. in his relationship with a critical press⁴⁹. After his rather painful departure from the leadership in 1992, he committed himself to his presidency of the European People's Party (EPP), developing this loose confederation into the largest party in the European Parliament at any price. He brought in the British Conservatives – for a limited period – the Spanish People's Party, the Hungarian Fidesz and many other (moderate) right-wing parties, culminating in the welcoming of Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia. Among MEPs who were members of the EPP, there was great resistance to Forza Italia, but Martens reduces this to personal and irrational objections – and lack of insight into the 'grand design' of the whole operation. It is not what is written that is painful, but what is not written – the substance of the debate is missing⁵⁰. Seen from this perspective, the Martens memoirs are an almost traumatic and definitely a melancholy story. The general tone is one of politics as compliance, dedication and selflessness – almost to the point of absurdity. During a crucial meeting about the umpteenth attempt at constitutional reform in Belgium, he received the message that his son had been involved in a serious accident during his holidays in Spain. The playwright Bart Meuleman wrote a monologue on the character of Wilfried Martens, based upon interviews with Martens' political intimates. The scene where he gets this news, a precise representation of the events, is central:

“At night, at half past nine, the party presidents and the prime minister convene a second time to check the points of view. Cools [Walloon socialist] was now really drinking a lot. He pushed off immediately 'Scum', he says to Tindemans, and he holds his fists ready to

49 Martens 2006, p.295

50 Martens 2006, p.677-678

harm the prime minister, ready to punch him in the face. 'He', and he points with a fleshy finger to Martens, 'he's reliable. But you!!!' 'Now, now. Come on, come on.' The other presidents jump up. 'André, that's enough.' Cools acts as if annoyed, gasps, puffs, and most of his poison seems to have been discharged. Until Martens, who has kept his calm all day, suddenly stands up and addresses those present. 'Gentlemen,' he says, 'I don't want to spoil the good atmosphere, but at five o'clock this afternoon I learnt that my son Kris has had an accident at Marbella in Spain.' And Wilfried Martens starts to cry. Everybody is struck dumb. 'But what are you doing here', says Cools, suddenly sober, 'Take the Mystère [government jet] to go to your wife and son!' 'Cannot', says Martens, sobbing, 'I am not allowed to take a government plane for private matters.'"⁵¹

This incident summarizes the whole of Martens' private *and* political persona: political conscientiousness, self-deprecating irony, sentiment as a last resort. His rival André Cools, president of the socialist party, embodies the completely opposite character – but probably as desperate as Martens himself about the 'invasion' of private matters into the public realm. It also summarizes a certain attitude towards the duties of a politician as such. The debate in the room was about the constitutional nature of certain reforms, after criticism by legal experts: not a minor issue, and even in his personal distress Martens represents a strict, almost puritan viewpoint. A formalist viewpoint, which could symbolize this generation of Christian democrats' general concept of democratically legitimized power. A conservative viewpoint, in the profound sense of the word – balanced reforms can only be conceived and applied with utmost respect for the actual configurations of power. The fact that in the meantime the idea of an alternative vision of the world – which he once represented as the president of the 'miracle board' of young Christian democrats – had to be abandoned, was not even a conscious decision by one person, but a slow disappearance, though never felt as a surrender to the 'establishment'. The dramatized incident also marks the sudden realization of something lost, although Martens the politician was never aware of it: the very atypical crying fit is the physical sign of this horrible awareness. In Meuleman's dramatization, the interruption of a fundamental political discussion – and clearly one without any sense of propriety, as Cools' behaviour shows – by a family tragedy is no coincidence. The tragedy of Martens' son is the tragedy of Christian democracy – and social democracy, for that matter – and in the case of the Belgian Prime Minister

51 Meuleman 2006, p.57-58

it led, in his memoirs, to rancour as a defence mechanism. Here, political melancholia is not even aware of the substantial (ideological) loss itself, let alone that this feeling would be capable of refining a certain sense of loss, or of realizing what precisely was lost in the lost object. Wilfried Martens was not really a failed politician: under his leadership Belgium was transformed into a federal state, his austerity politics led to successful budget control – after a big increase in public debt in the early 1980ies –, and his stubborn insistence on installing NATO missiles strengthened North Atlantic loyalties. If 'failure' is the right term, this is about the demystification of idealisms in post-war Europe: the failure to stick to the welfare state 'as we knew it'. Not because this idealism was too cloudy, but because the welfare state never existed as an ideal for late Capitalism as such, only as a tool for the creation of (de-politicized) consent. And in this moral failure, or moral loss, melancholia prospers.

Conclusion: crisis as melancholia

Melancholia was defined above as a 'historicizing' attitude: it is a structure in which actual feelings are traumatically confronted with lost objects. Here 'lost' means: once present, but in the past. Melancholia has to do with time, with the possibility (or impossibility) of structuring experiences connected with material and mental objects in terms of past, present and future: from this perspective, melancholia is a thoroughly modern notion. Jürgen Habermas described the modern *Zeitgeist* as the combustion resulting from the clash between historical and utopian thinking:

Modernity can no longer borrow its orientating standards from examples in the past. Modernity is left exclusively on its own – it has to create its normativity out of itself. From now on, the authentic present is the place where continuation of the past and innovation cross each other.⁵²

It is thus not surprising that this 'combustion' takes the form of contemporary expressions of loss, which are always hard to define, let alone to quench. We have quoted literary examples in John Wilmot – the satirical revolt against 'false reason' – and Robert Musil – the poetic ambivalence regarding technological progress. And we have discussed (historical) political examples in Théroigne de Méricourt – the revolutionary disillusion transformed into 'medical' insanity – and Abraham Lincoln – chronic depression sublimated as visionary stubbornness. Our closer examination of four examples of contemporary politicians revealed a few

52 Habermas 1985, p.141

correlations between life stories and forms of depression, but they should have demonstrated in the first place the gap between political agency and the societal transformations these actors asserted that they had always invested in. These Prime Ministers, with substantial political capacities, occupy a political space they have to define themselves, taking into account, in Habermas' terms, 'authentic present', 'continuation of the past' and 'innovation'. In this political realm, a purely abstract interaction – politics as a (constitutional) procedure – is transformed into a manifestation of political subjects⁵³. And consequently a space for melancholia is opened up, in the cracks between past and present, present and future, public persona and private citizen, political agent and political subject. And it is here that the notion of crisis might be helpful, from both the perspectives sketched above: crisis as an aspect of the historical condition of Modernity, and crisis as a concept by which to define specific dysfunctions in a late Capitalist society.

Even with the caution that every beginning has its necessary history, the positioning of the Cartesian *cogito* as the vantage point of reflexive thought is effectively a beginning: it is a break with a world-view, and not simply a translation and/or a transfer of theological content to a secular realm, as if every teleological idea – like historical progress – were a variation on eschatological themes⁵⁴. Secularism, as a paradigm, is embedded in the experience of rift, while a continuation of the past implies a break with the same past. The strongest form of this rift is of course a revolution, where the political space is truly 'theatricalized' in a radical present: the meaning of history is revealed, but the viewpoint is different depending on whether one is an actor in the events or a spectator – it is the latter who has to confirm the 'opening' of the political space⁵⁵. But at the same time, an abyss opens up between the space of experience and the horizon of expectation, as historian Rainer Koselleck put it⁵⁶, when the rift is projected onto interaction with the future. It is here that the notion of crisis arises: the teleology as a stalemate. Translated into concrete contemporary terms, 'crisis' means – as a structural notion, not as an transitory incident – that experience and expectation cannot be reconciled, due to two major characteristics of this society: the acceleration of events, and the complex 'layering' of fields of experience – social, political, cultural, technological, medical, etc. – that can no longer be apprehended in a single 'structure of feeling'. It is precisely this acceleration that complicates this 'layering', and 'desynchronizes' our experiences: every field develops its own speed and rhythm, its own relationship with

53 Rancière 1998, p.241-242
54 Revault d'Allonnes 2012, p.66-69
55 Arendt 1963/1990, p.52
56 Koselleck 1979, p.349-375

past and future.⁵⁷ The result of this shifting of 'tectonic plates' is, on the political level, fundamentally disenchanting: the present is embodied in the permanence of the state of crisis, and politicians are not able to 'historicize' it – or else they are punished by their voters on such issues as immigration and global warming. At the same time, political subjects are forced to put their social actions in a context of past and future – a past and a future of their own making, since political agents – with the decline of the *état-providence* – no longer provide it.⁵⁸ Crisis, as a permanent condition, thus means the impossibility of deciding on which level which relationship between past, present and future should be established. In the case of politicians, this 'indecidability' has become acute: they are elected on the basis of the horizon of expectation they have proposed and even embodied, but in their actual exercise of authority they are stuck in the present. The cases presented above illustrate this abundantly.

But there is also an ideological aspect to be considered. Apart from being an historical category, coexistent with the concept of Modernity as such, 'crisis' is also a political tool, especially 'crisis of authority': "a 'crisis of authority' is spoken of: this is precisely the crisis of hegemony, or general crisis of the State"⁵⁹. 'Hegemony' is the specific correlation between the consent of a population and the degree of coercive power exerted upon those groups who challenge the 'spontaneity' of this consent⁶⁰. Thus when this correlation is out of balance, one can speak of a 'crisis'. Hall *et al.* describe how consent was constructed – in the United Kingdom, in their study – after World War II. Three thresholds of tolerance were built around the 'civilised society', the common denominator of consent: a threshold of 'permissiveness', defending normality from sexual deviance and non-violent protest, a threshold of 'legality', defending it from non-violent crime and violent protest, and a threshold of 'extreme violence' defending it from violent crime and terrorism. Consent was preserved – and actually experienced, interiorized, rationalized – as long as the variety of protective (coercive) actions was applied according to the status and character of the 'circles'. The hegemonic authority of the state was invisible and the balance was reached. But under the pressure of international developments since the 1960s – profound economic changes such as the disappearance of the gold standard, the raising of oil prices, the development of (deregulated) financial markets – the state took an exceptional form, and the differences between the levels of coer-

57 Revault d'Allonnes 2012, p.111-118
58 Hartog 2003, p.126 & Revault d'Allonnes 2012, p.135
59 Gramsci 1971, p.210
60 Gramsci 1971, p.12

cion were blurred⁶¹. Both real threats – the ‘troubles’ in Northern Ireland – and imaginary dangers – the infiltration of Black Power into West Indian neighbourhoods – served as an excuse to install a ‘law-and-order’ state, strongly supported by the tabloid press. The notion of ‘mugging’ – disproportionate violence in street robberies – was the symbol of this ‘moral panic’: phenomena of discontent, mostly not politicized, were magnified and in their mediatized form caused excessive panic, mostly directed at minority groups. Hall *et al.* do not suggest that this societal unrest was a conscious answer, the tactically well-planned ‘creation’ of a government that felt threatened: the preservation of hegemonic political structures almost invisibly encourages the blurring of levels of ‘seriousness’ in deviance. The coercive power fills in all the gaps left open by the dilution of consent. This kind of ‘hegemonic crisis’ might be the culminating point of political melancholia: the existential Modernity crisis is the breeding ground for this eruption of authority. In this metaphorical context, moral panic is more a symptom of hysteria: it scapegoats minority groups, it scavenges on the loss of the UK’s imperial status – post-colonial depression, post-imperial melancholia⁶².

When we consider the critical stories of Bérégovoy, Brown and Martens, both perspectives of ‘crisis’ are present. The result of the ‘desynchronisation’ of the public realm is the outsourcing of political agency to other actors: arbitration in legal conflicts, economic boards, international institutions, which all nibble at the classic properties of sovereignty⁶³. And at the same time pressure grows, from the electorate, to re-affirm this sovereignty in a traditional way: citizens claim the re-establishment of political symbols, local regulation and physical barriers – a nation has a specific spatio-temporal identity that should be recognizable⁶⁴. These politicians are all children of an era in society – from 1945 until the late 1960s – which was characterized by a ‘partnership’ between an expanding economy, a strong commitment to the welfare state and a progressive sharing of national sovereignties with European institutions. But the abyss between this progress, this post-national development, and the different agenda adhered to by the economic basis of this ‘historical compromise’ – corporate Capitalism, which is significantly different from free market Capitalism⁶⁵ – has created illusions that have been sublimated in various ways. This discomfort was embodied in the ‘undercover’ marriage between centre-left policy and corporate business (the Mitterrand-

61 Hall, et al. 1978/2013, p.215-223

62 Gilroy 2004, p.98

63 Revault d’Allonnes 2012, p.147

64 Judt 2010, p.195-196

65 Crouch 2011, p.49-70

Bérégovoy deals), the creation of an autonomous economic government (the Blair-Brown deal) or in the stubborn and rancorous embodiment of an imaginary general will (the relationship between Martens and King Baudouin).

Returning to the notion of ‘anomia’, mentioned above, as a necessary ‘black hole’ of an absence of rules between the actual modes of production and their political representation, these ‘failed’ politicians embody anomia, each in their own way. The very virtual ‘idealism’ of election campaigns and the prosaic realities of governance were reconciled – if that is the right term – in the shadowplay of ‘affairism’, where there is not even a code of honour: that was the tragedy of the Mitterrand presidency. In the UK, the mania of Gordon Brown – not as a pathological condition, but rather as an attitude – could be seen as the answer to bridging the gap caused by deep societal change. Between 1979 and 1997, a seemingly irreversible shift took place, away from the post-war bipartisan consent over the welfare state known as ‘butskellism’ – the blending of ideas of the centrist Tory minister R.A. Butler and the centrist Labour leader Hugh Gaitskell⁶⁶ – towards the re-introduction of a screwed-up class struggle known as Thatcherism. There were no (political) rules available for a transition to deregulation, and so anomic mania became the answer to the lack of societal firm ground. It is of course ironic that a social democrat was the executor of Thatcher’s political testament, thus causing melancholia – among those who believed in a reversal of fortune in 1997 – about Brown’s (and Blair’s) political legacy. The ‘anomia’ of Wilfried Martens is of a still different kind. Christian democracy, as an ideology, but even more as a political force, is an empty shell, in which objectively opposed interest groups – corporate business with a Catholic pedigree, trade-unionism in the ‘anti-socialist’ tradition – can work on a consensus, before any public political struggle or coalition government. But the flipside of this flexibility is the steady hollowing out of the all too abstract, ‘personalist’ ideological common ground. Martens embodied the same ‘neoliberal’ shift in hegemonic consent that Thatcher represented, but in a less confrontational way, and his successor Jean-Luc Dehaene finished the job, as Blair & Brown did. But the ultimate condition needed to make this transition work is absolute political silence, or a communication based upon de-politicization. So, again, no rules can be proclaimed, the laws are not only unwritten, they are not even proclaimed: this is structural anomia, a structure of feeling also known as melancholia. And we do not know what is lost, even if we start to guess what was lost in what we lost: a whole way of life.

In his essay on the revolution of 1848 and the subsequent *coup d’état* by Louis Bonaparte in 1851, leading to the constitution of the Second Empire in France, Karl Marx tries to analyse the way societal movements

66 Judt 2010, p.49

do or do not coincide with political rifts: what is the ‘relative autonomy’ of the political realm⁶⁷? Marx analyses the case where the Bonapartists strip the political rights from the bourgeoisie – the hegemonic class – in order to promote their self-defined ideas of political order and popular sovereignty. More fundamentally, Marx shows how a spontaneous ‘dramaturgy’ becomes apparent when different regimes try to represent particular balances of power in the existing society. No regime coincides with the modes of production or with the societal ‘state of the art’. Even when Marx’ goal is to inquire into the conditions of (successful) revolutions, his analysis points to the situation where political melancholia appears – as a property of a political culture, or as an individual attitude. Between the totalizing ambitions of every political regime – they represent the necessary mode of governance in the given conditions – and the impossibility of this same regime of creating a stable *régime d'historicité* to realize these ambitions: fault lines appear in this contradiction, and in these fault lines, the abyssal rifts, things disappear. And there, in the best possible world, mourning commences.

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Notes on a Deleuzean Theory of Melancholia: Object, Cinema, World

Jon Roffe

The absence of any reflection on the category of melancholia in the work of Gilles Deleuze is not, *prima facie*, particularly surprising. The famous assertion early in *Anti-Oedipus*, according to which “A schizophrenic out for a walk is a better model than a neurotic on the analyst’s couch,”¹ is hardly an isolated sentiment. Throughout that text, Deleuze and Guattari frequently come back to the figure of neurotic interiority in the same terms, writing of

the abject desire to be loved, the whimpering at not being loved enough, at not being “understood,” concurrent with the reduction of sexuality to the “dirty little secret,” this whole priest’s psychology—there is not a single one of these tactics that does not find in Oedipus its land of milk and honey, its good provider.²

This “sick desire,” the “desire to be loved, and worse, a sniveling desire to have been loved, a desire that is reborn of its own frustration,”³ is the affective apotheosis of the interiority that Deleuze’s work attacks without reserve from beginning to end. Elsewhere, Deleuze is just as harsh. In a short 1978 text on drug addiction, he writes of “The narcissism, the authoritarianism, the blackmail, the venom – only neurotics equal drug addicts in their efforts to piss off the world, spread their disease, and impose their situation.”⁴ The very idea of the cure, conversely, goes in an entirely different direction than that indicated in the foundational texts of psychoanalysis: “you can’t fight oedipal secretions except by fighting yourself, by experimenting on yourself, by opening yourself up to love and desire (rather than the whining need to be loved that leads everyone to the psychoanalyst).”⁵

This aggressive rejection of any form of neurotic subjectivity is an extension of Deleuze’s arguments in the early *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, where the target is any and all forms of bad conscience – conceived in Freudian as well as Nietzschean terms.⁶ It also motivates some of the most severe judgments leveled at Freud in *Anti-Oedipus*, according to which Freudian psychoanalysis mistakes the socio-historical specificity of neurotic Oedipal subjectivity for the general form of all investments of desire.

Given this animus, the interminable maudlin and narcissistic in-

1 Deleuze and Guattari 1983, p. 2.

2 Deleuze and Guattari 1983, p. 261.

3 Deleuze and Guattari 1983, p. 344

4 Deleuze 2006, p. 154.

5 Deleuze 1995b, p. 10.

6 See Deleuze 1983, pp. 104-9.

troversion that characterizes the melancholic on Freud's justly famous account could not be further from Deleuze's central concerns with dynamism, the event, and the Outside, nor from the austere, systematic and affirmative atmosphere of his conceptual constructions. Nevertheless, the speculative thesis I will advance here is that the psychoanalytic conceptualization of melancholia, precisely to the degree that it is irreducible to this kind of neurotic interiority, allows us to conceive of Deleuze as extending psychoanalytic insights rather than repudiating them. For all the force and significance of the anti-oedipal critique, one cannot help mourning the loss of psychoanalysis in Deleuze's work after *Anti-Oedipus*. The loss can be redressed not through the promulgation of a deconstructive fantasy in which Deleuze remained secretly indebted to Freud and Lacan, but through the creation of a new link between his later work and the psychoanalytic heritage. In particular, we will see that Deleuze's account of the cinema provides us with one point at which such a re-affiliation could begin to take hold.

What follows sketches an approach to melancholia that departs from Deleuze's work on the object-cause of desire, and then engages this work on the cinema, guided by a psychoanalytic trajectory that runs from Freud to contemporary Lacanian theory. The essential claim is found in a phrase that Deleuze uses to characterize the work of Félix Guattari before the two had published *Anti-Oedipus*: what is at stake is "a rediscovery of psychosis beneath the cheap trappings of neurosis."⁷ It is once melancholia is firmly located on the terrain of psychosis that a fruitful Deleuzean approach reveals itself.

The virtual character of *objet a*

Deleuze's major works in the sixties and early seventies bear the unmistakable stamp of Lacan's influence, particularly with regard to his theory of the object and its relationship to psychic organisation. *Difference and Repetition*, *The Logic of Sense* and *Anti-Oedipus* all explicitly mention Lacan's *objet a*, and while it is always the case with Deleuze that his concepts are woven with threads drawn from many sources, in this case the Lacanian influence is quite pronounced. Here, I will focus on *Difference and Repetition*, before drawing a pair of points from the work written with the psychiatrist Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*.

Like Lacan, Deleuze will insist that neither the real objects in the world that satisfy biological drives, nor these drives themselves, are sufficient to explain the nature of desire. And also like Lacan, he will argue that what distinguishes the two can be conceived in terms of a particular kind of object: "desire finds the principle of its difference from need in

7 Deleuze 2004, p. 195; cf. Deleuze 2004, p. 200: "The real problems have to do with psychosis (not the neurosis of application)."

the virtual object."⁸The term 'virtual' is a complex one in Deleuze, but for our purposes we can note that when he introduces (it in the context of an account of psychogenesis) he invokes the seminar on the *Purloined Letter*: "Lacan's pages assimilating the virtual object to Edgar Allen Poe's purloined letter seem to us exemplary. Lacan shows that real objects are subjected to the law of being *or* not being somewhere, by virtue of the reality principle; whereas virtual objects, by contrast, have the property of being *and* not being where they are."⁹

The first trait of the virtual object, then, shared with the Lacanian position, is that it is constitutively lost, lacking from its place while nevertheless constituting an unoccupied place that attends all biopsychical processes. "Loss or forgetting here," Deleuze notes "are not determinations which must be overcome; rather, they refer to the objective nature of that which we recover, as lost."¹⁰ It is this that will lead Deleuze, to call the virtual object "a shred [*lambeau*] of the pure past."¹¹

How does the virtual object function in the constitution and regulation of psychic life? In general terms, the virtual is the *problematic* for Deleuze. This category is to be understood in the way that Kant uses it in the first *Critique* when describing the Ideas of the faculty of Reason: "Kant never ceased to remind us that Ideas are essentially 'problematic,'"¹² Deleuze notes, insofar as we keep in mind that

'Problematic' does not mean only a particularly important species of subjective acts, but a dimension of objectivity as such which is occupied by these acts [...] Kant likes to say that problematic Ideas are both objective and undetermined. The undetermined is not a simple imperfection in our knowledge or a lack in the object: it is a perfectly positive, objective structure which acts as a focus or horizon within perception.¹³

The advent and regulation of the psyche is nothing other than the ongoing attempt to 'solve' the problems posed by the virtual object-causes of desire, where these problems are nothing other than the insistence of the objects themselves. *Objets a* do not act – they give the subject's acts their *raison d'être* by virtue of their irreducible insistence.

Given all of this, we can see what Deleuze means when, drawing

8 Deleuze 1995a, p. 106.
9 Deleuze 1995a, p. 102.
10 Deleuze 1995a, p. 102.
11 Deleuze 1995a, p. 101, translation modified.
12 Deleuze 1995a, p. 168.
13 Deleuze 1995a, p. 169.

on both Kant and psychoanalysis, he declares that “The virtual object is a *partial* object.” (DR 100) The virtual object is not only partial in the Lacanian sense, unable to be assimilated to the order of the material-real and the concept of the whole or global object, it is a positively incomplete object that functions as the ultimate structure for material-real processes by giving these a locus around which to turn. Rather than speaking of the non-being of the virtual, then, Deleuze will rather invoke its (non)-being or ?-being.¹⁴

From this point of view, neurosis and psychosis very clearly appear as those modes of psychic organisation in which the problematic nature of the virtual object overwhelms the always temporary resolutions forged from the contingent matters at hand. “Neuropaths and psychopaths,” Deleuze writes, explore this problematic nature of the object-cause of desire, “at the cost of their suffering.”¹⁵ He continues, in the same remarkable passage, writing that:

Precisely their suffering, their pathos, is the only response to a question which is itself endlessly shifted, to a problem which in itself is endlessly disguised. It is not what they say or what they think but their lives that are exemplary, and are larger than they are. They bear witness to that transcendence, and to the most extraordinary play of the true and the false which occurs not at the level of answers and solution but at the level of the problem themselves.¹⁶

We can see then why Deleuze will come to suggest “a helix or a figure 8,”¹⁷ as the schema of subjectivity, which invokes the two independent circles of the actual material and the virtual problematic and their intersection. In turn, “[w]hat then would be the ego, where would it be, given its topological distinction from the Id, if not at the crossing of the 8, at the point of connection between these two intersecting asymmetrical circles, the circle of real objects and that of the virtual objects or centres?”¹⁸

The ego therefore, rather than being an artifact or kernel of discrete interiority, is instead an ongoing product; the ego names the contingent and variable integration by the subject of the two objectal regimes.

14 Deleuze 1995a, p. 205. It is perhaps, in the end, these brackets that mark the real difference between Deleuze and Lacan. Lacan's non-being and Deleuze's (non)-being - two different conceptions of the being of the object.

15 Deleuze 1995a, p. 107.

16 Deleuze 1995a, p. 107.

17 Deleuze 1995a, p. 100.

18 Deleuze 1995a, p. 100.

No one has ever walked endogenously. On the one hand, the child goes beyond the bound excitations towards the supposition or the intentionality of an object, such as the mother, as the goal of an effort, the end to be actively reached ‘in reality’ and in relation to which success and failure may be measured. But *on the other hand and at the same time*, the child constructs for itself another object, a quite different kind of object which is a *virtual* object or centre and which then governs or compensates for the progresses and failures of its real activity: it puts several fingers in its mouth, wraps the other arm around this virtual centre and appraises the whole situation from the point of view of this virtual mother.¹⁹

With these points in mind, I would like to add a couple of remarks about Deleuze's first work with Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*. It is a common view that this work constitutes a rejection of psychoanalysis, and presents a non-psychoanalytic theory of desire — nothing could be further from the truth. On balance, what looks like an off the cuff remark by Deleuze in an interview just after the book's publication is likely its best gloss:

Lacan himself says ‘I'm not getting much help.’ We thought we'd give him some schizophrenic help. And there's no question that we're all the more indebted to Lacan, once we've dropped notions like structure, the symbolic, or the signifier, which are thoroughly misguided, and which Lacan himself has always managed to turn on their heads to bring out their limitations.²⁰

This means, on the one hand, dispensing with the paradigmatic status of neurosis and starting with the various forms of psychosis instead; on the other, it means following through in a rigorous way the very claims about the nature of the object of desire hinted at in Freud and then developed in such a powerful way by Klein and then Lacan. This is not to say that there is nothing in *Anti-Oedipus* that breaks with psychoanalysis, but rather that the book's argument must be seen as part of the trajectory that begins with Freud and runs through Lacan if it is to be understood at all.

One of the key elements that *Anti-Oedipus* adds to the picture found in *Difference and Repetition* is an emphasis on the direct investment of the social by desire: “every investment is social, and in any case bears upon a socio-historical field.”²¹ This is not to say rather simply that humans are social beings, but rather that the social precedes the individual at the level of desire, and, importantly, that the investment of desire is not

19 Deleuze 1995a, p. 99

20 Deleuze 1995b, p. 14.

21 Deleuze and Guattari 1983, p. 342.

mediated by the family unit. In an inversion of the Freudian picture, the Oedipus complex as a formation of desire is itself the product of the more fundamental social organisation of modern capitalism. This is why they will speak of “the primacy of the libidinal investments of the social field over the familiar investment.”²²

The important consequence of this claim here is that — like the anti-psychiatry movement insisted before them — we cannot simply or in the first instance attribute madness to particular individuals. Again, though, Deleuze and Guattari mean by this something much more radical than the idea that particular forms of society make us ill. It is true that capitalism produces schizophrenics, for Deleuze and Guattari, but this can only make sense if we understand that social formations are themselves essentially means for the production of particular forms of subjectivity.

Given this, the desultory treatment that neurosis receives at Deleuze and Guattari’s hands can be more easily justified. What is at stake in the investment of desire – and this is the second point – can never be reduced to the ploys of an interior depth. Once the decision to adopt the paradigm of neurosis, as Freud does, we are left without any ability to grasp anything other than it: as Deleuze and Guattari insist, we get either Oedipus as a crisis or Oedipus as a structure, and nothing besides. In place of this, *Anti-Oedipus* gives us a psychotic model of subjectivity.²³ Schizophrenia, in their view, must be understood as the basic mode of the investment of desire. This is not any form of aestheticisation and admiration of madness — another common misconception — but rather a claim about the structure of subjectivity. At root, subjectivity is not prior to investment, but rather an ongoing, discontinuous and fleeting product of the processes of investment themselves. That the desire of the neurotic is necessarily desire-as-lack, mediated as it is by the symbolic order — for Deleuze and Guattari, from within the capitalist social formation — in no way reveals the more general situation. In fact, the schizophrenic situation is the fundamental one, and in it, “Desire does not lack anything; it does not lack its object. It is, rather, the subject that is missing in desire, or desire that lacks a fixed subject.”²⁴

If we bring these two points together, we can see why the single

22 Deleuze and Guattari 1983, p. 356.

23 Further discussion of this claim, in the context of the Deleuze-Lacan interface, can be found in Bartlett, Clemens and Roffe 2014, pp. 66-9.

24 Deleuze and Guattari 1983, p. 26. In Lacanian terms, “the schizophrenic is not identified with the hole in the universe, the real cause of the lack in the Other, but with the object of jouissance which is not separated from the body.” Gallano 2012, p. 6) The only problem with this formulation from Deleuze and Guattari’s point of view is that the identification is not imaginary but real – the body is, at least in one respect, nothing other than the ensemble of these objects in their activity (objects of desire as desiring-machines).

most basic diagnostic distinction that Deleuze and Guattari introduce is between the paranoid and schizophrenic poles of social-libidinal investment, and makes no reference to neurosis. This is

the distinction between two poles of social libidinal investment: the paranoiac, reactionary and fascisizing pole, and the schizoid revolutionary pole. Once again we see no objection to the use of terms inherited from psychiatry for characterizing social investments of the unconscious, insofar as these terms cease to have a familial connotation that would make them into simple projections, and from the moment delirium is recognized as having a primary social content that is immediately adequate.²⁵

I will return to these two poles at the close of the piece.

By passing from Freud to Lacan, and then showing the through-line from the thesis of the *objet petit a* in Lacan to the virtual object in Deleuze, the problematic of melancholia seems to have been marginalized. But it is at this point that we can fruitfully turn to the rather unlikely seeming terrain of the Deleuzean theory of the cinema. It is there that an account of melancholia, bearing all of the structural traits it possesses in Lacanian psychoanalysis, nonetheless inflected by Deleuze and Guattari’s insistence on the social investment of desire, can be found.

Cinema and modern melancholy

How might the cinema be of interest here? I began by saying that Deleuze’s books on the cinema constitute one of the sites at which the category of melancholia might be developed. This is so despite the fact that, bar its stray and occasional adjectival use, the term itself is absent from both *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image* and *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, as it is from all of the works of Deleuze discussed here. Despite this, though, the entire structure outlined earlier is in play there: the break with the material real alongside the persistence of the lost problematic object; the suffering that results from its unmediated presence; and the creation, from within this psychotic set-up, of new forms of relation with the object. It is the cinema itself that is the engine of this construction, the construction of a new meaning existence and action within the modern scene. To be particularly provocative, we could say that the cinema is for Deleuze what Joyce is for Lacan — the most significant, inventive, and, so to speak, ‘free’ response to the psychotic situation.

Summarily speaking, Deleuze’s books on the cinema involve three concomitant components. The first is a taxonomy of kinds of cinematic

25 Deleuze and Guattari 1983, p. 366.

signs; the second, a master distinction between movement- and time-images as general categories of these signs; and finally, a theory of thought. Despite being the subtitles of the two books and a rubric deployed in both to distinguish very different ways of treating time in the cinema, the second of these is ultimately the least consequential. This is registered on the surface of the text by the way in which some of the same films, and many of the same directors, are used as examples for both movement- and time-image cinema — as if the distinction ran lengthwise through the whole history of the cinema, like an undulating crack, rather than being inaugurated by a rupture that would simply correspond with Italian neo-realism and the French new wave.

The relationship between the cinematic image and human thought is therefore our primary concern here, and Deleuze will describe their interplay according to four rubrics.²⁶

The first concerns the *production* of the cinematic image itself. It may seem a banal point to make, but it is essential in Deleuze's view that we recognize the non-human origin of the images of the cinema. The eye of the camera is not a human eye, and the images that it produces are marked by this absolute and irreducible artificiality.

The second cinema-thought rubric concerns the consequent *reception* of the image. In order to explicate the nature of human reception of cinematic images, he turns to Henri Bergson's account of the sensori-motor schema (SMS). The SMS is a network of habits and expectations that connects and organizes the relationship between perception and action, while at the same time making perception and action feasible for finite beings in an open context. On the side of sensory reception, the SMS functions as a filter, constructing an image (a perception-image) of the world that subtracts from it everything that does not complement the psychophysical habits of which I am composed. On the other hand, the images of possible courses of action (action-images) are necessarily projections that model future outcomes on present habitual dispositions. Thus how the world appears to me and what I conceive as possible to do within it are ineluctably subject to the SMS.

When making use of this Bergsonian idea, Deleuze very clearly gives it an extra-subjective scope: the SMS is not mine, but rather ours, an intersubjective structure — whatever its particularities for each individual — for the organisation of experience. The significance of this qualification is unmistakable in the *Cinema* books, as we can see in passages like the following from *The Time-Image*:

26 A different way through these four rubrics is presented in what is to my mind the central, tour de force chapter of *The Time-Image*, entitled "Thought and cinema," Deleuze 1989, pp. 156-88).

Neither everyday nor limit-situations are marked by anything rare or extraordinary. It is just a volcanic island of poor fishermen. It is just a factory, a school . . . We mix with all that, even death, even accidents, in our normal life or on holidays. We see, and we more or less experience, a powerful organization of poverty and oppression. And we are precisely not without sensori-motor schemata for recognizing such things, for putting up with and approving of them and for behaving ourselves subsequently, taking into account our situation, our capabilities and our tastes. We have schemata for turning away when it is too unpleasant, for prompting resignation when it is terrible and for assimilating when it is too beautiful. It should be pointed out here that even metaphors are sensory-motor evasions, and furnish us with something to say when we no longer know what to do: they are specific schemata of an affective nature. Now this is what a cliché is. A cliché is a sensori-motor image of the thing.²⁷

Note that the very fact of the SMS gives to the production of cinematic images (first rubric) a particular radicality: the human perspective unavoidably constrains every image that it produces in the course of experience, but the images of the cinema are not subject to its rule. And not just produced, for the SMS also functions to *organize* these images. The SMS, this is to say, is in the end a montage-form for subjective experience. It joins the images that it subtracts from sensation in a very particular way, such that what is perceived provides a situation in which meaningful action is possible. This, then, will be the definition of the classical cinema: the ensemble of films in which images are presented and joined together in a way consonant with the way that the SMS presents and organizes images of the world. This is true even in the cases that mark the limits of the classical in the cinema: for Hitchcock and Ozu with respect to the production of images resistant to the SMS, and for Eisenstein, whose dialectical conception of montage presses at the limits of the SMS's own mode of the organisation of perception-, affection- and action-images.

What happens in the modern cinema on Deleuze's view? What happens, that is, when the cinema produces images which, being non-human in origin, do not arise on the basis of the SMS, and which are no longer organized according to it? The answer brings us to the third rubric, that of the *disruption* of thought by the modern (direct-time) image. What is meant by time-image here concerns us less than the challenge to classical montage that the modern cinema presents. Or, to put the matter another way, the introduction of images that cannot be assimilated (at least, not readily) by the SMS gives rise to a new problem of connection: how to join together images that do not make a natural fit with the habitual organisation of the SMS. Thus Deleuze will write that "The modern

27 Deleuze 1989, p. 20.

image initiates the reign of ‘incommensurables’ or irrational cuts.”²⁸ We see these images, but they place us in the situation of one of Rossellini’s protagonists, able to see, but not to react, nor to think the meaning of what we see.

The fourth and final rubric comes under the head of *creation*: the creation of new capacities in thought. A banal observation in one sense, it takes on its full amplitude by noting that for Deleuze, alongside the passage of the cinema, an historical development of broader scope — one that comes to intersect with developments in the production of cinematic image and its capacity to engender new modes of thought — has taken place. It is true that the history of the modern cinema confronts us with a powerlessness proper to thought, and demands that it raise itself up through the constitution of new capacities. But at the same time, a much more general and profound displacement of the SMS was underway. This displacement is due to the events of the twentieth century as such: “Why is the Second World War taken as a break? The fact is that, in Europe, the post-war period has greatly increased the situations which we no longer know how to react to, in spaces which we no longer know how to describe. These were ‘any spaces whatever,’ deserted but inhabited, disused warehouses, waste ground, cities in the course of demolition or reconstruction.”²⁹

As Paola Marrati glosses it,

It is not by chance that the crisis of the action-form occurs in the aftermath of World War II [...] We no longer believe that our actions have a bearing on a global situation, that they can transform it or even simply reveal its meaning. And, accordingly, we no longer believe in the capacity of a community to have hopes and dreams powerful enough to bring about the confidence necessary to reform itself. Our ties to the world are broken.³⁰

Modern subjectivity is born from an encounter with images that we could not assimilate without trauma, and from which we could not project future courses of action. The images of the world that we now habitually give ourselves no longer open onto a range of effective action.

However, Deleuze will also stress, we need not invoke these terrible traumas themselves, because the same effects now arise thanks to the domestic means deployed to overcome these traumas in the social order. Recall Deleuze’s decisive passage in an interview with Antonio Negri:

28 Deleuze 1989, p. 277.

29 Deleuze 1989, p. xi.

30 Marrati 2008, p. 105.

I was very struck by all the passages in Primo Levi where he explains that Nazi camps have given us "a shame at being human." Not, he says, that we're all responsible for Nazism, as some would have us believe, but that we've all been tainted by it: even the survivors of the camps had to make compromises with it, if only to survive. There's the shame of there being men who became Nazis; the shame of being unable, not seeing how, to stop it; the shame of having compromised with it; there's the whole of what Primo Levi calls this "gray area." And we can feel shame at being human in utterly trivial situations, too: in the face of too great a vulgarization of thinking, in the face of entertainment, of a ministerial speech, of "jolly people" gossiping.³¹

In *The Time-Image*, Deleuze will put it this way: “The modern fact is that we no longer believe in this world. We do not even believe in the events which happen to us, love, death, as if they only half-concerned us. It is not we who make cinema; it is the world which looks to us like a bad film.”³²

There are thus two sources from which disruptions to the SMS arise: the cinema itself, and in particular the modern cinema, and history. The effects of these challenges are however very different, for the disruptive force borne by the creations of the modern cinema does not lead to a repudiation but a problematisation of the SMS. In this regard, the images produced by the cinema (again) distinguish themselves from the images of the world that we produce ourselves. The latter leave us with no recourse, rendering us purely passive, while the former act to instigate change in the viewing subject. At issue is a shock to thought, not at the level of content but form: the images presented to us are inassimilable for us in the present, but they will become thinkable to the degree that they themselves engender the development of new capacities of thought in thought itself.

In effect, what this means is that the images of the modern cinema are problematic objects — to be more precise, they give us a *new image of the world*. The modern situation institutes a schism between situation and action, image of the world and subject, but in this gap cinema is able to produce images that are neither veridically true nor false but novel.

Again Deleuze will borrow from Bergson, here, his concept of fabulation. Bergson initially uses the term, in *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, to indicate the kind of delusory effects of close-minded religious thinking. However, certainly as Deleuze deploys it, it names a more fundamental capacity. We tend to go beyond our perceptions of the

31 Deleuze 1995b, p. 172.

32 Deleuze 1989, p. 171.

world when confronted by traumatic experiences by fabricating responses (new action-images) that are not implicit in our perception of the world. Thus fabrication in the cinema engenders new images of the world, and engenders new relations with the world on this basis. Moreover, in a late interview, Deleuze is once again clear about the intersubjective weight of his account, arguing that "We ought to take up Bergson's notion of fabrication and give it a political meaning."³³

Confronted with the new images of the world created by the cinema, and forced by these images to think them – there is no voluntarism here, and throughout Deleuze will use Spinoza's 'spiritual automaton' to characterize the viewer of film – we are literally educated, drawn into a new way of sensing and thinking that the images of the world produced by the SMS do not warrant.

It is with this outline in hand that the problematic of melancholia can finally be outlined on Deleuzian terms. We find, first of all, a collapse of the mediating apparatus which gives sense to subjective experience – the SMS that loses its grip in the face of modern trauma. However, the object that we have lost our grip on, the world itself, is not itself gone, but now looms up as that on which we no longer have any grip. The world, no longer the locus of human agency, becomes problem. Finally, the moment of stabilization or compensation: the cinema as the means of creating a new set of connections with the world that no longer go by way of the former intersubjective order of the SMS. Here is the well-known passage from *The Time Image* that condenses this general line of argument:

The link between humanity and the world is broken. Henceforth, this link must become an object of belief [...] Only belief in the world can reconnect us to what we see and hear. The cinema must film, not the world, but belief in this world, our only link. The nature of the cinematographic illusion has often been considered. Restoring our belief in the world – this is the power of modern cinema (when it stops being bad). Whether we are Christians or atheists, in our universal schizophrenia, *we need reasons to believe in this world*.³⁴

Marrati devotes some powerful pages to this thematic in Deleuze's *Cinema* books, and in the current context the following passage comes to bear in particular

We "moderns" are not, according to Deleuze, in an interminable state of mourning for God and for the divine; it is not that we are unable to accept the news of the death of God, nor are we unable to

33 Deleuze 1995b, p. 174.

34 Deleuze 1989, pp. 171-2, translation modified.

wait for the "God to come," as Heidegger might maintain. In other words, modernity is not *melancholic*; it is not attended by the shadow of a lost object, nor is it split between those enlightened ones who could at least name and think their condition as impossible and unendable mourning and those blind ones plagued by maniacal triumphs. We are lacking something very different: the world. We have "lost" the world, but the modality of this loss is not that of death, disappearance, distancing, or any of the notions connected with the register of mourning. The world is indeed there, but what is now lacking is the hope required to create new possibilities of life in it. The true modern problem is thus the problem of a faith that can make the world livable and thinkable once again, not in itself, but for us.³⁵

The first thing to note is that Marrati transparently conflates mourning and melancholia. Unlike mourning, it is not the shadow of a lost object, but the lost object itself — the object lost in advance, the virtual, problematic object =x —that is central. On the other hand, it is certainly the case that the modern problem for Deleuze is that the world persists, but it does so not 'as itself' but as just such a virtual problem, one that calls for an ongoing series of contingent 'solutions'. In fact, what we must claim is that the modernity of which Deleuze writes in the *Cinema* volumes is indeed melancholic. In particular, this account involves two of the crucial features we earlier identified, the persistence of the object we just referred to, and a recognition that a response is to be found not by overturning the state of affairs with an eye to a return to 'normal' neurosis, but by creating a new intermedial regime.

This work of stabilization is nothing other than the temporary resolution of the problem posed by the virtual object, in the terminology of *Difference and Repetition*, but in the terminology of the *Cinema* books, it is the very effort of modern cinema itself. Indeed, since for Deleuze neurosis itself – and the whole of the ordinary unhappiness with which it is associated – is a particular form of stabilization, there is nothing but stabilization, compensation, the patchwork construction of temporary formations. The modern situation described in the cinema books is not a particular case of melancholia, but the most general form of the phenomenon: the real appearing no longer as a stable referent but as a problem, a new way of taking this problem. The existing habits of the SMS have failed, and now a new set of habits of seeing, feeling and thinking are required – 'compensation', perhaps, but necessarily creation.

Now in fact the *Cinema* books present two particular responses to the presence of the lost object of the world – to borrow from Judge Schreiber, we might say that all leprous corpses are not equal. There is, on the

35 Marrati 2008, pp. 88-9.

one hand, the ‘classical’ melancholic response, which at denounces the world and clings ever closer to the subject position that gave access to it at the same time. This response is what we find *par excellence* for Deleuze in post-war Hollywood cinema. At the close of *The Movement-Image*, Deleuze identifies the characteristics of this moment in the cinema, all of which turn around the weakening or breaking of the links between situation and agency, the equation of agency and an inconsequential wandering or *balade*, and the supposition of a paranoid vision of the world as an endless tissue of deception. Ron Bogue admirably summarises the point, “when the sensori-motor schema begins to disintegrate, and with it the interconnecting links that hold action and situation together, the only totality remaining that can provide the coherence and coordination of space and time is either a network of circulating clichés or a conspiratorial system of surveillance.”³⁶ When Deleuze writes, “[e]ven the ‘healthiest’ illusions fail,”³⁷ the response of Hollywood cinema was to pathologise fabulation itself and dwell in the gap that yawns between a situation that only appears as false, and actions that are no longer possible to conceive, let alone prosecute. In this regard, classical melancholia in the Deleuzian scheme must be seen to decline towards paranoia.

On the other hand, there is the passage through the torment of the presence of the absent world constituted by an internal reconstruction that dispenses with recourse to a confected imaginary. The act of cinematic creation, which gives us new images of thought, new images of the world and new means of acting in these images, necessarily presents a schizophrenic character. It transforms by shattering, stupefying all pre-existent images; in this sense, it is the cutting edge that runs between classical and modern as such.

All of this returns us to the final key feature of melancholia as given in classical psychoanalysis: the matter of the identification of the ego and the lost object. If identification has not played a part in the discussion of Deleuze so far, this is because, in his view, it varies in significance depending on which tendency (paranoid or schizophrenic) is in play. For Deleuze and Guattari, to repeat, the hallmark of schizophrenia is the manifest absence of the subject: “Desire does not lack anything; it does not lack its object. It is, rather, the subject that is missing in desire, or desire that lacks a fixed subject.”³⁸ In paranoia, on the other hand, the subject becomes the polarized black hole around which everything turns.

The various modalities of melancholic construction, therefore, run between the paranoid pole marked by i’(a), the (new, auxilliary) imaginary formation around the *objet a*, and the schizophrenic pole at which

36 Bogue 2003, pp. 108.

37 Deleuze 1986, p. 211.

38 Deleuze and Guattari 1983, p. 26.

the *objet a* is present without imaginary mediation, in its essential problematicity.³⁹ The entire ground between the two is the realm of melancholic forms.

World

It is important to see here – and the passage through *Difference and Repetition* and *Anti-Oedipus* was meant to convey nothing else – that the loss of the world in modernity and the hope that cinema offers for reconnecting to it is *not analogous* to the process of psychosis, but this very process itself, grasped on what Deleuze takes to be its own proper regime, in fact and by right. If the investment of desire is always primarily social, and the subject of desire a secondary, contingent and variable product of this investment, then the stakes of psychosis in Deleuzian terms must themselves play out at the social level, and at the level of the creation of new social institutions of thought. Such, in any case, is one trajectory (though certainly not the only one) according to which a Deleuzian account of melancholia might begin to be constructed.

The Deleuzian account of melancholia I have just described is precisely what is at issue in the following text, which appears in Deleuze’s late work *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*. Reflecting on the place of Leibniz’s philosophy in the history of western thought, and in particular of the contemporary situation in which all fundamental theological principles have been undone, Deleuze asks:

what happened [...] before the world lost its principles? Closer to us, it was necessary for human reason to collapse, as the last refuge of principles, the Kantian refuge: it dies through “neurosis.” But even earlier, a psychotic episode was necessary, the crisis and collapse of all theological Reason. This is where the Baroque assumes its position: Is there a way of saving the theological ideal, at a moment when it is enbattled on all sides, and when the world cannot stop accumulating “proofs” against it, violences and miseries, at a time when the earth will soon tremble...? The Baroque solution is the following: we will multiply principles—we can always pull out a new one from our sleeve—and consequently we will change its use. We will no longer ask what giveable object corresponds to this or that luminous principle, but rather what hidden principle corresponds to this given object, that is to say, this or that “perplexing case.”⁴⁰

39 I make use of this matheme the way Fabien Grasser deploys it in “Stabilisations dans la psychose.”

40 Deleuze 1988, pp. 90-1.

The Fold concludes with a famous invocation of a post-neurotic present, one that does away with both the unshakeable onto-theological certitude of Plato and Descartes and the restricted melancholia of the Leibnizian conceptual construction, always having in the final analysis to advert to divine supervenience. In its place, the local contingent construction of new connections that Deleuze calls ‘nomadic’ is our schizophrenic sense of a generalised melancholia. The world is neither the ordered realm of reason in classical thought, nor the neurotically structured world of Kant and his epigones. Instead, it is just *this* world, the perplexing object requiring, each time and in each encounter, a new construction.

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Bile/Pale Fire: Benjaminian Allegory and Nabokovian Melancholy

Sigi Jöttkandt

"I myself / Rich only in large hurts" — *Timon of Athens*

No one reads letters anymore.¹ Who even *writes* letters today? Why would we, for, if Tom Cohen is to be believed, they are destined to remain unread. And this is only true for the letters that are actually posted, which the majority are not according to Darian Leader.² Or at least those letters written by women. Letters that are written but unposted are doubly unread, off-cuts of a conversation that founders before it begins. Misfires. Miscarriages. Or just simply missed. Perhaps the letters that remain unposted are written by a melancholic hand. The melancholic misses. This is what she does best. She misses the one who has inexplicably gone. More precisely, she misses the time in which it is proper to miss. Missing someone ultimately means accepting their absence. Accepting their absence implies one has sufficiently mourned. But the melancholic, as Freud tells us, fails to mourn because mourning ultimately means turning one's back on the loved one, making an about-face towards reality again. Against such a betrayal of love, the melancholic rebels. She rises up against the slow and painful process of detaching her libido from the lost loved object, making of herself in the process, as Freud says, "the greatest nuisance." Melancholics, Freud writes in "Mourning and Melancholia," always seem as though they felt slighted and had been treated with great injustice. All this is possible only because the reactions expressed in their behaviour still proceed from a mental constellation of revolt, which has then, by a certain process, passed over into the crushed state of melancholia.³

What distinguishes mourning from melancholia, Freud explains is that in the latter, the object flees into the ego which comes to house this foreign 'king.'⁴ Usurped by the introjected object, the ego survives on the margins as a "critical agency," issuing summonses to the simultaneously loved yet hated object occupying her former realm. Indeed, Freud clarifies, the melancholic's excoriating self-accusations "are really 'plaints' in the old sense of the word... everything derogatory that they say about themselves is at bottom said about someone else." In this way, through the hollowed out words of the plaintive plaintiff, the loved object lives on, as a "shadow" on the ego.

1 Cohen 2005a, p. 83.

2 Leader 1997.

3 Freud 1917, p. 248.

4 "His Majesty the Ego, the hero alike of every day-dream and every story." Freud 1908, p. 150.

I. “I was the shadow of the waxwing slain/
By the false azure of the window pane”⁵

Pale Fire was written while Nabokov was translating Pushkin’s famous poem “Eugene Onegin” (or “You-gin One-Gin” as Nabokov liked to call it⁶). His “literal” translation of Pushkin was a daring approach in 1964, ultimately costing him his friendship with Edmund Wilson in a public falling out in *The New York Review of Books*.⁷ Nabokov’s *Eugene Onegin* was notable primarily for its refusal to conform to the unspoken convention of the time that poetic translations should faithfully reproduce the rhythmic and metrical patterns of the original.

In his Foreword justifying his unorthodox choice, Nabokov describes the three ways a translator may approach the work. There is the:

- “free” or “paraphrastic” translation of the original, with omissions and additions prompted by the exigencies of form
- the “lexical” or constructional translation that maintains the basic meaning and order of words
- and finally the “literal” approach, which Nabokov calls the “only true translation.” This is achieved by using the associative and syntactical capacities of the new language to render “the exact contextual meaning of the original.”⁸

Nabokov acknowledges the Sisyphean nature of the literal translator’s “task”: “He may toy with ‘honourable’ instead of ‘honest’ and waver between ‘seriously’ and ‘not in jest’; he will replace ‘rules’ by the more evocative ‘principles’ and rearrange the order of words to achieve some semblance of English construction and retain some vestige of Russian rhythm.” But if he is still not contented, Nabokov explains, “the translator can at least hope to amplify it in a detailed note.” And in his Commentary that accompanies his Pushkin translation, Nabokov does precisely this, writing more than 1000 pages of critical annotations.

With its quadruple structure composed of a lengthy Foreword, John Shade’s Poem, Kinbote’s Commentary and an ambiguously authored Index, Nabokov’s *Pale Fire* ironically mimics the shape of his “Eugene Onegin” translation. In this respect, *Pale Fire* extends Nabokov’s fondness for creating doubles in and of his works. His first English-language novel, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (1941), for example, reads as a kind of first-run

5 Nabokov, 1996, p. 457.

6 Boyd, 1991, p. 112.

7 Wilson and Nabokov, 1965, n.p. Wilson accused Nabokov of “flattening Pushkin out and denying to his own powers the scope for their full play.”

8 Nabokov, 1964, pp. vii-viii.

for material that would later appear in *Speak, Memory* (1951) (itself subject to a further parodic rewriting in the late novel *Look at the Harlequins* (1974)). A key characteristic of these multiplying textual doubles, also shared by *Pale Fire*, is the way that what they imitate is *already* a fake or bastardized text — each text a “double redoubled” as Alan Cholodenko would say.⁹ Thus *Speak, Memory*, putatively the true memoirs of Nabokov’s own “real life” and therefore invested with the full aura of autobiographic authority, in fact re-presents a number of events that have been culled from their prior fictional telling in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*. Complications multiply with the latter novel’s titular conceit that the novel is the narrator, V.’s, attempt to set the truth straight following the earlier, unauthorized publication of Sebastian’s biography by a certain Mr Goodman. (The novel thus strangely anticipates Nabokov’s own future difficulties with his first biographer Andrew Field, but this is another story¹⁰). To read Nabokov is to roam through a strange hall of textual fun-house mirrors: in the case of *Pale Fire*, the poem-as-novel parodies the English translation of an iconic Russian novel-in-verse, translated by a Russian speaker whose mother tongue has been wrested from him by his exile in America.

Who wrote “Pale Fire”? Presenting as a ‘whodunit’ mystery, the question of the poem’s internal authorship has most exercised the critical reception of the novel to date. Is it John Shade, the ostensible poet named as such in the text. Or his editor, Charles Kinbote (aka Charles II, aka Charles the Beloved)? Or perhaps someone else again, for example the Russian scholar, Professor V. Botkin, whom some see as a thinly-disguised alter ego of the deranged Kinbote?¹¹ But if this critical question has not yet been satisfactorily answered, it suggests it has not been correctly posed. The obsessive scrutiny of the seemingly impossible coincidences and spiritual concordances among the characters in fact suggests a comically collective, almost ‘Kinbotian,’ effort on our part to miss Nabokov’s point. For it is the total breakdown of authorial identity, of linguistic ‘personhood’ altogether that is at stake in Nabokov’s aesthetic wager, along with the systems of power and legitimacy that underpin these tropes. What is this wager? It is that death can be defeated through literary art — albeit, as we will see, an ‘art’ of a very particular kind.

Turning to the novel, this twisting Moebius-strip of a text is simultaneously a mourning song — John Shade’s 999-line poem torquing under the pain of the poet’s loss of his daughter Hazel to suicide — and Charles Kinbote’s critical commentary on the poem, which subsequently

9 Cholodenko, 2007, p. 493.

10 Note this account does not even take into account *Speak, Memory*’s own peculiarly doubled history, hints of which are given in the subtitle, ‘An Autobiography Revisited.’

11 See DeRewal and Roth, 2009, n.p.

becomes the organ through which Kinbote underhandedly slips us his secret history of Charles II's flight from the Kingdom of Zembla which has been taken over by rebels, Charles's clandestine arrival in America, his friendship with Shade, and the latter's accidental death by a bullet supposedly intended for the fugitive King, shot by a certain Jacob Gradus ("alias Jack Degree, de Grey, d'Argus, Vinogradus, Leningradus, etc." as the Index helpfully informs the confused reader). It rapidly becomes clear from his ballooning Commentary, which gradually overtakes and supersedes the poem, that Kinbote has been imagining all along that Shade's rhyming epic would relate his story Charles the Beloved's heroic escape following the Zemblan revolution, whose details Kinbote has been drip-feeding Shade during their evening walks in New Wye. Kinbote's disappointment when he finally sees Shade's manuscript — which he has squirreled away beneath a pile of girls' galoshes and furred snowboots in the confusion following the poet's death — is profound. Not a peon to his lost kingdom, the poem presents merely the rather "dull" theme of Hazel's portrait which "has been expanded and elaborated to the detriment of certain other richer and rarer matters ousted by it" (Nabokov 1996, p. 556). Of these other "richer and rarer" matters, the poem contains in fact only one vague reference in line 937, which Kinbote annotates in his Commentary thus:

I am a weary and sad commentator today. Parallel to the left-hand side of this card (his seventy-sixth) the poet has written, on the eve of his death, a line (from Pope's Second Epistle of the *Essay on Man*) that he may have intended to cite in a footnote: *At Greenland, Zembla, or the Lord knows where*
So this is all treacherous old Shade could say about Zembla — *my* Zembla? While shaving his stubble off? Strange, strange...
(Nabokov 1996, pp. 635-6)

II. "But who is man that is not angry?" —
Timon of Athens

Upon receiving a rejection for his short story "The Vane Sisters," Nabokov wrote an irritable letter to his editor Katherine White at *The New Yorker* berating her for "failing" him as a reader. White had rejected the tale because she felt the story was irremediably hobbled by Nabokov's "overwhelming style" (White's phrase). But White's critical shortcoming was that she — *somehow* — overlooked the clue to the story's comprehension, namely, a hidden message written in acrostic in the first letters of each word in the final paragraph ("Icicles by Cynthia, meter from me, Sybil"). In his letter, Nabokov anticipates White's objections: "You may argue that reading downwards, or upwards, or diagonally is not what an editor can be expected to do." Even still, he expresses a deep

disappointment that White, "such a subtle and loving reader, should not have seen the inner scheme of my story."¹²

Nabokov's ill-tempered reaction to his failure to be properly read mirrors in inverse Kinbote's disappointment in Shade's poem, which similarly fails to tell 'his' story. For it is clear that what is at stake in *Pale Fire* is a war over poetic intentions, and one in which, at least superficially, the critic is victorious. Kinbote secretes his (anti-)heroic tale of Charles the Beloved's brave escape and exile from Zembla literally in between the lines of Shade's heroic couplets.¹³ In usurping Shade's poem in this way, Kinbote covertly cites the book's title *Pale Fire* which, as is well known, itself 'steals' from Shakespeare's own dual-authored play in the form of a citation. Written in collaboration with Thomas Middleton, *The Life of Timon of Athens* is one of Shakespeare's notorious 'problem' plays. Focusing on the definition of generosity, *Timon of Athens* cycles through the stages of melancholy Robert Burton identifies in his magisterial "Anatomy of Melancholy": from man's initial excellency, his fall, miseries, and then to raging despair.¹⁴ Timon is initially a "good and gracious" Greek citizen, the "very soul of bounty," whose extravagant kindness towards his friends will find him denuded of his riches. "Engluttred" by the Athenian's largesse, Timon's friends flee the moment he needs their assistance. "Burn, house! sink, Athens! henceforth hated be / Of Timon man and all humanity!" Timon shouts after them in his fit of legendary rage that for Walter Benjamin has become the prototype of the melancholic, a man he describes as being "past experiencing."¹⁵

An uncommon cloud of black bile accordingly hangs over the play's entire fourth Act which opens with Timon piling curse upon curse on the people of Athens. By this point, the poverty-stricken Timon has abandoned the city to live as a hermit, feeding only on roots and his accumulating hatred of all humankind. Yet as he digs for sustenance, he comes across a hoard of gold. No sooner he has discovered it, he is again "throng'd" by people who would steal his treasure from him. In scene 3, Timon lectures his would-be thieves on the nature of theft. Everything is a thief, he complains bitterly, although unlike his "knot of mouth-friends," the bandits in front of him are at least honest about their intentions:

12 Nabokov 1989, pp. 115-116.
13 Much of Kinbote's story in fact appears to have been itself plagiarized from the account of Charles the Second of England's escape following his defeat at the Battle of Worcester. See William Harrison Ainsworth's novel *Boscobel, or, The Royal Oak*, 1871.
14 Robert Burton 1638.
15 Benjamin 2003, p. 335.

The sun's a thief, and with his great attraction
Robs the vast sea: the moon's an arrant thief,
And her pale fire she snatches from the sun:
The sea's a thief, whose liquid surge resolves
The moon into salt tears:
(Act IV, scene iii, 2149-2155)

Thievery begets thievery. Stealing his novel's title from Shakespeare's treasury of signifiers is evidently not enough for Nabokov, who will go on to parasitize Timon's speech. Here is how the words appear in the translation by Charles the Beloved's uncle, the aptly named Conmal (one who "cons" or learns badly, especially by rote) whose knowledge of English was apparently acquired by "memorizing a dictionary":

The sun is a thief: she lures the sea
and robs it. The moon is a thief:
he steals his silvery light from the sun.
The sea is a thief: it dissolves the moon.

As with Nabokov's Pushkin, the radiant "bloom" of poetic language fades in Conmal's literal translation. A bare, stripped-down imitation replaces the Bard's fulgent language. But with this substitution, what Cohen calls the "whole premise of mimetic representations" is fatally undone. The copy 'prosaically' infiltrates the system of identity through which notions of poetic authority, ownership and linguistic propriety are maintained.¹⁶ Shorn of the Bard's characteristic verbal flourishes, the bastardized Zemblan version "robs" Shakespeare of what makes him "Shakespeare" (although this "Shakespeare" is already, as we know, non-originary, because doubled in the play's murky dual-authorship). As he thieves from English literature's most eminent son, Nabokov implicitly exposes the whole system of literary ownership and identity as a scam. For in Nabokov's hands, the sun, traditional *fons et origo* of a metaphorical exchange system, finds itself hijacked, rerouted by a cinematic *lunacy* that reveals the entire system of transfer of properties in figuration as a massive contraband operation that is as unreliable as it is unlawful.¹⁷ Things get lost. Meaning goes astray. Mysteriously missing from Conmal's version are Timon's concluding lines:

16 Cohen 2005b, p. 214.

17 See Derrida 1982: "The very opposition between appearing and disappearing, the whole vocabulary of phainesthai, of aletheia, and so forth, of day and night, visible and invisible, present and absent, all this is possible only under the sun," p. 52

The earth's a thief,
That feeds and breeds by a composture stolen
From general excrement: each thing's a thief.

Nabokov's real target in this kidnapping operation is what holds the rules of tropological exchange in place, namely, a final ground. There is no substratum that as first origin and infinitely generative source would arrest the *mise en abyme* of literary theft. Instead, in Nabokov, a "cinematic" *dissolve* surrenders the fiction of poetic autonomy to an unstable scene of reflection and counter-reflection ad infinitum. Citation, in this case, turns out to be a lure for advancing another form of literary production that flouts all the sacred rules and protocols of literary propriety.

III. '[T]hese pencill'd figures are / Even such as they give out' — *Timon of Athens*

Smuggling his narrative like so much illicit 'moonshine' into the margins of the text as critical annotations, Kinbote licenses himself to tell another tale than the one Shade intended in his poem. Which narrative did Kinbote displace? "Pale Fire" the poem is Shade's long and, if truth be told, somewhat rambling elegy to his dead daughter. Centring on the story of Shade's near-death experience, the poem revolves around the promise held out by poetic language of a life that continues beyond death. In Canto 3, Shade recounts how, shortly after delivering a talk titled "Why Poetry is Meaningful to Us," his heart momentarily stopped beating and he travelled to the Other Side.

I can't tell you how
I knew — but I did know that I had crossed
The border.

From here, Shade is treated to a vision of a totality:

A system of cells interlinked within
Cells interlinked within cells interlinked
Within one stem. And dreadfully distinct
Against the dark, a tall white fountain played.
(Nabokov 1996, pp. 476-77)

The fountain, he is convinced, was "Not of our atoms" and "I realized that the sense behind/ The scene was not our sense" (p. 477).

Later, after recovering, Shade stumbles across what he takes to be a non-coincidentally similar account of a near-death experience by a "Mrs Z," who seems to have had almost an identical vision during the interval

between her heart stopping and its being “rubbed back to life by a prompt surgeon’s hand” (Nabokov 1996, p. 478). Shade describes how, in her version, Mrs Z,

... told her interviewer of “The Land
Beyond the Veil” and the account contained
A hint of angels, and a glint of stained
Windows, and some soft music, and a choice
Of hymnal items, and her mother’s voice;
But at the end she mentioned a remote
Landscape, a hazy orchard — and I quote:
“Beyond that orchard through a kind of smoke
I glimpsed a tall white fountain — and awoke.”
(Nabokov 1996, p. 478)

This uniformity of their experiences would point to the undeniable and incontrovertible reality of a life beyond death. Shade is convinced that,

Our fountain was a signpost and a mark
Objectively enduring in the dark,
Strong as a bone, substantial as a tooth,
And almost vulgar in its robust truth! (Nabokov 1996, p. 478)

But on conducting further research, Shade discovers that the fountain in Mrs Z’s vision was in fact really a mountain: the *m* had been misprinted as an *f* in her published account. Nonetheless, far from shattering his conviction of the existence of an afterlife, the typographical error only serves to confirm Shade all the more in his belief. In a famous passage from the poem, which is often taken by critics as a statement reflecting Nabokov’s own views on the death-defying powers of art, Shade exclaims,

Life Everlasting — based on a misprint!
I mused as I drove homeward: take the hint,
And stop investigating my abyss?
But all at once it dawned on me that this
Was the real point, the contrapuntal theme;
Just this: not text, but texture; not the dream
But a topsy-turvical coincidence,
810 Not flimsy nonsense, but a web of sense.
Yes! It sufficed that I in life could find
Some kind of link-and-bobolink, some kind
Of correlated pattern in the game,
Plexed artistry, and something of the same
Pleasure in it as they who played it found.

(Nabokov 1996, pp. 478-80)

At one level, of course, it is not hard to see how, from a certain perspective, both “fountain” and “mountain,” despite their Saussurean differences from each other, convey the same poetic or, figurative, “intention,” making Shade’s asseveration of renewed belief in an afterlife somewhat understandable. This is because, even if “Old Faithful” (as Shade calls it) metamorphizes by means of a typographical error into mountain, both images nonetheless reliably lend themselves as archetypal figures for poetry. To take “fountain” first, it is not difficult to hear in it echoes of the medieval concept of the *fons vitale*, that is, the idea of God as the source or origin of creative inspiration, which becomes updated and contemporized by Nabokov’s coeval, Rainer Maria Rilke, as the “fountain of joy” (*Quelle des Freudes*) in the German poet’s own extended mourning song, the *Duino Elegies*.¹⁸ Mountain, on the other hand, irresistibly recalls Mount Parnassus, the sacred home of the Muses, a poetic connection that would seem reconfirmed in passing with Nabokov’s choice of name for Kinbote’s would-be assassin. Jacob Gradus, as Priscilla Meyer reminds us, carries an implicit reference to the famous 17th century versification handbook, the *Gradus ad Parnassum*, or “steps to Parnassus.”¹⁹ There appears to be a deeper connection between the two words, *fountain* and *mountain*, than a chance typographical error would suggest. From this perspective, the typesetter’s mistake would only have served to bring into visibility something that Walter Benjamin in “The Task of the Translator” calls the underlying “kinship” between the two words.

In this famous essay, published in 1921 as the Foreword to his own work of translation of Baudelaire’s *Parisian Scenes*, Benjamin discusses the translator’s task in ways that are strikingly similar to Nabokov’s description in the Foreword to *Eugene Onegin* (although to my knowledge there is no evidence to suggest that Nabokov had ever read Benjamin’s essay, which was published in Harry Zohn’s English translation in 1969, that is, five years after the appearance of Nabokov’s Pushkin translation²⁰).

18 An interesting case might be made for Rilke’s *Duino Elegies* as an intertext of Shade’s “Pale Fire.” The resonances between the poems are particularly strong in the Tenth Elegy, which contains explicit references to both fountain and mountain: Rilke writes of the mountains of “Grief-Land” “where the fountain of joy / glistens in moonlight.” The typographical element at the heart of Shade’s poem implicitly cites Rilke’s figure of the southern sky “pure as on the palm of a sacred hand, the clearly shining M.” Finally, Hazel’s name is suggested by Rilke’s “bare hazels”: “But if the endlessly dead woke a symbol in us, see, they would point perhaps to the catkins, hanging from bare hazels, or they would intend the rain, falling on dark soil in Spring-time.”

19 Meyer 1988, p. 70.

20 Nonetheless Nabokov’s much-trumpeted claim neither that he spoke practically no German, despite having lived in Berlin for over a decade during the 1920s and 30s, is considered questionable by Nabokov scholars such as Michael Maar (2009). It is thus possible he did read the Benjamin text, either in its original or in its French translation by Maurice de Gandillac, but this appears in print in 1971, i.e. even later than the Zohn English version.

Here Benjamin similarly describes the work of translation in terms of literality. Arguing that translation concerns precisely the continuing survival of works of art — a work of art's *afterlife* — Benjamin begins by criticizing those who believe that the translator's role is to faithfully transmit the poem's content: a poem's "message," he says, is merely something inessential. Instead, he writes, the translator's true task is to express what he calls the "innermost relationship of languages" (Benjamin 1996, p. 255). But Benjamin cautions that this relationship or "kinship" does not necessarily involve something called "similarity." Rather, it consists in the way that, in all languages taken as a whole, "one and the same thing is meant" (Benjamin 1996, p. 257). This "one and the same thing," Benjamin explains, is a "suprahistorical" kinship, achievable "not by any single language but only by the totality of their intentions supplementing one another: the pure language [*Reine Sprache*]" (Benjamin 1996, p. 257).

As a case of linguistic "kinship," Shade's fountain/mountain convergence might initially advance an understanding of Benjamin's *Reine Sprache* as an original intention or Ur-meaning that succeeds in shining radiantly in and through the Babel-like fall into multiple tongues. Still, this is precisely what Paul de Man in his own critical commentary on Benjamin's text warns against, lambasting as the "naivete of the poet" the idea that the author "has to say something, that he has to convey a meaning which does not necessarily relate to language."²¹ De Man clarifies that for Benjamin, "Translation is a relation from language to language, not a relation to an extralinguistic meaning that could be copied, paraphrased, or imitated" (De Man 1985, p. 34). To gain a proper understanding of what Benjamin means by "kinship," we must look more carefully at his concept of the *Reine Sprache*.

Benjamin's peculiar phrase is usually translated as "pure language." This is how both Harry Zohn and Steven Rendell, for example, render the German original. But another possibility could be "pure speech" or even "sheer" speech. In this variation, Benjamin's concept *Reine Sprache* might suggest something along the lines of Lacan's concept of "full speech" (*parole pleine*), which Derrida (mis)characterized as the dream of a replete speech uncontaminated by the perpetual deferral, errancy and interruption of *différance*.²² In her suggestive reading of Benjamin, however, Carol Jacobs quickly puts an end to such poetic "temptations" which, as she points out, have already been dismissed in advance through Benjamin's reference to Mallarmé in this text. In the passage Benjamin cites from *Crise de vers*, we find the French poet insisting on the "plurality" of languages, maintaining that the "supreme language is lacking" ("*Les langues imparfaites en cela que plusieurs, manque la suprême*").

21 De Man 1985, p. 34.

22 Derrida 1996, n.p.

Venturing another translation of *Reine Sprache*, as "purely language," Jacobs proposes we understand it this time in the sense of "nothing but language."²³ Far from gesturing to a transcendent plenitude, *Reine Sprache* would mean precisely nothing but the "mutual differentiation" of various "manners of meaning."

For when Benjamin says that both "*Brot*" and "*pain*" mean "the same," this doesn't suggest that they mean the same *thing*, Jacobs cautions. What is the "same" is precisely what makes each of these words mean "nothing at all." What a literal or *Wörtlich* translation effects, in other words, is a rupture of the signifying articulation that links the signifier to its signified. This would ultimately render all meaning "extinct." Jacobs puts it in this way, "A teratogenesis instead of conventional, natural, re-production results in which the limbs of the progeny are dismembered, all syntax dismantled" (Jacobs 1975, p. 763). Jacobs first quotes Benjamin:

Translation [...] does not view itself as does poetry as in the inner forest of language, but rather as outside it, opposite it, and without entering, it calls into the original, into that single place where, in each case, the echo is able to give in its own language the resonance of a work in a foreign tongue. (Jacobs 1975, p. 763)

She then glosses Benjamin's text as follows: "Translation's call into the forest of language is not a repetition of the original but the awakening of an echo of itself. This signifies its disregard for coherence of content, for the sound that returns is its own tongue become foreign" (Jacobs 1975, p. 764).

Let us now step back a little from Jacobs' argument and ask what it means for one's own tongue to "become foreign"? Literally, of course, this is the condition of the exile, the figure of the American Nabokov composing in a foreign language, pilfering from his Russian *oeuvre* to produce English texts that are merely "pale fires" of their original "suns."²⁴ From a psychoanalytic point of view, too, the idea a certain foreignness of one's own tongue is not hard to reconcile with the Freudian unconscious, where a seemingly 'alien' agency wrests the intent from one's spoken words in order to tell a rather different story in the monstrous, misshaped form of the symptom that runs a similarly outsized, ballooning 'commentary' on

23 Jacobs 1975, p. 761.

24 Nabokov's English and Russian works are rife with internecine borrowings. For example, a thinly-disguised Kinbote appears in Nabokov's last and unfinished Russian language novel, *Solus Rex* as the king K, and in the short story, "Ultima Thule" as the "strange Swede or Dane — or Icelander," the "lanky, orange-tanned blond fellow with the eyelashes of an old horse" See *The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov* (1997). 'Sirin,' a traditional figure of a maiden-bird in Old Russian folklore with mythological origins in the Sunbird, was Nabokov's Russian pseudonym which he adopted as a young writer to distinguish his writings from those another VN, i.e. his father.

one's unconscious *jouissance*.

In my own mal-conning of foreign dictionaries in the meantime, I have discovered another possible translation for Benjamin's word "*Sprache*," this time as "style." "Pure style" or perhaps, in Katherine White's reported words, "overwhelming style" is Nabokov's most signature characteristic, as he confirms in the letter to White: "All my stories are webs of style [...] For me 'style' is matter" (Nabokov 1989, p. 115). So I am tempted to offer still another understanding the linguistic 'kinship' in play in the fountain/mountain typo, this time as a stylistic matter: *penmanship*. In his commentary on the word "misprint" in line 803, Kinbote remarks that future translators of Shade's poem will encounter difficulty in reproducing the precise effect of the crucial typographical error as the similarity of the two words is not replicated in other languages such as "French, German, Russian or Zemblan." Fountain/mountain is an error, that is, that would be specific to the English language. But in the same note, Kinbote then divagates on another case of a misprint, one which somehow does succeed in traversing both Russian and English languages intact. In an article in a Russian newspaper reporting on the Tsar's coronation, Kinbote recalls how the word *korona* (*crown*) was first misprinted as *vorona* (*crow*). This was then apologetically corrected only to suffer a second typographical error, namely, to *korova* (*cow*). "The artistic correlation between the crown-crow-cow series and the Russian korona-vorona-korova series" he writes, "is something that would have, I am sure, enraptured my poet. I have seen nothing like it on lexical playfields and the odds against the double coincidence defy computation" (Nabokov 1996, p. 627).

Well, let us first pause for a moment to take Kinbote at his word and try following the lines of translation for fountain and mountain. One would expect them to follow fairly straight paths from one language to another, say from Russian to German to French to English. But look at what happens: a quick perusal of an online dictionary gives us the following sequence for fountain: *фонтан*/*Brunnen* or *Quelle*/*fontaine*/*plume*/*pen*. And run through the same 'mechanical' translation process, mountain gives us *гора*/*Bergen*/*montagne*/*mont* as in Mont Blanc/*pen*. It is as though there is some unseen obstacle that causes the stream of all languages to circle back around as if swirling around an eddy. The impression is of some hidden object, some kind of 'dark mattter' or *black sun* silently exerting its "great attraction" on language, imperceptibly rerouting the chain of signifiers to a spectrographic scene of writing.

What kind of 'kinship' or perhaps better, 'kin-boat' would be registered in this translation process? It suggests a 'suprahistorical' relation that cannot be accounted for through linear logics such as poetic intention. This warping of the translation offers material evidence

of the theft of poetic desire by something else, something that topples all concept of sovereignty and which recognizes the jurisdiction of no linguistic laws. What name could we give to this usurper? In answer, we must look to the errant letters that initiated the sequence, F and M. We should not be surprised to find that they closely, if "grotesquely," mimic the sounds of Vladimir Nabokov's initials, V and N.²⁵ And with this as our clue, we should also not be surprised to find the same telltale letters haunting the other errant translation sequence Kinbote refers us to in his Commentary (koroNa-Vorona-koroVa). Surfacing with an almost clockwork regularity at every scene of writing, this spectral signature functions as the marker of another agent of literary production active in Nabokov's work: a transl(ite)ration that recognizes the borders of no national, linguistic or natural body politic. VN, penmarks of Nabokov's "pure *stylo*," are the calling cards of a consummate thief. For this "other" VN, all borders are equally permeable, including that separating life from death.

IV. "Each man apart, all single and alone/Yet an arch-villain keeps him company" — *Timon of Athens*

If, for Benjamin, a translation is part of the "afterlife" of a text, for Nabokov, it would be material proof that *death does not exist*. It is on this point of artistic doctrine that Benjamin and Nabokov now part ways. In *The Origins of German Tragic Drama*, Benjamin comments that "the only pleasure the melancholic permits himself, and it is a powerful one, is allegory."²⁶ What Benjamin means by the "allegorical way of seeing" involves a double process whereby the object is first plucked from its ordinary surroundings in discourse. In allegorical language, sound and sense become "emancipated" from their traditional meaning. "Any person, any object, any relationship," he explains, can mean absolutely anything else" (Benjamin 1977, p. 175). Drained of their living "essence," words become the shrunken, hollow forms that are the special preserve of the melancholic: "melancholy causes life to flow out of [the object]" (Benjamin 1977, p. 183). This depletion then sets off a train of reactions that pulverizes language down to a molecular level. Benjamin describes this as an "atomization" of language (Benjamin 1977, p. 208). Words present to the melancholic allegorist as fragments but at the point where the fragment breaks down to the letter, language acquires a new luminescence. As if burnished in the crucible of the melancholic reduction, the letter rises Phoenix-like from language's ashes: "In its individual parts fragmented language has ceased merely to serve the process of communication, and as a new-born object acquires a dignity equal to that of gods, rivers, virtues

25 Recall Kinbote's comment on the Mrs Z's "grotesque pronunciation" of, naturally, Mont Blanc (as "Mon Blon"). Nabokov 1996, p. 625.

26 Benjamin 1977, p. 185.

and similar natural forms which fuse into the allegorical” (Benjamin 1977, p. 208). It is a bizarre Carollian court that Benjamin excavates from the ruins wrought by the allegorical vision. An alphabet of rebellious letters whose phosphorescent light is the stolen reflection of no celestial sun rises up, jostling for the title of King:

in its fully developed, baroque, form, allegory brings with it its own court: the profusion of emblems is grouped around the figural centre, which is never absent from genuine allegories [...]. *The confused ‘court’* — the title of a Spanish *Trauerspiel* — could be adopted as the model of allegory. This court is subject to the law of ‘dispersal’ and ‘collectedness.’ Things are assembled according to their significance; indifference to their existence allowed them to be dispersed again. (Benjamin 1977, p. 188)

Taking center stage as a ‘person’ in its own right, the letter thus revolts against the word-image. Yet it is not so much in the service of “the personification of things,” as Benjamin clarifies. The real function of this allegorical prosopopeia is “to give the concrete a more imposing form by getting it up as a person” (Benjamin 1977, p. 187).

It is the “schema” that ultimately determines the character of allegory (Benjamin 1977, p. 184). To approach the world as a schema is to recognize all of nature as “writing, a kind of sign-language” (Benjamin 1977, p. 184). What text does this schematic writing formalize? In allegory,

the observer is confronted with the *facies hippocratica* of history as a petrified, primordial landscape. Everything about history that, from the very beginning, has been untimely, sorrowful, unsuccessful, is expressed in a face — or rather in a death’s head. (Benjamin 1977, p. 166)

A deathly prosopopeia would be at “the heart of the allegorical way of seeing, of the baroque, secular explanation of history as the Passion of the world.” “Its importance,” Benjamin contends, “resides solely in the the stations of its decline. The greater the significance, the greater the subjection to death, because death digs most deeply the jagged line of demarcation between physical nature and significance” (Benjamin 1977, p. 166).

But now we are light years away from Nabokov as, in fact, we are also from Benjamin himself in his later essay, “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire.”²⁷ In *The Origin of German Trauerspiel*, Benjamin could still read in the “death-signs” of the baroque an allegory of the resurrection of the world. In his 1939 essay on Baudelaire, however, he proposes a very different figure, one that overleaps the wish for the “completed mourning”

27 Benjamin 2003.

which Julia Kristeva in her own treatise on melancholia, *Black Sun*, sagaciously pinpoints as the melancholic theoretician’s secret desire.²⁸ Where, in 1925, Benjamin described the allegorical dialectic as executing a sudden “about-turn,” enabling it to re-discover itself “not playfully in the earthly world of things, but seriously under the eyes of heaven,” his conclusion is that allegories “fill out and deny the void in which they are represented” (Benjamin 1977, p. 232-3). Yet by the time he writes his essay on Baudelaire, Benjamin has developed another figure for melancholic representation or “spleen” in the form of eyes that have “lost the ability to look” (Benjamin 2003, p. 339).

With this figure of the unseeing gaze (whose own literary genealogy would see us Nabokovianly ping-ponging back and forth between Baudelaire’s *prose* windows and Mallarmé’s *poetic* windowpane), Benjamin is referring to the uncanny effect produced by de-auratic art. In the photograph or cinematic image, we do not have the sense of the object returning our gaze. Benjamin explains, “What was inevitably felt to be inhuman — one might even say deadly — in daguerreotypy was the (prolonged) looking into the camera, since the camera records out likeness without returning our gaze” (Benjamin 2003, p. 338). De-auratic art is thus defined by the failure of the personification or prosopopeia that previously held the melancholic-allegorical universe in place. If, previously, the allegorical vision of nature elicited only a message of death, this death nevertheless took place under the all-seeing “eyes of heaven.” But in Baudelaire’s poems, Benjamin observes a “mirrorlike blankness” in the eyes of the loved one. This “remoteness” is paradoxically attributed to the fact that “such eyes know nothing of distance” (Benjamin 2003 p. 340). There is a too-closeness about them that, like the cinematic image or the photograph, prevents the transubstantiating act of seeing ourselves reflected in the other and in nature which depends on the “magic of distance” (Benjamin 2003, p. 341) to come to pass.

When Nabokov, in *Pale Fire*’s opening lines, dashes his poet against the Mallarméan windowpane’s promise of an “azure” realm of art beyond time, his artist, misperceiving the glass’s transparency, smacks up against the hard surface of representation:

I was the shadow of the waxwing slain
By the false azure in the windowpane;
I was the smudge of ashen fluff — and I
Lived on, flew on, in the reflected sky.

Yet although art’s “magic of distance” is violently unmasked as a brutal con, in his collision with language’s impenetrable surface the Nabokovian

28 “To posit the existence of a primal object, or even of a Thing, which is to be conveyed through and beyond a completed mourning — isn’t that the fantasy of a melancholy theoretician.” Kristeva 1992, p. 66.

artist does not die but rather splits in two:

And from the inside, too, I'd duplicate
Myself, my lamp, an apple on a plate:

The encounter with language's materiality does not kill its object as Maurice Blanchot imagined, but rather initiates an uncontainable, self-perpetuating 'cinematic' self-duplication on *this* side of the representational divide that will take in, retake and displace the entire field of aesthetic representation as privileged site of mourning for lost presence.

If cinema in Benjamin's conceptualization pares the image away from its aura, Nabokov's cinematic style de-auraticizes the literary word. In the new proximity that results from this loss of the word's auratic depth Nabokov obtains a 'mechanical' form of literary reproduction whose implications are, literally, immortal. For with each splitting of the poetic 'intention' as it bumps up against the hard surface of language comes an irrepressible 'stickiness' that attaches itself to each of the internally duplicating "new-born" objects (Benjamin 1977, p. 208) of representation, ensuring that they are always encumbered by an excess. This little smudge of "ashen fluff" — or, indeed, unshakable, unbearable, halitoxic "friend" — is the material witness to our original "shock experience" ("*Chockerlebnis*," Benjamin 2003, p. 343) that is one's encounter with language "as such." Jacques Lacan of course has a name for this pesky "friend" who infests every one of our mourning songs with his own uncanny message of 'life.' Lacan calls him the lamella, the indestructible drive that survives "any division, any scissiparous intervention."²⁹ Every melancholic reduction of language takes us into the realm of this pure propulsive force, what Mladen Dolar calls "pure life in the loop of death,"³⁰ and which Cholodenko — in his own immortal words — calls "hyperanimated, hyperanimatic, hyper*lifedeath*: at once a life more death than death, more dead than dead, and a death more life than life, more alive than alive."³¹

Stripped of the necessary "magic of distance" that generates art's illusion of depth and perspective, Nabokov's "pure style" thus discloses art's true function, not as window but as *screen*. Onto its shimmering surface are projected the little letters that the melancholic's blank gaze reveals as the fundamental elements of our world. But if for the Benjaminian allegorist these letters point relentlessly towards death, for Nabokov — although he would never dream of phrasing it in the manner of

29 Lacan 1998, p. 197.

30 Dolar 2005, p. 159.

31 Cholodenko 2009, n.p.

the "Viennese quack"³² — these little letters have always pulsed with the gift of an absolute generosity without return, the pure life instinct which is another name for the *death drive*.

V. "I am sick of that grief too, as I understand how all things go." — *Timon of Athens*

Wilson had complained about Nabokov's prosaic "flattening" of Pushkin's poetic language not realizing that it is precisely this compression in fact that allows the "full play" of the prose writer's literary powers. The "full" or extended play would be the insufflation of words as they cartwheel in slow motion around their own axes, presenting at each face the flatness of a two-dimensional plane but which, when strung together, effect the appearance of life and movement. Nabokov's name for this 'animating' play of language is word golf. If one consults this term in *Pale Fire*, one finds the Index instructing us, after noting Shade's "predilection for it," to "see Lass." Flipping back through the Index to Lass, we find the instruction "see Mass." Under Mass come the words "Mass, Mars, Mare" and the instruction to "see Male." Under "Male" the reader is referred again to the beginning: "see Word golf." Like pebbles skimming across a pond, words spin and mutate by degrees (Jack Degree we recall is one of the assassin Jakob Gradus's aliases). What if, Nabokov asks, the dimensions of "reality" were also somehow faceted in this way, and that "live" and "kill" — like "male" and "lass" — were simply steps or "degrees" in an ontological version of the game of word golf? What if, that is, what we perceive as "death" is simply an error in perception, an illusion produced by our desire to see *through* the surfaces of representation to an Other side of the windowpane? All that there is lies on *this* side of representation, Nabokov the materialist insists, but representation is multi-faceted; the limit we encounter as "death" may just be a step in a mechanical rotation or "quarter turn" in the universe of discourse. Here the best figure for the melancholic as the one who is "past experiencing" is not the raging man but one who suffers from "love's melancholy" - the form of melancholy conspicuously absent from *Timon of Athens* but whose "miseries" are affectionately documented by Burton. The melancholic's unshakable love for the lost object comes fully into force as our best tip-off that such a turn has taken place: "Love is a sign that one is changing discourses."³³

Malallegory. Lamellancholia. It would be a question of reading letters again.

32 Nabokov's satirical name for Freud, whom he also at times refers to as "Sigismond Lejoyeux" (*Speak, Memory*), "Dr. Sig Heiler," "Herr Doktor Sig," "Dr. Froit of Signy-Mondieu-Mondieu (*Ada*)," "Dr Bonomini" ("Ultima Thule"), "the Viennese medicine man" (*Lolita*). See Daniel Rancour-Laferrrie 1989, p. 15.

33 Lacan 1999, p. 16.

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Issue 2

Melancholegalism: Black Letter Theory and the Temporality of Law

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I won't go about to argue the point with you, — 'tis so, — and I am persuaded of it, madam, as much as can be, "That both man and woman bear pain or sorrow, (and, for aught I know, pleasure too) best in a horizontal position."¹

For the sake of authenticity, as a matter of jurisprudential tone, in the interests of style, there should unquestionably be a certain exhibition of melancholy in the exposure and analysis of this dark humour as an effect of law. As that greatest of authorities, Democritus Junior, *fons et origo*, as lawyers say, of any discussion of the saturnine humor, puts it early in his treatise, "I writ of melancholy, by being busy to avoid melancholy."² He adds, shortly after this touching *confessio infirmitatis*, an elaboration of the point by way of a cautionary reference to Lucian: "To this end I writ, like them that recite to trees, and declaim to pillars, for want of auditors." Knowledge is nothing if not proclaimed and, while the baroque Burton acknowledges his "Mistress Melancholy, my Egeria, or my Evil Genius," he persists in his relentless outpouring precisely so that being schooled in woe he can offer succour to the woeful.³ Needless to say, high on the list of those whom Junior deems in need of treatment for their melancholic affects and effects, are those atrabilious agalasts, those cavillers and casuists, the devious and diffuse rabble of early modern common lawyers.

It is not clear, of course, that a profession that travels under the sign of Saturn can be cured of its principal *insignum* and symptom, its melancholegalism, without ceasing to belong to the guild, without leaving the very discipline that has caused the commonwealth to suffer. Yet a starting point is necessary and an historical awareness of issues of reception and transmission, a location of the question in its aesthetic, medicinal and legal aspects requires a certain acknowledgement of the classical character of the question of humors and the turning point, the reorientation that occurs in the long seventeenth century.

Burton is the preferred point of embarkation, as representing the zenith of the late Renaissance reception of theological treatises on the necessity of downcast eyes, of reverence and solemnity, quietness and somber dress within the political theology of everyday life.⁴ The Christian tradition, that of the two Romes, those of the Papacy and legal imperium, carried with it a set of irenic practices reflective both of sobriety and

1 Sterne 2003, p. 194.

2 Burton 1927, p. 16.

3 Burton 1927, p. 17.

4 The most pointed example of juridical enchiridion to this effect is Fulbeck 1599. There is also a significant tradition of works both theological and medical on curing melancholy, long preceding the eminent Burton. Thus, for example, Bright 1586; or Rowlands 1607. In a more literary and theatrical vein, there is also, plucked from amongst numerous works and plays on erotic melancholy, Greene, 1584.

antipathy to spectacle and play.⁵ As the Psalm has it, *qui seminant in lacrimis in exultatione metent* — they that sow in tears shall reap in joy.⁶ The dawn of modernity, and reason's attacks on emotion, came in the form of a suppression of the discourse of moods, of levity, hilarity and dance, as the practices that dissipated the vapors of melancholy and the irrational and emotive singularities that it promoted. Melancholia was thrust into a domain prior to thought, alternately a religious state and an anomic excess, an enthusiasm and wit that exceeded both reason and law. As befits the worm of knowing, the tenebrous and umbrageous instance of invention, the more than thought, the melancholic logic and dark garb of the new juridico-political realm inhabits a domain of the repressed, of the said of the unsaid that marks the opaque continent of the unconscious.⁷ It is there, in what legal culture ignores, in what reason eschews, that the force of melancholy lives on.

Common law, the *mos britannicus*, was born of the reception of Roman law and Christian faith and so it is hardly surprising that it shares the themes of the unhappy consciousness of sin and the melancholic demeanor and environment of the profession. Common law will be my example, but, as its Latin nomination implies, it belongs to the *mores* and patterns of a humanistic tradition and European erudition that time and illiteracy cannot wholly erase. Melancholegalism refers initially, but things of course change, to a certain *déformation professionnelle*, an inexorable condition of practitioners, a degree of institutional capture that cannot be escaped but may on occasion be adapted to more or less well. The reverend Burton, *musarum sacerdos*, to stay with our example, appears to have learned from Democritus and come to enjoy his symptoms. He never stopped expanding and revising the treatise. He continued 'to writ' presumably because he had not entirely escaped his dark woe, his evil shadow, his tenebrous condition, and yet he can also laugh at times in the company of satirists:

I rub on in a strictly private life; as I have still lived, so I now continue, as I was from the first, left to a solitary life, and mine own domestic discontents: saving that sometimes, not to tell a lie, as Diogenes went into the city, and Democritus to the haven, to see fashions, I did for my recreation now and then walk abroad, look into the world, and could not choose but make some little observation... I did sometimes laugh and scoff... and satirically tax... lament...

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5 Stillingfleet 1660 devotes much energy and numerous cautions — cautions — to *gravitas*, seriousness of intention and deportment, the avoidance of play and excess within the restored polity. For elaboration of this theme, see Goodrich 2006.

6 *Psalm* 125:5.

7 This theme underpins the historical epistemology of law that is put forward in Edelman 2007.

sometimes again I was bitterly mirthful, and then again burning with rage.⁸

When it comes to jurists, to melancholegalism, the hint of rubbing along in private, of solitude, of declamations to empty auditoria, captures a pertinent sense of isolation, of disciplinary confinement, of institutional segregation and linguistic idiosyncrasy that mark much of the saturnine humour of law. The iconologist Cesar Ripa, whose work was very much contemporary with the learned Burton's, offers an intriguing and significantly schizoid emblem of melancholia. It bears description (Figure 1).



Fig. 1

A robed and swarthy, dark-skinned male stands with his left foot slightly raised and resting on a square stone. In his right hand he holds an open book, in his left a purse tied shut. The very emblem of *melancholicus de melancholia adusta calida*, which is to say of the dark and scorched figure of a generalized humour. A bandage or gag is looped around his head and covers his mouth, while atop his pate sits a solitary bird — *un passereau solitaire* — one which eschews the company of the flock, and like the poet Horace prefers loneliness to the hubbub of the court.⁹ The figure of the melancholic is that of an escaping or at least an ambivalently split lawyer. Melancholegalism, a first hypothesis, expresses the desire and the impossibility of escaping law, the simultaneous dash for the exit and the locked door. Take each element of this Riparian emblem, this lit-toral lawyer in its serial turn.

The stone represents the seat and sedimentation of legality, the immovable character of law as architectonic and structure, as monumental, permanent and immovable. It is equally a pedestal, the stand on which *Justitia* would usually be portrayed, but here the figure is distinctly in a quandary, half on the stone, half off, neither climbing up nor stepping down. The scholar, the learned lawyer, the *iuris peritus* or jurist, is pulled in two directions at once, is neither on nor off but between and astride, condemned in this depiction to being neither entirely a scholar nor wholly

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8 Burton 1927, p. 15.

9 Ripa 1677, II.54. This edition, one of many editions and translations of the 1593 Italian publication, first published with woodcuts in 1603, is translated and edited by the lawyer and emblemist Jean Baudoin.

a practitioner. The open book is code, *lex legum*, law of laws and signals at the very least the textual tradition, *ratio scripta*, the many years of arduous and sedentary study — *multorum annus opus* — the deeply embedded humanism that leads in the words of the sages of common law to the requisite appreciation of our most valuable inheritance, the tradition, the priority and antiquity of our indigenous and best of all laws, *commune ley*. This is the mark of the jurist, the scholar of law, the disciplinary figure in a profession without discipline, lacking then and now any distinctive method, “an auncient palace” that, however substantial, “is yet but darke and melancholy” in the words of one of Ripa’s and Burton’s contemporaries.¹⁰ And thus what the right hand proffers in terms of knowledge and learning, the left hand takes in the form of the closed purse, the trove of fees and costs that lawyers accrue during their lengthy litigations. Next, penultimate symbol, the best for second to last, is the blindfold (*bandelette*) that has rather humourously slipped from the eyes to the mouth. It is a sign of taciturnity, the mark of an orator who will only speak for money, whose mouth is closed until gold has changed hands. It is a satirical symbol shared with other legal emblematisers, but note also that it is a sign of subjection, of being bound and silenced, and in one etymology which derives *fascia* from *fascinum*, it is a mark of enslavement, of being in thrall to a species of sorcery and bewitchment, generated not least by the dark art of law.

The Riparian icon shares with Burton’s textual depiction a somewhat covert or archaeological reference to the melancholy generated by law. For the author of the *Anatomie*, the textual connection resides both in the attribution of most civic and social melancholia to the proliferation of lawyers, and also in the expression of malaise to be found in the references to disputes, quarrelling, the factious and fractious behavior that legalism prompts and promotes. In Ripa’s woodcut the archaeology is symbolically heavier but nonetheless requires a degree of decryption because of the subtle and subversive rearrangement of the elements, of the pedestal, the robe, the blindfold, the book and the purse to indicate an unhappy because disordered figure of *prudens*, of the scholar lawyer, the jurisconsult, the legal casuist who, in Nietzsche’s terms, is already a dusty and shadowy figure, the son of a filing clerk, *melancholicus de melancholia adusta calida*, to use the proper phrase.¹¹ Also concealed in this solitary and swarthy figure is the hint of a reference to dark arts, to the Druidic rites of the early common lawyers, the robes and sacrifices of an esoteric governance which has its earliest roots, its imagined origins, *illud tempus*, in the mythical time of divinity and nature, symbolized by the bird that sits atop the head and crowns the totality. The image of the

10 Cowell 1607, p. 3.

11 I am borrowing here from the wonderful Klibansky, Panofsky and Saxl 1979, p. 71, meaning a warm and affected melancholic.

solitary avian thus also has a critical edge, as the representation of an idea of solitude, of disciplinary isolation, of lonely imbrication in the dark and atemporal space, the tenebrous and timeless nocturne of an archaic past, an antiquity that the sages were wont to term ‘out of mind’ or ‘beyond memory’.

With the immediate roots and incidents of melancholegalism adumbrated and shared, I will follow the indications of Ripa’s emblem and trace a double reading, a dualist apprehension of this split persona. It is in part a question of unhappy consciousness, of the awareness of an outside while being locked inside the institution. Melancholia is a mild psychosis, although perhaps not so innocent amongst bellowing lawyers, but the question to be addressed is that of the specifically juridical in melancholegalism. The melancholic cannot give up the object of their love, he or she clings to the affective, to the sources of their jurisdiction, the symbols of a legitimacy that she cannot quite believe. That said, the study of melancholegalism has to begin paradoxically with the external elements of desire forgone but never entirely abandoned, the legitimacy and authority of a jurisdiction which the scholar jurists (*prudentes*) remain in equal measure bound to and dissatisfied with. This leads to a disciplinary listlessness, to the *tristesse* of an unrealized or literally courtly love, a thwarted liturgical desire. It is here, in the second, textualist imaginary of law, in the plethora and plenitude of the unread and unseen that a disagreeable solitude manifests itself in the melancholia of the jurist who cannot let go of the unrealized ideal of an outside of the discipline, a beyond of the institution. Here, and we can borrow momentarily from Benjamin’s notion of the melancholy leftist, the humanist, the critical legal scholar must face, must come to terms with the experience of their privilege at the same time as they admit their lack of power.¹²

The obscure object of the lawyer’s desire

What does the lawyer love? What lies at the root of their sorrow, in the tendrils of their *nostos*? It is a question first of the aftermath of a certain lust, a devouring of law, of the indigestion occasioned by the over rapid consumption of an ill-prepared amalgam of norms. Consider in this regard a passage I am fond of from the Renaissance antiquary and lawyer of both laws, William Fulbeck, in his conference of diverse laws:

And I have had a verie great desire to have some understanding of Lawe, because I would not swim against the streame, nor be unlike unto my neighbours, who are so full of Law-points, that when they sweat, it is nothing but Law; when they neese [sneeze] it is perfitte law. The booke of Littletons tenures is there breakfast, their dinner, their boier, their supper, and there rere-banquet ... the booke of

12 Benjamin 1999, p. 423.

the Groundes of the Law is his portesse, and readie at his girdle to confute you.¹³

Here the brave *magnifico* of the local law is stuffed with rules and from his girdle hangs their little cognized and barely understood, paradoxically uncoded proof in breviary as a substitute for writing as *ratio scripta*, as codex and pandect, as commandment, tablet and law.

William Fulbeck is unhappy because of the lack of learning exhibited by undisciplined common lawyers. He shares or indeed predicts John Cowell's lament as to the 'auncient palace', the collection of particulars that is lacking all "comfortable lights" of knowledge. The conference that he suggests with the other laws, canon and civil, is precisely to introduce method, and along with it continental humanism, the scholarship that accompanies the universal law, into the Inns of Court. He craves black letters, here meaning *lex scripta*, the great *Corpus iuris civilis* and its sibling *canonici*, and their greater tradition of the glossators, commentators and humanists. Specifically, he accuses his unlearned contemporaries of lacking both the protocols of a discipline and the normative structure of rules. The common lawyers are gluttons, they are endlessly consuming law, tirelessly eating cases, singularities, particular instances and occasions of dispute and judgment, but never rising to the level of *universalia*: "which default is for want of rules".¹⁴ Method requires a trajectory from the universal to the singular, from norm to instance — *progreduendum ab universalibus ad singularia*.¹⁵ If the cure is evident, the ailment is somewhat less obvious. The lawyers are stuffed with law, they are eating it all day, four meals *per diem*, a gluttony of ill masticated words and phrases. It is necessary to turn to the matter of digestion.

For all their talk of the great inheritance of common law, an expression, incidentally, taken from Cicero, the Anglican sages had no Code, *Corpus*, or complete collection of laws. They lacked a Justinian, and had no *Pandectae* nor could they claim that all their laws were wholly digested — *totius omnium digestorum... iuris*, as the great work of Tribonian announces before it even starts. There is a lack, an absence of order, a paucity of learning that leaves the common lawyer in an apologetic and uncertain frame. For all their eating of cases, maxims and rules, the common lawyers have acquired no Justinian, no *corpus iuris* of all their laws, no pandect or encyclopedia and every time their eyes pass over the Latin maxims and law French *termes del ley* they are reminded of what they do not have, namely the continental law, the classical tradition, the Trinitarian structure of legality that derives ultimately from *Gaius noster* and the

13 Fulbeck 1602, fol. B2

14 Fulbeck 1829, pp. 223-24.

15 Fulbeck 1829, p. 223.

first of the great Latin institutes. There is a deficit of legitimacy, a questionable disciplinary authority, an aura of inauthenticity most often manifest in the exaggeration of the qualities and distinctiveness of common law, its greater antiquity, its peculiar excellence, its indigenous perfections.

Common lawyers, though they are hardly alone in this, have their costumes and rites, rods of office, benches, thrones and portraiture to show their regal authority. Less remarked, and in the case of common lawyers less visible, and this is the issue, there are also their collections, their libraries, their books. The metaphor of eating the law, of a body of norms, a *corpus iuris* internal to the subject, transmitted from exterior to interior, like food, and *Digested* for all to see, lies at the root of the legal tradition and is well expounded by Legendre in a short essay on collections and collectors. The purpose of the *Digest*, of this massive effort of collecting the laws, of compiling all of the rules, is precisely to forge an identity, to fashion a unity out of the dispersal and decay, the decomposition and desuetude that affects all human endeavor and all administration. The root of *digestus* is the verb *digero*, signifying not simply to take in, but more strongly to force apart, to separate, to divide and hence the strange elective affinity between collecting and identity, between plurality and singularity. To collect is a facet and function of power and whatever its disparate forms, the different modes of collecting all share a theme: "that of *authentically* being in the service of a ritual, a celebration which harbours, as the antiquated catholic vocabulary puts it, a 'collect', which is to say a prayer."¹⁶ The identity of the collector is taken over by that of the collection, he is possessed. The drama of the fetishized tomes and texts takes the form of the *collecta* and *rogationes*, the prayer and the bidings that it transmits *ad collectam*, to the community.

When it comes to law, the collection belongs primarily to the eras of legislation, to the code and the sovereign. It is accompanied by a degree of animism in that the purpose of collecting is to unify the entirety of knowledge and then to animate it, to make a *corpus* or body out of it. The collect, the prayer of the collector, is to be monarch, to become sovereign through being possessed by, and the incarnation of the laws that they have digested. That is the path of the law within the Western tradition, of the *mos italicus* and its tributaries. The common lawyers are not simply not immune to this fetish, they suffer more by having less. Their *corpus* envy is well expressed by Francis Bacon, himself a great collector throughout his checkered career, who announces that "[Justinian] for a monument and honour of his government [revised] the Romane lawes from infinite volumes ... into one competent and uniforme corps of law, of which matter himselfe doth speake gloriously, and yet aptly calling of it

16 Legendre 2006, p. 75.

proprium et sanctissimum templum iustitiæ consecratum."¹⁷ The greater the collection, the greater the power. The principle is one that Legendre expatiates upon in the dual terms of theatre and phantasm. The collection conceals and shelters the abstract objects of fetishization to the end of transmitting two key invocations. The first dogma transmitted by the collection is a visible manifestation of the phantasm of totality, and through this representation of all of the law, *omnia in corpore iuris inveniuntur*, the theatrical presence of this total text projects the figure of the sovereign — the Master, the lawgiver — into play. *Lex animata*, as Bacon puts it in the preface to his collection of legal maxims, is *lex loquens*, a walking, talking, figure of absolute law, the collector as an ambulant *corpus iuris*.¹⁸

Once the collection is established, the sovereign present and spectacular, the game of law, the play of interpretations, of gloss and commentary, *brocardica* and biting, can begin. *Prudentes sicut serpentes* — wise as snakes. The social hermeneutic of interpretation, of relaying the text, the task of the exegete, that of crawling along, of travelling without legs, has begun. The key point is that the exegete is possessed by the textual collection, by an anterior interiority, a reference back to an invisible source. The second function of the collection is thus that of instituting a logic of authority, the trail of ink, the black letters that mark the path from darkness to text, from sovereign to delegate, from interior to exterior. It is authority that is signaled, the incontestable because prior and greater source of the totality that exegetes, [*iuris*] *prudentes*, have simply to render, or indeed to excrete. The fiction of the source and totality of law is to be introduced into the social through the dogmatic application of its parts and more obscurely through love of the collection, desire for the text and all that it represents, all that it can do for the serpent, the creeping being, the exegete.

It is tempting to conclude that the subjection of the legal servant to sovereign ruler, of the exegete to the text, such being the form that the juristic fetish takes, is the source of *melancholia juridica*. Melancholegalism would here simply be the expression of possession or more precisely of being possessed by what you cannot have. Sir Edward Coke, the exegete of Littleton, "our English Justinian", says as much in remarking *non verba sed veritas est amanda* — it is not the words but the truth that is to be loved. The black letters, the emanations from darkness, the expostulates of the shadow realm, of the invisible and dead sources of legality are but the vehicle of the *animus* that Coke seeks, through staring long and hard enough at Littleton's tomb and tome, to embody and to incorporate, to take it on as law. It is the territory of the night watch, or in the words of another great English institutist, who incidentally correctly calls Coke a

17 Bacon 1630, n.p. 'Epistle Dedicatory'.
18 Bacon 1630, n.p. 'Epistle Dedicatory'. For more on that theme, see my Goodrich 2013, p. 498.

commentator rather than an institutional author, *vix Viginti Annorum Lucubrationis Acquiratur* — it is acquired through twenty hard years of lucubration.¹⁹ The path to legal knowledge, the self-same Wood remarks "is dark and rugged".²⁰ The position of *Magister ars iuris* is not easily acquired nor necessarily happily exercised, if the practice, as Legendre elaborates it, is that of relaying the phantasm of an absolute power, that of implementing a mystical theology, the fetish object of the collection, in the quotidian rites of juristic practice. The artist or artisan of law inhabits "the vertigo of a floating world" and, more to the point, experiences "the inexplicable sorrow of existing to bring the work to life, while inhabiting its secret".²¹ The jurist is in that sense a hidden figure, a dweller in the shadows, an epigone, and, once aware of that subordination, must come to feel a certain loss of freedom.

The common lawyers, however, were not such good collectors. They did not have, nor did they inherit either the *corpus iuris civilis* or the *corpus iuris canonici*, they lacked a Justinian, a Gratian, even if those were indubitably their models and *exempla*. Their melancholia is thus a sorrow for what they never had, for what they did not lose but could not make, for collections that belong to others. Theirs is in that sense an inauthentic love, an unreciprocated desire, a lust for a lost object that was never theirs. One says it again: *Corpus* envy. A brief example, contemporary with Wood's *Institutes*, can be taken from the other law, from a complicated jurisdiction internal to common law, that of English canon law as codified in Edmund Gibson's *Codex juris ecclesiastici Anglicani* of 1713. The title is *Codex*, after that part of Justinian's *Corpus iuris* that named the Imperial Edicts "*since the greater part of the Written Laws which compose this Body (tho' framed and assented to by the other Branches of the Civil and Ecclesiastical legislatures) did yet receive their sanction and final authority from the Prince.*"²² To this, the learned Bishop Gibson adds that he has supplemented the black letters of the Prince's dictate with the rules of Common and Canon law decisions, and had these required a separate title, "*they might properly enough, and by a like parity of Reason, have been called a Digest of Ecclesiastical Laws.*" His collection too is thus also full of gloss and commentary, and while he notes that "they are to be reduced into one Body without Addition or Diminution", he also notes that "*we must be content to digest them into the best Form they will bend to.*"²³

The collector, Gibson, is the amanuensis of the *Codex*, the living

19 Wood 1724, v.
20 Wood 1724, iv.
21 Legendre 2006, p. 81.
22 Gibson 1713, p. viii.
23 Gibson 1713, vii.

emblem and relay of the author of the laws, the Prince, and through him, *Pater omnipotens*, the mythic figure of the father who writes all. The black letters, the laws, are precious because it is he who sent them. It is for that reason that they must be collected, preserved, archived, commented and, as Foucault observed, commented again, and yet remain to be commented. They belong to a space of repetition, to the permanence of the black letter, the perdurance of law from which Gibson gains his identity and cause. The *Codex* is the “Body” of all the laws and their pertinent digestive tracts. Gibson is quite emphatic: everything must be included. Love of law requires going to the “Foundation in all Cases” which alone “enables us to come to a Full and Final determination of our selves”.²⁴ It is we who are in the end inscribed, and we who bear the law in our interior — variously termed the heart, the chest, the digestion, the body. But consider that what is loved is “the Foundation in all cases”. It is the “Originals” that must be returned to and relayed, because these precisely transcend and are “too great a Privilege for any private Person whatever”.²⁵ Thus by proximity to and transmission of the ‘originals’, through love and relay of foundations, the collector ascends, exceeds, and escapes the limitations of that merely private person and through association becomes a part of that superillustrious and blindingly powerful fetish figure, *pater legum*. The compiler of the *Code* becomes through this body, through these black letters, himself a minor monarch, a sovereign of sorts, *in imitatio imperii*.

The sacred and laws have historically always been such. Whether the jurisdiction is spiritual or temporal makes no difference, for it is precisely that which escapes the private, which is no more one but rather belongs to, and exists with the totality, be it conceived as community or divinity. In Gibson’s case this conjunction effectuated by the collection is dramatized legally in the insistence upon originals and foundations. Here the *Codex* adopts an unusual and strikingly indicative strategy of reproducing all the laws quite literally: “Not only, such Laws as are now in force, but such also as are Repealed or Obsolete”.²⁶ This admirably impractical undertaking is in fact no more than the expression of belief in the lineage of law, in its force and power — *vis et potestatem* — to which we must hold, the classical authors tell us, much more closely than to the *ipsis-sima verba*, the black letters themselves. They are the bearers of a truth that exceeds mere signs. That the lawyers cannot let go of any laws would seem to be the implication and Gibson indeed follows this to its logical conclusion in determining that knowledge of law is never complete until the *iuris peritus* is in command of the originals and foundations, “till he is

24 Gibson 1713, vi.

25 Gibson 1713, vii.

26 Gibson 1713, v.

sure he has before him all the Light that the Constitution affords.”²⁷

The heliotropic metaphor and the reference to the Constitution is significant. The *Codex* is being propelled into a jurisdiction that has no written constitution and in which much of the purpose of the Collection, of the ‘collect’, is to contravert and challenge the common lawyer’s refusal to acknowledge the rules of canon law and the priority and antiquity of ecclesiastical well-being. The old law has a certain priority and it always threatens to return, to reform the subsequent errors of common lawyers and to revert to a past that is closer to the infancy and indeed the birth of law and so closer to the original and foundation, *nuda veritas*, the untempered truth. Thus “it may be no improper Remedy, to resume and revive those, which are Repealed or Obsolete”, and to this can be added the benefit of simplifying and reducing the number of laws and hence limiting the “Evil” of multiplying new laws which add impertinent novelty as well as complexity and secular intention to the pristine and better forms. The “former Foundations” may well most effectually “answer the Ends of Religion”. The black letter never dies for the simple reason that it is but a glimpse of the shadow, the darkness from which it emerged, or to borrow from Agamben on Bartleby: “The ink, the glimpse of shadow with which the pen writes, is thought itself”.²⁸

The paradox of collecting, as Gibson evidenced, is that it is an impossible task. It is a desire precisely for what cannot be recovered, for the unlimited fetish object, the phantasm of monarchy and mastery, paternity and law, which depends upon nothing so much as tenebrous indefinition, upon escaping enclosure and collection alike. Law has to institute an enigma as its source, a fetish, an image that will propel the enthusiasm of the collector and whose dramas can play out upon the social stage as a moralizing distraction from the desire for power and the draught of shadows, the ‘wormsign’ that marks the grimoire of the juridical collector.²⁹ Here then is the paradox of melancholegalism, that of desiring to be a lawgiver, to make laws, to be a master, in a discipline whose black letters confine the jurist to the role of the scribe, the chirographer and copyist of what has been handed down. Law then is the experience of limits in the face of the unlimited, the incorporation of time in the face of the timeless. This means, for the humanist lawyer, for the genuine melancholegalist, not a cry against the dark, which is the collector’s futile gamble, but rather an embracing of the decomposition of time and the ennui of knowing too much.

27 Gibson 1713, vi.

28 Agamben 1999, p. 243. The Italian is *la goccia di tenebra*. I have irresponsibly altered the translation.

29 Masciandro, 2014, p. 81. A grimoire is a textbook on magic and this is perhaps the moment to salute the opus *Melancolology* and confess the blatant translation and traducing of my title and theme.

Saturn was the lord of my geniture

The wounds of the jurist are somewhat unnumbered but the layers of their loss can be untethered. Following the author of the *Codex*, we can begin with the loss of the repealed and obsolete, the fading of the antique, the prior and better, in the face of the incursions of secular law and the depredations of man made jurisprudence. *Novum omne cave*, as the emblematicists say.³⁰ We can find the same in others, before and contemporary with Gibson, in Fortescue, Fraunce, Coke, Selden, Spellman, Davies, all of whom viewed modern lawyers as an immoderate and unlearned crew — *rabulae forenses*.³¹ Erasmus is happy to reiterate and expand on Burton's lengthy lucubrations on the misfortunes brought about by law, and in a discussion of friendship, the amicability of the educated, deplores the loss of the skills of the ancient jurists: "The purity and majesty of the Latin language is revealed by the very fragments that a boastful Justinian thrust upon us instead of complete works, though even they are full of the most unbelievable textual errors."³² The collector, in other words, also introduces error and in their passion to possess they excise, traduce, mangle and mislay. The French humanist Hotman states it best in castigating the interpolations of the classical law that Justinian's compiler, Tribonian had introduced into his barbarous extracts from the earlier texts. The collector substituted his own "fables and reveries", the phantasms and false enthusiasms of the pseudo legislator for the black letters, or better the (to him) invisible truths of history, the prior and older law.

Human error, the fallibility of lawyers, the first and best-recognized woe of melancholegalism, is that of time and the sorrow-laden *chronographia* of juridism.³³ Saturn, in Greek *Chronos*, is the sign that in the history of legal myths watches over the jurist because time is the originary law. The figure of Saturn, the father of Jupiter, can form a starting point for the temporality of loss. Portrayed as an old male figure, he is shown in a ragged robe, a scythe in one hand, a serpent in the other and sometimes with his legs bound with yarn. The depictions vary although the elements are consistent if not currently so well known. The tattered robe indicates the blandishments of time: age wears out and consumes the cloth and it

30 The motto, beware all novelty, comes from Johannes de Solorzano, *Emblemata regio politica incenturiam unam redacta* (1653), p. 416.

31 The best lines come from Fraunce 1588, vii: "you would love the law but *sine rivali*; you would reign, but alone, *hinc illae lachrymae*". For discussion, see Goodrich 1990, Ch.2: 'A Short History of Failure: Law and Criticism 1580-1620'.

32 'Ne bos quidem pereat' — not even a bovine would be lost. I have used Baker 2001, p. 367. Hotman 1567 is the more extended discussion of this theme.

33 Edelman 2007, p. 14: "How to change and remain the same? How to repose in the halcyon time of law, this time that culls the past to engender the future? This is the first aporia. And the jurists invented the fiction of continuity, namely a category of immortality, the moral person."

falls away. That Saturn also has part of his robe in his mouth, in Cartari's depiction, again ironically indicates how tattered time will devour us all.³⁴ (Figure 2).



Fig. 2

This has a further representation in the myth that Saturn ate his children. In some images, he holds a serpent that is eating its own tail, a marker of how time turns on itself, how it forces us to waste ourselves through the obscure affections by means of which we collect, identify, mark and witness our own passage and decay. More than that, the children figured in the shadow, to the left of Saturn's feet, harbour a similar threat of returning the favour and eating the father.

Angered by his father Coelus' cruelty to his children, Terra, Saturn's mother armed him with a scythe and he castrates Coelus with it. Jupiter, his son, later and out of a similar anger, castrates Saturn, leading the orator to say *Corpus effoetum tradit senectuti*.³⁵ The yarn that is sometimes said to bind the legs of Saturn also indicates the limitation that temporality places upon the body and movement. If law desires to be a *corpus* then a threefold calamity will affect it. The body will decay. Its attributes will fall away, its movements will grow constrained and it will wither. Second, time catches the law in a play of repetitions in which it will devour its children at the same time as its children will revenge themselves upon the parent. Law is caught up in this sense in a war with itself, in sacrificing and being sacrificed. Third, this latter and more specific feature of this symbolism of the scythe is that castration is the mark of law, that foreclosure that precludes the son taking up the place of the father, that makes the lawyer schizoid. Saturn's genitals are tossed into the sea as a mark of fecundity, from which Venus emerges. His genitals, torn off, become the

34 Cartari 1610, p. 38.

35 Ross 1672, p. 380. (The wasted body betrayed by age).

genitive of others. Saturn, however, is wrested free of desire, his lust cut away, to comply with the Aristotelian maxim of law being wisdom without desire.

Christian myth, Western political theology, inherits these neo-platonic figures and themes of saturnine influences and temporal woe. The black letters of law, the gothic typefaces, the *litera mortua* intend to preserve a text that time wrecks, that the illiterate betray and that the collector can never wholly compile or contain. It slips away. Writing itself, the black letter, the umbrageous quality of ink, the dark liquid of thought, can do nothing to prevent or stall the fact of loss. The body will pass into dust, our children will consume us, all our errors and enthusiasms, our collections of laws, will be defiled and interpolated. To borrow a phrase, the black letters that are intended to permanently mark, to stain indelibly, to act as literal custodians of the law, ironically reproduce the very darkness, the self-same loss that they seek to exclude.³⁶ The letter, to borrow from Lacan, is littoral. It borders what it seeks to escape, the *ex nihilo* of creation, at the same time as it is sent to the indefinite emptiness, the repetition and degradation of what is to come. The coastal metaphor also signals the graphological, the dark ocean of ink from whence the letter came, from which the drop was drawn and to which it must return. The wasted body is simply the text upon which the letter fails and withdraws.

The common lawyers, in their enthusiasm and their muddle seek inevitably enough to place law outside time, and indeed invented the word *immemorialis* to depict an atemporal or at least forgotten origin commensurate semantically with a time without reason. The lawyer Thomas Blount in his *Glossographia* defines *immemoriabilis* as that which is unworthy of remembrance, that is to be forgotten and that cannot be remembered.³⁷ As with all things saturnine, the common lawyer's concept of a time before memory, 'out of mind' in one expression, is of time that has somehow fallen away or returned to the *nihil* whence it came. It is, however, an English civil lawyer and divine, John Favour, the author of an expansive treatise on the layers of temporality, who provides the most cogent theory of the atemporal.³⁸ It requires, of course, that I misread him somewhat, but I would hardly be an apposite melancholic if I did not.

The starting point is the political theology of a time that escapes temporality, a mystic time incorporated for common lawyers in custom extended to the immemorial — *gravissimum est imperium consuetudinibus* — and by virtue of their antiquity enigmatically beyond recollection in the domain of reverence rather than research: *sunt haec arcana imperii* —

36 Juranville 1993, pp. 75-86 is a useful elaboration of this theme. Schiesari 1992 is also of interest.

37 Blount 1656, s.v. immemorable. Baxter and Johnson 1943 provides the details.

38 See Favour 1619.

these are the mysteries of majesty, to cite a Gallic, which is to say a non-English common lawyer.³⁹ John Favour adds definition to this claim and makes a version of the humanist argument in nominal and substantive promotion of the original sources. In a debate with Roman Catholicism and in advocacy of the English settlement, Favour argues against novelty and in defense of the scriptures. Start with latter. The Romanists inveighed against the scriptures as an Inkstand theology (*Theologiam atramentariam*), as a wax nose (*nasum cereum*), a dead judge, a black Gospel (*Evangelium nigrum*), goose quills (*pennas anserinas*), dead ink, riddles and enigmas.⁴⁰ The black letters, in their view, and plausibly enough granted their inscription in Hebrew, Greek and Latin, need interpretation, *traditio*, the benefit of the patristic tradition. These, however, for the lawyer Favour are simply novelties, opinions, "vanishing imaginations" and new learning. It is for him antiquity that must be garnered: "In apparel, in diet, in furniture, in sense, yea in your very speech you renounce your Ancestors; you ever praise antiquity, and every day live after the new fashion".⁴¹ One theologian's antiquity, it transpires, is another theologian's novelty. What follows is six hundred pages of defence, *pro et contra*, of the value and antiquity of the scriptures and their justification through proximity to a pure age, a naked truth that precedes and has priority over even the age of the scriptures.

Echoing Gibson, Favour defines antiquity as the original, "not that which is old... but that which is oldest, that is first and primitive, without any mixture, or derivations, or mingling, or meddling with following ages, and after times..." and leads to the conclusion that "antiquity has no bounds, no limits, it signifies the age of indefinite time".⁴² The model of antiquity is revelation, the first expression, the word whose antiquity "passes by all things created, and resteth only in that infinite majesty, beyond whom there is no time, without whom there is no being, from whom their lieth no appeal."⁴³ The temporal and the spiritual, the higher law and its shadow, the copyists black letters, have thus to be kept divided, the pure theory of time representing a centrifugal implosion of the temporal which, being unlimited and boundless, both includes all of history, past and future, and exceeds it in the singular instance of the divine. It is a duality that only appears to have transcended itself into a higher unity because the theological form of juridical institutions will in this frame constantly recur. The atemporal or pure instance of the divine is but the

39 Hotman 1616, pp. 270 and 268.

40 Favour 1619, p. 151

41 Favour 1619, pp. 11-12.

42 Favour 1619, p. 35.

43 Favour, *Antiquitie*, at 35.

genitive point of a parallel progress, a dualism that separates a temporality that cannot exceed its limits and a spirituality that cannot engage with its human delegates and vicars.

The melancholy truth of juristic history is that of a political theology that justifies law by reference to vanishing points that cannot be tracked, a littoral abyss after which there are only the equivalents of blinding light or oceanic darkness. It is that endpoint that reveals the final layer of loss, the last instance of melancholegalism, which is that of having to divest the discipline of law of its intrinsic plurality of eruditions. Consider Favour dismissing *fabulosa antiquitas*, fabulous antiquity, and one could add the fictions and myths of religious history. Does indefiniteness really require the abandonment of creativity, the loss of the art of invention? Similarly, in dismissing the ‘Ancient Father’ who said that “the word of God and the Holy Scriptures were like a beautiful image, which indeed had only one true aspect known only to the artificer, the Holy Ghost”, does limitlessness really exclude aesthetics or preclude the experience of sensual apprehension from the methodology of law? The vanishing point evaporates the will and stems desire at precisely that instant where desire is most pertinent, even if that desire be melancholegalistic ennui. Despite himself, almost because of the wounds that he perceives the Church to have suffered, the diversions that the law has traversed, Favour does offer a clue to which I will advert as a form of conclusion.

Favour begins his dedicatory epistle to the book by stating that it is in his own antiquity that he has come to write of antiquity and he dedicates the work to the oldest bishop that he knows. In other words, he recognizes that he is approaching his limit, that he is soon to become indefinite, an acknowledgment that obtains expression in the statement *Antiquitas mea Jesus Christus*, my antiquity is Christ. Yet Christ is hardly antiquity and is an unlikely figure for the indefiniteness of time. Christ is dead, the testament being in that sense the last will of the departed and serves only as the mediate figure of incorporation, of that impossible unity upon which political theology depends. *Antiquitas mea* suggests something more, an opening, an antiquity of his own, a recognized invention and with it the potential for collapsing the dualism that resides at the root of melancholegalism

Last words: Embracing ennui

Lord Shaftesbury, an irrefragable source of inspiration on a miscellany of topics from enthusiasm to ennui, regards melancholy as a species of inebriation, a poetic state, a kind of ecstasy temporarily obstructed.⁴⁴ The fumes of melancholy are like the vapours of wine or the frenzy of love, an affective and expressive state that brings humour to religion and passion

44 Shaftesbury 1732, p. 67. Citing More 1662.

to law — *ingeniosos omnes melancholicus esse*.⁴⁵ Melancholegalism is the somewhat inebriate state, the reverie of humanist lawyers who would love the law but find that such desire is thwarted. This *melancholia generosa* is a spiritual and intellectual state, an exercise of wit and imagination in a domain where these are resisted and denied. We recognize that the collections cannot be completed, that the texts are unfinished, that the ‘corps’ will dissipate, the custodians die, as also that knowledge evaporates in a world and profession that resists theory and generally ignores scholarship in favour of collections and an atrabilious attachment to *litera mortua*.

Where Burton offered melancholy as a diagnosis of the adverse effects of lawyering upon the polity, Shaftesbury suggests a *melancholia mea*, a state of affection, a hobbyhorsical attachment to an uncollected and inchoate law, to a method and invention of a norm to come. It is not the lawyer as practitioner, the filing clerk, the collector and traducer of particulars, the caviling adherent of adversarial causes who suffers any awareness that their “auncient palace”, their supposed science is “but dark and melancholy”. It is rather the humanist, the scholar, the jurist open to the disciplines, the figure of the *nomikos* who apprehends the draught of shadows, the trauma and the thought from which a law that lacks seeks continuously to draw. These are the inheritors of the *studiosi* and the *literati*, the enthusiasts who offered law tough love though it must be admitted that this was rather too often in the mode of a courtly yet obscure *amour lointain*.

Melancholegalism refers in a primary sense to the melancholy of legalism, the parlous and obscure desire of souls lost in the law, adherents of a juristic *sola scriptura*, the exegetes and literalists, who are oblivious to the uncollectible and porous character of law’s littoral letters. They are not consciously unhappy, or so I suppose, nor likely melancholics because they lack the enthusiasm, they have not realized that their lover is unfaithful, that their science is a piecemeal and unsystematic undertaking that will never be complete or collected. They are astride their hobbyhorse without realizing that they are riding it in ever diminishing circles. Melancholegalism in its secondary sense is the sweet ennui, the irrational *furor*, the capaciousness of deliberation and desire that underpins the humanistic diagnosis of this putative science and its accompany humour, mood or condition. Finally, however, it is the fate of the critic, the scholar outside any exclusive inhabitation of the discipline of law, who feels the pain, who inhales the vapours, who suffers the wound, and slowly becomes inebriated, drugged by a sense of desire and of loss. That is the underplot as Shaftesbury has it, the path of the miscellany, the divagation of *vis imagi-*

45 The notion of the genius, the creativity of the melancholic goes back to Aristotle but is taken up with peculiar force by Kant. See Edelman 2007, pp. 36-61. On the Aristotelian sources, see Klibansky et al. 1979, p. 42 et seq.

nativa, in love with the transitive and mobile shadow of thought.

The legalists, the common law exegetes, as if such a project were remotely plausible, have lost their humour, have taken law too seriously and so not seriously enough at all. The fetish, as Legendre points out, is a theatricalization of foundations, and a dramatization of law. From the distance necessary for critical apprehension of the system, the rites and ceremonies, the paper and forms, appear to continue in their age-old patterns. From the perspective of the critic, however, these patterns and forms are marked most distinctly by being ‘not ours’, not *lex mea*, if we can borrow and adapt a last time from Favour. Ours is a courtly love, a distant longing, in an era when, to coin a phrase, love is an unloved feeling. It is not in the end time but rather Saturn’s scythe that generates the melancholegalistic frame, the dull and unenthusiastic repetitions of what is most questionably termed a wisdom without desire. Were I to wrap up, to shroud the ending of this essay, it would be to reiterate Favour’s call for a desire and expectancy that embraces the ennui of texts and inhabits the drama and dispossession, the miscellaneous and marginal aspects of legality. Here is how it goes, the wormsign, the grimoire, the melancholic inebriation of a legal enthusiast.

The dance of the jurist is that of recognizing that the law is constantly invented yet that creativity can never be acknowledged. The iron cage of *scientia iuris*, the rulebook of precedent in the case of common lawyers, prohibits open acknowledgement, the theatrical limelight or social stage of acclaimed performance. The jurist hides her talent, veils her art, and over time comes to forget the very act of fiction, the storytelling, the rendering or more precisely painting that their path and performance project. It is the task to the critic not to love himself, which would be an obscure and useless *amour propre*, but rather to offer tough love, a critical apprehension of the theatre of justice and law. That means embracing melancholegalism, black letter theatre, fiction and loss, enactment and ennui as the price, not of reading, but of radical appreciation — *non in verbis sed in sensu*. The patristic authors, with whom our Doctor of Civil Laws, dear divine Favour identified, manifested excitement, enthusiasm, embrace of the ink divinity, the dark hotchpot, and a degree of ecstasy, a properly melancholic enthusiasm, *adustus calida*, or inebriation which dictated flight to the mountains, escape to the snow clad peaks of the scriptures — *fugiendum ad montes, ad montes scripturarum*, to borrow from Saint Jerome. Favour keeps repeating that injunction, and I am in favour, save that such flight should not be conceived externally nor as a running away. It is something other, darker, and dare I say more thoughtful. A running into the law, an embrace of its tenebrous texts, an engagement with all of its inkings, their plethora and enigmas. So too the confession of the critic, that he desires to bruise the head of the serpent, and that she wants to take a scythe to the law.

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The Happy Melancholic

Alexi Kukuljevic

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.

...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 Almásy Square simply offered him no refuge at all.¹

The books that we need, to paraphrase Kafka², 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: Schocken 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*).⁴That 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—devaluat-

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.

ing 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.

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

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 schizoprenic, 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 indispensable 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 melancholia¹⁵, 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 something 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 “*identifica-*

22 Stanzas, 25.

23 Stanzas, 25.

tion 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 objectification 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-

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

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 disso- ciation. 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 con- sists 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 enuncia- tion 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 rav- enously 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 autobio- graphical poem, *My Heart Laid Bare*, “Of the vaporization and centraliza- tion of the self. Everything is here.” The withdrawal into the I is the con- dition 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 sen- sibility 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 inside³⁹ 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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