

## Melancholy, The Liminal Condition

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Melancholy (*malenconia*, *atrabilis*) has a long history of analysis in western thought as well as has been part of medical and scholarly discussion throughout the ages. It was thought that a preponderance of *black bile* (μέλας – χολή) predisposed a person to a saturnine and autumnal condition (hesitant, elayed) paradoxically characterized by both abulia and mania/irritability, as well as (a happy addition due to Hippocrates-Galen) by delusional and obsessive behavior. The irritability part of the equation represented by the connection of Saturn with poetic inspiration also assimilated melancholy to the overall condition of *μανία*, a combination of madness and irrationality that bespoke of uncontrollable elements inside the human psyche, which were attractive as well as dangerous as later rediscovered by Romanticism. Apollonian love and the cultivation of sexual Bacchic frenzy were not seen as separated as it might seem, in the same way that Apollo and the interpretation of his prophecies amidst a drug-induced state by the Pythia were not considered contradictory by religious spirituality but part of the same process of finding oracular truth and discovering God. Deep down, what we face here is that the sane control operated by society on the individual by providing him with order had to allow, in an established anthropological interpretation, for moments in which the freedom from societal constraints was given a release mechanism that sanctioned as necessary the carnivalesque, the irrational, the pleasurable.

In melancholic patients, *furor* or ire, a wrathful condition *in malam partem* (as opposed to the good wrath that motivates and leads to perseverance; see Serés and Cortijo)<sup>1</sup> appears together with subdued depressive states and anguished anxiety, as famously represented by Albrecht Dürer's engraving, something not entirely dissimilar to the idea represented by the topic of the two laughing-weeping philosophers, Democritus and Heraclitus, who display either depression about the fleeting (pessimistic) state of existence or happiness and elation about its many possibilities (remember that Burton's persona in his *The Anatomy of Melancholy* is called Democritus Junior). Freud opposed the states of melancholia and mania, pointing out that the content of both is probably the same, but while in melancholia the ego has succumbed to the problem, in mania it has mastered it or pushed it aside. Through melancholy's connection to the personality and behavioral characteristics displayed in poems and novels by fools of love, melancholy also became associated at the end of the Middle Ages with the so-called *amor hereos*, as Leriano, Tirant, and most famously Don Quixote represented in genres like the successful sentimental and chivalric fictions of the late Middle Ages. The doleful and anguished lover that pervasively populates European lyric since the 13<sup>th</sup> c. can also be seen as suffering from the melancholic and disastrous effects of love. Love, in sum, is seen as the ideal playground of melancholy, either in its human form or in that famous medieval and later Renaissance construction called *amor Dei*.

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<sup>1</sup> Cortijo Ocaña, Antonio, *La porfía. Identidad personal y nacional en Lope de Vega* (Barcelona: Anthropos, 2013): Serés, Guillermo, "La ira justa y el templado amor, fundamentos de la virtud en *La Galatea*", *Bulletin Hispanique* 98.1 (1996): 37-54.



remember that women also perceived their liminality as new subjects of love, having lost their previous *aphasic* condition that permeated genres such as lyric poetry (in which they only participate as non-speaking characters) with the modern novel that incorporated them as (talking) characters. In addition, in real life, they became voracious readers, obliging (male) authors to incorporate their experience as necessary in their novelth. Probably no other female figure represented this ambivalence between states of elation and *tristitia* than Mary Magdalene. She encapsulated the paradoxical nature of *malenconia*, a figure that was seen alternatively as a consoling or disconsolate figure (as was also the case of Don Quixote), depicted in ae famous representation by Artemisia Gentileschi.

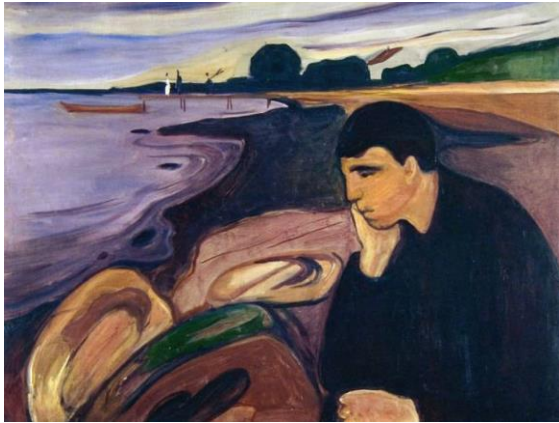


*Mary Magdalene as Melancholy* (Artemisia Gentileschi, 1625-26)

The resulting disturbance experienced in these anxious moments produced alternating elated and depressive states, later repeated in the aesthetic movements called Renaissance and especially Baroque, the *melancholy* period *par excellence*, in a way similar to that presented by Montesquieu's understanding of human condition with reference to Democritus and Heraclitus. In John Florio's 1603 rendition of the French philosopher's work, "Our owne condition is as ridiculous as risible, as much to be laught at as able to laugh" (*Essayes*, London: Melch. Bradwood for Edward Blount and William Barret, 1613). Acceptance of a new modern (anthropocentric) paradigm that made sense of the world around created tension, rupture, fear and anxiety as God was abandoned as not necessary and the human mind stood alone with its *self* to try to make sense of reality. New societal groups accessed power, old ones lost it, and new ways of conceiving of the world gave way to new explanations, now mostly centered around the individual and the self, as pointed out by Decartes.

The liminality of melancholy places it as a dangerous emotion, one that elicits great fear and concern because the sad can lead the way to the irrational, in the same vein that Eros can easily give way to Dionisos. Romantics understood that the poetic numen and its geniality could only be accessed through the connection of the *vas vatis* with the irrational *mania*, understanding the work of the aesthete or writer as one that practices *ποίησις* and *ποιεῖν* as bringing into being what had no previous existence, therefore assimilating the melancholic state of (poetic) creation with divinity, for only God (and the poet) were able to create *ex nihil*, *ex ovo*, thus tapping into the sublime as a realm of meaning and creation.

Moving forward in history, the so-called *fin de siècle* and its belief that the end of the century was leading to a cultural period of decadence gave birth to feelings of *élan*, *ennui* and pessimism in a revolt against rationalism, positivism and materialism, once again opposing a laughing (happy) tendency (to last until the Roaring Twenties) with a pessimistic take on life (to be continued during the after-war period) that resulted in a depressing *mal du siècle*. Both Munch and Van Gogh represent this feeling in two of his famous paintings, *Melancholy* and *Portrait of Dr. Gachet*. Once again, the consciousness that they were witnessing the end of a period and had to face the unknown represented by *modernity* elicited a gloomy feeling that had already been perceived by Huizinga with respect to a past period, the Middle Ages, or had been seen by the romantics as a reaction to the happy optimism of the previous time, something that had even been foreshadowed by the 18<sup>th</sup>-c. philosophy of moral sentiments or even by the melancholy that tinged Watteau's paintings (Pierrot's in particular) that displayed a taste that clearly diverged from the exultant tone of academic genre paintings.



*Melancholy* (Eduard Munch, 1894)



*Portrait of Dr. Gachet* (Van Gogh, 1896)



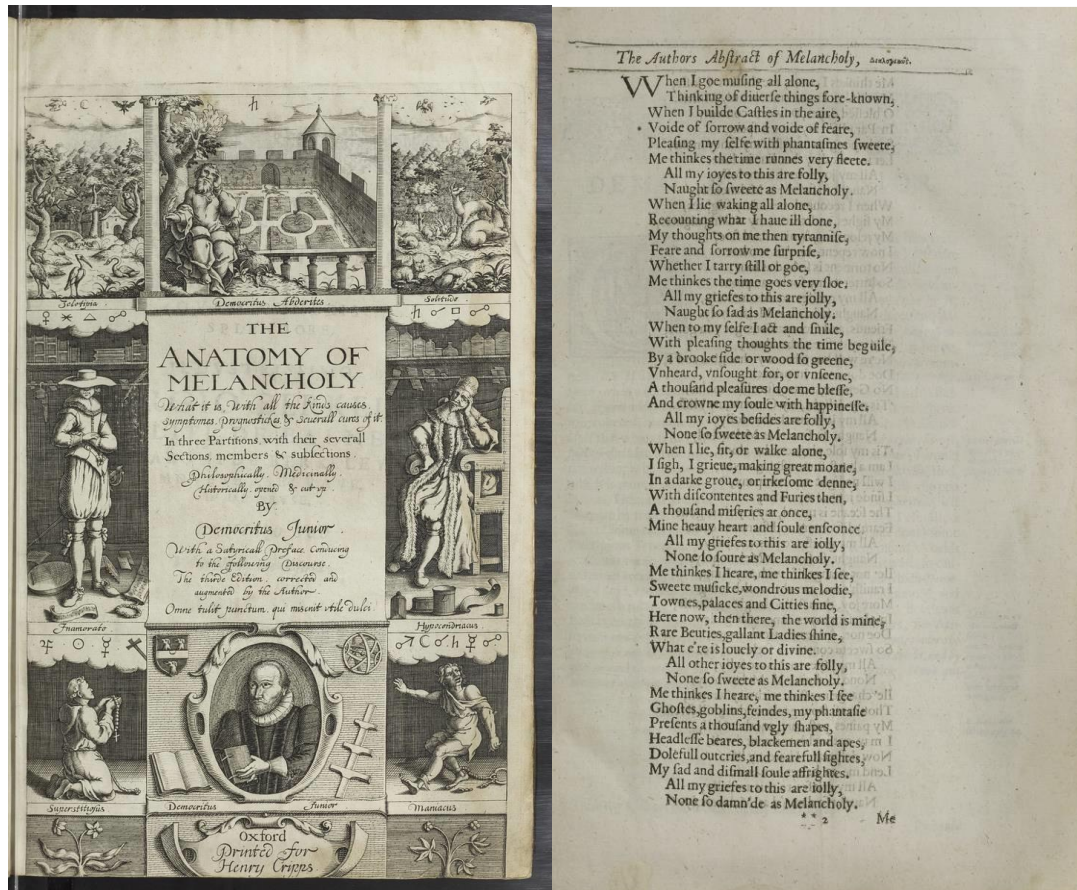


*Pierrot [Gilles]* (Antoine Watteau, ca. 1718-19)

The distance between the Early Modern period and our contemporary times is one that goes from Richard Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy* to Freud's "Mourning and Melancholia", considering that the former includes an encyclopedic knowledge of classical and medieval discourses on melancholy that preceded it, thus encompassing the classical period and discourse. Burton went as far as to call transitory melancholy a "character of mortality", proclaiming it unescapable for men ("from these melancholy dispositions no man is free"). He defined it as either in disposition or in habit, temporary or not according to a gradation of seriousness that could end up in an ambivalent pleasant or painful habit difficult if not impossible to be eradicated:

In disposition, is that transitory Melancholy which goes and comes upon every small occasion of sorrow, need, sickness, trouble, fear, grief, passion, or perturbation of the mind, any manner of care, discontent, or thought, which causes anguish, dulness, heaviness and vexation of spirit, any ways opposite to pleasure, mirth, joy, delight, causing forwardness in us, or a dislike. In which equivocal and improper sense, we call him melancholy, that is dull, sad, sour, lumpish, ill-disposed, solitary, any way moved, or displeased. And from these melancholy dispositions no man living is free, no Stoic, none so wise, none so happy, none so patient, so generous, so godly, so divine, that can vindicate himself; so well-composed, but more or less, some time or other, he feels the smart of it. Melancholy in this sense is the character of Mortality... This Melancholy of which we are to treat, is a habit, a serious ailment, a settled humour, as Aurelianus and others call it, not errant, but fixed: and as it was long increasing, so, now being (pleasant

or painful) grown to a habit, it will hardly be removed. (*The Anatomy of Melancholy*. Oxford: Henry Cripps, 1638)



Freud inquired in 1917 about the deep connection between melancholy and mourning. Both are predicated on painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity, and, in the case of melancholy, also a lowering of the self-regarding feelings to a degree that finds utterances in self-reproaches and self-revilings, and culminates in a delusional expectation of punishment. In mourning, he says, there is a turning away from reality and a clinging to the lost object of love through hallucinatory wishful psychosis, making it unable to disappear. In mourning, the world at large is what has become poor and empty; in melancholy, on the other hand, there is an impoverishment of the ego, and the patient represents to others this ego as worthless, vilified, morally despicable through “the delusion of a mainly moral inferiority,” which reflects the realization, from the subject’s point of view, that s/he has lost his/her self-respect. In reality, though, the self-denigration is a way for the patient to establish an identification of the ego with the abandoned object, creating a reproach against the loved object shifted away to the patient’s own ego and producing a strong fixation with such object. Hence, melancholia borrows some of its features from mourning, and some others from a process of regression from narcissistic object-choice to narcissism, avoiding the need to express hostility (the real goal) to the original object of desire and turning it into sadism, which can even result in suicide or suicidal tendencies. Again, the ambivalence that Burton saw in melancholia or that was expressed in the Democritus-Heraclitus pair reappears now in Freud



when he talks about the conflict due to the ambivalence in melancholia of the love-hate felt towards the object of love: by taking flight into the ego, he concludes, love escapes extinction, as in the case of mourning. In mourning the fixation with the object is overcome by giving up the object; in melancholy it does so by disparaging and denigrating it, as a way of killing it. At this point, melancholy can lead to the triumph of a manic state of mind. (“Morning and Melancholia”, in *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XIV (1914-191), On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works*, London: The Hogarth Press, 1957, 243-58).



*Idilio atómico y uránico melancólico* (Salvador Dalí, 1945)

Let's go back to the liminal state of melancholy. The *ambivalent* or *paradoxical* elements in melancholy point to the deep presence it has had in artistic productions throughout time. But it is in times of crisis when it has surfaced with more intensity, precisely because of the connection between crisis, transition and melancholy. Its liminality (its being in between) is then connected to its essence, as a state that allows for the processing of grief, the reflection about the uncertainty of change and future, the difficulty with the processing of the past, or the manifestation of the fear produced by the catastrophic reality of historical and personal times of turmoil. Recently, Andreenko has also inquired into the influence of the individual experience of time in melancholic emotional states, noticing its presence especially in the first 20<sup>th</sup> c.:

The feeling of the interrelation of melancholy and the epoch is extremely specific for a person of the first third of the 20th century, evidence of which could be found in the philosophical and cultural reflection of this period. Crisis worldview is reflected in literature, painting, cinema, philosophy, social theory, etc. Thus, it is possible to represent

melancholy as a phenomenon, partly caused by the problem of individual experience of time. Melancholy occurs when a crisis worldview is supplemented by an experience of circular temporality, the disappearance of the future, preoccupation with the past, passivity, or isolation. If these elements come together, a total worldview is formed in which real world events intensify melancholy. In this sense, phenomenologically speaking, melancholy is not so much a state as a dynamic process. (Sami Khatib, “Melancholia and Destruction”, *Crisis Critique* 3.2, 20-39, 32)

We could add that for Walter Benjamin, “the gaze of melancholy world and world history have become the exterior display of inner emptiness”. Benjamin also borders with his life and thought a liminal space “between inside and outside, the interior of the individual psyche and the external stage of world history,” which are not clearly distinguishable. For him, “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”, thus creating a tension between past and future. Through the special relationship of Chronos and Saturn, in Benjamin

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. (Khatib, *op. cit.* 35)

History’s destiny is to be able to become a *future antérieure*, a will-have-been, a condition of possibility to redeem the past and exert a temporal messianism, “pulling of the “emergency brake” of the catastrophically racing train of capitalist modernity” and “rescuing a past futurity and the retroactive stimulation of a ‘not yet’ forever to come.”





*Saturno devorando a su hijo* (Goya, ca. 1813-23)

Thus, between the crisis of the present and the ambiguity of the past futur antérieur, melancholy takes root in the subconscious, between the castration of Uranus and his management during the Golden period and its final demise, defeated and imprisoned in Tartarus. Melancholy is a condition that moves through the ages, between *tristitia* and *pigritia* and ends up working towards a *manic* state that functions as a desideratum that is not always attainable.

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From the marginal space of the psychic analysis and within a world always stepping into unknown territory and creating new categories of thought, the madman as a love fool is transformed into a *tristis* (sad) and anxious sentient being (suffering from *acedia*, *anxietas*, *taedium cordis*) who is infirm (feeling sickness and pain, *aegritudo*) as well as worried and despaired (*sollicitus*, *conturbatus*). The state of his (per)turbed mind (*conturbatio*) reflects his/her impossibility to analyze life from the point of view of the previous paradigm, a feeling of loss that leads to *anger* (*iratus*) (see Piera in the present volume), like that displayed by the *iratissimus par excellence*, Saint Paul, the convert to a new life (born again) that signaled the beginning of a new (Christian) period, a new epochal moment that transcended the dangerous *limen* into a new paradigm. The Renaissance/Baroque, the time immediately preceding and following Industrial Revolution, and Post-modern times from the *fin de siècle* are the periods covered by the essays in this volume. As mentioned before, this does not happen at random. Rather, a somber and gloomy malady, *malenconia*, seems to have weighed heavy on people's souls since the waning of the Middle Ages (as established by Huizinga), tinting everything with despair and anxiety. The temporal span covered by this volume that deals with a history of melancholy in the Iberian Peninsula encompasses a period that goes from the medieval Cid to the contemporary cinema during the COVID-19 times. Spain sees itself in these essays reflected in a mirror that projects its essence, its meaning, and even "destiny" at times, in a liminal exercise of narcissism and fixation with itself that is a *future antérieur*. It would seem that the abstract entity of Spain is a morbid patient always sick from/about his past, always needing to find its identity in a context of somber melancholy.