

# Politics and Melancholia: Introduction

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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.<sup>1</sup>

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.<sup>2</sup>

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.'<sup>3</sup>

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.'<sup>4</sup> 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.'<sup>5</sup> 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.'<sup>6</sup> 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.'<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup>

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.<sup>10</sup>

This collection, however, is not on depression as an effect or symptom of depoliticization, but on melancholia.<sup>11</sup> 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.'<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup> 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.<sup>14</sup>

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.<sup>15</sup>

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 quantity and quality, 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 17<sup>th</sup> 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.<sup>16</sup>

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

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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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