Saturnine Constellations: Melancholy in Literary History and in the Works of Baudelaire and Benjamin

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Abstract

Aristotle famously asked the question: why are extraordinary people so often melancholics? “Problem XXX,” written by Aristotle or one of his disciples, speculates that black bile, the humour once believed to cause melancholy, can promote a form of genius, a profound intellectual power. Walter Benjamin and Charles Baudelaire are two writers for whom this theory was true: though they suffered from gloominess and despondency, they also recognized that in the interior of sadness, and even madness, is a kernel of aesthetic, artistic, and philosophical truth. Melencolia illa heroica – whose theory was authoritatively formulated by Ficino, taking after Aristotle’s Problems and Plato’s theory of divine madness – emerged in the Renaissance and established a melancholy, understood as a virtue, rather than a vice, such as acedia [sloth]. This virtuous melancholy – which Benjamin referred to as “sublime melancholy,” and others as “heroic(al) melancholy” – is always flanked by its counterpart, the “splenetic melancholia.” This conception of a positive melancholy underwent a variety of transfigurations – by the path set, in part, through Dürer’s “Melencolia I,” Milton’s pastoral poems, and Burton’s Anatomy of Melancholy – and turned into the “melancholy malcontent” stereotype prevalent in Hamlet and Le Misanthrope. Later, become the Romantic theory of genius, melancholy enjoyed a significant return via the writings of Blake, Keats and Kierkegaard. With Baudelaire, and the advent of modernity, melancholy is put into correspondance with spleen – classically understood as the site of black bile – with astonishing results. In the first instance, Baudelaire was able to get closer to a vision of melancholy through the relationship between spleen and idéal; in the second, he crafted an interior correspondance of spleen with(in) itself. Benjamin, in his early career, influentially reinterprets the Renaissance melancholy tradition, and its impacts on the Baroque Trauerspiel [mourning play]. Later, as his work turns to Baudelaire, Benjamin’s form of melancholy as philosophical method reaches its acme. This work holds, as its main conclusion, that the interior, dialectical complementarity of opposites, which melancholy exemplifies all along the line, is a necessary mechanism to the productions of literature and philosophy.

Keywords

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Note on the Text

All citations from Aristotle’s Problems are provided from the Mayhew edition, part of the Loeb Classical Library collection. After an initial reference to the authors of Saturn and Melancholy by their full names (and then as Klibansky et al.) I consistently refer to them with the abbreviation “KSP.” Citations of Burton are provided from the Jackson edition of the Anatomy of Melancholy (hereinafter Anatomy) with the page and partition/section reference; the Oxford edition of his works was consulted.

Blake citations are provided from Erdman edition of Blake’s Complete Poetry & Prose (hereinafter E). Citations of the longer prophecies provide the plate number and lines, with the page reference to the Erdman text. The Bentley edition of Blake’s poetry was consulted, as was The William Blake Archive. Kierkegaard citations are from the Hong and Hong editions of his works, including the book’s title. Keats citations are provided from Stillinger’s edition of the Complete Poems (K).

For Baudelaire and the accompanying translations: all quotations are from the Œuvres complètes (hereinafter OC); translations of Les Fleurs du mal and Le Spleen de Paris are from Francis Scarfe’s edition The Complete Verse (CV) and Paris Blues (PB); translations of “Le mangeur d’opium” when appropriate are the concurrent passages from De Quincey’s Confessions of an English Opium-Eater (Confessions); all other, unmarked translations of Baudelaire’s prose are my own, with pagination from the OC.

While the German edition of his complete works was consulted, all citations from Benjamin are provided in the English translations from the Selected Writings (hereinafter SW), The Arcades Projects (Arcades, including the complete reference) and The Origin of the German Tragic Drama (Origin). It is hoped that a future version of this project will include quotations of the German texts from the Gesammelte Schriften.

All translations from the French throughout the dissertation are my own unless otherwise marked.
Table of Contents

Abstract ................................................................................................................................. i
Keywords ................................................................................................................................. i
Acknowledgments .................................................................................................................. ii
Note on the Text ....................................................................................................................... iii
Table of Contents .................................................................................................................... iv

Saturnine Constellations: Melancholy in Literary History and in the Works of Baudelaire and Benjamin ........................................................................................................... 1

Introduction: Constellations around Black Bile, Spleen and Thought ........................................ 3

Chapter 1 – Spleen and Heroica: Under the Sign of Saturnine Melancholy ................................. 21
  Aristotle’s paradigm (a view of history) ................................................................................. 23
  Ficino, Saturn and Melancholy ............................................................................................. 34
  Dürer’s angel and Milton’s twin melancholies ...................................................................... 43
  Burton’s Anatomy of the scholar and love-melancholy ....................................................... 54
  Hamlet’s tragic, less-than-extraordinary idleness .................................................................. 66
  Molière’s reasonably unreasonable malcontent .................................................................... 76
  Conclusion ............................................................................................................................... 85

Chapter 2 – The Dialectics of Sorrow: Views of Melancholy in Blake, Kierkegaard and Keats ................................................................. 87
  Blake’s figures of despair: “The Spectre of Urthona” and Urizen ....................................... 89
  Blake illustrates Milton’s muse: Mirth and melancholy, sorrow and joy ............................. 101
  Kierkegaard and the dialectic of Tungsind and Melancholi ................................................. 109
  A parable of love-melancholy with a moral on repetition .................................................... 116
  “Mood assails”: Sorrow and joy in Keats’ poetry ............................................................... 126
  Do not go to Lethe: Reading the “Ode on Melancholy” ...................................................... 135
  Conclusion ............................................................................................................................... 144
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter 3 – The Road to Absolute Spleen in Charles Baudelaire</th>
<th>145</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Lexiconographies” and definitions of spleen</td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The artifices of opium and the unbearable lightness of dreaming</td>
<td>156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The perfume of melancholy in “Correspondances”</td>
<td>167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irony and the language of absolute spleen</td>
<td>178</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between two spleens at twilight: the two “Crépuscule du soir” poems</td>
<td>187</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The redemption of the Saturnine through the heroism of death</td>
<td>201</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>211</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 4 – Walter Benjamin’s “Saturnine Vision”</td>
<td>212</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Towards a methodology: Productive spleen and “Saturnine vision”</td>
<td>214</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A lamentation trickles out from the forest of language</td>
<td>223</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The figure of Saturn/Cronos in Benjamin’s theory of melancholy</td>
<td>230</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The melancholy ar(t)chivist visits the Bibliothèque Nationale</td>
<td>242</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Je me souviens” … of that journey into the cave of spleen</td>
<td>253</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Survival and Baudelaire’s “Le Cygne”</td>
<td>260</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>270</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concluding Remarks: On Depression, Sorrow[fulness], and “Melancholizing”</td>
<td>272</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Works Cited / Bibliography</td>
<td>280</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary sources</td>
<td>280</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary sources</td>
<td>281</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curriculum Vitae</td>
<td>295</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Saturnine Constellations:
Melancholy in Literary History and in the Works of Baudelaire and Benjamin

*Regarding the fitness craze: America has lost its soul; now it’s trying to save its body.*

*Marcher n’est pas un sport.*

Melancholy was not the original subject of the dissertation, but it was always already its mood. In the Winter of 2013, I was teaching a course and, as part of the plan for the term, I had invited a few guest lecturers. One of them, Joel Faflak, had long since been working towards a paper on film musicals and the cult of happiness in American culture. The students were hearing a version of the draft paper in lecture form, one I had heard Faflak present on a different occasion. This lecture – that turned into “Get Happy! American Film Musicals and the Psychopathology of Hope” – struck me to the core. At the time, I had in mind a dissertation on the cadence and details of handwritten manuscripts by Dickinson, Kafka and Proust. I was to analyse how one may interact with the visual aspect of manuscript works. Unfortunately, the thesis was equal parts self-evident and a dead end, and worse still: it was not clear where else I could be going with the dissertation. When Faflak’s lecture concluded, I was convinced that the dissertation needed to be personal to my own experience; my previous project was an abstraction that failed to move me, and this was reflected in my struggles to write on that topic. What compelled me to make this change in my trajectory was the essential kernel of Faflak’s thesis in “Get Happy!” and the conclusions he had drawn from it.

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1 George Carlin, *Brain Droppings* (quoted in *3 x Carlin*, 92).
2 Frédéric Gros, *Marcher, une philosophie* (7).
The pathological purpose of American popular culture, so perceived by Faflak, was that if the populace can be kept on an obsessive, worker ant-like schedule with no time to think – other than on how to get happy – people will seldom ever stop to think at all. Faflak’s conclusion points out:

One final irony [that] is the most chilling of all: the right to happiness we have manufactured for ourselves might be our acceptance of a failure to deal with the complexities of real problems under the guise of dealing with them – the inevitable outcome of Ayn Rand’s call to an utterly narcissistic capacity for self-development, or more recently Sarah Palin’s blind subscription to the myth of improvement. If hope is film musicals’ most protean and volatile resource, perhaps the most portable commodity this hope has produced is not the capacity for human flourishing but failure itself as insurance against the threat of deep thought. Success at any cost: the right to fail – spectacularly. (154)

I asked myself: if happiness in this culture is a “right” – one that endlessly forestalls our engagement with the actual problems of the culture – what is the fate of sadness? The immediate consequence is that no one is allowed to be sad, or else they are the representation and embodiment of failure. For deep, contemplative thought is seen as a threat to the cult of happiness. This word, happiness, also seemed to me entirely suspect, and I began to reflect on other words as well: sorrow, joy, depression, melancholy. It did not take long to realize my project would have little to do with happiness, and a lot more to do with the relationship between joy and melancholy, especially the latter word. After a few nights of reflection and contemplation, the first germs of my thesis on melancholy were gleaned. I had found my path.
Introduction: Constellations around Black Bile, Spleen and Thought

Melancholy: When a dash of disappointment renders an etching of sadness.  

Melancholy defers identity. 
The videowork becomes a figure for a skeptical embodiment of melancholy as the transformative soul.

At its core, this dissertation asks the same question that Michael Ann Holly asks in the opening of The Melancholy Art: “Might we not consider melancholy as the central trope of art historical writing, the conceit that underwrites the deep structure of its texts? How might melancholy, not as medieval or Renaissance humour but as both a metaphor and an explanatory concept in the twenty-first century, help us as practitioners to acknowledge the elegiac nature of our disciplinary transactions with the past?” (6). Melancholy, in its history, struggles with the characteristics of its root structure, its most basic unit of representation. If, in linguistics, the most basic unit of language is the phoneme, what would be such a unit for melancholy? This struggle is characterized, in part, by the impossibility of its resolution: melancholy’s root structure is a tension between things; this “in-between” – the representation of tension, which is not visible in and of itself – frustrates attempts to make melancholy present. One always “sees” the instance of melancholy as a “something” not actually there. What is intended to be literal description

4 The complete passage from Lisa Robertson’s Nilling: Prose Essays on Noise, Pornography, The Codex, Melancholy, Lucretius, Folds, Cities and Related Aporias runs such: “Melancholy defers identity. Its videowork offers partial aesthetic models of metaphysical and sociological dilemmas which are not separate, realising affect from the proper boundaries of the human person, into contingent and potentially non-human utopias. The videowork becomes a figure for a skeptical embodiment of melancholy as the transformative soul. It proposes too that the soul is prosthetic: an artifice annexed to the person. And so, I will describe what the uncertain experience of interiority could be in representation, rather than in consciousness. It is in representations that we see thinking feel and make its parameters, figures and mistakes. In the videowork, a speculative thinking being to emerge from thinking’s normally inconspicuous site” (49).
is plagued over and again by figures and metaphors. Ilit Ferber’s monograph on Benjamin’s early writings introduces this aporia elegantly: “Melancholy has always been marked by acute contradictions in its depiction, invoking an expansive array of meanings; it encompasses positive, creative facets – such as depth, creativity, and bursts of genius – as well as negative qualities – including gloominess, despondency, and isolation. This history of the term is saturated with different and at times conflicting articulations that, paradoxically, seem to consistently point to more or less the same set of features” (2).

The Western history of melancholy, and all of its theories and definitions, has a long standing history reaching back to the Ancient Greeks, notably Hippocrates, Plato, and Aristotle. Melancholy, one discovers in reading this history, is polymorphous and polysemous: it changes its meaning from discourse to discourse, its diversity lives on through the after-effects of its instantiations. As Mary Cosgrove has noted, a “diversity of meaning … always lurks behind the term ‘melancholy’” (4). Its most seemingly basic expression brings with it a constellation of phenomena, stories and experiences. Its nature is clouded in ambiguity, its valuation is at once positive and negative; no one position is absolute, but all positions are grounded in the weight of (its) history. The impossibility of desire, expressed as either the love of something one cannot have or the reversal of an event that is irremediable, is essential to the construction of melancholic affect in its virtuous and pathological facets.

Raymond Klibansky, Erwin Panofsky and Fritz Saxl, in their major treatise, *Saturn and Melancholy*, present the semantic varieties of “melancholy” such:

In modern speech the word “melancholy” is used to denote any one of several somewhat different things. It can mean a mental illness
characterised mainly by attacks of anxiety, deep depression and fatigue – though it is true that recently the medical concept has largely become disintegrated. It may mean a type of character – generally associated with a certain type of physique – which together with the sanguine, the choleric and the phlegmatic, constituted the system of the “four humours,” or the “four complexions” as the old expression was. It may mean a temporary state of mind, sometimes painful and depressing, sometimes merely mildly pensive or nostalgic. (2)

By the “medical concept” Klibansky et al. (henceforth “KSP”) mean the one for “melancholy” as defined within the ancient theory of the four humours, whose dominance began to wane in the seventeenth century. The prevalence of the four humours system of melancholy in medicine and psychology from the Ancient Greeks up to the Baroque links the human body (fluids) to the human soul (humours): at the origins of the Ancient Greek system health is defined as “the equilibrium of different qualities, and as the predominance of one – a concept truly decisive for humoralism proper” (KSP 3-4).

Noga Arikha describes the collapse of the humoral theory thus:

Once the connection between disease and the existence of germs had been firmly established, about 150 years ago, it was indeed impossible to hold on firmly to the theory of humours. In fact, humours had already begun to lose theoretical credibility by the seventeenth century, when the circulation of the blood was properly understood. But in practice, the theory continued for another couple centuries to sustain medicine and to offer a general scheme within which anatomy, physiology, and psychology could be made to fit. Some medical manuals were still recommending treatments based on humoral theory as recently as in the early 1900s. (xviii)

Jennifer Radden has suggested that from its inauguration, black bile (unlike blood, bile and phlegm) has signified as an extended metaphor. Radden writes that from the viewpoint of modern clinical psychology black bile “was a kind of metaphor for the dark mood of melancholy rather than a reference to any actual substance” (63). Melancholic affect is a balance between an empirical experience of the world, of seeing what is visible
to perception as compared to trying to explain, via language, what is unseen. Black bile is a conceptual workaround to a “something” – like a phantasm – that cannot be seen, but may be felt by the body. A conceptualization that cuts in between the fluids of the human body and a series of characteristics of the human soul the body manifests through various (melancholic) affectations.

Within the old organization of knowledge, black bile, as a term, could not lose either its medical or metaphorical importance, for otherwise it would collapse, and with it that whole organization. The beginning of the collapse occurred over the times of the early Enlightenment – Burton’s *Anatomy* is regarded as having been the last work of the epistemic “Ancien Régime.” With the advent of modern science, black bile lost its “scientific” credibility. The definitive exclusion was effected at once by psychiatry and psychoanalysis. Black bile, which has continued to have a half-life as a metaphor, lost its semantic impact in popular discourse. Nowadays, black bile is one of those entities filling the dustbin of the no-longer usable conceptual tools. At the same time, during the twilight of this collapse, one finds the attempt to hold onto black bile in *poetry*, as an erotic, pathological embrace of something no one believes is real. The melancholic poet is in love with the phantasm of unobtainable desire: their intellectual power is the transference and transfiguration of this eroticism into a form of personal heroism. The nineteenth century was the crisis moment for the theory of black bile and its connection to melancholic affect. For while its decline has long since begun – the march of science, and the attendant discoveries of human anatomy made the theory of the humours increasingly less viable and valid – in the nineteenth century the metaphors central to melancholy
affects, (re)discovered and elaborated in the Renaissance, make a comeback. It is this period of time – the nineteenth century with a brief look at the first half of the twentieth – that most concerns my argument. When faced with melancholy’s radical, dialectical ambiguity, my thesis gathers two particular structural images, whose sources are deeply intertwined. The first image is that of the constellation. One of the most famous passages in Walter Benjamin’s Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels – translated into English as *Origin of the German Tragic Drama* and often referred to as the Trauerspiel book – occurs in the “Epistemo-Critical Prologue.” There, Benjamin writes that the organization of phenomena in the realm of ideas is like a constellation and its stars. One does not grasp ideas, for one recognizes them as a visual shaping of phenomena:

> The set of concepts which assist in the representation of an idea lend it actuality as such a configuration. For phenomena are not incorporated in ideas. They are not contained in them. Ideas are, rather, their objective, virtual arrangement, their objective interpretation. If ideas do not incorporate phenomena, and if they do not become functions of the law of phenomena, the “hypothesis,” then the question of how they are related to phenomena arises. The answer to this is: in the representation of phenomena. The idea thus belongs to a fundamentally different world from that which apprehends. The question of whether it comprehends that which it apprehends, in the way in which the concept genus includes the species, cannot be regarded as a criterion of its existence. That is not the task of the idea. Its significance can be illustrated with an analogy. Ideas are to objects as constellations are to stars. (34)

Melancholy is such an idea, as defined by Benjamin’s structural-epistemological metaphor. It is not something one can grasp. It is too distant, not so much transcendental as strangely otherworldly – as if put into the world before humans came along – but like the constellations, it organizes meaning and defines the fate of the natural world, as interpreted by the mind. It is a mask that conceals an endless series of other masks.
The general idea of melancholy is perceived only in the form of its invisible outline, in the form of a collection of stars, even though it is felt in the human body, by the human body. Its astrological metaphors are an externalization of what people feel under the spell of melancholic affect. These stars have many names, one of which is the Greek root for melancholy – μέλαινα χολή, melaina kole – and there are others too: black bile, Cronos, melencolia illa heroica (the so-called “heroic melancholy” by certain interpreters), spleen, Langeweile, capital “M” Melancholie, melancholia, Melancholi, Tungsind, atrabile, Schwermut, Saturn, Ennui, acedia, sloth, idleness, depression, saudade, and melancholy – the particular, moment-to-moment form of its general idea at any given time. It may appear ridiculous to embrace the entirety of these significations in a single word, “melancholy” – yet, this is precisely what Benjamin proposes. In his later years, Benjamin archived of his intellectual constellations in Das Passagenwerk. That constellation had been shown to the twentieth-century German critic by a nineteenth-century Parisian poet: Charles Baudelaire. The latter had taught Benjamin which stars in the night sky formed this celestial image, an image that connected the two men across their two centuries. Indeed, Baudelaire’s enigmatic focalization upon melancholy that Benjamin discovered an invaluable bridge between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. Jean Starobinski, in writing about Baudelaire’s use of the word melancholy, offers this helpful appraisal:

Surely the very word ‘melancholy,’ and its direct descendant, the adjective melancholic, had become hard to utter in poetry [in Baudelaire’s day]: these words were suffering from overuse. They had been linked too often with solitary contemplation, in landscapes of cliffs or ruins. Commonplace sentimental remarks also relied on it. In “Fusées” (“Rockets”), after a list of affectionate “caprices of language,” we find: “Mon petit âne mélancol-
lique” (“My little melancholy donkey”). In his verse, Baudelaire uses this dangerous word only rarely, and then judiciously. (This is not true in his prose, his critical essays, or his correspondence, where the same precautions are not required.) (118)

Melancholy, though seldom uttered in Baudelaire’s poetry, hangs over each word, a part of the Baudelairean Parisian landscape: it is expected and does not require the formal announcement of its presence.

The brightest star in Baudelaire’s schema of melancholy’s constellation, and the second structural image for this dissertation, is spleen – and not the one that produces red blood cells. In poetry, spleen became particularly prevalent in the eighteenth century, with many poetic examples emerging from England. Spleen in this sense, like melancholy, used to be understood both literally and figuratively. While it is no longer considered an organ whose imbalanced functioning produces liquefied bad moods in the blood stream, spleen has not lost its powerful appeal to poets and artists. Spleen continued to be one the stars recognized in the constellation of melancholy. Baudelaire’s Fusées provides an overview of his splenetic doctrine:

J’ai trouvé la définition du Beau, – de mon Beau. C’est quelque chose d’ardent et triste, quelque chose d’un peu vague, laissant carrière à la conjecture. Je vais, si l’on veut, appliquer mes idées à un objet sensible, à un visage de femme. Une tête séduisante et belle, une tête de femme, veux-je dire, c’est une tête qui fait rêver à la fois, – mais d’une manière confuse, – de volupté et de tristesse ; qui comporte une idée de mélancolie, de lassitude, même de satiété, – soit une idée contraire, c’est-à-dire une ardeur, un désir de vivre, associé avec une amertume refluante, comme venant de privation ou de désespoir. Le mystère, le regret sont aussi des caractères du Beau. … Je ne prétends pas que la Joie ne puisse pas s’associer avec la Beauté, mais je ne dis que la Joie [en] est un des

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5 Let it be said that my own prose, while it in no way aspires to matching Baudelaire’s highest of heights, imposes no limit on the frequency of “melancholy” appearing in this text – the reader will suffer its overuse here.
In the image of spleen, the pathological and the ugly become a gateway into the beautiful and the sanguine. It is in this image that Baudelaire would found the core of his poetic doctrine, from which Benjamin later drew inspiration.

Spleen was attractive to Baudelaire because, unlike melancholy, its image was in its twilight without having, just yet, exhausted its poetic capital. The phantasm of spleen, which carries an English sensibility and strangeness, was designated to carry the burden of signifying (and being strange) for melancholy, and pointing to the tension of *correspondances* that Baudelaire’s poetry sought to characterize. Baudelaire has defined beauty through an image which is, at once, sad and beautiful, despairing and yet breathtaking, that he has found, at once, his definition of beauty and melancholy. His assessment of melancholy is inseparable from his erotic, fantasizing appraisal of the feminine face. The vision of this figure lapses consciousness into a dream state. The Baudelairean pseudo-dialectic of *correspondances* seeks the depths of consciousness, its layers and folds, its phantasms and fantasies. In his coupling of “Spleen et Idéal” Baudelaire found the means to *melancholize* his allegories. Mario Praz, in his reading of *Les Fleurs*, argues that

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6 I have found my definition of Beauty, – my Beauty. It is something ardent and sad, something a little vague, which gives way to conjecture. I will apply, if it is allowed, my ideas to a sensible object, to the image of a woman’s face. A head so seductive and beautiful, the head of a woman, one which makes one dream at once, – but in a confused manner, – of sensuousness and sadness; one which contains an idea of melancholy, of laziness, even of satiety, – whether it is of a contrary notion, that is to say, an ardor, a desire for life, associated with an overflowing grief, as if arisen from lack or despair. Mystery and regret, these are also characters of Beauty. … I do not pretend that Joy cannot associate with Beauty, but merely that Joy is only one of its most vulgar ornaments; – whereas Melancholy is its most esteemed companion, to such a degree that I cannot scarcely conceive of (is my brain an enchanted mirror?) a type of Beauty in which there is not Woe.
“beauty” emerges from a pastiche of “materials that are generally considered to be base and repugnant” (28-30). Baudelaire advocates that one should fall in love with something that ought to make one sick, body and soul. For in French mal means both evil and illness, feeling bad as well as being bad. There is something in the feminine figure, for Baudelaire, that provokes a deep sense of malaise (un mal de femme, so to speak). Eroticism in Baudelaire is a desire for not only something one cannot have, but something one should not desire to begin with: the event of a falling in love with pure memory, pure consciousness. There is no woman “out there” for the melancholic gaze, just a self-conscious and ineffective devotion to a figure of Beauty that engenders profound sadness, a Petrarchan “Laura” represented wearing a death mask, the ultimate representation of the death of love.

Benjamin had an affinity for locating and interpreting dialectical images of melancholic tension equal to Baudelaire’s deftness for writing them. I have already named spleen as one such image in the constellation of melancholy. Benjamin writes in “Central Park” about spleen as “a bulwark against pessimism” and defending the notion that for all of his disturbing, despairing imagery, “Baudelaire is no pessimist” (SW 4:162). Marcus Bullock argues that this refusal to succumb to pessimism represents “the heroism of the dandy, who conquers the absence of love by a devotional atheism, celebrating his equanimity while repeating forms of a life that he believes most likely never was and certainly never will be” (62). What Benjamin learns from Baudelaire, very early on, is that the realization of the impossibility of a task, such as the task of the translator or endless responsibility of the scholar, is no reason to abandon a project.
Benjamin develops, refines and in some ways redefines a melancholy consciousness as the foundation for contemplative thought. In the Baroque, Benjamin is seeking melancholy’s emblems as expressed in the Trauerspiel; in la modernité he seeks the commodities of melancholy itself. Put differently, “Allegorical emblems [from the Baroque] return as commodities [in the nineteenth century]” (SW 4:183). Benjamin reads, or detects, heroism in Baudelairean melancholy, which is a return, in a different form, of a heroism that manifested in the Baroque Trauerspiel. Each of these heroisms is attributed an image: the “souvenir” in Baudelaire represents a transfiguration of the Baroque corpse and becomes an object of the collector; or in Benjamin’s words:

Melanchthon’s phrase “Melancolia illa heroica” provides the most perfect definition of Baudelaire’s genius. But melancholy in the nineteenth century was different from what it had been in the seventeenth. The key figure in early allegory is the corpse. In late allegory, it is the “souvenir” [Andenken]. The “souvenir” is the schema of the commodity’s transformation into an object for the collector. The correspondances are, objectively, the endlessly varied resonances between one souvenir and the others. “J’ai plus de souvenirs que si j’avais mille ans.” (SW 4:190)

This passage ties together Baudelaire’s poem to Benjamin’s analysis of the Baroque: it is perhaps the most central to this dissertation, and its importance is addressed throughout.

The themes of heroica (also heroic, heroical) as a melancholic Eros, the phenomenal experience of memory, and personal heroism of poetic genius are the cornerstones of my reading of the Renaissance and Romanticism, as well as, Baudelaire and Benjamin, the latter two being the major subjects of this dissertation. The familiar phrase of Melanchthon’s melancolia heroica reappears as the textual piece of thread in the above quotation. It has both a historical meaning, in the form of love melancholia, and a personal meaning in the manner Benjamin deploys the phrase in “Central Park” and the
SATURNINE CONSTELLATIONS

On one occasion – which is cited and commented upon in chapter four – Benjamin has called this variety of melancholia “sublime melancholy” (*Origin* 151). I deploy this phrase in a few key places in this work, usually in contrast to the term *spleenetic melancholia* which serves as sublime melancholy’s dialectical partner.

Max Pensky – whose critical apparatus in *Melancholy Dialectics* I have borrowed from – provides an important, though flawed, reading of *melancolia heroica*:

Baudelaire’s modern melancholy is “heroic” for precisely the same reasons that the Renaissance melancholy of Ficino or Melanchthon was heroic. The melancholic realizes that the sentence of melancholia is, if inescapable, also endowed with a dialectical force. The same powers that torment the subject with sadness, despair, and the *taedium vitae* can, through the self’s submission to a discipline, be transformed into the powers of a higher insight into the occult secrets of nature. Ficino, for these reasons, understood the dialectic of Saturn to promise the elevation of the soul into the transcendent realm of mystical correspondences even as the soul remained tormented by the symptoms of melancholy sadness. (175-176)

Melancholy in Baudelaire and Benjamin is elevated, through the tension of sorrow and inspiration, into an intellectual power. It is the submission to the embrace of a pathological eroticism and heroism. The desire for the lost object in-itself, rather than being absolved from this loss, afforded by Baudelaire and Benjamin a certain pride, a sense of having been chosen. The willingness to abscond, alone, into a vortex of spleenetic melancholia as the permanent state of one’s own (unhappy) consciousness is a confirmation of one’s intellectual pursuits in a world that would negate the veracity of these ambitions. The source of this insight was the Renaissance thought – elaborated most notably by the Italian humanist philosopher, Marsilio Ficino – on a sublime

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7 I credit this term to Jonathan Flatley’s reading of Benjamin in his *Affective Mapping* (65).
melancholy, mediated by a splenetic melancholia. At the same time, and this is where Pensky’s reading misses the mark, *melencolia [illa] heroica* is an *erotic* melancholia, not solely an intellectual, heroic melancholy. As Ioan P. Couliano points out: “Ficino himself admits the relationship between melancholy and erotic pathology, and Melanchthon makes them one and the same thing in his turn of phrase *melencolia illa heroica*” (20). In other words, Pensky reading of *heroica* as strictly “heroic” is not entirely on point: *melancolia heroica* is a primarily a relationship between eroticism and melancholy.

Renaissance melancholy was both a representation of the intellect stimulated by melancholic affect, and a warning about the potential, negative consequences of this stimulation. The threat of *erotomania* is the danger that makes the *heroism* of intellectual life thrilling, at times more so than love relationships. At the same time, this eroticism is always more about the stimulation of the mind, as opposed to being strictly about, for example, sexuality or sexual desire.

As this dissertation unfolds, my use of the word “melancholy” will show its manifoldedness: it represents the general idea that constellates its various faces and definitions, its phenomena and instantiations, its symbols and emblems. There is a danger, to which one can succumb, in idealizing melancholia. In many instances, melancholia is a narcissistic refusal to accept what has passed, a refusal to let go when “letting go” is the only option. This type of melancholic narcissism is marked at points in this dissertation. The other melancholy, which manages to leave such a narcissism behind, is the intellectual power that allows the intellect to *precisely let go* of the lost object, but also contemplate its essential character in the *moment* of loss. This
melancholy assists in the heightening of one’s consciousness. This erotic gaze upon loss is arguably possible in intellectual contemplation only, which is what has fascinated Ficino, Baudelaire and Benjamin. Baudelairean (poetic) or Benjaminian (sublime) melancholy is the after-image of (h)erotic melancholy, an instantiation of what Giorgio Agamben interprets as “Melancholic Eros” in his *Stanzas*. In his reading of Ficino’s *De amore*, Agamben notes that an excess of contemplation launches the subject into an over-exaggerated embrace, from gazing into the lake to launching oneself into one’s own reflection like Narcissus (17-18). Agamben contends that the melancholic has a predilection for believing as tactile and real what is ethereal and transcendental. In other words, “the incapacity of conceiving the incorporeal and the desire to make of it the object of an embrace are two faces of the same coin, of the process in whose course the traditional contemplative vocation of the melancholic reveal itself vulnerable to a violent disturbance of desire menacing it from within” (18). In this way, the melancholic transforms into a form of self-conscious and contrived heroism what is, essentially, an embrace of the phantasm, from a certain point of view afforded by the perspective of temporality.

It is the image of this embrace that helps structure my reading of Baudelaire and Benjamin. For the poet or the philosopher, this embrace may be transferred and transfigured from its sexual dimension into a contemplative sphere where erotic intensity itself is refracted onto new objects. This embrace is a representation of the “tragic insanity of the Saturnine temperament” that “finds its root in the intimate contradiction of a gesture that would embrace the unobtainable” (Agamben 18). There is a moment in the
development of a thinker where the lost embrace – of a woman, a god, an ideal, a fantasy – may be transferred into fuel for intellectual activity. In the figures of the Baroque, in the twilight of love-melancholy, Benjamin and Baudelaire located the dialectical image of the embrace of the incorporeal, and founded their form of intellectual heroism from this image. It is an obsessive, principled eroticism for the “lost object” as Freud would call it: in the case of Baudelaire, it was the image of spleen and for Benjamin it was the constellation/quotation as emblem for the melancholic archive of historical things. It gives life to the journey into pure thought. Their images for spleen and the archive grow out of a concern that their societies were losing or had lost something vital. The embrace of their projects is life-affirming and self-confirming.

The melancholic is blessed with an overpowering memory. Benjamin acknowledges this character trait when he quotes the first line from the second “Spleen” poem in his assessment of Baudelaire’s genius (above): “J’ai plus de souvenirs que si j’avais mille ans [I am fuller of memories than if I had lived a thousand years]” (OC 1:73; CV 175). This line provides a view into the anatomy of Baudelairean spleen. The speaker is observing Paris in the 1850-60s as the city undergoes fundamental transformations. The rubble left after the 1848 revolution is replaced with Haussmann’s boulevards and the arcades of a new capitalism. The speaker is excited and terrified at once, by the possibilities of the new and the erasure of the old. Starobinski suggests that the poem “organizes itself according to a comparative structure” and it “ultimately leaves indeterminate the quantitative growth of remembered objects: their number far surpasses the enormous measurement of the supposed period of time … There is a disproportion
between an unspeakable real and what one allows to be uttered (‘a thousand years’)’” (438). A person with over a thousand years’ worth of remembrances would be forever lost in revisitation and thus, like Borges’ Funes, unable to settle on a single thought, unable to organize the endless recollection of phenomena. But that is what Baudelaire’s speaker feels compelled to do in the face of endless fading beloved objects, each as precious as the last. At the same time, the old order of the world is long past, and attempts to revive this world are futile. The inevitable failure to perform the impossible is crushing, and leaves the speaker alone with a most unhappy consciousness as the indivisible remainder. This hypothetical stretching of the mind, however, represents that vital force of melancholy, this capacity to be lost in thought, but also to generate thought at unbearable depths. This is the “heightened self-awareness” from KSP’s theorization of melancholy, and one I engage with throughout my own work. The liminal perspective of the poet or philosopher is the inheritance of an unhappy consciousness, a love of idealisms that are real to the artist but appear frustratingly invisible to most other people. The development of a noble melancholy in the Renaissance is the reversal of frustration into accomplishment.

In recent times, histories of melancholy have begun to (re)surface. Just in the last few years, Noga Arikha, Clark Lawlor, Jacky Bowring, László F. Földényi and Stanley Jackson have each provided attempts at general histories of melancholy as both idea and its conceptual manifoldness. Each of these has had to square up both the influence of Freud and the semantics of depression. One may recall that Julia Kristeva speaks, in her

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8 George Steiner has offered at least “ten” reasons for the “sorrow without a cause” (4).
Soleil Noir, of melancholy and depression “sans distinguer toujours les particularités des deux affections, mais ayant en vue leur structure commune [without always distinguishing the particularities of the ailments but keeping in mind their common structure]” (18; trans. Roudiez 11). Kristeva writes in the tradition of a melancholia handed down from Freud – who had, in turn, drawn it out from Hamlet and other sources. The latter’s essay “Trauer und Melancholie [Mourning and Melancholia]” has endlessly influenced and complicated the history of melancholy since early twentieth century. In writing about melancholy, Kristeva chooses to focus on its ideality and acknowledges the multiplicity of its manifold concepts. Freud’s essay takes the other approach, where melancholy as concept is the singular focus of the paper, which purports to contrast its negative to mourning’s positive. The approaches of Kristeva and Freud retain equal legitimacy in the face of the entire history of what has been said about melancholy. They are both divergent from my own, such that I have opted to proceed in a different way, which will unfold over the course of the dissertation’s successive chapters. In order to effectively study a type of melancholy, expressed in Benjamin’s treatises and passages, that will be foreign to a number of readers, I have needed to resort to a few innovative, lexical tactics. My study is not solely concerned with charting the history of melancholia – as this has been done: part of my aim is to recognize and analyses a phenomenon in literature and art where one becomes self-aware of one’s own melancholia, relative to the history of melancholy in general.

To study this phenomenon of a self-aware melancholia, this dissertation offers up a neologism: metamelancholy – credit for its invention goes to Călin Mihăilescu – a term
which has not, to my knowledge, ever been used before. The purpose of this term is to acknowledge the moments of self-consciousness in the history of melancholia between the gap of one’s own melancholy and that of others, and of the other’s place in the total history of melancholy’s constellation. It is not a term that appears frequently in the dissertation, and is deployed only at crucial moments of the text. Metamelancholy is inaugurated in the work of Robert Burton’s *Anatomy of Melancholy*, whereby a pseudonymous Democritus Jr. presents a theory of melancholy intended to treat the melancholia of its author, Burton himself. Metamelancholy, quite literally the melancholy of (i.e., about) melancholy, attempts to view the interiority and phenomenological mechanisms of the affect itself. One may seek melancholy from outside of its influence, one may also develop an awareness of how melancholy – in oneself or others – grows, evolves and suffers many transfigurations over time. This dissertation, in many ways, charts the history of (meta)melancholy.

In the first chapter, I outline a history of “heroical” melancholy from its generally accepted origins in (pseudo)Aristotle’s *Problems*, through its developments in Ficino and Burton and (on its way out) to *Hamlet* and *Le Misanthrope*. The chapter is meant to show *melancolia heroica* in its positive and negative acceptations: intellectual power, erotic love-sickness, tyrannical misanthropy, scholarly gloom. The nineteenth century sees a revival and re-engagement with Renaissance melancholy. The second chapter takes up this revival, in its implicit and explicit aspects, in the work of Blake and into its twilight with Kierkegaard, with Keats’ poetry sitting in the middle. The progress of this chapter follows the development of a dialectic between joy and sorrow in these writers,
something that they share in common. In the chapter on Baudelaire, I chart an explicit return and revival of melancholy in his poetry, which is contrasted with his understanding of spleen. Be it said here that as splenetic melancholia begins to dominate in Baudelaire’s writing, the poet discovers an interiority within spleen itself: this interior is explored at the cost of a Renaissance-style noble melancholy. With Benjamin, this melancholy is rescued and redeemed in two movements. In the first instance, sublime melancholy is discovered in the study of the German *Trauerspiel*, where Benjamin focalizes a melancholic constellation of images; in the second instance, Benjamin’s archive redeems Baudelaire’s spleen by preserving its highest moment – from “Tableaux parisiens” – in a crystal of quotation carts and notes.
Chapter 1 – Spleen and Heroica: Under the Sign of Saturnine Melancholy

All creative action resides in a mood of melancholy, whether we are aware of the fact or not, whether we speak at length about it or not. All creative action resides in a mood of melancholy, but this is not to say that everyone in a melancholic mood is creative.\(^9\)

What art thou, Spleen, which ev’ry thing dost ape?
Thou Proteus to abus’d Mankind,
Who never yet thy real Cause cou’d find,
Or fix thee to remain in one continued Shape.
Still varying thy perplexing Form,
Now a Dead Sea thou ’lt represent,
A Calm of stupid Discontent,
Then, dashing on the Rocks wilt rage into a Storm.\(^{10}\)

Heidegger’s *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* addresses boredom at some length. In the essay’s second part, the German thinker builds from the attunement of profound, *ennui*-like boredom and how one in such a state can engage the world. What in the Medieval period, under the name of *acedia*, had been known as the greatest of the sins was now, in the twentieth century, being considered for the first time as a grounding affect for Dasein, an attunement that plays a role in disclosing the world. The term that Heidegger deploys to express the “mood of melancholy” is *Schwermut*. It is an infrequent word in Heidegger’s writing. On this rare occasion where Heidegger addresses melancholy directly, a famous question is recalled, quoted (in Ancient Greek) as if one should recognize it immediately. “Why is it that all those men who have achieved exceptional things, whether in philosophy, in politics, in poetry, or in the arts, are clearly melancholics?” (Aristotle, cited in *Metaphysics* 183). Through this quotation, Heidegger

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\(^{10}\) Anne Finch, Countess of Winchilsea, “The Spleen: A Pindaric Poem” (l.1-8).
signals his apprehension of the tradition of philosophical, scholarly melancholy that
grows out of the giants of Ancient Greece and would be brought to its full fruition at the
time of the Renaissance. The influence of the theory of an inspired melancholy that
brings out the “genius” in people waxes and wanes, and this chapter charts a portion of
this progression. My reading of “Problem XXX” is meant to highlight certain key details,
which are later refined by Ficino’s generation of Renaissance writers and thinkers. Over
the shoulder of an entire age stands, or rather sits, Dürer’s (feminized) melancholy angel,
all the while. A dog in the same engraving casts a knowing, furtive glance to this winged
icon of history, and perhaps to us as well. Milton’s contribution to this melancholy
dialectic, in the form of his two poems “L’Allegro” and “Il Penseroso,” represent the
synthesis of the twin traditions of a sublime and splenetic melancholia.

In between Renaissance melancholy and Baroque misanthropy lies the over-
whelming figure of Burton and his book *The Anatomy of Melancholy*. With Burton is
inaugurated a unique form of reflection upon melancholy, one that landed in the middle
of not only Christian medieval, religious concerns about melancholy as sloth and idle-
ness, but also the inheritances of Aristotle, Ficino, and the entire tradition of classical
poetry. Burton was a physician of the soul whose remedies are the works of poets. In the
balance between melancholies, contemporary and ancient, personal and impersonal,
Burton discovered a metamelancholic form of reflection. For Burton was always already
using an entire tradition of theories on melancholy to work through his own gloom. His
tract on melancholy was built on both his personal emotion and those proper to historical
melancholy. Aristotle and Ficino had argued for a *balanced* use of melancholy: they had
warned of consequences if black bile burned too hotly. Burton expands these warnings into a massive treatise. Love-melancholy, to which Burton devoted a great deal of his attention, captures the essence of melencolia heroica. The representation of erotic phantasm casts its influence over the intellectual struggle over gloom and despondency. With the malcontents of Hamlet and Alceste, one witnesses the exemplification of love-melancholy turned misanthropic. This is also the death – neither the first nor the last – of Renaissance, sublime melancholy. With Hamlet, one sees a superego overwhelm the pleasure of melancholy with privilege, egotism, misogyny and tyrannical fits of rage. Alceste caricatures the melancholy man, showing him to be a laughable, unreasonable buffoon: right in thought and opinion, but wrongheaded in execution and manners. Both men lose love as a result of contrived intellectual machinations, and they are swallowed by the burning heat of an Eros falling back to earth like a meteorite. The suffering of these malcontents is worthy of a laugh, rather than sympathy, a cautionary tale on what may happen should one come into the grip of the Saturnine constellation.

**Aristotle’s paradigm (a view of history)**

As one opens an investigation of melancholy (in the West) it is crucial to acknowledge the influence of the rightly famous passage from Aristotle’s *Problems*, which Heidegger chose to recite as grounding his philosophy on boredom. As a constellation around which medicine and psychology, the visual and literary arts, and the individual and social faces of sadness and dejection, melancholy leaves marks of a profound series of internal contradictions, daring interpretation. It is not the task of this analysis to determine whether
Aristotle was correct or incorrect in his assessment of melancholy: what is at stake is, on the one hand, the historical importance and resonance of his influential discussion, and, on the other hand, the structure of the Problems’ metaphor for melancholy’s inner workings. Within the schema of the four humours (blood, bile, phlegm and black bile), Aristotle\textsuperscript{11} notes the paradoxical co-presence of melancholy as the mark of both madness and genius. The opening passage of chapter 30, section 1 of the Problems (also called Problemata physica) is the classical articulation of that dichotomy:

Why is it that all those men who have become extraordinary in philosophy, politics, poetry, or the arts are obviously melancholic, and some to such an extent that they are seized by the illnesses that come from black bile...? (277)

More than two millennia later one is no closer to an answer to that question. As Földényi notes, with the question posed by “Problem XXX,” for the first time, “the concepts of excellence and extraordinariness are associated with melancholia, which may be surprising” at first glance (7). It is, however, in the manner in which Aristotle’s text analyses this question that one arrives at the central problem of the question itself, or the problem that the question seeks to announce worthy of further scrutiny. The question itself, and its assumptions, are of crucial importance. Certain individuals, and Aristotle lists a series of mythical heroes and actual men, are extraordinary. Beyond this, they are extraordinary in certain areas, all of which require an idealized creativity or knowledge base, a capacity for strenuous and exemplary intellectual work. And yet, the excellence in the arts, philosophy or politics is contiguous with the affliction of melancholy, or by the

\textsuperscript{11} More probably, one of his followers, possibly Theophrastus, as noted in the introduction of the Mayhew edition of the Problems (274-275) and by scores of other critics. The dissertation refers to this author as Aristotle for the sake of simplicity.
symptoms of melancholy as illness. In that conjunction, between the “obviously melancholic” and the “illnesses that come from black bile” lies the crucial dichotomy of at least two melancholies. The one that permits extraordinary accomplishments is inexorably connected to the one that marks a branch of the sick. These two faces appear on the same coin. Under the humoral theory, black bile, when in excess, causes the symptoms of dejection and self-loathing that are associated with melancholic affliction. The author’s primary concern, however, is in the exceptional individual who happens to have a mark of the unexceptional, the sick. There are melancholics for whom nothing is exceptional beyond their illness: it is part of their nature, a predisposition. This makes Aristotle’s problem all the more curious: he has found melancholics of two completely different types. One who is prone to symptoms of melancholic illness, and yet is capable of exceptionalism in certain creative fields, and the other who is a melancholic suffering from the illness without signs of other extraordinary capacity, beyond their suffering. “Problem XXX” is a thorough attempt to speculate on the mechanisms of these two melancholies, in particular the one of the exceptional person.

Classics scholar Peter Toohey – like Földényi – thoroughly analysed Aristotle’s references to Heracles, Lysander, Ajax and Bellerophon from the opening paragraphs of “Problem XXX” in his monograph Melancholy, Love, and Time. Toohey productively reads the extremities of melancholia, whereby the mania of Heracles is contrasted with the depression of Bellerophon (34-40). It should be noted that Toohey is deeply critical of Aristotle’s position, which has been “canonical” in the West, but at the same time “deceptive” as it “masks the reality of the ancient understanding of melancholy” (42). In
other words, Aristotle’s position has been accepted as if the writers of Ancient Greece fell in line with it, without other alternative theories. Földényi’s assessment of “Problem XXX” is far more generous, saying that Aristotle’s view of the melancholic helps clarify the “melancholics’ talent for surprisingly accurate prophesying” (23). In a later passage, “Problem XXX” hints at a dichotomy within the positive valuation of melancholy itself. Aristotle writes:

[Melancholy] is a mixture of hot and cold; for its nature consists of these two things. And this is why black bile becomes both very hot and very cold. For the same thing can naturally be affected by both of these, for instance, even water, which is cold: if, however, it is sufficiently heated, as when it is boiling, it is hotter than the flame itself, and stone and iron made red-hot become hotter than the coal, though they are cold by nature. (285)

The analogy to water is compelling, for a single substance can take on a variety of properties based on its manipulation. Moreover, a heated black bile begins to resemble its counterpart in the choleric humour, and a chilled one in the phlegmatic humour; they trend toward depression on the one hand, and mania on the other.

The right mixture of hot and cold may be read as metaphor for marriage, and also of the sex act. As Földényi writes, one affected by melencolia heroica “is at the mercy of Eros, and that is not only a joyful state but also a suffering” (229). Agamben suggests that “erotic disorder figures among the traditional attributes among the traditional attributes of black bile” (16). Consolidating citations from Aristotle (see “Problem XXX” on breath, 283-285) and Hildegard von Bingen, erotic melancholy is associated by Agamben with the “feral” character of the melancholic. This is in constant tension with the intellectual

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12 The title of Starobinski’s L’Encre de la mélancolie evokes the watery and liquid qualities of black bile.
side of the melancholy Aristotle problematizes, but it is also marked by the image of the
breath in “Problem XXX.” Couliano, who is critical of Agamben’s reading on certain
points, also marks the erotic character of burning melancholy, quoting the same sources.
The mixture of hot and cold may be taken to represent the erotic and the intellectual
respectively, which Melanchthon’s *melencolia heroica*, noted earlier, combines these
aspects. The melancholy born in Aristotle’s analysis will continue to carry these twin
significations: a lustful, leering, and perverse sexuality contrasted to a contemplative and
anthropocentric intellectualism. The image of this melancholy is the fulsome embrace of
the unobtainable, and the latter can take many forms (transcendence, idealized love,
immortality, global transfiguration). Aristotle’s primary concern, and this is where one
ought to return to the literal surface of his text, is the characterization of this mixture of
hot and cold in black bile.

Jackie Pigeaud – in her French edition of Aristotle’s “Problem XXX” – argues
that “black bile is a perfectly unstable mixture. It can be extremely hot or cold at any
moment” (*Homme de génie* 21). Földényi notes that the moderate temperature of black
bile, as “a *medium* type … is therefore *healthy*, and since the hot and cold were mixing
appropriately, melancholics were capable of all kinds of things” including achievement in
the arts “though they were also at constant risk” from the shifting temperature of the
black bile (13). Black bile, in this analysis, is the most flexible of humours, the one which
can suffer the most difference, the most tempering from extreme dispositions and
temperatures, *despite* its association in the four humours to cold and dry climes.
Moreover, it may resemble the conditions of its supposed humoral siblings, at times
taking on the qualities of the sanguine, choleric and phlegmatic temperaments. The force of this heating and cooling water, in this metaphorical schema, is considerable and potentially overwhelming. Aristotle continues:

Now black bile, being cold by nature and not on the surface, when it is in the condition mentioned, if it abounds in the body, produces apoplexy or torpor or spiritlessness or fear; but if it becomes overheated, it produces high-spiritedness with song, and insanity, and the breaking out of sores and such things. In most people, therefore, arising from their daily nutrition, it produces no differences in character, but only brings about some melancholic disease. But those in whom such a mixture has formed by nature, these straightaway develop all sorts of characters, each difference in accordance with the different mixture; for instance, those in whom (the black bile) is considerable and cold become sluggish and stupid, whereas those in whom it is very considerable and hot become mad, clever, erotic, and easily moved to spiritedness and desire, and some become more talkative. But many too, owing to this heat being near the location of the intelligence, are affected by diseases of madness or inspiration … and all the inspired persons, when (the condition) comes not through disease but through natural mixture. (285-287)

In this passage, Aristotle attempts to distinguish the characteristics of black bile as the source of melancholic illness from those qualities that make the melancholic subject to bouts of exceptionalism. The spirit, excited by the phantasms of natural black bile, stokes the faculties of desire, but also of the intelligence and the will.

Continuing in the structural analogy between the natural, observable properties of water and black bile Aristotle asserts that the right mixture of black bile, the right mixture of cold and hot. Too cold leads to the depressive, impotent feelings of despair; too hot leads to an energetic, lustful and manic insanity. The heating or cooling of black bile does nothing unusual in “most people,” that is to say, they become ill in a normative manner. For some, for the very few, the right mixture leads to the exceptionalism in the arts, politics, or philosophy Aristotle wishes to pinpoint. Aristotle argues that, in the right
people, the presence of the hot and cold black bile leads to a melancholic condition that is
*not* an illness, but a mark of the genius. This analysis is the location of the genius and
madness dynamic of melancholy, and the first gestures to the melancholy that the
Renaissance would theorize. Aristotle elaborates on this proper level of heat for black
bile and the melancholic humour:

> But those in whom the excessive heat is relaxed to a mean, these people
> are melancholic, but they are more intelligent, and they are less eccentric,
> but they are superior to the others in many respects, some in education,
> others in arts, and others in politics. And in the face of danger, such a state
> produces great variation because many of the men are sometimes in consis-
> tent in the presence of fears. For as their body happens to be with
> respect to such a mixture, so they differ in themselves. Now the mel-
> ancholic mixture is itself inconsistent, just as it produces inconsistencies in
> those with the (melancholic) diseases; for like water, it is sometimes cold
> and sometimes hot. (287-289)

Aristotle speculates that the genius is marked through the mixture of a correctly heated,
*natural* black bile, with exceptionalism is a symptom of the latter.13 Földényi notes, since
the black bile “was a medium type, it was therefore healthy” (13). This black bile is not
exogenous, because it occurs naturally in the bodies of exceptional melancholics. It is as
natural to these people as their sanguine, red blood. As Pigeaud writes, the significance of
Aristotle’s theory lies in the obligation “to consider together tradition and actuality, the
imaginary and biological fact, nature and culture” (*De la mélancolie* 10). This mixture,
however, could turn out to be a veritable witches’ brew.14

13 Faced with “danger” – whether physical or psychical – some people fold and some excel. In *Beyond the
Pleasure Principle* Freud would write about how anxiety serves as preparation for fear, to avoid trauma if
frightened. Heidegger considered anxiety an attunement that disclosed the world to Dasein, and allowed the
latter to care (*Sorge*).

14 In other words, the mixture is potent and of uncertain composition. The Renaissance period speculations
on magic would attempt to provide the needed ingredient list to this “natural black bile.”
Aristotle did know, however, what could stoke the fire of this black bile mixture. The introduction of fear becomes the differentiator between the normal person, for whom melancholy will crush their energies when faced with a fearful situation, and the person of exception, for whom the danger of *melancolia heroica* is an enabling power:

So when something fearful is announced, if it happens when the mixture is colder, it makes the person cowardly; for it paves the way to fear, and fear cools. Those feeling great fear prove this: for they tremble. But if the mixture is hotter, the fear brings it down to the moderate level, and *(makes the person)* in possession of himself and unaffected. And so it is with respect to daily spiritlessness; for we are often in a condition of feeling grief, though for what reason we are unable to say; and sometimes we are in a cheerful condition, but why is not clear. Such affections and those called superficial come to be in everyone to some small extent, for some of their capacity is mingled in everyone; but those in whom they are deep, these people are already this type with respect to their characters. (289)

It is the mixture in the person that decides their temperament – Mayhew remarks in a footnote that mixture and temperament are equivalent terms – with sufficient heat, the introduction of fear balances the mixture, rather than bringing on bouts of trembling. It should be noted that Pigeaud, in her French translation of the text, argues that mixture is the best, most direct term, when compared to temperament (*Homme de génie* 42). As Aristotle contends, the “condition” of the melancholic “is quite saturated, they are very melancholic, whereas if it is mixed in a certain way, they are extraordinary” but an incorrect mixture leads “melancholic diseases” (289-291). Aristotle’s analysis, argues Pigeaud, opens itself to a difficulty, since “the complaint of the sick person is a return to a deaf biological world and yet is a revelation of being. Melancholic thought witnesses a dramatic valuation of the relationship between concept and affect” (*De la mélancolie* 42-43). The experience of living melancholia is inseparable from its concept, and vice-versa.
The experience of melancholia gives rise to a metamelancholic reflection on what living as a melancholic person can feel like.

Aristotle concludes his analysis of melancholy, and provides a useful summary of his overall argument:

So, to sum up, because the power of the black bile is uneven, melancholic people are uneven; for (the black bile) becomes both very cold and very hot. And because it is character-forming (for of the things in us, the hot and cold are especially character-forming), just like wine being mixed in the body in greater or lesser amounts, it produces certain qualities of character in us. Now both wine and black bile are full of breath. But since it is possible that what is uneven is well tempered and in a fine condition, and when it should be the disposition is hotter and then again cold, or the opposite owing to there being an excess, all melancholic people are extra-ordinary, not owing to disease but owing to nature. (293-295)

It is the nature of the melancholic and exceptional person to transform black bile into something productive, says Aristotle. One explicitly or implicitly recognizes the potential of contemplative thought and the will to art, despite also recognizing a cocktail of symptoms that one nowadays calls depression and manic-depressiveness. After Aristotle’s “Problem XXX” there are few developments in the above theory of melancholy. In the case of melancholy, its legacy lies in wait during the medieval period and its concern for acedia, until the Renaissance would take it up once again. For as Laurence Babb notes, an educated Elizabethan, if “asked which of the four temperaments [is] considered most desirable, [they] would probably say the sanguine” for “warmth and moisture are the primary qualities of blood, the predominant humour in the sanguine man” (“Elizabethan Man” 247). In the exceptional melancholic person, by nature, a preponderance of black bile takes on the qualities of the sanguine temperament. There would be no real second attempt to respond to this aporia to exceptional melancholy until
the Renaissance, where a theory of melancholy born out of Aristotle’s initial analysis would emerge. For Babb, melancholy “is the scholar’s occupational disease” (“Elizabethan Man” 252). In the Renaissance, an attitude which emerges is that “there is no need for the man of letters to be ashamed of his melancholy” because “few if any of the servants of the Muses escape the malady” (“Elizabethan Man” 253). The challenge for Renaissance period physicians, then, is to “determine what specific variety of melancholic humour Aristotle meant or to define the particular circumstances under which melancholy heightens the intellectual powers” (“Elizabethan Man” 253).

For KSP – who in their reading of the *Problems* honor its importance by quoting the full text of chapter 30 uninterrupted – there are two major branches of effects of black bile on the constitution of a person, one that is a condition in itself and another that is dependent on the character of a person. The effects of melancholy as condition differ entirely from those of melancholy’s effects based on a person’s character. The condition of melancholy “generates ‘melancholic diseases’ (among them epilepsy, paralysis, depression, phobias, and, if immoderate heat be the cause, recklessness, ulcers and frenzy)” whereas the melancholic character forms a part of that person’s “nature” where “for the first time the difference, present in the theories of medical writers as a tacit presupposition of which they were at most only partially aware, was clearly shown and expressed” (29). They continue:

On the other hand, men normal by nature ... could never acquire the qualities proper to the natural melancholic thanks to his habitual disposition. The normal man certainly was liable to melancholy diseases, but these diseases would then be merely temporary disturbances with no psychical significance, having no lasting effect on his mental constitution. The natural melancholic, however, even when perfectly well, possessed a
quite special “ethos,” which, however it chose to manifest itself, made him fundamentally and permanently different from “ordinary” men; he was, as it were, normally abnormal. (29-30)

KSP add that the “spiritual singularity of the natural melancholic” makes a person abnormal in both senses – ill and/or extraordinary; furthermore, once such a balance is established “it formed a basis of argument for the main thesis that all outstanding men were melancholics” (30-31). They continue: “The Problem, however, considers a melancholy disposition essential for just those achievements which require conscious aim and deliberate action – those in fact which correspond to the essentially intellectual virtues, that is to say achievements in the realm of art, poetry, philosophy or politics” (37). Further, “‘Problem XXX’ stands therefore at a point in the history of thought where Platonism and Aristotelianism interpenetrate and balance one another” (41). This mixed legacy is the one Ficino inherits.

Aristotle’s analysis of the problem of melancholy creates the dynamics of a character for whom the madness of creativity is the virtue of genius. Theories of melancholy, at certain points in history, would seize upon this figure of the melancholic genius as the representation par excellence of the artist. As Pigeaud opines: “‘Problem XXX’ is a reverie on creation, or rather, like one would say today, on creativity, on the capacity to create” (46). This reverie has had an immense reach. As Angus Gowland notes, there is a certain “orthodoxy” to conceptualizations and characterizations of melancholia in the Renaissance, many of which grew out of Aristotle (“Ethics” 103-104). In his reading of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* – a related text to “Problem XXX” – Gowland notes that melancholics were “temperamentally inclined to follow the guidance
of their imagination” because “melancholics are not themselves good or bad, precisely they do not deliberate” (“Ethics” 104). The *Nicomachean Ethics*, for Gowland, “inculcated a view of black bile and the melancholic complexion” noted above. For a Ficino, this represents the point of departure into a reading of Aristotelian melancholy. As Couliano notes, the combined heritage of Aristotle and Theophrastus carries forward into Ficino, having to sort out the Medieval *acea* from the Aristotelian natural black bile and the “‘hot’ melancholy” or “*melancholia fumosa*” (47-48). Melancholics are individuals for whom the imagination is primary above all else, including (as Couliano has noted) reason. The phantasms of Eros, as Agamben perceives them, drive the energies of hot melancholy. Amidst the array of qualities of the Saturnine character, can the force of Eros be turned away from the explicitly sexual and redirected to one’s own intellectual powers, which “heroical” melancholy can also lend assistance?

**Ficino, Saturn and Melancholy**

Theophrastus, in his *Characters*, when he describes “overzealousness” provides examples of what an overzealous person does – for example, certain acts, like a list of tendencies – as if the overzealous are predisposed to doing certain things and not others (91). In the description of mania in “Problem XXX,” one is met with a similar character type, that of the manic-melancholic character. The relationship between *Characters* and *Problems* is noted by scholars, including Paul Demont, who writes:

> The development, with Aristotle and his disciples, of the study of “characters” (in the *Ethics*) led to an ulterior step, the definition of a “melancholic character,” with the implied difficulty that for the foundation of a morals – of a physiology of *ethos* which constrains melancholics to
vehemence and temperance. The great author of “new” comedy, Menander, to whom links to Theophrastus, student of Aristotle, were known, stars and stages melancholics, at the end of the fourth century, in his plays Epitrepontes [“Men at Arbitration”] and Apsis [“The Shield”]. The melancholic temperament is defined more abstractly in one of Aristotelian Problems – the famous [“Problem XXX”] – which one can probably trace back to the same Theophrastus. (35)

What KSP identify in Aristotle, or the pseudo-Aristotle who could be Theophrastus, is the emergence of the melancholy type. As Mayhew notes, Theophrastus is attributed with a text called On Melancholy that is now lost (275). The Aristotelian/Theophrastian melancholic character type was associated, for Couliano, with “a prodigious memory, [and] an extraordinary capacity for analysis” (48). Furthermore, “Henry of Ghent, who recognized in melancholics a special aptitude for the arts due to their highly developed phantasmagoric faculty, denied them any leaning towards abstract thought. Ficino corrected that injustice by identifying the melancholic with the Saturnian” (Couliano 48). This innovation, from which KSP take the title of their study, has defined the astrological definition of the melancholic ever since. Not to be forgotten, in this Saturnian schema, is the burning energy of the heated, natural black bile. Eros is the fire than keeps the melancholic warm in the cold forest of solitude and loneliness, a place to which the latter have been condemned, speaking only to other phantasms. This fire, however, is as likely to keep one warm in these Dantean woods as it is to light the trees ablaze.

“In Ficino’s eyes, the melancholic personality was ambivalent” and their “most striking characteristic” appeared to be that “they were responsible for their own fate” (Földényi 101). The Saturnine character, in this way, represents a complex, constructed epithet that ascribes a series of personality traits avant la lettre. In the Renaissance the
connection between Saturn (Cronos), melancholics and genius was prevalent such that “the creative underside of the melancholic state was thus always apparent” (Arikha 117). From the trait of melancholy creative activity can be seen as a more probable result, in the same manner that the overzealous individual will tend towards actions that exaggerate and exacerbate. The Renaissance was an age of melancholically despondent yet exceptional individuals – or at least an age where Western intellectuals went to pains to notice this exception. This is part of the legacy constructed by Ficino’s De vita libri tres [The Three Books of Life], which Lepenies considers as the moment of “legitimation” for melancholy as an affect (166-167). Ficino read the key passages from Plato – not explicitly covered anywhere here in this dissertation – and Aristotle as a roadmap to recognizing melancholic types. As Rudolf and Margot Wittkower write: “Ficino showed that melancholy, the ambivalent temperament of those born under the equally ambivalent planet Saturn, was a divine gift” and that “the melancholy of great men was simply a metonymy for Plato’s divine mania” (102-103). Ficino’s influential theory, and the apprehension of its reception by later writers, such as Burton, has proved to be extremely significant. Alberto Manguel, in his The Traveler, the Tower, and the Worm, writes that the “thinkers of the Renaissance tried to turn what the early Christians has seen as the sin of acedia into something like a virtue” and “melancholy came to be seen as a privileged state, part of the intellectual condition, as well as the source of inspired creation” (59-60). Tamara Albertini has argued in favor of the importance of the intellect – and its relationship to the will – in the thought of Ficino. The intellect, she writes, represents in Ficino a predisposition to truth “and grasps what is universal in objects, which is why its inward
and enfoldling motion separates it from things” (223). In the envelopment of the intellectual, and subject to its powers, melancholy becomes the unstoppable force to shift the immovable object.

Ficino, following up on the Aristotelian discussion of melancholy, suggests that there “are three major reasons why scholars become melancholics. The first is heaven-caused, the second is natural, and the third is human” (6). The heavenly causes, writes Ficino, have to do with the influence of Mercury and Saturn, the latter “has us stick to them and make discoveries” (6). As Pascal Brisette notes, Ficino, in his studies, brought to bear “three kinds of knowledge: the Platonist conception of poetic furor, as his master described in Ion, the astrological that attributes to Saturn a decisive influence on the faculty of understanding, contemplation and metaphysical speculation, and, finally, medical knowledge that proposed rules of hygiene that help counter the negative effects of black bile on one’s spirit” (54). Ficino is not satisfied by the astrological causes, which is why he pairs it with the natural and human causes of (scholarly) melancholy. The natural cause(s) is of most interest, about which Ficino writes:

[Black] bile rigorously provokes the soul so that it might gather itself into one piece, stay in one piece, and be contemplated. This drives the student to the center of each thing, like the center of the world, and moves him to understand the highest things, since it is in accord with Saturn, the highest of planets. Contemplation itself, on the other hand, with a kind of rigorous gathering up, almost a seizing, contracts one’s nature like black bile. The human cause is through ourselves. Because with Sagittarius the mind often violently dries up and a great part of its moisture is consumed (which is nourishment of its natural warmth), much of its warmth is also extinguished. The condition of the brain then turns dry and cold, which is why this quality is called earthly and melancholy. (6)
Ficino, in this description, has taken the physical and chemical warming and cooling of black bile, and has implicated the human soul and the power of the intellect. In her path-breaking study, *The Gendering of Melancholia*, Juliana Schiesari comments, on the above passage, that “black bile ‘provokes the soul’ into concentration, *causes* this concentration” and “is also *like* concentration”; moreover, “the impetus to the cosmological center (of the earth) is at the same time a passage to the universal circumference (the orbit of Saturn, then thought to be the outermost planet)” (129). The astrological forces of Saturn move and alter the spiritual capacity of human beings, but for Ficino, the natural causes are even more interesting than these. As Couliano argues, the five senses from the body are a window for the soul, but “the soul cannot grasp anything that is not converted into a sequence of phantasms” (5). In short, the language of the soul is phantasmatic: the melancholic soul reads the world as a series of erotic, feral phantasms that the intellectual powers embrace. In this union, for Ficino, the total embrace of Eros, and its energies, in philosophical contemplation *was the risk* of the scholar: one could become lost and consumed by one’s perception of the phantasms *as real*. One would, quite literally, fall in love with ghosts, or rather, the ghostly apparitions of the ethereal as the real.

Ficino goes on to explain his views of the mechanics of black bile’s formation, and the role digestion plays, and then writes:

Of all scholars, those devoted to the study of philosophy are most bothered by black bile, because their minds get separated from their bodies and from bodily things. They become preoccupied with incorporeal things, because their work is so much more difficult and the mind requires an even stronger will. To the extent that they join the mind to bodiless truth, they are forced to separate it from the body. Body for these people never returns except as a half-soul and a melancholy one. This is in fact what our dear Plato meant in the *Timaeus*, when he said that the soul, in frequent
and intense contemplation of the divine, grows on such nourishment and becomes so powerful that it departs the body, and its body, left behind, seems to dissolve. It is as if it abandoned its bodily nature, fleeing sometimes with great agitation, and sometimes with none at all. (7)

Because melancholy, as idea, is without corporeality, the scholar’s essence likens itself to that spiritual, ethereal quality. The mind leads itself to metaphor and abstraction, though this comes at the risk of the body, which is also of great concern to Ficino – the latter preaches moderation and diet in other sections of The Book of Life. A mind and body not prepared, or predisposed, to these rigours of melancholy risks everything, risks death. Moreover, if the mind can no longer tell apart the fantasy from the perception of reality, there may be no return to a sanguine temperament for the melancholic scholar. As Eric Wilson poignantly writes, summarizing Ficino’s view of “melancholy philosophers”: the latter are “sorrowful thinkers [that] delve into the crepuscular continuum between clarity and clarity. They think that edges, circumferences, and fringes are the most interesting places in the world, for there on the terminal things reveal their deepest mysteries: their blurred identities, their relationship to opposites, their tortured duplicities” (75). In Wilson’s assessment of “Ficino’s hope,” the former argues that the latter constructs an image of the “melancholy philosopher” as one who, “after a long season of brooding on the boundary between conflicting potencies, will discover a hidden complicity, an untapped concord … [a] sudden insight into secret marriages between antinomies” (76).

Melancholy, as “a secret marriage between antimonies,” is an astrological, cosmological and natural force that drives scholarly discovery.

Addressing the explanation given by his forebears – Aristotle, Plato and Democritus – Ficino finds “unsatisfactory” the “more divine than human” explanation of
“why nobody is more melancholy than thinkers” (8). It is not sufficient to cite astrological forces as the sole cause. Ficino’s discussion continues:

Melancholy, that is, black bile, is something double: some of it is called natural by doctors, but another part touches on burning. This natural type is nothing other than a part of the blood getting thicker and dryer. The burning type is divided, however, into four kinds: for it is produced by a combustion of either natural melancholy, pure blood, bile, or phlegm. When the burning kind occurs, it is harmful to judgment and wisdom, for when this humor rises and burns, it makes you upset and angry, what the Greeks call ‘Mania,’ what we call madness. But even when it is extinguished, and its subtler and clearer parts broken, and all that is left is a foul soot, it makes you dull and stupid. This is why they call the melancholy disposition madness and insanity. Only that black bile, therefore, which we have called natural, is conducive to judgment and wisdom. But not always! For if it comes alone, it is too black, darkening the spirit with a thick mass, scaring the soul, and thus blocking thought. (8)

Ficino, like Aristotle, seizes upon a dual nature to black bile; furthermore, he locates a natural black bile, which is potentially harmless, but that can burn fiercely from the slightest, extraneous stimulus. Agamben refers to Ficino’s reading of black bile as a “double polarity,” which is an apt phrase (12). Natural black bile is the substance that for Ficino that lends the soul towards contemplation, particularly for the artist and the philosopher. Given this desirable black bile, which in the wrong person manifests as the burning one, Ficino is interested in prescribing how best it can be regulated, monitored and used to one’s advantage. Concerning natural black bile, Ficino adds: “Let black bile abound then, but very thinly” and then continues:

It should not seem so surprising that black bile is so easily inflamed, and once inflamed, burns so terribly. If we imagine it to be like plaster, we see that when water is boiled out, it immediately burns up. Melancholy has a power just as extreme. It is stable when in a certain unity and of a fixed nature. This is the situation when extremity does not reach to the other humors. When greatly heated up, it moves to great boldness, even ferocity, and when it gets very cold, it moves to extremes of fear and cowardice.
There are middle stages between cold and heat, various stages of incompleteness, where it produces various effects, not unlike what happens with wine, especially with strong wine. (9-10)

Ficino warns that black bile becomes extremely hot easily: “its dry nature is easily inflamed because it is so solid and tough. Once inflamed, it burns a long time” (10). One may use the power of melancholy, under the proper conditions, and only for the right people (scholars, “exceptional men”). As Schiesari argues, “there is [for Ficino] what we can call an art of melancholia, that is, a set of techniques that allows the scholar – and only the scholar – to avoid the pitfalls of excessive black bile and at the same time benefit from it” (132-133).

Noel Brann’s monograph on genius and melancholy in the Renaissance marks the tension between Platonism and Aristotelianism as the battleground for melancholy: where melancholy is located, as either a natural explanation of frenzy or the divine mark of supernatural inspiration, becomes the crucial distinction (9). Brann argues that for Ficino, genius “is furnished with an appropriate ally in the form of a moderately inflamed melancholy humor. Depending on which species of divine frenzy is working in cooperation with melancholy – mystical, prophetic, poetic, or love frenzy, according to Ficino, the result will be differing manifestations of genial forms” (82). The geniality of melancholy becomes the central interest of Renaissance thought on the subject. Brann adds that Ficino is subordinating Aristotle’s view to Plato in this case, and not eliminating it (83).

KSP write that Ficino’s Neoplatonism “gave shape to the idea of the melancholy man of genius and revealed it to the rest of Europe” (255). They add: “those thinkers who indulge in the deepest speculation and contemplation suffer most from melancholy” and
therefore it “is Saturn who leads the mind to the contemplation of higher and more hidden matters” (259-260). KSP also say:

Ficino’s system … contrived to give Saturn’s “immanent contradiction” a redemptive power: the highly gifted melancholic – who suffered under Saturn, in so far as the latter tormented the body and the lower faculties with grief, fear and depression – might save himself by the very act of turning voluntarily towards that very same Saturn. The melancholic should, in other words, apply himself of his own accord to that activity which is the particular domain of the sublime star of speculation, and which the planet promotes just as powerfully as it hinders and harms the ordinary functions of body and soul – that is to say, to creative contemplation, which takes place in the “mens,” and only there. (270-271)

Note that KSP say “turn” and not embrace. One may contemplate Saturn, but it is nonsense to attempt an embrace of a celestial body. That said, under the influence of melancolia heroica, this is precisely what happens: one attempts to embrace the impossibly distant, the ethereal, the transcendental, the fantastic. Heroical melancholy, as Burton calls it, is equal parts inspiring and fatally dangerous, for oneself and others.

“As enemy and oppressor of all life in any way subject to the present world, Saturn generates melancholy; but as friend and protector of a higher and purely intellectual existence he can also cure it” (KSP 271). Yet this turn to the Saturnine always risks the temptation of the embrace, to which the “Saturnine” melancholic “must take every precaution” as they are in constant danger (KSP 271). The intellectual existence which cures melancholy cannot be forever sustained. Eventually the artist completes an artwork or stops working to rest: in these moments the melancholic soul is returned to the prisons of his body. As Brann notes, Ficino’s recognition of this intellectual power was not without some feelings of apprehension: “as [a] physician Ficino was all too aware of the destructive potential of melancholy, in the capacity of which it acted more as a
deterrent to spiritual advancement” (91). Brann goes on to argue that: “Nevertheless, as perceived by Ficino, the potentially injurious effects of melancholy did not prevent it from concurrently serving as an aid to more favourable expressions of the human mind, underscoring the dual ability of the melancholy humour to promote the nobler as well as ignobler inclinations of human behaviour” (91). Moderation was the preached refrain, melancholy in moderation, and only for those able to withstand its fiery energies. Everyone else should check themselves, and stay away from the melancholic power they cannot hope to control or command. Indeed, there would be a number of exceptional individuals that emerged in the noon-time and twilights of the Renaissance – two of note, namely Dürer and Milton, are discussed next.

**Dürer’s angel and Milton’s twin melancholies**

Some scholars are critical of the reception history KSP, alongside their mentor, Karl Gielhow, have established for Ficino’s theory of melancholy. Piers Britton has expressed frustration with the “cliché of ‘artist’s melancholy’ [that] has long basked in a glow of late Romantic mystification … [as] it continues to generate too many scholarly arguments that are nebulous and highfalutin” (673). Britton further contends that many Renaissance artists would have held a cautionary attitude towards melancholy, an attitude representative of his reading of Giorgio Vasari. The latter “was so suspicious of genuine melancholia that we might reasonably expect him to be brutally scornful of its affectation” (Britton 674). Britton has good reason for his concerns: the idealization of melancholy provides free license for the kind of narcissism and inwardness that has produced,
amongst other things, the stereotype of the ivory tower, scholarship cut-off from societal concern(s). Indeed, much of Ficino’s project in *De vita libri tres* has to do with dominating and denouncing the negative influences of melancholy, which for most people, are the only consequences of an excess black bile in the blood. The chances of being the right kind of person under the influence of Saturn were (are) the longest of long odds. Melancholia is a state of mental suffering for the large majority of people, under even Ficino’s generous theorization. The fantastical, though compelling, narrative of mastering gloom through a melancholic discipline, in Britton’s assessment, led to the wish-fulfilment of the Romantic and post-Romantic periods. Britton is essentially saying what the Europe after the Renaissance would discover: what happens when the wrong person, like a despotic or tyrannical King – who commands a large army – tries to master melancholia and fails? I will turn to this question in a moment.

For now, one may turn to KSP’s reading of Dürer’s famous engraving “Melencolia I” in the final part of their study and contrive how the famous brooding angel represents the apotheosis of the Ficinian tradition of melancholy, married to the geometrical principles of High Renaissance art. KSP’s argument stages a marriage between Ficino’s melancholy and Dürer’s brooding angel, attempting to demonstrate the fundamental union between melancholy and intellectual fortitude as the representation *par excellence* of the poetic arts as laid out by the Renaissance. It is altogether surprising, to my mind, that the connection between “Melencolia I” and the tradition of melancholy would prove so difficult to establish, or require the substantial space KSP devote to the argument. For the authors of *Saturn and Melancholy*, it was neither self-evident to think
of Ficino and Dürer in the same breath, nor was it meant to be presented without concerted effort to provide substantive arguments and evidence. In considering the points of their analysis, one may glean the difficulties with which the three authors were wrestling. They write:

The idea behind Dürer’s engraving, defined in terms of the history of types, might that of Geometria surrendering to melancholy, or of Melancholy with a taste for geometry. But this pictorial union of two figures, one embodying the allegorised ideal of a creative mental faculty, the other a terrifying image of a destructive state of mind, means far more than a mere fusion of two types; in fact, it establishes a completely new meaning. When Dürer fused the portrait of an “ars geometrica” with that of a “homo melancholicus” – an act equal to the merging of two different worlds of thought and feeling – he endowed the one with a soul, the other with a mind. He was bold enough to bring down the timeless knowledge and method of a liberal art into the sphere of human striving and failure, bold enough, too, to raise the animal heaviness of a “sad, earthly” temperament to the height of a struggle with intellectual problems. (317)

KSP, via Ficino (by way of Agrippa), marry an image of proportion and measurement to the imaginative, intellectual powers of melancholy. In essence, they are trying to prove “Melencolia I” is the embodiment of melancholia heroica, in both its erotic and heroic, its intellectual and visceral, facets. This “fusion” of the suffering of the melancholic mind and the ratio of the natural world expressed through mathematical abstraction is the substance of their analysis of Dürer’s work of art (317). It is the merger of two melancholies, one of which is addressed as a sublime melancholy, and the other as representation of splenetic melancholia. It is also a convergence of the divine and animal worlds upon the human one, inside a specifically imaginative realm. For the inner workings of the human mind, especially the extraordinary creative mind, are not visible – despite the claims of cognitive and neurological science – in the act of creation.
It is through the product of *artistic representation* that one must deduce the inner mechanisms of the soul. KSP continue:

Geometria’s workshop has changed from a cosmos of clearly ranged and purposefully employed tools into a chaos of unused things; their casual distribution reflects a psychological unconcern. But Melancholia’s inactivity has changed from the idler’s lethargy and the sleeper’s unconsciousness to the compulsive preoccupation of the highly-strung. Both are idle, Dürer’s wreathed and ennobled “Melencolia,” with her mechanically-held compasses, and the dowdy “Melancholica” of the calendar illustrations with her useless spindle; but the latter is doing nothing because she has fallen asleep out of sloth, the former because her mind is preoccupied with interior visions, so that to toil with practical tools seems meaningless to her. The “idleness” in one case is below the level of outward activity; in the other, above it. If Dürer was the first to raise the allegorical figure of Melancholy to the plane of a symbol, this change appears now as the means – or perhaps the result – of a change in significance: the notion of a “Melencolia” in whose nature the intellectual distinction of a liberal art was combined with a human soul’s capacity for suffering could only take the form of a winged genius. (317-318)

Geometria is characterized in KSP’s analysis as melancholic, beginning with an image of idleness from a cold black bile, and then moving towards the mania of overheating that same bile. For in the idleness of a panic attack, the melancholic subject’s mind races through terrors. The theme of idleness addressed above is the topic *par excellence* of Burton’s *Anatomy* – it is addressed momentarily. The tools of Geometria are a mess, but this mania is represented in an image where no one and nothing moves; or, as Wojciech Balus contends, the “objects and figures shown in ‘Melencolia I’ have been immobilized in their physical materiality” preserving a “dynamism in immobility” (18). If one accepts KSP’s claim that this allegory of melancholy has been raised – in the form of ‘Melencolia I’ – into a symbol, it is because the image is entirely emblematic of melancholy’s perfect ambiguity and polysemy. Dürer’s masterwork is the staging – to borrow Ferber’s
phrasing once more – of a melancholy’s “struggle for presentation.” The dispute between allegory and symbol has certainly its own problems, and is best left to the canonical treatments authored by Benjamin and Paul de Man – discussed on multiple occasions in chapters three and four of this work. Returning to the matter at hand, the angel figure’s unseen thoughts are the representation of *acedia* elevated into not a cult of melancholy, but a perfect equilibrium of melancholy’s infinite faces, with its languid chin resting upon an half-open fist. Pensky offers a useful assessment of this convergence, in the manifestation “self-consciously dialectical nature” of melancholy (32). He writes that in the “process whereby the individual sets out to master Saturn” one discovers the “true nature and use” of grief and sorrow (32).

Concerning the “affinity” of melancholy and geometry in Dürer, KSP affirm that their correspondance emerges in the image of the planet Saturn, for in Saturn, one locates an image that coordinates astrology and myth, the imaginative and the mathematical, and the old order of knowledge meeting the new one (332-333). Their image of geometry transfigures at times into Saturn, and into a triad of geometry, Saturn and melancholy at other times, in the midst of their analysis (334-335). What is at stake in this marriage of the Saturnine and the geometrical? Again, one has to acknowledge the *erotic* that is part of the melancholic. If the vision of melancholy was *solely* intellectual, a simile of geometry and melancholy would suffice, and this comparison would appear both self-evident and contrived. The intellectual in the composition of “Melencolia I” is, in fact, the geometrical, with the animal and spiritual worlds represented *separately*. This is why there is a dog *and* an angel represented, and why the animal world and the spiritual world
come into the same space while occupying separate representations. For the angelic figure in the foreground, as Robert J. Manning notes, is “the personification of Saturn, or more specifically Cronos, the child of Uranus (god of heaven) and Gaea (goddess of earth). Thus she stands for the union of heaven and earth, or more precisely, given her disposition, for their disjunction” (27). For KSP, Dürer “never tired of preaching” that the “creative ‘power,’ which he regarded as the essence of artistic genius, was bound up with the possession of ‘art’ – that is to say, with knowledge based on mathematics” (341). They further contend:

“Power,” therefore, is what Dürer considered the end and essence of artistic capacity; and thereby the apparently causal sentence “keys signify power” acquires a new and deeper meaning. If, as we have seen, the Melancholy of ‘Melencolia I’ is no ordinary Melancholy but a “geometrical” Melancholy, a “Melancholia artificialis,” it is perhaps the case that the “power” attributed to her is not the ordinary power of the Saturnine person, but the special power of the artist…. Is not Melencolia herself the presiding genius of art? (341)

KSP’s points are occluded here by some tortured syntax. I read this passage as saying that “Melencolia” – in all of the forms KSP have invoked – represents a key to incredible, intellectual power. This power is given to the artist: through their intellectual abilities and through their mastery of the artificiality of art, in the ability to make the artificial take part of reality. In this way, melancholy is given shape and form through the artist, and the artistic manipulation of geometry. Blake, whom I study in the second chapter, once famously said: “Allegory addressed to the Intellectual powers while it is altogether hidden from the Corporeal Understanding is My Definition of the Most Sublime Poetry” (E 730). The “intellectual powers” Blake refers to here reads like the one described by KSP
above.\textsuperscript{15} The question “Melencolia” asks is this: “What if a melancholic person controlled the mechanisms and proportion of art itself? What would their image look like?” The engraving is the representation of this question, and also of its answer.

Peter-Klaus Schuster – author of the monumental \textit{Melencolia I: Dürers Denkbild} – is perhaps the greatest historian of Dürer’s influence in the history of art and thought. In an article that summarizes the track of those influences in the West, he argues that “Dürer’s successors” when faced with the polysemy of the engraving, tend to aim for “a singular interpretation” (103). Schuster, instead of reading the “Melencolia I” as “personification of a gift” against the “allegory of resignation” – or vice-versa – proposes that these oppositions are “closely mixed in many ways within several polyvalent pictorial motifs” which recognize a form of “virtue” to the “melancholic figure” (103).

As noted by Schuster in his studies of Dürer, Burton provides a brief analysis of “Melencolia I” in the first partition of the \textit{Anatomy}. There, Burton writes that Dürer “paints Melancholy like a sad woman learning on her arm with fixed looks, neglected habit, etc.; held therefore by some proud, soft, sottish, or half-mad … and yet of a deep reach, excellent apprehension, judicious, wise and witty” (\textit{Anatomy} 392, 1.3.1.2). In this assessment one may note that Burton too keeps in mind the dual nature of melancholy, that in the brooding subject is a form of heroism, and that this heroism has its counterpart in depressive sadness and mania.

\textsuperscript{15} In fact, I credit reading Blake as a vital gateway into Renaissance thought of this time. While Blake is no literary theorist or art historian, make no mistake: few read the history and practice of Renaissance art with the acuity and sensitivity he possessed.
Burton’s *Anatomy* has two interpenetrating sides. While, on the one hand, the pseudonymical author, Democritus Jr., purports to diagnose the “causes” of melancholy and provide remedies, on the other hand, the text also chronicles the actual author’s own melancholy. In this interstice, Burton discovers the interior of melancholy through a metamelancholic exercise. As Gowland argues, Burton’s theory of melancholy infects the political body with melancholy (224). The separation of civic life and contemplation collapses and conflates in his “Democritus Junior to the Reader” (224). Burton, Gowland writes, has a “commitment to a traditional Christian humanist morality [that] placed him in opposition to the contemporary neo-Stoic ethic that separated the inner and outer being” (229). Burton’s *Anatomy* is as encyclopedic as it disruptive. It speaks to the Baroque mind inasmuch as it is informed by Renaissance knowledge, the genius of that age and its recuperation of Ancient Greek learning. Its examination of the medical discourses on melancholy as well as the character of the melancholic type sets up the method of every treatise on melancholy that follows. *The Anatomy* is, as Stamatina Dimakopoulou has argued, “as a space of dialogue between the Baroque and High Renaissance” – whose image is that of a Deleuzian fold (¶3). It blends philosophy, philology, literary history and medicine in that mixture which the contemplation of melancholy, and melancholy contemplation, demands. It is the twilight of melancholy and splenetic melancholia all at once.

Burton is more than a little ironic in this assessment of the scholar, for he must regard his own work as the digressions of scholarship, to stave off the despair of idleness,

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16 It is worth noting, as Sears Jayne does, that Ficino’s influence upon Burton was decisive (218).
which Burton goes on to describe in the third partition. It is not surprising to learn, as Gowland points out, that “idleness was associated with sloth (acedia), not only productive of agitation … but a form of tristitia and so conducive to melancholy” (“Worlds” 123). In diagnosing melancholy in the scholar, he diagnoses himself, as Douglas Trevor observes: “Burton diagnoses himself in Galenic terms, insisting that he is irrevocably, dispositionally melancholy: driven to scholarly endeavor that, in isolating him from others and promoting a sedentary way of life, will only further exacerbate his naturally sorrowful proclivities … Burton never claims that a melancholic disposition is itself changeable” (118). It is vital, in Trevor’s words, that the “scholarly profession … is one of the very few in which true rank (as designated by one’s learnedness) must be earned and cannot be awarded” (133). Burton can see the power of melancholy as a source of meaningful contemplation; he has also anticipated the “demise of the humoral theory” (Trevor 118). Melancholy, in the time after the Renaissance, becomes an increasingly generalized affect, as Trevor suggests: Milton cultivated “a benign form of melancholy that is neither wholly Galenic nor fully post-humoral” (118). For Trevor, “Milton’s imagination of the scholar-figure sets him apart” from his contemporaries and immediate predecessors (150). In this sense, as KSP have written, one sees the awakening of melancholy as a form of “heightened self-awareness” that marks the post-medieval period in the history of melancholy, which was inaugurated by a Renaissance that partially survives in the Baroque (229). They further cite Milton as a crucial example of melancholy’s positive force in poetry.
This awareness is the recaptured capacity for the type of exceptionalism outlined in Aristotle’s *Problems*, a view of melancholy at times totally obscured during the medieval period. The heightened self-consciousness represents the “specifically ‘poetic’ melancholy mood of the modern”:

[Melancholy becomes] a double-edged feeling constantly providing its own nourishment, in which the soul enjoys its own loneliness, but by this very pleasure becomes again more conscious of its solitude, “the joy in grief,” “the mournful joy,” or “the sad luxury of woe,” to use the words of Milton’s successors. This modern melancholy mood is essentially an enhanced self-awareness, since the ego is the pivot round which the sphere of joy and grief revolves… (231)

In his two classic and complimentary poems, “L’Allegro” and “Il Penseroso,” Milton Plays the personifications of Mirth and Melancholy off of each other. Compare the opening lines of the former:

Hence loathed Melancholy
   Of *Cerberus*, and blackest Midnight born,
In *Stygian* cave forlorn
   ‘Mongst horrid shapes, and shrieks, and sights unholy,
Find out som uncouth cell,
   Where brooding darknes spreads his jealous wings,
And the night-Raven sings (l.1-7)

With invocation to the godly muse of the latter:

   But hail thou Goddes, sage and holy,
Hail divinest Melancholy,
   Whose Saintly visage is too bright
To hit the Sense of human sight;
   And therfore to our weaker view,
Ore laid with black staid Wisdom’s hue (l.11-16)

In “L’Allegro,” one finds melancholy as black obscurity, whereas in “Il Penseroso” melancholy is a bright muse. The melancholic black of an infernal dog contrasts to the personified goddess of divine inspiration. And yet both faces of melancholy, the brooding
beast and the divine figure of inspiration, are vital images and genuine instantiations of melancholy. In these lines, Milton captures – to borrow a phrase from Blake – the contrary states of the human soul, and perhaps the essence of melancholy itself. Dürer, with his angel and his hound, offered the pictorial counterpart to Milton’s poetic version. Milton separated the two halves of melancholy across two poems, which while they do not force melancholy into synthesis that it always already refuses, set the stage for a dialectic it leaves, appropriately, non-synthesized. The two contradictory melancholies sit there, defiantly. For the pleasant melancholy of “Il Penseroso,” Milton’s speaker says it is a “sweet musick breath” of the “unseen Genius of the Wood” and that he will “choose to live” with “These pleasures Melancholy give” (l.151, 154, 175, 174). For the speaker of “L’Allegro,” he abides with Mirth, from fear of suffering an Orphic fate (l.145-151).

Eleanor Sickels, in her classic study *The Gloomy Egoist*, has argued that Milton’s twin poems inaugurated an entire tradition of English writing, notably in the forms of the poems and the personification of Melancholy (see chapter “Invocation to Melancholy,” 41-90). One can see this tradition stretch and evolve all the way to Keats.

Bridget Gellert Lyons praises Milton’s poem for “translating the complex and contradictory ideas connected with melancholy” inherited from Burton, “into lyric poetry” (150). As KSP have also noted, Lyons suggests that “the poems give expression … to one of the melancholic’s most essential characteristics, [one’s] heightened awareness of time” (151). For Trevor, one may read in the images of the two poems a privileging of “Il Penseroso” over “L’Allegro” (158). Laurence Babb has argued that the

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17 One may read a kindship here to KSP’s “heightened self-awareness.”
melancholy in one poem is Galenic, and the other in the style of Aristotle and Ficino. He writes that there are no other “two literary pieces [that] could better illustrate the dualism of the concept melancholy as it existed” in Milton’s times (“Background” 270). Babb further argues that the “melancholy which Milton rejects in ‘L’Allegro’ is not the same thing at all as that which he accepts in ‘Il Penseroso’” (“Background” 270). Trevor is less certain such a lineage is traceable (159). Nevertheless, it is fair to argue with Babb’s assessment that the “melancholy of ‘Il Penseroso’ is a melancholy of sober and solitary contemplative pleasures” and that “Under the goddess’ influence, the poet will take solitary nocturnal walks,” and further, the poet’s “life will be scholarly” and he “will apply himself to the study of mystical and divine philosophy” (“Background” 270-271).

Burton is fully aware of the boons of melancholy, but in the construction of a utopic vision of English society, he is wary of its influence, on both himself and the English body politic. Melancholy power, in the wrong hands, is a threat to the utopian dream of an English, and European, society.

**Burton’s Anatomy of the scholar and love-melancholy**

Burton’s *Anatomy of Melancholy* represents, for Northrop Frye – for whom this text offered key inspiration for his 1957 *Anatomy of Criticism* – a study of “human society … in terms of the intellectual pattern provided by the conception of melancholy, a symposium of books replaces dialogue, and the result is the most comprehensive survey of human life in book that English literature had seen since Chaucer, one of Burton’s favourite authors” (*Anatomy of Criticism* 311). With the Renaissance, as noted by Andrew
Saturnine Constellations

Scull, melancholy “became something of a fashionable disorder among the cultivated classes, an affliction to which it appeared that the scholar and the man of genius were particularly prone” (93). Adam H. Kitzes notes that by “the seventeenth century” the label of “melancholy discontent had been so thoroughly overused that it had given way to stereotype” (123). Burton comes upon the history of melancholy at the crossroads between the ages of the Renaissance and the Baroque. As Lepenies notes, Burton “saw melancholy neither as singular illness nor as one of many characteristics of the genius” (15). Thus arises in Burton, in Lepenies’ analysis, a particular opportunity: “the moment the concept of melancholy is conceived of as universal in nature” Burton can expand his analysis concerning “the ‘genius’ theory” of melancholy and safely ignore, to an extent, “the medical-psychopathological theory” of melancholia; furthermore, “if all are melancholic, then melancholy can no longer really be regarded as a disease” (15). Burton seeks a middle way, a temperate way, “neither as universal as the cosmology of antiquity or the Middle Ages nor as micrological as the medicine of antiquity or of the Arabic and medieval worlds,” but something in between a “melancholic nation” of the Elizabethan period and “anti-melancholic” utopia where melancholy is banned (Lepenies 19). Anne S. Chapple has suggested that Burton’s enterprise was a geography of melancholy, that his catalogue used the image of a map as one of its dominant structural metaphors. And so, Burton’s book was “the greatest compilation of Renaissance thinking on melancholy” and “Burton counselled those who would avoid melancholy’s toils and troubles, ‘Be not solitary, be not idle’” (Scull 94; Anatomy 432, 4.3.2.6). One imagines that a book this size, along with its multiple revisions and new editions, was a fine resistance to idleness.
Burton’s reading of history, argues Drew Daniel in his book *The Melancholy Assemblage*, is “panoramic rather than cumulative; he surveys history as a total set of available ideas rather than as a narrative arc of emergences and disappearances,” such that “Burton seeks to distract rather than persuade,” and the central tactic of the “*Anatomy of Melancholy* replaces argument with assemblage” (168). Daniel marks a kinship between Burton and Benjamin in the writing of melancholy, saying that they “are united in their methodological practice of responding to through the construction of melancholy assemblages that level down and drift across a historical range of raw material. Each engages in a powerfully seductive mythologizing of their own identity as a scholar who both studies melancholy and simultaneously models it for their reader” (169).

In the Renaissance there is a constant intellectual tension between the inheritance of Aristotle’s *Problems* where melancholy is at once a mark of distinction and a pathological affliction. Daniel calls the manifestation of this tension in the Renaissance a melancholy “assemblage” – in a manner similar to Deleuze’s definition of the term – whereby any perceived singularity of melancholy has been regarded as a plurality (9). Melancholy is not something one isolates, but is perceived in the interactions between various traits, which together reveal a pictorial schema of the constellation. Földényi writes that Aristotle resolves the dualism in Plato where the melancholic is both a manic drawn to the transcendental skies and yet chained on the Earth (28).

Burton’s definition of melancholy, like much of his thought, is an assemblage of quotations from his sources. A notable passage which exemplifies this opens the section titled “Of the Matter of Melancholy,” where he writes: “Of the matter of melancholy,
there is much question betwixt Avicenna and Galen, as you may read in Cardan’s *Contradictions*, Valesius’ *Controversies*, Montanus, Prosper Calenus, Capivacius, Bright, [Ficino], that have written either whole tracts, or copiously of it in their several treatises of this subject” and furthermore, “material melancholy is either simple or mixed; offending in quantity or quality, varying according to his place, where it settleth, as brain, spleen, meseraic veins, heart, womb, and stomach; or differing according to the mixture of those natural humours amongst themselves, or four unnatural adust humours, as they are diversely tempered and mingled” (*Anatomy* 173, 1.1.3.3). Burton’s frustration is partially facetious, partially an expression of his own stubborn, melancholic complex. Later in the first book, he turns to the subject which had captivated Ficino, that of the scholar’s melancholy. In a lengthy section entitled “Love of Learning, or overmuch Study. With a Digression on the Misery of Scholars, and why the Muses Are Melancholy” that completes the third “Member” – largely concerned with the mental aspect of melancholy – Burton takes up Ficino’s now classic, decisive problem.

At the heart of the scholar’s melancholy, says Burton, is the directionless aim of the discipline required to be an expert in the knowledge of a field. Expertise is not in demand in the same way as “other trades and professions … [which] are enabled by their craft to live of themselves” (*Anatomy* 305, 1.2.3.15). By contrast, scholars “are most uncertain, unrespected, subject to all casualties, and hazards … not one of a many proves to be a scholar” and furthermore, “we can make mayors and officers every year, but not scholars” (*Anatomy* 305, 1.2.3.15). Burton expresses his aggravation thus:

All which our ordinary students, right well perceiving in the universities, how unprofitable these poetical, mathematical, and philosophical studies
are, how little respected, how few patrons, apply themselves in haste to those three commodious professions of law, physic, and divinity, sharing themselves between them, rejecting these arts in the meantime, history, philosophy, philology, or lightly passing them over, as pleasant toys fitting only table talk, and to furnish them with discourse. (*Anatomy* 309, 1.2.3.15)¹⁸

The scholar sacrifices more in order to earn and benefit less: the benefits of scholarship have few direct, measurable actualities in the short term. And though the scholar’s burden is “worthy of double honour,” it leaves them “distressed and miserable” (*Anatomy* 311, 1.2.3.15). Worse still, there are those committing to the scholarly arts with entirely no talent for the labour. For the internal dialectic of melancholy is felt more precisely by the scholar, and is muddled by other would-be acolytes. It is no surprise, then, to see “poverty and want” identified as causes of melancholy (*Anatomy* 346-357, 1.2.4.6). For what is the lot of the scholar: it is the endless burden of necessary pathology. It may be implied that Burton also means intellectual poverty and want, as well. As Gowland notes, there is in Burton a “melancholic nostalgia for an idealised antiquity when ‘Schollers were highly beloved, honoured, esteemed,’ rewarded as ‘Princes companions’ and ‘admitted to their tables,’ that also restated the humanist case for the political worth of the scholar-philosopher” (Gowland 268, quotation of Burton: *Anatomy* 1.2.3.15). Burton’s dedication to his humanism is tantamount, and it requires the near-constant management of melancholy, from within and without.

In the third partition of the *Anatomy* Burton is largely concerned with “Love-Melancholy” – at several points this is called “Heroical Love” – and its sub-species,

¹⁸ In reading this passage, the reader may be struck, as I certainly was, by the relevance and prescience of Burton’s words. I am uncertain as to whether this passage should be cause for hopefulness or outright despair in our contemporary context.
jealously and religious melancholy. As Gowland notes, in “the early seventeenth century, it had become commonplace in learned medical circles to acknowledge and discuss the species of love-melancholy” (Worlds 67). Love-melancholy is a transfiguration of melancholy into a religious parody of itself, which carries not a small amount of irony due to melancholy arising in order to transfigure acedia into a poetic virtue. The dialectical wheel comes full circle. Toohey suggests that “love-melancholy begins to gain real currency at the same time, approximately, as descriptions of depressive melancholy become current” (“Love” 285). Burton has already, at this point, remarked that study and scholarship were means to warm up oneself from the dull cold of idleness – so long as this activity was not overly “tedious” or “gloomy” (Gowland 136, see Burton 2.2.4.1). Burton calls love-melancholy “heroical, because commonly gallants, noblemen, and the most generous spirits are possessed with it” – restoring a medieval tone to the melancholy transformed by the Renaissance, which was the signal beacon out from the Medieval period (Anatomy 40, 3.2.1.1). Love is powerful, Burton writes, and “heroical love, which is proper to men and women, is a frequent cause of melancholy, and deserves much rather to be called burning lust, that by such an honourable title” (Anatomy 52, 3.2.1.2).19

As Gowland summarizes, Burton is receiving both the intellectual, “genial melancholy” from Neoplatonism and the “occultist explanation for love melancholy proposed by Ficino and Baldassare Castiglione,” which draws upon “a Platonic notion of Eros as a form of magical enchantment” (Worlds 91). In this way, the melancholy of Renaissance thought from Ficino that Burton acknowledges (see Anatomy 41, 3.2.1.1) turns into a

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19 I have addressed the part eroticism has to play in melancholy earlier in the chapter.
form of melancholia, whereby the burning excess of such an intensity, expressed in the form of extreme erotic or sexual passion, has become pathological. Love-melancholy may warm the scholar from the vexations of their vocation, but the comfort of this abstracted fire, left alight in the mind and soul for too long, may occlude the warmth one finds amongst other people. One may, even, turn cold to the fate of people in general (e.g. misanthropy). Burton does not advocate for a passionless existence, for he quotes a saying from Juvenal “he who does not feel the power of love is either a stone or an animal” – essentially a sufferer of an extreme, depressive melancholia (Anatomy 52, 3.2.1.2). Burton, like Ficino, preaches moderation. When love, as Gowland notes, becomes “immoderate, inordinate, and not to be comprehended in any bounds,” this is where Burton intervenes (Anatomy 54, 3.2.1.2). The lover cannot be sated with a single object of affection, and desires all. This immoderate love “is a wandering, extravagant, a domineering, a boundless, an irrefragable, a destructive passion; sometimes this burning lust rageth after marriage, and then it is properly called jealousy; sometimes before, and then it is called heroical melancholy; it extends sometimes to corrivals, etc., begets rapes, incests, murders” (Anatomy 54, 3.2.1.2). Love-melancholy gone array produces the plots of Othello (jealousy leading to murder) and Macbeth (overwhelming passion and ambition leading to murder, rape, genocide). Burton’s prime example, though, is Chaucer’s Wife of Bath (Anatomy 54, 3.2.1.2). Again, in Burton one never loses sight of the erotic primacy of melencolia heroica, even as one pursues the secondary quality of scholarly, intellectual, and heroic accomplishment.
What, then, for Burton are the causes of this heroical love, love-melancholy, non-genial melancholy? Burton’s first answer is astrological, in keeping with his sources (Ficino, Plutarch and Chaucer): it has to do with the constellations and planetary influences (Saturn, Venus; see Anatomy 58, 3.2.2.1). Beyond the astrological and cosmological, Burton lays the blame upon a few culprits, with one in particular he chooses to single out:

Idleness overthrows all, love tyrannizeth in an idle person. It thou hast nothing to do, thou shalt be haled in pieces with envy, lust, some passion or other. Through doing nothing men learn to do ill. (Anatomy 62, 3.2.2.1)

In remaining idle, one “nourishes” love-melancholy (Anatomy 63, 3.2.2.1). As Burton had intimated, jealousy is a deeper, more perverse form of love-melancholy: “If idleness concur with melancholy, such persons are most apt to be jealous” (Anatomy 266, 3.3.1.2).

Burton goes on to say:

Of all passions, as I have already proved, love is most violent, and of those bitter potions which this love-melancholy affords, this bastard jealousy is the greatest, as appears by those prodigious symptoms which it hath, and that it produceth. For besides fear and sorrow, which is common to all melancholy, anxiety of mind, suspicion, aggravation, restless thoughts, paleness, meagreness, neglect of business, and the like…. ’Tis a more vehement passion, a more furious perturbation, a bitter pain, a fire, a pernicious curiosity, a gall corrupting the honey of our life, madness, vertigo, plague, hell, they are more than ordinarily disquieted, they lose … [the boon of peace], as Chrysotom observes…. (Anatomy 280, 3.3.2)

In their assessments of jealousy, Burton and Blake are in concord. Jealousy is the risk which melancholy faces, at the edge of an abyss. For in the intellectualism of melancholy lurks always already risk, tension, the danger in the act of tightrope walking, which few

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20 Burton is here quoting Horace in places (I have excluded the Latin text).
can attempt, and fewer still can accomplish. Burton, as a scholar, is aware of his own privileged position as a reader and terrified of those who pretend to know of melancholy in aspiring to style themselves in its corroded image. Wars have been started by sovereign rulers in the grip of melancholic idleness, bored with the plaything of their absolute power. These consequences transcend the individual and bleed into the social: for Burton is a utopian writer – as Gowland has argued – and utopias, and dystopias, are invented because the political climate of the day has turned for the worse. As a melancholic, Burton is affected by the ability to see a social order that is superior to his own, a dream state. At the same time, he is also gripped by the terror that, if the wrong circumstances come to pass, Britain may descend into further violence and the anarchic, Hobbesian war of all against all. In the hands of unexceptional ruler, the king or tyrant, what happens then? What happens when the idle, bored, and despotic melancholy prince gets a hold of melancholy, and designs illusions of greatness? The enthusiasm of the Renaissance has its consequences in the thought and politics of the Baroque.

The remaining type of melancholy, another sub-category of love-melancholy, is the religious one. In the case of religious melancholy, there are cases of too much and not enough love. On his subject, Burton says he is alone in its theorization: “I have no pattern to follow as in some of the rest, no man to imitate” (Anatomy 311, 3.4.1.1). The issue for the love-melancholy is the excessive love of too many things, of love objects. The jealous person is one locked in the bonds of marriage who either is too possessive or desires outside that marriage. One case for religious melancholy occurs when someone loves only things, and turns their gaze from divinity in the world. As he writes: “Some [religious
melancholics] are busied about merchandise to get money, they lose their own souls, whiles covetously carried, and with an unsatiable desire of gain, they forget God, and desire of His glory” (Anatomy 316, 3.4.1.1). Religious melancholy does not solely affect those who turn away from god (and become capitalists avant la lettre), but also those who try to be close to god in the wrong way. As Burton writes:

Monks, anachorites, and the like, after much emptiness, become melancholy, vertiginous, they think they hear strange noises, confer with hobgoblins, devils, rivel up their bodies … they become bare skeletons, skin and bones…. Such symptoms are common to those that fast long, are solitary, given to contemplation, overmuch solitariness and meditation. Not that these things (as I said of fasting) are to be discommended of themselves, but very behoefeful in some cases and good…. [One can experience] “a divine melancholy, a spiritual wing,” Bonaventure terms it, to lift us up to heaven; but as it is abused, a mere dotage, madness, a cause and symptom of religious melancholy. (Anatomy 343, 3.4.1.2)

Goethe’s Faust turns to the occult in a modern manifestation of religious melancholy, in conferring his soul to devils in order to know of godhood. As Burton would confirm shortly after, it is, again, idleness that is the main culprit of religious melancholy, for if one forces “this fasting and solitary meditation” the consequences are that one will “alter men’s minds … make a man mad, ravish him, improve him beyond himself, to undertake some great business of moment, to kill a king, or the like, [the bad priests] bring him into a melancholy dark chamber, where he shall see no light for many days” (Anatomy 345, 3.4.1.2).

For Burton, “black choler” is a lure which the devil places in the souls of people as “a bait to allure them, insomuch that many writers make melancholy an ordinary cause and a symptom of despair” (Anatomy 395, 3.4.2.3). When a person succumbs to despair, their melancholy has become a “terror of conscience” (Anatomy 396, 3.4.2.3). Hamlet, in
dealing with the ghost of his father, is possessed by the terror that a devil is tricking him. Alceste continually fights with the semblance of slights from other people just minding their own business, affronts to his divine right of providence, his self-contrived high position over his social peers (who are morons). Despair is the reduction of one’s life into a living hell marked by “fear, sorrow, furies, grief, pain, terror, anger, dismal, ghastly, tedious, irksome, etc. … an epitome of hell, an extract, a quintessence, a compound, a mixture of all feral maladies, tyrannical torture, plagues, and perplexities” (Anatomy 404, 3.4.2.4). In the later years of Milton’s life, it is possible he disregarded melancholy “as an outdated psychological disorder, or perhaps a sign of what goes wrong when human behavior is reduced to a series of physical operations” (Kitzes 176). One sees in the life of a Milton the repeated encounters with the kind of men that likely kept Burton up at night: veritable tyrants who would take the power of the Hobbesian Leviathan and use the power of melancholy to dominate the human (and divine) worlds with an iron fist.

I would venture that these bad men, the malcontents which Burton has described, would have looked something like Shakespeare’s Hamlet or Molière’s Alceste. These latter two are seldom brought together. When they are, it is usually in passing, as in the example of this passage – which also serves as a summary of the argument so far – from M. A. Screech’s Montaigne & Melancholy:

In late medieval and Renaissance France tristesse [sorrow] was an aristocratic emotion, a sign of sensitivity and depth. Such delightful delicate sadness gradually merged in the more ambitious state of melancholy affected by many noble figures of fact and fiction. Dürer captured the mood in his portrayal of Melancholia, as did Milton in “Il Penseroso.” Melancholy also suffers much with acedia, the pensive sloth that afflicted contemporaries in monasteries. Burton catches the feeling of this pensive melancholy. … Tristesse suggested noble sensitiveness; melancholy
suggested genius – no wonder so many thought they were marked with it. No affectation was so widely cherished. Empty-headed men pretended to be stricken with it; at the other extreme character as diverse as Hamlet and Alceste … were cast in the mould\(^2\) of high melancholy. (22-23)

With Hamlet, one has the impression of a man wearing an endless series of masks, only to reveal there is no face behind it. Alceste, on the other hand, is a representation of the abyss on stage: he exists in a mental world void of colour and contrast. Both figures characterize and run in parallel to Burton’s analysis of idleness, where this idleness is the source of these character’s profound flaws, but is also the core of their desire: to remain idle, to sustain the temporality of their imaginations, to validate their ethical interpretation of the world. Lyons, in her outstanding study *Melancholy Voices*, outlines “melancholy character types” and the emergence of the “malcontent” type. Both Alceste and Hamlet are representations of this type. As Lyons explains:

> The melancholy figures which became common on the Elizabethan stage appear to have been based originally on the disaffected or discontented people who made their presence felt in London towards the end of the sixteenth century. Such people were labelled as melancholy, or malcontents, or “melancholy malcontents.” The melancholy malcontent took a stand against the world which was not an essential part of melancholy in its medical sense: he was primarily one who was discontented, sometimes to the point of mutiny and rebellion, with the existing social and political order. (17-18)

Lyons argues for two types, one recognized in comedy or satire, and the other from tragedy – though it appears that Lyons’ distinction between types has more to do with the genre of the plays than the attitude of the character under study. Indeed, she remarks that

\(^{21}\) It is altogether too easy to walk into a performance of either play and assume – as I did upon seeing these plays – that the representation of melancholy from each play falls into a cast, or “mould,” to use Screech’s term. This assumption gives too little credit to Shakespeare’s and Molière’s texts, and to the ability of the director and actors to affect those texts.
Hamlet’s dress and entrance (from Act I, cited above) are satiric in nature (27). The malcontent type, for Lyons, was often characterised by love-melancholy, a scholarly character, but by “political malcontent” (56). In short, by Shakespeare’s time, it is no longer a speculative exercise to contemplate one’s melancholy, it has become something one can recognize intuitively, at a glance. For Lyons, then, Hamlet’s melancholy has to do “with the problem of action in a more fundamental sense: melancholy is the source of Hamlet’s superior imagination, and of his awareness of the corroding effects of time or change that specific actions appear meaningless” (78). With Hamlet, the middle ground of Burton’s Anatomy has given way to the stereotype of a scholar, one who is learned not for virtuous reasons, but only for the actualization and confirmation of entitlement.

**Hamlet’s tragic, less-than-extraordinary idleness**

In rereading Shakespeare’s classic tragedy, I ask a number of questions: is the tragedy of Hamlet one of a heroic man whose melancholy elevated his philosophical insight such that he could, and no one else would, pin his father’s murder upon his uncle, driven by the phantasm of the old king? Or is the audience watching the dramatization of a splenetic melancholia which, on the one hand, depressed the titular character into fatal inactivity, and, on the other, wasted his energies to the wrath of mania, madness and the desecration of erotic love? Is Hamlet’s melancholy merely a performance, a self-aware, hollow metamelancholy which betrays not only the Danish prince’s profound idleness, but reveals to the audience a visual of melancholy’s interiority? There is likely no way to get oneself out of the frustrating ambiguity of the play, and how one can or ought to
assess its titular prince. The positive and negative influences of melancholy on Hamlet’s intellectual powers are not easily discerned or separated (Trevor 65-66). Gidal’s view of Hamlet is balanced between a melancholy that “served as a stand-in for either barbarous misanthropy or native genius depending upon the political and ideological commitments of the critic at hand” (235). What is clear, however, is that Hamlet is melancholy, or, at least, desires that everyone around him know that he is melancholy.

In Act I, his mother, Gertrude, suggests that something appears off, as Hamlet is dressed in all black has a foul countenance. Hamlet “seems” like he is affected by more than just the weather. He responds to her entreaty:

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 forced 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 passeth show –
These but the trappings and the suits of woe. (342, 1.2:76-86)

Hamlet has put upon himself the cloak of melancholy, whether it is from an authentic affect or by the convenience and contrivance of his motives, the audience will ask themselves for the entire performance. For Lyons, this speech announces the performativity of Hamlet’s melancholy: “until his departure for England” the play will show the prince “playing a variety of melancholy roles: disillusioned scholar, satirist and misogynist, ambitious political malcontent, melancholy lover, madman” (80-81).
One should place particular emphasis, as Juliana Schiesari does, on Hamlet’s misogyny (see Gendering of Melancholia 96-97, 233-267). For it should never be forgotten that Hamlet’s melancholia is the representation of his profound privilege: his heightened awareness was meant as a blessing of Saturn. The Eros of his melancholia heroica expresses itself pathologically, for Hamlet, as a hatred for and dominance over the women in his life, particularly Gertrude and Ophelia. Hamlet’s self-mastery, evidenced by his intellect, reduces the women in his life to beasts, to being less than him, and less even than his enemies. Schiesari fittingly describes Hamlet’s affectations:

[The] melancholic’s desire for the father’s gaze is concomitant to and inseparable from a profound denigration of women, who are typically accused of all the horrible things the melancholic can also accuse himself of: duplicity, inconstancy, inhumanity, animality, and base materiality. Obviously, the melancholic projects on women the lack he would deny in himself, except of course when he addresses himself in the voice of his own superego. What is sometimes termed moral masochism is also a displaced and misogynistic sadism. For Ficino, the nostalgia and regret the melancholic philosopher experiences is the result of his fall from the higher realm of Saturnian masculinity into what he feels is the debased feminine world of lack, corporeality, and materiality. (239)

Hamlet, after all, was a primary source text for Freud’s psychoanalytic network of psychical pathologies. The prince has cathected melancholic Eros as external to his intellectual melancholia, inverting the former in the process into a hateful fury. Hamlet’s performance of victimhood does not suffer the feminine, lending every honorific to the masculine, even in the case of his mortal enemy. The sound of Gertrude’s voice is the immanent chain binding Hamlet from his transcendental design of divine retribution, the barrier to gain freedom from his melancholy. The question of Hamlet’s heroism, and whether he is a tragic hero, can be addressed in terms of his melancholia. The latter has
commenced an erotomania in the name of the father. “Though Hamlet may be plotting vengeance on Claudius for his father’s murder, it is the women who … always seem to bear the brunt of his (melancholic) aggressivity” (Schiesari 240). Hamlet’s malcontent, characteristic idleness is matched only by his reverence to patriarchal equals, betters and adversaries.

As Babb argues in his seminal work, *The Elizabethan Malady:* “The malcontent is – or thinks he is – a person of unusual intellectual or artistic talent. His melancholy is essentially Aristotelian” (76). Babb identifies several types for the “melancholy man,” namely the villain, the scholar, and the cynic; he reserves the melancholy lover for a separate discussion (76). Hamlet, in Babb’s reading – similarly to Lyons – takes up all of these characteristics (106-107). At the same time, the conflict of Hamlet’s melancholy, in the mind of the character, is the true drama of the play: the character of Hamlet is “a type which cuts across types” (109-110). In this sense, Hamlet is the everyman and every man, in keeping with his masculine desires. Babb argues that for the audience, particularly in Shakespeare’s times, Hamlet’s melancholy is not one bit mysterious, it is a “failure of self-mastery” and confusing only to those around him (109). King Claudius, like Ophelia and Gertrude, consistently interprets Hamlet’s melancholy as a form of mania, of an overly excited black bile. 22 The characters around the Danish prince diagnose his malady by turns. When Claudius resolves to send his nephew to England, he opines on the possible causes of Hamlet’s malaise:

22 Carol Falvo Heffernan reads Hamlet’s melancholia through the lens of contemporary, Renaissance medical pathology, particularly through Timothy Bright. Paul A. Jorgensen has also looked closely at the psychopathological component of *Hamlet.* W. F. Bynum and Michael Neve have argued that, indeed, *Hamlet* the play and Hamlet the figure have been measuring rods for psychiatric opinions on madness.
Love? His affections do not that way tend,
Nor what he spake, though it lacked form a little,
Was not like madness. There’s something in his soul
O’er which his melancholy sits on brood,
And I do doubt the hatch and the disclose
Will be some danger; which for to prevent,
I have in quick determination
Thus set it down: he shall with speed to England
For the demand of our neglected tribute. (375, 3.1:161-169)

As Heffernan argues, in Shakespeare’s time, sending a melancholic to some different air
was a common remedy (135). Hamlet’s “overactive imagination” could be blamed on a
“poor memory,” which is an ironic reversal of the Saturnine gift of an excellent ability for
recall (Heffernan 136). Claudius, in this speech, appears to have Hamlet’s best intentions
in mind. It is, indeed, Claudius who seeks to reunite Rosencrantz and Guildenstern with
his nephew, and those motives are “primarily curative” (Heffernan 139). This fittingly
connects to the works of Ernest Jones and Freud, as noted by Heffernan (143-147). While
Hamlet, in his diatribes with the King, as well as in his mistreatment of both Ophelia and
his own mother, comes off as manic, which is in contrast to the presentation of his inner
thoughts, conveyed by his monologues. In his interior life, Hamlet is dithering, idle in
action because he is paralyzed in thought. Despite all of this, however, Hamlet is an intel-
ligent man with an imaginative soul. The play grants him moments of (nearing) grace.

As Hamlet has determined with the players to arrange the performance of the
Gonzago play, and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern make their exit, Hamlet is left alone to
deliver the closing speech of the second act, quoted in full below:

   Now I am alone.
   O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!
   Is it not monstrous that this player here,
   But in a fiction, in a dream of passion,
Could force his soul so to his own conceit
That, from her working, all his visage wanned,
Tears in his eyes, distraction in’s aspect,
A broken voice, and his whole function suitting
With forms to his conceit? And all for nothing!
For Hecuba!
What’s Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba,
That he should weep for her? What would he do,
Had he the motive and the cue for passion
That I have? He would drown the stage with tears
And cleave the general ear with horrid speech,
Make mad the guilty and appal the free,
Confound the ignorant, and amaze indeed
The very faculties of eyes and ears. Yet I,
A dull and muddy-mettled rascal, peak
Like John-a-dreams, unpregnant of my cause,
And can say nothing – no, not for a king,
Upon whose property and most dear life
A damned defeat was made. Am I a coward?
Who calls me villain, breaks my pate across,
Plucks off my beard and blows it in my face?
Tweaks me by th’ nose, gives me the lie i’th’ throat
As deep as to the lungs? Who does me this
Ha? ’Swounds, I should take it! for it cannot be
But I am pigeon-livered and lack gall
To make oppression bitter, or ere this
I should ’a’ fatted all the region kites
With this slave’s offal. Bloody, bawdy villain!
Remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, kindless villain!
O, vengeance! –
Why, what an ass am I! Ay, sure, this is most brave,
That I, the son of a dear father murderèd,
Prompted to my revenge by heaven and hell,
Must, like a whore, unpack my heart with words
And fall a-cursing like a very drab,
A scullion! Fie upon’! foh! – About, my brain!
I have heard that guilty creatures sitting at a play
Have by the very cunning of the scene
Been struck so to the soul that presently
They have proclaimed their malefactions;
For murder, though it have no tongue, will speak
With most miraculous organ. I’ll have these players
Play something like the murder of my father
Before mine uncle. I’ll observe his looks,
I’ll tent him to the quick. If a but blench,
I know my course. The spirit that I have seen
May be a devil, and the devil hath power
T’assume a pleasing shape; yea, and perhaps
Out of my weakness and my melancholy –
As he is very potent with such spirits –
Abuses me to damn me. I’ll have grounds
More relative than this. The play’s the thing
Wherein I’ll catch the conscience of the King. (371-372, 2.2:526-582)

In the representation of Hamlet’s suffering – represented in turn by the Gonzago play – something in Claudius will give way. Hamlet demonstrates in this speech a profound self-awareness of his own melancholy, and how his suffering can be externalized through representations. As scores of critics have said, like Descartes, Hamlet speculates that a devil may be misleading him, which in this instance is the ghost of his father. Hamlet interprets his melancholy religiously – in a manner similar to Burton’s version thereof – which comes into play at the moment of his attempt to take vengeance for his slain father in Act III. For Hamlet seeks vengeance upon Claudius in his interpretation of his divine right as the late King’s son, as one would seek to avenge a slain master. It is vital for Hamlet to obtain this justice, but his dithering has to do, in the first case, with confirming that the ghost is no devil, and in the second, that his murder of Claudius is a righteous one. When Hamlet stays his blade from killing King Claudius, while the latter is praying, he squanders the moment to take his revenge. His reasons not to strike the blow are that Claudius is “fit and seasoned for his passage” to heaven during the act of prayer, and Hamlet resolves to catch him “When he is drunk asleep, or in his rage, / Or in th’incestuous pleasure of his bed, / At gaming, swearing, or about some act / That has no relish of salvation in’t” (387, 3.4:86, 89-92). In the moment of his triumph, the
overwrought intellectualism of his melancholy has overwhelmed all reason. Hamlet’s logic for sparing Claudius, naturally, is entirely preposterous, and will cost both Hamlet and his family dearly. As Simon Critchley and Jamison Webster suggest, paraphrasing Benjamin’s assessment of *Hamlet*, the prince “wants to die a hero’s death – in one breath take in both his death and his destiny, transforming his guilt into a point of honour – but cannot. Mourning, lethargy, sloth, ruin, deathly contemplation, and becoming stone are all that is left to him” (68). As A. C. Bradley has noted, “Hamlet’s melancholy is his own inability to understand why he delays” for if he could “shake off the weight of his melancholy, and, because for the moment he is free from it, unable to understand the paralysing pressure which it exerts at other times” (126-127). In waiting to be a hero, Hamlet succumbs to the version of gloominess he most detests, that of a melancholy as an intellectual weakness, which he had attributed to Gertrude and Ophelia.

The concluding remarks of Benjamin’s “Tragedy and Trauerspiel” chapter from *The Origin of the German Tragic-Drama* contemplates the significance of *Hamlet* under the umbrella of the *Trauerspiel*. It was Benjamin’s contention that *Trauerspiele* are not bad tragedies; they stand apart as the representation of Baroque suffering in its most pristine form, the weeping lamentation of nature given a voice upon the stage. For the conclusion of *Hamlet*, in a manner reminiscent of a *Trauerspiel*, affords its audience no real catharsis: everyone who dies does so more by unhappy accident than by intention; Hamlet’s revenge is hollow in the face of the innocents Laertes and Gertrude being swept up in the carnage; along with his country suffering an invasion at the play’s conclusion. As Anselm Haverkamp puts it: “Taking to the stage in the character of a ‘melancholy
man,’ Hamlet’s responsibility for his own actions is limited, and this indeed seems to be his tragedy, because rather than resolving to avenge the murder of his father, doing away with his murderer, and taking over the power due to him by inheritance, he begins by killing Polonius, the father of his beloved and thereby drives her to suicide” (175). On top of all this, Hamlet is responsible for the deaths of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, his mother Gertrude, Laertes – Ophelia’s brother. As Haverkamp observes: “Hamlet, also loses his life … for good measure” with only two significant characters left alive at the end: “Horatio, friend and witness, and Fortinbras, secret competitor and eventual successor” (175-176). Benjamin’s analysis, who reads Hamlet in the twilights of the Renaissance and the Baroque, can recognize, in the Danish prince, the “feature of the sorrowful Contemplator” off in the distance, from the horizon of the Renaissance’s sunset. He writes that the Baroque “succeeded (at least once) in conjuring up the human figure who corresponded to this dichotomy between the neo-antique and the [medieval] light in which the [Baroque] saw the melancholic … The figure is Hamlet” (157). Benjamin describes his play’s innovation thus:

For the Trauerspiel Hamlet alone is a spectator by the grace of God; but he cannot find satisfaction in what he sees enacted, only in his own fate. His life, the exemplary object of his mourning, points, before its extinction, to the Christian providence in whose bosom his mournful images are transformed into a blessed existence. Only in a princely life such as this is melancholy redeemed, by being confronted with itself. The rest is silence. For everything that has not been lived sinks beyond recall in this space where the word of wisdom leads but a deceptive, ghostly existence. Only Shakespeare was capable of striking Christian sparks from the [Baroque] rigidity of the melancholic, un-stoic as it is un-Christian, pseudo-antique as it is pseudo-pietistic. (158)
Hamlet, in the moment of his death, comes face to face with the history of his syndrome. The play stages his metamelancholy, a coming to blows with the realities of spleen, his sloth, his fatal idleness. Hegel, in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, makes a passing reference to *Hamlet* that, in fact, restates the essence of the tragedy: “The consciousness … tarries with his revenge, even though the very spirit of his father reveals to him the crime by which he was murdered, and institutes still other proofs – for the reason that this revelatory spirit could also be the devil” (446-447). Hamlet’s consciousness is always already an unhappy one, and one that struggles with the divine law that makes a child eternally responsible to tend to and respect the body of family, the same divine law that condemned Antigone.

Andrew Cutrofello’s apt reading of *Hamlet* through the eyes of Nietzsche, Freud, Foucault and Derrida in his *All for Nothing: Hamlet’s Negativity* has examined how the play, for literary theory, as it had been for psychoanalysis, had proved to be a Rosetta stone for thought after modernity. As Cutrofello writes, “Like all of Shakespeare’s melancholy characters, Hegel’s unhappy consciousness feels cut off from the divine. It overcomes its alienation by confessing its misery to a ministering priest who stands in for the absent God” (35). Hamlet has no such priest to turn to: he only has, in the words of Schiesari, his own superego. Hamlet cannot hope to cure his “unhappy consciousness,” which would become “capable of playing the role of a rational agent who must endure further contradictions before being reconciled with the absolute. Under the initial guise of observing reason, this somewhat happier consciousness is forced to take seriously the kind of reductive materialism that in Hegel’s day appeared under the guise of
phrenology” (Cutrofello 35). The cure of his unhappy consciousness would be the equivalent to a lobotomy: this is not the Bildung Shakespeare has designed for his malcontented prince. Cutrofello continues, saying: “Hamlet’s ‘success’ as an unhappy consciousness would then consist in his ability to use the skull of Yorick to lay the ghost of his dead father to rest. [Jennifer] Bates’ interpretation [from Hegel and Shakespeare on Moral Imagination] implies that there is a kind of uneven development in Hamlet’s phenomenological journey, for he resolves a more ‘advanced’ contradiction while remaining stuck at an earlier stage. If he is still haunted at the end of the play, it is not because the Ghost hovers over the strewn corpses, but because his available courses of action are constrained by his Zeitgeist’s limited conception of justice” (35-36). “The rest is silence” – indeed.

**Molière’s reasonably unreasonable malcontent**

Turning to *Le Misanthrope*, one finds in the character of Alceste the unsettling, comedic counterpart to the tragic Hamlet. Hans Robert Jauss in “Paradox of the Misanthrope” calls Molière’s work the “comedy of character” influenced by La Bruyère’s adaptation of Theophrastus in *Les Caractères ou les mœurs de ce siècle* (306). He writes that *Le Misanthrope* represents “a limiting case created to test and explore (auszuspekulieren) what human nature can be – if man is capable of acting against his own nature” as determined by their character (307). Comedy serves as an exaggeration of character to an extreme to bring this character into further relief (Jauss 308). Alceste “struggles,” with a melancholy, argues Bernadette Höfer, that “operates as a form of psycho-physiological
revolt, which enables the main character to go beyond the self-negation that he perceives in his environment … Alceste’s melancholy also turns out to be profoundly pathological in that it is a psychosomatic manifestation of inner distress” (137). Alceste views himself as superior to all others, and manifests this superiority through his uncouth bluntness, in contrast to Philinte’s reasonableness and politeness that would tolerate an Oronte, rather than blast him, as Alceste does gleefully (Höfer 142). One result of extreme idleness and despair in Burton’s Anatomy, as outlined above, is misanthropy. Földényi writes about the relationship of the melancholic and the misanthrope, saying that:

At every moment, the life of a melancholic partakes of resurrection – that is why he does not die, at least not in the physical sense. A life that encloses resurrection within itself is a complete life and is therefore threatened not by death but by ordinary life, which rejects the ever-present possibility of resurrection, that is ecstasy. That is why melancholic heroes were misanthropes (as heroes, they differed from everybody else anyway), while melancholic philosophers, if not expressly misanthropic, looked down on those who were stuck in darkness and ignorance…. (34)

Földényi, while not writing on Le Misanthrope, has described Alceste’s agony almost perfectly. For Alceste’s greatest terror is the undialectical, flavourless puree of daily life. Time means something completely different for Alceste: his dire misery agonizes each moment spent around ordinary – though upper class – folk. Each of these passing seconds is just one more passing revolution of dull sameness. Each moment threatens the possibility of a deeply desired, authentic renewal.

The humoral positions of friends Alceste and Philinte are established early on in the play. It is worth mentioning that the words “mélancolie” and “bile noire” are not featured in the play, instead one interprets, in context, the use of “bile” – taking care to not confuse black and yellow bile. “Molière makes the grandiose one-sidedness of
Alceste problematic by playing him off against a counter-character. Alceste is compared with Philinte, the melancholic with the phlegmatic man” and so, according to Jauss, “Molière constructs a communicating system of characters who must unfold their nature dialogically rather than monologically in reciprocal role-playing” (316). In other words, Alceste and Philinte’s humoral affects are the sum total of their personalities, making them hilariously one-dimensional. Alceste’s character is atrabilaire, which is to say he is profoundly affected by black bile, whereas his friend Philinte, ever the reasonable one, is of a phlegmatic disposition. This exchange presents Alceste’s humoral caricature:

ALCESTE
Mes yeux sont trop blessés; et la Cour, et la Ville,
Ne m’offrent rien qu’objets à m’échauffer la Bile:
J’entre en une humeur noire, en un chagrin profond,
Quand je vois vivre entre eux, les Hommes comme ils font;
Je ne trouve, partout, que lâche Flatterie,
Qu’Injustice, Intérêt, Trahison, Fourberie;
Je n’y puis plus tenir, j’enrage, et mon dessein
Est de rompre en visière à tout le Genre Humain.

PHILINTE
Ce chagrin Philosophe est un peu trop sauvage,
Je ris des noirs accès où je vous envisage (1:651, 1.89-98) 23

Compare this to the exchange below which portrays Philinte as a phlegmatic philosopher, a comedic and ironic twist upon the characterization of the melancholy philosopher:

PHILINTE
J’observe, comme vous, cent choses, tous les jours,
Qui pourraient mieux aller, prenant un autre cours:

23 ALCESTE. My eyes are never spared, at court or in the town: / I’m always having to see sights that make me frown. / It puts me in a rage, to see what I detest: / The way men treat each other makes me so depressed. / Hypocrisy is everywhere, and flattery, / And crude self-interest, and even treachery. / I’ve had enough. Mankind’s an absolute disgrace. / I’ll make a stand, alone against the human race. / PHILINTE. Your grim philosophy is too morose by half. / Your fits of black depression simply make me laugh. (Trans. Slater 434-435)
Mais quoi qu’à chaque pas, je puisse voir paraître,
En courroux, comme vous, on ne me voit point être;
Je prends, tout doucement, les Hommes comme ils sont,
J’accoutume mon Âme à souffrir ce qu’ils font;
Et je crois qu’à la Cour, de même qu’à la Ville,
Mon flegme est Philosophe, autant que votre Bile.

ALCESTE
Mais ce Flegme, Monsieur, qui raisonne si bien,
Ce flegme, pourra-t-il ne s’échauffer de rien?
Et s’il faut, par hasard, qu’un Ami vous trahisse,
Que pour avoir vos Biens, on dresse un artifice,
Ou qu’on tâche à semer de méchants bruits de vous,
Verrez-vous tout cela, sans vous mettre en courroux? (1:653, 159-172)

Alceste’s sincere disgust of human behaviour is noted by he and Philinte as an excess of black bile. Alceste’s complaints throughout Le Misanthrope have to do with the banality of his everyday life, and how his friends complacently and merrily go about their business. As Corinne Bayle has argued, l’atrabilaire “trends [toward] melancholy and misanthropy,” where Molière’s Alceste “is a man who hates the human species, etymologically … but Alceste is also ‘L’atrabilaire amoureux,’” who, as Bayle notes, will appear like a sick man to “the eyes of the honest man, Philinte” (226-227). While Philinte and Alceste’s exchanges provide a great deal of the comedic drama of the play, there is something pathetic to how Alceste regards himself as superior to everyone, and how vapid the other characters around him appear to be by contrast. Alceste is decisively unfunny and unsympathetic in his misanthropy, he is also the only interesting player on

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24 PHILINTE. I’m like you: I can see a hundred things each day / That could be better done, if done a different way; / But though I may be shocked, I don’t, at any stage, / Make such a fuss as you, explode in fits of rage. / I take things easy, let men work their problems through; / I teach myself to put up with the things they do. / At court and in the town, I never intervene: / My phlegm’s more philosophical than all your spleen. / ALCESTE. I know – you’re so phlegmatic, Monsieur Reasoner – / No feelings ever move that bland exterior. / What if it happens that a friend is treacherous, / And tries his tricks on you because you’re prosperous, / Or does his best to spread false rumours, dare I bet / You won’t stand calmly by, you’ll find you’re quite upset? (Trans. Slater 438-439)
the stage, which lends him a vital dynamism, which pushes forward the action of the
play. Then as now, the approach is difficult to square up to dramatic convention, seeing
as the play is more pathetic than laughter inducing.

Lionel Gossman (like Jauss) explains the tepid reception of *Le Misanthrope* as a
comedy which failed to be funny: the play “came to be regarded as a *comédie de
caractère* and therefore not obligated to arouse laughter” (323). As Gérard Defaux
notes, if one asks whether a character like Alceste is *meant* to provoke laughter or not,
one is asking the wrong question (583). Gossman maintains, and I follow him, that “in
the seventeenth century the literary melancholic is still a type,” and in Molière this type
“is almost without exception a comic figure” and “is appropriately the affliction of men
of property, fathers and husbands, rulers, but not attempt is made to enlist the sympathies
of the audience for their sufferings and difficulties” (328). He goes on to add: “The
seventeenth century melancholic – and Molière’s is true to type – is indignant, self-
righteous, accusatory, denouncing the evils and disorders of society while remaining
blind to his own” and that Alceste is quick to outline how things would work were he in
charge (330).

Alceste’s melancholy is a satire of Renaissance melancholy as a mark of
distinction, Gossman argues, saying that:

> The destructiveness and subsequent decay of the princely courts of
> Renaissance Italy and the bitter experience of the dynastic and religious
> wars that devastated the rest of Europe in the late sixteenth and early
> seventeenth centuries undermine the Neoplatonic idea of a relation
> between melancholy and genius. The intensity of the experience of
> disorder made it virtually impossible to sustain the Neoplatonic belief in a

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25 Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s interpretation of the play was particularly and famously devastating.
26 The phrase “white male privilege” from today’s discourse shares a great deal with the stereotype of the
seventeenth-century melancholic man, particularly in Gossman’s characterization of the latter.
hidden objective order and harmony of the universe which the man of
genius with his special senses could perceive behind the discouragingly
untidy veil of appearances. Melancholy became simply the awareness of
the dereliction of man and of the chaotic, unintelligible condition of the
universe, the fictive character of all the pattern attributed to it. (332)

Melancholy in the Baroque retains aspects of character and type but also gains the threats
of suffering, mourning, tyranny and alienation. The melancholy malcontent is in love
with the illusion of power: a powerless person is funny in their buffoonery, a powerful
one is tragically capable of inviting the worst disasters. These threats are located by the
melancholic, who reflects on everyone else’s melancholy, as in the example of Alceste. A
sincere melancholic, as Molière presents it, is a character which can bend the comedic
form into something alien to its conventional self. In this sense, the character play and the
Trauerspiel, in their perversions of comedy and tragedy respectively, have some common
ground. Baroque melancholy and Renaissance melancholy, from this point of view, take
on oppositional qualities, where the ideals and humanism of the one is played against the
cynicism and tyranny of the other.

Writing on Benjamin and comedy, Adriana Bontea noted that the extant writings
from Benjamin on the genre of comedy are few and fragmentary. She notes in particular
the Trauerspiel book and Benjamin’s essay “Fate and Character” (1041). She writes that
the “comedy of character interjects this insight into the natural innocence of man; it
endows this innocence with the objectivity of a mask, a mask on which one can read the
protagonist’s features like a forehead or a hand” and that Benjamin “envisaged Molière’s
comedy in the same tradition as Greek tragedy, the tradition of drama of mask” (1054).
As Christopher Braider notes, Benjamin had once suggested putting together a book on
French drama, especially French tragedy, as a pair to the *Trauerspiel* book, but he never wrote it (382). Braider argues that the missing link in Benjamin’s suggestion is a reflection on French comedy (382). The relationship between mourning and the sovereign is what drew Benjamin to *Trauerspiel* in the first case (Braider 383). Braider notes that Benjamin concedes comedic potential in the *Trauerspiel* (see pages *Trauerspiel* 95-100) and that German Baroque drama produced few comedies (391). Commenting on Molière’s *Dom Juan, ou le festin de pierre*, Braider also says that “as funny as the play may be, and as pointedly providential as is its fiery end, the comedy is plainly dark, and hell remains no laughing matter” (392-393). The death of Dom Juan, in particular, draws comparisons to the scenes of suffering highlighted in *Trauerspiel* plays (Braider 393).

*Le Misanthrope*, as it nears its conclusion, finds Alceste on the path to disaster. The latter has resigned to leave forever, and take his lover, Célimène, with him. It is in this act that Alceste reveals the depth of his love-melancholy, his only, somewhat laughable, panacea against outright misanthropy. If Alceste can desire another, then there is a purpose yet in other people existing out in the world. This is not especially complimentary to Célimène, though she appears generally nonchalant about Alceste’s less than genuine affectations for her. Philinte, finding this plan to be entirely ill-conceived, irrational and destined to failure, attempts to reason with and console Alceste, to perhaps convince him not to retire from society forever, as is his intention. Philinte is not blind to the injustices of human society, and tries to find common cause with his friend:

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Non, je tombe d’accord de tout ce qu’il vous plaît,
Tout marche par Cabale, et par pur Intérêt;
Ce n’est plus que la Ruse, aujourd’hui, qui l’emporte,
Et les Hommes devraient être faits d’autre sorte.
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Mais est-ce une Raison, que leur peu d’Équité,
Pour vouloir se tirer de leur Société?
Tous ces Défauts humains nous donnent, dans la Vie,
Des Moyens d’exercer notre Philosophie,
C’est le plus bel Emploi que trouve la Vertu;
Et si, de Probité, tout était revêtu,
Si tous les Cœurs étaient, francs, justes, et dociles,
La plupart des Vertus nous seraient inutiles,
Puisqu’on en met l’usage à pouvoir, sans ennui,
Supporter dans nos Droits, l’Injustice d’Autrui (1:714-715, l.1555-1568)27

Alceste cuts off his friend in the middle of his speech, his love-melancholy to raging outwardly. Determined, against all reason, Alceste resolves to compel Célimène to come with him. Janet Morgan, who also reads Le Misanthrope as a character play, writes that readers/spectators “often find difficulty in accounting for Alceste’s irrational attachment to Célimène … they tend to regard it as a dramatic contrivance, amusing perhaps but not very plausibly introduced” (295).

To put it another way, Célimène is not particularly interesting, and the play does not contrive to explain why Alceste is so entirely fixated on her – given that they are not terribly compatible to begin with – and why his fixation would make him so entirely subject to a love-melancholy. Morgan argues that the drama of the play is in seeing Alceste attempt to sustain “his character to the end” as part of his character as atrabilaire amoureux; therefore, Célimène is part of this overall scheme (295-296). For Alceste is “an idealist who refuses to accept that social norms operate at a level of pragmatic

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27 Oh, no. You’re right to feel a sense of injury. / The world’s run by a selfish, greedy coterie. / Low cunning is the greatest new accomplishment, / That’s how to win – I wish things could be different. / But, granted that injustice and foul play are rife, / Is that a reason to abandon public life? / Humanity’s a mess, but let’s be practical, / And make sure our approach is philosophical. / That’s the best way to demonstrate we’re really good; / For if we tried to be as honest as we could, / And everyone was decent, fair, and virtuous, / Most of our virtues would become superfluous, / Since what we use them for is helping us to bear / Our grievances, when other people are unfair. (Slater 534-535)
convention different from moral law” with Philinte and Célimène providing the contrast to that impossible idealism (Morgan 297). And so, with this in mind, this is Alceste’s retort to Philinte’s entreaty:

Je sais que vous parlez, Monsieur, le mieux du Monde,
En beaux Raisonnements, vous abondez toujours,
Mais vous perdez le Temps, et tous vos beaux Discours.
La Raison, pour mon Bien, veut que je me retire,
Je n’ai point, sur ma langue, un assez grand empire;
De ce que je dirais, je ne répondrais pas,
Et je me jetterais cent Choses sur les Bras.
Laissez-moi, sans dispute, attendre Célimène,
Il faut qu’elle consente au Dessein qui m’amène;
Je vais voir si son Cœur a de l’amour pour moi,
Et c’est ce moment-ci, qui doit m’en faire foi. (1:714-715, l.1570-1580)²⁸

Alceste declines the invitation for company: “je me sens l’âme émue, / Allez-vous-en la voir, et me laissez, enfin, / Dans ce petit coin sombre, avec mon noir chagrin. [I’m too upset … / You go on up, I’ll stay, and try to find relief, / In this dark corner, here, alone, me and my grief.]” (1:714-715, l.1582-1584; Slater 535-536). Alceste needs this fixation upon Célimène, and his crucial error is the obsession for forcing a confrontation where a rejection will end not only his love for her, but also his ability to recollect that love fondly.²⁹ In the necessary ambiguity of his relationship, Alceste could retain a reason to be with other people, despite his hatred, because he, at least, could bring himself to love one of them. Once he forces a definitive answer from his lover, and once Célimène

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²⁸ Monsieur, I know that you are most articulate; / You’ve all the answers, and your reasoning’s sublime, / But still your speechifying’s just a waste of time. / It stands to reason that I can’t live here, among / My fellows, since it’s clear I can’t control my tongue, / And I can’t answer for the things that I might say. / I’d find myself in constant trouble, every day. / Don’t argue, leave me here to wait for Célimène. / Will she approve my plan to leave the world of men? / Will she commit herself, or else remain aloof? / It’s time now, time for her to give me proper proof. (Slater 535)

²⁹ This theme will come into play in the reading of Kierkegaard in the second chapter.
reasonably declines parting from civil society, Alceste’s final speech\textsuperscript{30} spits upon everything. The malcontent is the representation of what happens when the wrong people fall upon melancholy: it is a narcissistic refusal to let go, as opposed to an ennoblement of the intellect. This is not to say that Hamlet and Alceste are not clever men – at the best moments, these two merge on the inspired. In the cases of these two characters, they are possessed by a particular obsessiveness that condemns them to either tragic idleness or pathetic misanthropy.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I explored the emergence and the ebb and flow of melancholy from Aristotle to the figure of Alceste. As observed in this discussion, and by many of the scholars, the tradition of melancholy is neither uniform, nor continuous. What becomes clear in this view of history is that the negative and positive faces of melancholy are inexorable. Each planet in the constellation is like a coin, with two faces. I have called these faces by many names, but with *melencolia heroica*, the word “heroica” contains the dual nature of eroticism and heroism, of carnal vice and intellectual virtue. The forces of sublime melancholy and splenetic melancholia form a part of the same centrifugal and centripetal movement. Milton’s portrayal of these two faces is both the ultimate accomplishment and realization of melancholy, and yet a moment where its face had become so entirely familiar (in the form of Dürer’s angel) it had begun to ellipse its own significance. Renaissance melancholy passed, regarded as a fad, though its essential and

\textsuperscript{30} The closing moments of the play in the performance I have seen of *Le Misanthrope* have Alceste running in a circle, as if swallowed by the melancholic cyclone of his despair (see 1:726, l.1801-1806).
authentic character would be preserved in the suffering of the Baroque *Trauerspiel*. In the twilight years of the eighteenth century, melancholy would make something of a return in the image of Romantic genius, although this return, too, was less than uniform in its character and development. In the image of the genius, inspired by imagination, the Romantic poet was also bound by the threat of spleen. The dialectic of melancholy makes its next turn, riding the wave of revolutionary spiritedness.
Chapter 2 – The Dialectics of Sorrow:

Views of Melancholy in Blake, Kierkegaard and Keats

The Negation is the Spectre; the Reasoning Power in Man
This is a false Body: an Incrustation over my Immortal
Spirit; a Selfhood, which must be put off & annihilated alway.\(^{31}\)

In addition to my other numerous acquaintances,
I have one more intimate confidant – my depression.
In the midst of my joy, in the midst of my work,
he beckons to me, calls me aside,
even though physically I remain on the spot.
My depression is the most faithful mistress I have known
no wonder, then, that I return the love.\(^{32}\)

Deep in the shady sadness of a vale
Far sunken from the healthy breath of morn,
Far from the fiery noon, and eve’s one star,
Sat grey-haired Saturn, quiet as a stone,
Still as the silence round about his lair;
Forest on forest hung above his head
Like cloud on cloud.\(^{33}\)

This chapter examines three leading figures that have engaged with Renaissance
“sublime melancholy” or a version of *melencolia heroica*.\(^{34}\) With William Blake, one
encounters a poet and painter who was a notable figure of both the eighteenth and
nineteenth centuries. Contemporary of William Cowper and Thomas Gray, and also the
Romantic upstarts William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Blake’s most
important work took on the themes Romanticism most engaged with: the role of the
poetic imagination, the French Revolution and its aftermaths, and the renewed interest in
humanity’s relationship with nature before the advent of the industrial revolution. With

\(^{34}\) Susan J. Wolfson, a noted critic of Keats’ poetry, provides an excellent overview of the tradition of
melancholy in Romanticism in her article “Romanticism & Gender & Melancholy.”
Søren Kierkegaard, who died in 1855, one encounters a piecemeal, yet robust, theory of melancholia scattered throughout his writings. For Kierkegaard, there is indeed much common ground with Blake, insofar as they marry a radically personal Christianity to an analysis of melancholic affect (and how to get out of bad moods). In the case of John Keats, one finds a poet who was aware of the historical sources of melancholy from the Renaissance and the Baroque. In his poem “Ode on Melancholy” one finds a poet figure praying to the temple of “Melencolia.” In presenting these three writers together, one finds a common structural theme between them: the role that sorrow plays in one’s ability to find and know authentic joy, the latter being an outpouring of mirth and blissfulness, the true opposite of melancholy. For each of these writers, the melancholy found in sorrow – whose root is a combination of medieval *acedia* and “sorrow without a cause” à *la* Burton – focalizes a crisis consciousness that presents an opportunity to elevate thought. The choice one makes, when faced with melancholy, defines the path forward from this crisis. With Blake, the poetic representation of sorrow has a few forms, which are consolidated in his “Spectre of Urthona,” an astral figure representing an exteriorization of the confrontation with self-doubt and despair. This confrontation is meant to result in the annihilation of “Negation” and the return to the progress found in dialectical opposition and creation. For Kierkegaard, melancholy in adulthood is the self-conscious rediscovery of the anxiety that preserved one’s childhood innocence: melancholy is in fact the opportunity to take the next step in the stage of life. The successful melancholic uses this sorrow to locate an ethical center to their own agency, and later, an ironic plasticity to take the hits of life in stride, on the path to an authentic spiritual life. For Keats,
sorrow is always already the complement to joy. Moreover, in the face of “Melancholy,” which in his ode is the titular mistress to whom the poet pays tribute, one finds a gleaming joy, and in silent communion, a pleasant beatitude.

**Blake’s figures of despair: “The Spectre of Urthona” and Urizen**

The word “melancholy” seldom occurs in Blake’s writings. When it does, like so many words in Blake’s polemic and poetic lexicons, “melancholy” ends up in unavoidable ambivalence. On the one hand, one observes a use of the word that is thoroughly negative, in a near-direct equivocation with the medieval *acedia*, the sin of sloth. On the other hand, there is a notion of melancholy in Blake that is not abject negation, an intellectual phenomenon that the imagination may redeem, may transform melancholic affectations into joy, like a return to prelapsarian innocence despite one being trapped in a postlapsarian world of experience. As Ian Balfour suggests in his *The Rhetoric of Romantic Prophecy*, Blake’s models from the Bible, the politics of his day, and his poetic forebears – while interpreted by the poet in an idiosyncratic manner – offer some paths to align him with the history of the literary and visual arts. In the *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Blake outlines his now famous repudiation of Church dogma and in praise of following one’s energies. There, he also accuses Milton of letting his Puritan rationalizations obstruct the divine inspiration of his poetry, in particular *Paradise Lost*. The *Marriage* is a hybrid, experimental text, abandoning much the lyrical style from the *Songs of Innocence and Experience* in favour of terse prose poetry, aphorism and chilling prophetic verse. One reads in the *Marriage* a poetic philosophy that announces a program for Blake’s career
ambitions, an uncompromising dialectical mode of thought and art-making. The terms of 
his dialectic would evolve through his career, but their basic, structural valuation remains 
remarkably consistent. Blake’s apparent villain in the text is Enlightenment *Reason* that 
restrains the overflow of poetic, divine *Energy*. He writes: “Without Contraries is no 
progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary 
to Human existence” as the announcement of his dialectic of necessary contrariety (E 34). 
He then parodies the morality of good and evil: “From these contraries spring what the 
religious call Good & Evil. Good is the passive that obeys Reason[.] Evil is the active 
springing from Energy. / Good is Heaven. Evil is Hell” (E 34). Blake is not interested in a 
duality of good and evil, and instead strives first to reverse the values of the binary, and 
then to demonstrate their mutual complementarity. About Milton, Blake famously 
proclaimed: “The reason Milton wrote in fetters when he wrote of Angels & God, and at 
liberty when of Devils & Hell, is because he was a true Poet and of the Devils party 
without knowing it” (E 35).

The centerpiece of the *Marriage* is the “Proverbs of Hell” section, a list of conca-
tenating phrases that mean to overthrow conventional moralism in favour of Blake’s own 
Christian code of art, grounded in visionary experience and a prophetic tone. Below are 
four proverbs that treat the word “sorrow,” presented in the order they appear:

The busy bee has no time for sorrow.  
Excess of sorrow laughs. Excess of joy weeps.  
Joys impregnate. Sorrow bring forth.  
Joys laugh not! Sorrows weep not! (E 36-38, l. 11, 26, 29, 60)

One locates in these aphorisms a double conclusion: first, the condemnation of *acedia* in 
the form of sorrow, and second, the acknowledgement of that same sorrow provoking
uncontrollable laughter. At the same time, across the aphorisms, Blake is consistent on the complementarity of joy and sorrow, and these words figure prominently in several poems from the *Songs*, notably “Infant Joy,” “Infant Sorrow,” and “On Another’s Sorrow.” The pure joy of a child’s innocence is born from their ignorance of suffering. In Blake’s “Infant Sorrow,” it is the parents who suffer the birth of the child, and in “Infant Joy” is the new born child who narrates the magic of perceiving the world through pure imagination. One smiles at the inquisitive nature of a child’s eyes, knowing nothing of the larger world that awaits after childhood. Parents protect their children from experience until the inexorable encounter with the latter begins to chip away at the safeguard of innocence, and the child falls into adulthood, just as the first humans fell from Eden.

Blake’s poetry from the *Songs* is, in fact, illustrative of this anxiety that is part of a child’s innocence. Robert Essick, one of Blake’s greatest editors and critics, once wrote:

“Anxiety can be distinguished from depression because the former includes hope” (507).

The innocence of children is the unmediated experience of hope, and the anxiety that comes from the intuition that something other than hope may exist in the world. In the “Innocence” poems, the speakers, who are often children or childlike figures, intuit that suffering is not something one should accept. Instead, the child wishes to imaginatively redress suffering in the world. The “Experience” speakers, much more frequently adults, are paralyzed by the encounter with anxiety. The perspective of innocence can make use of anxiety as a means of empathy and ethical sight; the experienced speaker, riddled with anxious thoughts, can no longer lend a helping hand. As Sharon Krishek notes, “there is an important difference between despair and sorrow. While the latter is a proper response
to loss – it reflects upon the value of the *lost thing* – despair is an improper way of responding to loss.

For Blake, one’s sympathy for a sorrowful person is the root of a truly joyful person. Sensibility to another’s sorrow is a core part of the divine human:

Can I see another’s woe,
And not be in sorrow too.
Can I see another’s grief,
And not seek for kind relief?

Can I see a falling tear,
And not feel my sorrows share,
Can a father see his child,
Weep, nor be with sorrow fill’d.

Can a mother sit and hear,
An infant groan an infant fear –
No no never can it be.
Never never can it be. (“On Another’s Sorrow” E 17, 1.1-12)

Blake’s poetry often makes this kind of appeal to the apprehension and comprehension of ethics through an empathy for the other, a recognition of the divine in the other person, which all of humanity shares. As Schneider argues, “Anxiety is the keynote of the *Songs*”; furthermore, “innocence stands at the beginning and end of Blake’s cosmogony” and for “Kierkegaard, anxiety – which he equates with innocence – is also both the starting point and final destination of the individual’s journey of self-discovery (358).

The mark of sorrow is a core of the human experience, but it also a call to action, to transfigure sorrow into something else, namely joy. In all three subjects of this chapter – Blake, Keats and Kierkegaard – there is a concord on joy as the counter-mood of sorrow. It is never sufficient in Blake’s universe to *just* notice the suffering of humanity; one must be compelled to act in redressing it. In Blake’s mythical poetics, he will come to
characterize sorrow, joy, mourning and melancholia under a series of figural names, and have these figures perform the dialectic of his thoughts.

Blake’s extreme concentration of irremediable sorrow and anxiety comes in two major forms. One is the personification of that extreme sorrow as “Urizen” and the other as Blake’s notion of the “Spectre.” Urizen is prominent throughout the Prophecies, most notably in *The Book of Urizen*, whereas Blake’s “Spectre of Urthona,” with one notable exception from *America: A Prophecy*, features prominently in the long poems of Blake’s output: *The Four Zoas, Milton* and *Jerusalem*, the first of these left unfinished and without completed illustrations. There is never a simple way to explicate the players in Blake’s prophetic mythology, but it is impossible to proceed without attempting some form of summary. Concerning the “Spectre,” Morton Paley offers an outstanding reading in his article, “Cowper as Blake’s Spectre” where he outlines key aspect of the “Spectre” figure, and suggests that William Cowper – whom Blake admired, and who had been a close friend of William Hayley, Blake’s patron in Felpham – may have served as one model in plate 10 of *Jerusalem*. Mitchell, who is adeptly capable in outlining the stakes of Blake’s poetics, offers this cogent description:

Within Blake’s psychodrama there are, finally, those “dark forces” that have abundant names in modern psychology: paranoia, depression, fixation, obsession, compulsion, regression, rage, narcissism, melancholia, hysteria, mania, delusions of grandeur, fetishism. Blake does not have these names. He gives his symptoms the concrete bodies, spaces and “English names” that come to him, spaces such as “the petrific abominable chaos,” “the abomination of desolation,” “the Void outside existence,” “the Abyss of the Five Senses”; human forms and bodies such as the Spectre and Emanation, the Abstract Folly, Thel, Oothoon, Los, Orc, Urthona, Urizen, Hand. These figures and places hover on the threshold between private obsessions and publicly recognizable forms and fantasies, including the “national imaginary” of Albion, the collective mind/body of
England and of humanity, whose nightmares are the drama of the illuminated books. ("Chaosthetics" 453)

Blake’s poetic method is to transfigure ideas, and engage them as if they were a crossing between imaginary friends and mythical creatures. The “drama” of his books for his reader, then, is the untangling of names and relationships known only to Blake himself. Moreover, what these names and relationship mean change from poem to poem, sometimes from page to page.35

Lorraine Clark36 offers an excellent point of departure into the critical points of Blake’s poetic typology that is relevant to the current analysis. She writes:

The dialectic of Los and the Spectre of Urthona which Blake worked out during his three years at Felpham and made into the central dynamic of *Milton* and *Jerusalem* was an extraordinary breakthrough for him, a solution (as he saw it) to the problem of “the contraries” which had dogged him throughout his career. For although he never wavered from characterizing life as a dynamic interaction of contraries, he struggled throughout his career with different ways of representing that interaction. His continual reworking of the *Songs of Innocence and Experience* was part of this struggle, as was his sustained engagement with the battle between Orc and Urizen which [Northrop] Frye has so thoroughly explicated. Blake’s increasing dissatisfaction with this static Orc cycle, as Frye has called it, and final abandonment of that battle with the appearance of the Spectre of Urthona is the crisis or turning point…. (3)

In this paragraph, Clark names the major figures that are part of Blake’s dialectical machinations. Urthona is one of the four Zoas divided from the body of Albion (a figure of both the ideality and the body politic of Britain). Los is the human form of Urthona, and appears throughout Blake’s prophetic writings. Both Los and Urthona are portrayed as creator figures and blacksmiths, forging the body of the human and divine world. As

35 Vincent De Luca called this difficulty Blake’s “Wall of Words.”
36 My interpretation of Blakean dialectic is deeply indebted to Clark’s *Blake, Kierkegaard, and the Spectre of Dialectic.*
Frye explains in his classic *Fearful Symmetry*: “The Spectre of Urthona is the isolated subjective aspect of existence in this world, the energy with which a man or any other living thing copes with nature … it is that aspect of existence in time which is linear rather than organic or imaginative” (292). As a result, the “Spectre of Urthona is the inventive faculty, and invention is the art of finding things in nature: it does not create so much as supply the instruments for creating. The Spectre of Urthona, properly controlled, is the obedient demon who brings his master Los the fire and metals and other physical needs of culture, and brings the artist his technical skill” (Frye 294).

If one accepts Clark’s thesis, whereby the epiphany at Felpham, which rescued Blake from his three years of despair, was the productive evolution of his dialectic of contrariety into something new, which allows the progress of his long poems, then one has found the crisis moment of melancholy in Blake. It is interesting to note that Blake’s patron, Hayley authored a poem entitled “The Triumphs of Temper,” which takes up the “Cave of Spleen” episode from Pope’s *The Rape of the Lock*. Nelson Hilton notes that “the spectre shows some affinity to the eighteenth-century figure of ‘Spleen’” through Hayley (151). While spleen does not figure prominently in Blake’s work, it is fair to assume his familiarity with its conceptualization and history. The negation of a splenetic, black melancholy is a central feature of Blake’s late work. A further connection is outlined by Jane Darcy in her article on the struggles of Cowper with melancholia and madness: Blake admired Cowper, and Hayley wrote a biography of the latter, and has

37 Mary Crosby notes that Blake was commissioned to make engravings for an edition of Hayley’s work – two letters in Blake’s collected writing mention this work (E 723-725; 762-763).
been his long-time friend and patron before his death. With this in mind, one can read the Blake of *Milton* as one who has made “the turn from … ‘Two Classes of Men’ (*The Marriage*) to the ‘The Three Classes of Men’ (*Milton* and *Jerusalem*), and from ‘the Two Contraries’ to “the Two Contraries and the Reasoning Negative’” (Clark 3). This version of Blake is a writer who has realized that the negative side of melancholy is crucial to the broader revision of the world. Another crucial figural relationship is that of Los and Urizen. In the middle of *The Book of Urizen* and the opening “Bard’s Song” of *Milton*, Blake represents a creation scene where Los attempts to form a new world from the negation of Urizen. The first poem predates Blake’s time in Felpham and the latter poem is the direct result of his epiphany there, ending “a three-year period of intense despair, out of which he recovered to write his last prophecies” (Clark 23). The comparison of the two creation scenes outlines the before and after difference of the Felpham epiphany: the aborted creation of *Urizen* leaves the figure of Los in despair, unable to make something of the irremediable melancholia that Urizen represents. In *Milton*, while the new attempt at a creation from Urizen’s body brings out complications, the poet is able to distill – from Urizen’s refusal to take a form – the third of term of new Blakean dialectic. The three sons, Rintrah, Palamabron and Satan (indeed, Milton’s Satan) form the pieces of a three term dialectic, with the first two sons as opposites (the wisdom of innocence and the wrath of prophetic experience) and Satan serving as the absolute negative. This is a deepening of the insight Blake realized in the *Marriage*, and one that extricates him from the impasse of the *Book of Urizen*. 
In the *Book of Urizen* – which, as Mitchell suggests, “can be endlessly investigated as a parody of traditional Miltonic cosmology” (“Pictorial Form” 89) – Blake’s Los stands before the titular figure and laments the portion of the divine Albion, which used to be part of him, as Los was himself a part of Albion’s body. Mark L. Barr suggests that Los suffers a “rapid decline into insanity when Urizen is torn from his side … Los has been also been literally deprived of reason” (747). Reason in Blake, even when it is dominated by the imaginative faculties, has some redeeming qualities. Reason left to its own devices, or, worse, to dominate the world of thought, is the principle of tyranny incarnated. Beholding Urizen – which Tilottama Rajan convincingly connects to Kristeva’s abject – Los desires to redeem a perceived wrong, to correct the error that Urizen represents. Blake describes their encounter thus:

9. Los wept howling around the dark Demon:  
And cursing his lot; for in anguish,  
Urizen was rent from his side;  
And a fathomless void for his feet;  
And intense fires for his dwelling.

10. But Urizen laid in a stony sleep  
Unorganiz’d, rent from Eternity

11. The Eternals said: What is this? Death  
Urizen is a clod of clay.

12: Los howld in a dismal stupor,  
Groaning! gnashing! groaning!  
Till the wrenching apart was healed

13: But the wrenching of Urizen heal’d not  
Cold, featureless, flesh or clay,  
Rifted with direful changes  
He lay in a dreamless night

14: Till Los rouz’d his fires, affrighted
At the formless unmeasurable death. (pl. 6-7, E 73-74)

Urizen is most commonly associated with a “stony” quality while also being described as formless. Where Urizen is made of rock, perhaps Los could sculpt his body into the symbolic mountains of Albion. Los, being a blacksmith, turns to his creative tools to shape the unshapeable figure of Urizen. The Eternals, who represent a form of parody of religious leaders or councils, have made Urizen Los’ problem. Los agonizes on what to do: Andrew Cooper argues that the Los’ “fashioning of the formless Urizen in defense of the Eternals and the dialectics of their ensuing relationship can be seen to dramatize how the madman is in part a socially constructed alter ego against which a culture defines itself. … As a form of chaos within culture, mental illness threatens the bounding line between self and other” and the borderline between the definitions of good and evil (590). Urizen is pure abjection, something to be shaped into anything other than what he currently is. And so Blake turns to the next plate of his book, and tells of the creation Los attempts, which mimics the seven-day creation of Genesis (see pl. 8, E 74).

This description of Los struggling to commence the creation is rife with the images of Blake’s bleakest visions of hell. The fury of Los’ creative labour is a sublime pouring of desperate and furious energy, striving to reshape Urizen anew. Blake proceeds through the description of seven ages passing, each ending in “a State of dismal woe” (Urizen chapter 4, pl. 10-13). At the conclusion of these ages, Los capitulates from his immense task:

I. In terrors Los shrunk from his task:
   His great hammer fell from his hand:
   His fires beheld, and sickening,
   Hid their strong limbs in smoke.
For with noises ruinous loud;
With hurtlings & clashings & groans
The Immortal endur’d his chains,
Tho’ bound in a deadly sleep.

2. All the myriads of Eternity:
All the wisdom & joy of life:
Roll like a sea around him,
Except what his little orbs
Of sight by degrees unfold.

3. And now his eternal life
Like a dream was oblitered

4. Shudd’ring, the Eternal Prophet smote
With a stroke, from his north to south region
The bellows & hammer are silent now
A nerveless silence, his prophetic voice
Siez’d; a cold solitude & dark void
The Eternal Prophet & Urizen clos’d (pl. 13:20-40, E 77)

Los’ mythical identity is intimately tied to his abilities as a creator, a maker of (beautiful) things from inert substances (rocks, metals, and the like). This failure to make of Urizen, who is the clod of clay, something other than what he is, something that redeems his phenomenality for the sake of the Eternals, crushes Los. For the remainder of the poem, Los broods, weeps and is disconsolate. As Mitchell puts it, at the end of the seven ages, “Los is absorbed into the Urizenic mode of consciousness” (“Pictorial Form” 94). The despair that would soon grip Blake himself utterly defeats Los. In having fashioned an absolute contrary to his Los in the form of Urizen, and outlining the perfect of Urizen’s formlessness, Blake’s mythological narrative is caught at a standstill in the shadow his doctrine from the *Marriage*. Urizen represents the entirety of religion and reason’s oppressions over creativity, so much so, that the very energies of creativity Blake praised cancel out completely.
“The struggle Blake depicts is not simply of the divided mind at war with itself, but of the tragic consequences of a world of Urizenic law that compels the artist into the fragmented agency of prophetic insanity and, in so doing, forces a disassociation between the text and contemporary political reference, transforming poetry into a purely aesthetic object” (Barr 758). Blake’s dialectic, in refusing to resolve two terms into a synthesis, eventually learns that the two originary terms are not the positive and the negative, but rather two oppositional positives wrestling with the same principle of negation. This is represented in the difference in how Los treats Urizen: in the Book of Urizen Los mistakes Urizen for “a negative” and attempts to destroy him, whereas in Milton, Los can humanize his opponent, and realize that the principle of negation is something else, namely Satan. In biographical terms, as Clark argues, Blake learns that Milton, while an opponent to his biblical poetics, is someone he must embrace as a true father figure, which can cleanse the dark spectre of his inadvertent, tyrannical impulses (45). At the time of Urizen’s composition, before the turn of the nineteenth century, Blake is at an impasse. One may opine, as Rajan convincingly does in her path-breaking study The Supplement of Reading – upon the poetic and philosophical merit of Urizen’s despairing conclusion as compared to Milton’s system-building expansion. With Milton, Blake escapes the quandary he had gotten himself into with Urizen. The central, interminable question, for the interpreter of these works, is whether Blake’s dialectic has indeed taken the next step, or fallen off its own track.
Blake illustrates Milton’s muse: Mirth and melancholy, sorrow and joy

In the later years of his life, Blake was commissioned to illustrate most of Milton’s major works, which he engaged in from 1801 into the end of the 1810s. This includes the illustrations of “L’Allegro” and “Il Penseroso” prepared from 1816 to 1820. The total work is a dozen illustrations, and on the back of these images Blake wrote commentary in pencil (see description from The William Blake Archive, text in E 682-685). Blake makes a few remarks concerning the Milton’s poems, and his illustrations of them, which reveal a crucial characteristic of his position on and practice of personification. The handwritten text that accompanies the illustrations to Milton’s text are short lyrics followed by brief comments in Blake’s typically idiosyncratic and dense prose. The first six pages are grouped under the title “Mirth. Allegro” and the last six are titled “Melancholy. Penseroso” (E 682, 684). The two halves of the designs portray personifications of Mirth and Melancholy, for which plates one and seven are the principal images of each. Bette Charlene Werner argues that the figure of Milton portrayed in the texts is the same Milton figure from Milton: A Poem – Blake’s pseudo-biographical poem about the spiritual life of Milton, who resides in heaven, but experiences a lingering discontent about his past life (146). One reads in these texts hallmarks of Blakean poetics: an ambivalent attitude to Milton as both poetic hero and dogmatic pseudo-Neoplatonist, the presentation of an opposition between innocence and experience as a progression towards aesthetic truth, and the allusions to an entire mythological network of figures unique to Blake’s writing. The personification of Melancholy, portrayed on plate seven, is seen guiding Milton – who explicitly figures in plates eight through twelve – on plate ten.
through a forest, in a scene that evokes both the garden of Eden and the opening of Dante’s *Commedia*. Blake’s commentary reads:

And when the Sun begins to fling  
His flaring Beams me Goddess bring  
To arched walks of twilight Groves  
And Shadows brown that Sylvan Coves  
Milton led by Melancholy into the Groves away from the Suns  
flaring Beams who is seen in the Heavens throwing his darts & flames of fire  
The Spirits of the Trees on each side are seen under the domination of Insects raised by the Suns heat (E 685)

Under the trees’ canopy, Milton is guided away from the demonic energies of the sun, which Blake praised, towards the church approved images of morality and duality that Blake’s polemic railed against at every opportunity. In Blake’s allegorical typology, moving into the shadows often represents a descent into philosophical obsessiveness, instead of radiating before the vision of a brighter, starry constellation. Milton sees the face of god’s commanding reason and the snakes of Eden instead of the divine energy from the sun that commands them both. In this, Blake’s Christianity was always an enemy to the church doctrines that repressed the expressions of the “human form divine.”

What, in this configuration, is the role of melancholy? One sees a reversal of melancholy’s role from Milton’s “Il Penseroso” as a positive muse “sage and holy, / … divinest melancholy” (l. 11-12) – which is contrasted in “L’Allegro” as “loathed Melancholy” – in Blake’s text: here, it is Melancholy personified as Milton’s muse which leads the poet’s focus astray from the true energies of his inspiration. In the analysis of Blake’s note on the illustration, one sees a melancholy that proves to be a damning agent for all the wrong reasons: leading Milton to a view of heaven and hell that are, to Blake’s mind, inversions from their true potentialities. One sees Blake’s central thesis from
Milton: A Poem, and one of the main tenets of The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, repeated here: Milton, though divinely inspired to write the texts of Paradise Lost and its companions, was insufficient in fulfilling this inspiration through to the end. Milton offers a narrative where the seventeenth century poet attempts to “correct” his errors, succumbing to his “Spectre” instead of learning to subdue it. As Pamela Dunbar writes:

Despite his visionary gifts Milton was also according to Blake the propo-
nent of two signal “errors” – a belief in tyranny both domestic and per-
sonal, and support for self-righteous sexual morality. These “errors” are
exposed in the “L’Allegro” and “Il Penseroso” illustrations, although in
the concluding plate he is shown experiencing a vision of regeneration,
rejoicing, and renewal in which he appears to overcome them both. This
interpretation is similar to that offered in the Prophetic book Milton, in
which the Puritan poet descends to earth a second time to order to “cor-
rect” the errors of his previous existence…. (116)

Blake held Milton in high esteem, but he recognized in his idol a series of what to Blake were profound ideological impasses. Milton’s acceptance of, in Dunbar’s words, tyranny and overbearing sexual morality was unacceptable. Blake, feeling that there was some-
thing in Milton that could be redeemed, had tasked himself with Milton’s eternal salva-
tion. Blake strove to redeem Milton from the latter’s “Spectre.” As Mitchell puts it,
“Blake’s figure of the ‘Spectre’ or ‘Selfhood’ often appears as an externally located
phantom or vampire that hovers over the artist’s scene of labor, acting as a kind of
skeptical counter-muse who raises doubts about the work and leads the artist astray”
(“Chaosthetics” 450). The role of the false muse is attributed to “Melancholy” from
Blake’s illustrations of Milton’s poetry, who is shown leading Milton deeper into his own
forest of ruminations, and away from the energies of the sun.
For Blake, the figure of melancholy represents an essential force for creative art, but one whose classical characterization that misleads more often than it guides to truth. Melancholy has an instructive value as an error, which, if interpreted correctly, may lead one back on the path to Mirth. The themes from the “Allegro” and “Il Penseroso” illustrations suggest a complementarity between mirth and melancholy, similar to other oppositions in Blake, such as innocence and experience, or joy and sorrow. It remains clear that one is meant to go through hell in order to get to heaven: one is not meant to stay in a state of melancholy, sorrow, or evil. An irremediable melancholy, by itself, is consistently something to be cast aside. One sees this attitude mostly clearly reflected in one of his letters from 1800, a famous passage addressed to his friend George Cumberland:

I begin to Emerge from a Deep pit of Melancholy, Melancholy without any real reason for it, a Disease which God keep you from & all good men. (E 706)

The above passage is characteristic of Blake’s presentation of melancholia in his poetry: it focuses on the negative aspects of melancholy and leaves out Blake’s contact with the tradition of heroic melancholy. This is peculiar, for in various places Blake proclaimed Dürer, alongside Michelangelo, as the pinnacle of art. Blake was known to keep Dürer prints, including a copy of “Melencolia I,” near his work bench. It is remarkable that in his remarks about melancholy, the discrete influence of his idol’s masterwork, and the tradition of melancholy in which his engraving form a part, is noticeably absent. There is not, to my knowledge, any discernable commentary on “Melencolia I” in Blake’s writings. When Blake speaks of melancholy, it is largely absent of specifics on Dürer’s brooding angel. Moreover, brooding in Blake is normally represented as Urizenic, an
infection of reason, “the very personification of sanity and proportionality … Urizen’s rage for order, system, control, and law is consistently represented by Blake as producing the most pathological form of madness” (Mitchell, “Chaosthetics” 453). While Blake was famously a reader and interpreter of Renaissance art, the tradition of melencolia heroica is noticeably absent from his writings. Anca Violeta Munteanu has argued that Blake’s idea of melancholy falls into the tradition “with Ficino, Agrippa, Dürer or Milton into a territory where melancholy is explicitly connected to the life of the intellect or to heightened sensibility” (79-80). Blake’s deployment of melancholia is a part of the allegory that is meant to lead humanity into a higher form of consciousness. As Mary Lynn Johnson argues, Blake’s usage of innocence and experience, playing against each other, corresponds to an emblematic tradition from the seventeenth century, transformed into Blake’s own image, “a clear manifestation” of his peculiar form of “Allegory address’d to the Intellectual Powers” (E 730, cited in Johnson 170). Frank M. Parisi argues that Blake’s The Gates of Paradise is an analogue to the emblem book tradition (72). He further argues that, while “Blake was not aiming at so penetrating a resolution or so wide an application as Dürer, his design still belongs to the tradition which Dürer revitalized” (83). The influence of Dürer, for Blake, is most noticeable in the mechanics of his masterpieces, the engraved “Prophecies.”

In the early moments of Blake’s “Bard’s Song” – part of the “Book the First” of Milton – Blake reprises his creation scene from Urizen. The story is told to Milton, the central character of Blake’s pseudo-biographical poem, who is sitting in heaven, uneasy. Milton, in hearing the “Bard’s Song,” will recognize his errors and heroically descend
from heaven in order to redeem himself, and his Emanation, Ololon. The substance of his inspiring song is a creation myth, with a similar structure to the one from *Urizen*, but with a different result. The creation begins similarly between *Urizen* and *Milton*: “Urizen lay in darkness & solitude, in chains of the mind lock’d up / Los siezd his Hammer & Tongs; he labourd at his resolute Anvil / Among indefinite Druid rocks & snows of doubt & reasoning. / Refusing all Definite Form, the Abstract Horror roofd stony hard” (pl. 3:6-9, E 96-97). The seven ages pass in a truncated form to the version in *Urizen* – and that also appears in the abandoned poem *The Four Zoas* – and then:

Enraged & stifled without & within: in terror & woe, he threw his Right Arm to the north, his left Arm to the south, & his Feet Stampd the nether Abyss in trembling & howling & dismay And a seventh Age passed over & a State of dismal woe Terrified Los stood in the Abyss & his immortal limbs Grew deadly pale; he became what he beheld: for a red Round Globe sunk down from his Bosom into the Deep in pangs He hoverd over it trembling & weeping. suspended it shook The nether Abyss in tremblings. he wept over it, he cherish’d it In deadly sickening pain: till separated into a Female pale As the cloud that brings the snow: all the while from his Back A blue fluid exuded in Sinews hardening in the Abyss Till it separated into a Male Form howling in Jealousy Within labouring. beholding Without: from Particulars to Generals Subduing his Spectre, they Builded the Looms of Generation They Builded Great Golgonooza Times on Times Ages on Ages First Orc was Born then the Shadowy Female: then All Los’s Family At last Enitharmon brought forth Satan Refusing Form, in vain The Miller of Eternity made subservient to the Great Harvest That he may go to his own Place Prince of the Starry Wheels (pl. 3:24-43, E 97)

In one of the most striking passages from Blake’s poetry, Los succeeds in engendering a creation unlike the one from *Urizen*. Los cannot restore Albion, nor can (or should) he obliterate Urizen. He chooses instead to embrace the abyss Urizen represents, and resolve
his wrong qualities into the “Male Form howling in Jealousy,” which becomes Satan. Los is able to subdue his spectre and use its melancholic energies to create a new world, called Golgonooza. He then births his family, and instead of withering into sorrow, is able to fashion a life and a world. As the “Bard’s Song” goes on to relate, Satan causes quite a bit of trouble once he wanders away from his task of tending the “Starry Mills,” but the state of the world is considerably more manageable, and less bleak. This episode becomes the teaching moment for the character of Milton, who then sets off the major action of the poem. As Ryan suggests in his excellent article on Blake’s melancholia, the latter “view is that melancholy is the inevitable result [of mental debate] and that in order for the threat of monologism to be overcome, a process of ‘Self-annihilation’ is required” (13). When Blake declares, at the beginning of “Book the Second” (written backwards in the design): “How wide the Gulf & Unpassable! between Simplicity & Insipidity / Contraries are Positives/ A Negation is not a Contrary,” he reaffirms the fact that his dialectic of good and evil must get beyond a reversal of terms for its own sake (pl. 30[33], E 129). Concerning the interplay of contraries and negations, Mitchell cogently writes: “Form, and chaos, madness and sanity, in short, are incommensurable, irreconcilable, and inimical to all totality. They push the rule of dialectical contrariety into the realm of what Blake called Negations, dualisms or abstract antitheses, the border of Blake’s art that opens into a void of meaninglessness” (“Chaosthetics” 448).

In the climactic dialogue between Milton and Ololon – Blake’s poetic representation of Milton’s three wives and three daughters – towards the end of Milton, Milton
reiterates the renewal of Blakean dialectic in its latest version. Milton, arriving near the end of his journey to correct the errors of his life’s work, proclaims:

Obey thou the Words of the Inspired Man
All that can be annihilated must be annihilated
That the Children of Jerusalem may be saved from slavery
There is a Negation, & there is a Contrary
The Negation must be destroyd to redeem the Contraries
The Negation is the Spectre; the Reasoning Power in Man
This is a false Body: an Incrustation over my Immortal Spirit; a Selfhood, which must be put off & annihilated alway
To cleanse the Face of my Spirit by Self-examination.
To bathe in the Waters of Life; to wash off the Not Human
I come in Self-annihilation & the grandeur of Inspiration
To cast off Rational Demonstration by Faith in the Saviour
To cast off the rotten rags of Memory by Inspiration
To cast off Bacon, Locke & Newton from Albions covering
To take off his filthy garments, & clothe him with Imagination
To cast aside from Poetry, all that is not Inspiration
That it no longer shall dare to mock with the aspersion of Madness
Cast on the Inspired, by the tame high finisher of paltry Blots, Indefinite, or paltry Rhymes; or paltry Harmonies.
(pl. 40:28-41:10, E 142)

The sons of Los have learned to transform the negation of the spectre, and humans must learn to do the same. In the reasoning mind is a series of traps, forms of good and evil to classify human experience without touching its phenomenality, without getting one’s hands dirty in the workshop.

Milton has learned that the philosophical insights of his reason, rather than his intellect, have led him astray. Melancholy, in this schema of this epiphany, is ambivalent. On the one hand, Renaissance melancholy praised the dual roles of will and intellect, and celebrated the powers of exceptional individuals; on the other hand, melancholy in Blake is a form of selfhood driven brooding that may led one astray. In the caption with the melancholy muse, he succumbs to its advice rather than transform the figural false muse.
into a bright sun, radiating the energies of pure inspiration and imagination. Satan presents himself as benevolent – in particular in the episodes of Blake’s “Bard’s Song” – but his reason is the destruction of the creative in favour of the reasonable. It is reasonable to submit to one’s despair, for the events in the world readily confirm the struggle of life. The rejection of this struggle in favour of endless sorrow and despairing is the capitulation into a hell made of dead matter and stones. As Guinn Batten writes, “Blake has prepared us to understand that the poetry of Romantic melancholy recognizes that the humble body itself – the site of the Law’s inscription and of its resistance – reincarnates, in a radically Christian sense, the dead” (118). Blake’s program for human life is a constant “Mental fight” against the complacency of the everyday. The belief in humanity, so central in Blake, represents one of the most sustained efforts at an erasure of melancholia. Blake’s failure at Felpham was dwelling overlong in the mundane concerns of physical comfort and societal whimsy; the task of the divinely inspired artist requires the discovery of, and a commitment to, a Joyfulness that renders a dour melancholic mood an impossibility. The suffering of melancholia, while instructive, is not meant to define one’s authentic character. This view of melancholia as instructive towards the construction of the definitive, authentic self will appear in Kierkegaard’s writings as well.

**Kierkegaard and the dialectic of Tungsind and Melancholi**

In this second vignette on the spectres of melancholy, I turn to Kierkegaard, whose melancholy is comparable to Blake’s, with a difference. As the above analysis demonstrates, Blake’s version of melancholy is meant to be transfigured through its
annihilation. In this sense, it is a spiritual depression that weighs down the spiritual life from the full actualization of its poetic, divine consciousness. Kierkegaard, whom Simon Podmore refers to as “the modern inheritor of the scrupulous self-scrutiny of Luther: struggling, through the dark clouds of melancholy and despair” (“Physician of the Soul” 174). Blake and Kierkegaard carry the inheritance of a profound, radical Christianity. Elsewhere – in his monograph _Kierkegaard and the Self Before God_ – Podmore asserts that Kierkegaard is not only “one of modernity’s greatest anatomists of melancholy,” but also “one of the most virile and ironic critics of melancholic modernity” (51). Furthermore, his “writings anatomize an inner tension between the aesthetic and the religious that reveals a dialectical melancholy within the modern self” (51). The melancholy Dane’s imagination was well suited to engage in the critique of a modern mind, from both within and without. As opposed to producing a treatise on melancholy, as Kierkegaard did on despair and anxiety, the details of his melancholy are marked in his biography (Podmore, _Self Before God_ 51-52). Like Blake, Kierkegaard traces a genealogy of melancholy through the medieval acedia, which multiple scholars, including Podmore, have suggested. The imaginative leap required for Kierkegaard, then, is the translation of a religious theology into a modern world where it no longer plays in the same way.

Imagination plays a key role in Blake and Kierkegaard’s respective poetics. To borrow from Ronald Grimsley’s essay on Chateaubriand and Kierkegaard, the importance of imagination is the contact with sorrow that “comes from this [very] imagination which makes [one] aware of the unrealized and perhaps unrealizable possibilities of [one’s] existence and so leads [one] to break irrevocably with reality” (239). Like Blake,
“Kierkegaard recognizes that, whereas the melancholy person’s egotism is quite blame-worthy, melancholy in itself is an illness which afflicts ‘only the most gifted natures,’” (Grimsley 242). To lean on Grimsley’s description one more time: “The melancholy [subject] is imprisoned in [their] mood, leading a static and contemplative life that shows no moral or spiritual progress” (243). In this way, while melancholy is a mark of an authentic experience and yet is meant to be overcome. The convergence between Blake’s and Kierkegaard’s views on anxiety and innocence is an example of their spiritual friendship. Kierkegaard, in a passage allied to Blake’s thought on innocence, outlines the perspective of this pure innocence as a rarified form of Angst:

The anxiety that is posited in innocence is in the first place no guilt, and in the second place it is no troublesome burden, no suffering that cannot be brought into harmony with the blessedness of innocence. In observing children, one will discover this anxiety intimated more particularly as a seeking for the adventurous, the monstrous, and the enigmatic. That there are children in whom this anxiety is not found proves nothing at all, for neither is it found in the beast, and the less spirit, the less anxiety. This anxiety belongs so essentially to the child that he cannot do without it. Though it causes him anxiety, it captivates him by its pleasing anxiousness \( \text{[Beoengstelse]} \). In all cultures where the childlike is preserved as the dreaming of the spirit, this anxiety is found. The more profound the anxiety, the more profound the culture. Only a prosaic stupidity maintains that this is a disorganization. Anxiety has here the same meaning as melancholy at a much later point, when freedom, having passed through the imperfect forms of its history, in the profoundest sense will come to itself. (Anxiety 42-43)

The anxiety in the child is expressed as the melancholy of an adult. The path to freedom, first explored in the anxiety of childhood, is identified again in adulthood through melancholy. As Gordon Marino notes: “Depression becomes despair by virtue of the way

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38 James Rovira’s Blake and Kierkegaard: Creation and Anxiety studies this subject at length.
that the depressive individual relates himself to his depression” with those who define themselves in terms of their depression have “slipped into despair” (124-125). Thus, condemning this kind of despair (‘over the earthly’), Kierkegaard does not denounce an attachment to the earthly as such, but rather denounces a wrong attachment to the earthly, one that leads to despair” (32).

As Matthew Schneider argues, “innocence for Kierkegaard is the absence of self-consciousness, and therefore can only be conceptualized retrospectively” and anxiety is what calls innocence back to the edge of the abyss, for an authentic reckoning of spirit with itself (355). Concerning the above passage from Kierkegaard, and its connection to Blake’s Songs, Schneider argues: “By positing the essentiality of anxiety to the child, Kierkegaard points the way back to the Songs of Innocence, where Blake began what would turn out to be a lifelong inquiry into the existential complexities of innocence” (356). Blake marks in the Songs a crucial complimentary between the emotions of sorrow and joy, and part of the project of these poems is to expose how sorrow is routinely the path to intuit authentic joy. One of the major bases of Blake’s polemic is a refusal to synthesize. In the example of “joy” and “sorrow,” one’s pseudo-Hegelian impulse would be to either cast aside, or negate, sorrow in order to capture a pure joy, or to resolve sorrow in a synthesis with joy into some form of contentment. Blake refuses this form of dialectical resolution, which is similar to Kierkegaard’s thoroughly critical stance on Hegel as well. What would Kierkegaard’s reaction to Blake’s poem resemble? What is the former’s philosophical elaboration on the latter’s poetic problem, which captures the essential character of suffering in a modern, urban world? Kierkegaard provides a path to
the answer in his parable of “love-melancholy” from Repetition and a theory of melancholia from his Either/Or. In rereading passages from these works, I suggest a means through which Kierkegaard presents his idea of melancholy, and the means through which he encounters with melancholy is a productive learning moment. In Kierkegaard’s schema of melancholia, there is a distinction between depression and melancholy which Blake’s version does not make; therefore, Kierkegaard distinguishes, in the first case, between clearly productive and not-productive melancholic affectations. Further, his Melancholi is a necessary precondition on the stages towards a spiritual life, as opposed to the struggles of Tungsind, which McCarthy translates as “heavy-mindedness.”

N. J. Cappelorn has argued that “spleen” is associated with acedia in Kierkegaard’s thought, and also outlines the confusion surrounding the conceptual pair Melancholi/Tungsind; Alastair Hannay, in the same essay collection, offers a counter example to Cappelorn. The clearest example of the distinction between Melancholi/Tungsind occurs in the first volume of Either/Or. In Kierkegaard’s analysis of melancholy, he relies partly on a view of melancholy as “love-melancholy,” which is exemplified most clearly in a story narrated in his Repetition.

In his monograph on Kierkegaard, Vincent A. McCarthy suggests that Either/Or represents the Danish author’s treatise on melancholy, to go with his other tracts on irony, anxiety and despair – despite the fact that “in no place does Kierkegaard explicitly formulate a concept of melancholy” (53). One can only explore Kierkegaard’s thought on

39 Abrahin Khan and Podmore take exception to this translation (see Podmore, Self Before God 56-58; see also Podmore’s remarks on translations of Melancholi, Self Before God 202).
melancholy through a series of passages from his works, especially *Repetition* and *Either/Or*. Kierkegaard has a prescient passage from *Either/Or*, as part of a discussion of Mozart’s *The Marriage of Figaro*, from “The Immediate Erotic Stages,” where he writes:

> The sensuous awakens, yet not to motion but to a still quiescence, not to delight and joy but to deep melancholy. As yet desire is not awake; it is intimated in the melancholy. That which is desired is continually present in the desire; it arises from it and appears in a bewildering dawning. This occurs in the sphere of the sensuous, is put at a distance by clouds and mists, and is brought closer by reflection in them. Desire possesses what will become the object of its desire but possesses it without having desired it and thus does not possess it. This is the painful, but also in its sweetness the fascinating and enchanting contradiction, which with its sadness, its melancholy, resonates through this stage. Its pain consists not in there being too little but rather in there being too much. The desire is quiet desire, the longing quiet longing, the infatuation quiet infatuation, in which the object is stirring and is so close to the desire that it is within it. … When desire has not awakened, that which is desired fascinates and captivates—indeed, almost causes anxiety. The desire must have air, must find escape; this occurs through their being separated. (*Either/Or* 75-76)

The desire Kierkegaard characterizes above is similar to a Blakean will to create, for the latter desires to build from the abject of the spectre, to effect a reversal of its ugliness.

Kierkegaard’s characterization of melancholy, in this passage, is that of an awakening. In the contradiction between the experience of sorrow and the hope for joy, the mind awakens to a broader understanding of the world. In the unhappy consciousness, from this realization, found in the sensuous, the spirit may locate, hiding in the distance behind the clouds, an impression of joy’s authenticity. In travelling through melancholy, the process to self-revelation may begin.

Kierkegaard’s analysis in *Either/Or* continues below, offering another insight on the ambiguity of embracing melancholy’s ambiguity as a form of self-revelation:
Just as the life of the plant is confined to the earth, so it is lost in a quiet ever-present longing, absorbed in contemplation, and still cannot discharge its object, essentially because in a more profound sense there is no object; and yet this lack of an object is not its object, for then it would immediately be in motion, then it would be defined, if in no other way, by grief and pain; but grief and pain do not have the implicit contradiction characteristic of [Melancholi] and [Tungsindighed], do not have the ambiguity that is the sweetness in melancholy. (Either/Or 76-77)

Kierkegaard hit upon the difference between the sorrow of depression, which is despair without a redeemable value, and the ambiguity that allows melancholy to become something more than just itself. Khan argues that the distinction between Melancholi and Tungsind for Kierkegaard is fundamental: “Melancholi is aligned with irony taken as a personal standpoint, and is therefore indicative of a reflective individuality. Its correlation with irony implies that it is to be taken as a necessary condition for, the first phase in, the development of a complete personality” (78). By contrast, “Tungsind has to be understood as being correlated with an attempt to eternalize a sensual moment in temporality and the failure to accomplish [this]. The moods in the range of ennui and depression engendered by that failure are the syndrome of Tungsind, and of a personality that has not yet become in concreto (78). Khan insists on the difference between these melancholies, saying that in Kierkegaard, the complete, spiritual self is grounded in concrete phenomenality, whereas the aesthetic is mired in abstraction. McCarthy offers this analysis:

Melancholi is the innocent, passive and unawakened desire for the impossible object; Tungsind is also desire for the impossible object, but already with some awareness and intensity present. The ambiguity of the object-which-is-no-object constitutes the sweetness associated with Melancholi, while it later constitutes the gloom and heaviness of the reflective form Tungsind. (64)
Karl Verstrynge, in his essay on Kierkegaard’s place in the history of melancholy, emphasizes that “the theme of melancholy should be put in [a] larger, religious perspective” (4). Verstrynge, who notes a debt to McCarthy’s discussion of the same subject, discusses Tungsind in its broader context, translating it as “heavy-mindedness” as distinct from melancholy and in the same camp as the words Schwermut and morosité (5). He adds that Kierkegaard is more focused on Tungsind than Melancholi, arguing that “Kierkegaard lived in an age when heavy-mindedness was fashionable … the theme of consciousness and the development of consciousness in the individual are the very core of his philosophy” (6). An individual trapped in Tungsind is problematic for Kierkegaard, since s/he does not progress along the stages of life, but rather remains locked in a standstill (Verstrynge 7). This paragraph alone does not reveal the mechanics of this dialectic between Tungsind and Melancholi, but luckily, another one of Kierkegaard’s writings takes this up explicitly.

**A parable of love-melancholy with a moral on repetition**

One gains in Kierkegaard’s view of melancholy something that is much more difficult to discern in Blake: the difference between the negative valuation of melancholy and its positive face. For Kierkegaard, melancholia is not necessarily the unfortunate collapse into despair, but an essential test to avoid a life riddled with hopelessness. The melancholic subject is already marked, to an extent, with the potential for exception. Clark suggests an alliance between Blake and Kierkegaard’s concepts of despair, as versions of acedia, which accounts for the use of the word melancholy in Blake, and which “neither
man affected or indulged [in] melancholy as a ‘romantic’ state” (49-50). This melancholia is one Blake and Kierkegaard strictly strive to overcome, as Christians, in order to survive their profound isolation. Clark argues that for Kierkegaard and Blake:

Redemption therefore does not mean casting off experience and returning to innocence, but casting off a perspective on innocence and experience (dread) which allows one to redeem both. One paradoxically recovers innocence, defined as unity with life, by casting off dread and plunging into experience, defined as action and choice. (63)

Should one capitulate by “giving in to the spectre of dread” then one succumbs to “despair, what Blake call the state of Ulro or Satan” (63). The ambivalence one has for the suffering of experience, in this scheme, turns out to be the vital redemption of the innocence that experience has corrupted. The mastery of this irony, for Blake and Kierkegaard, is the crux of an imaginative, ethical life. For Kierkegaard melancholy is viewed as one of the essential stages of life, on the way to an ironic understanding of the world, and a communion with one’s spirit. This is in contrast to Blake’s view, which saw melancholy as something to annihilate from the divine body. The views do have some complementarity, insofar as melancholy is a step on the ladder to an enlightened consciousness.

In the stage of melancholy, and it bears repeating that Kierkegaard views love-melancholy as a “first stage,” one has a chance to progress into an ethical view of the world, and perhaps later, an ironic one. The sorrow of melancholia is that first glimpse into the serious, ethical sphere of existence. The alternative, should one fail at the melancholic stage, is the heavy-mindedness of Tungsind. In a story Kierkegaard tells in his

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40 James R. Scrimgeour and Clark both argue for a correspondence between Blake’s “Spectre of Urthona” and Kierkegaard’s elaboration of dread and despair.
Repetition, under the guise of Constantin Constantius, one sees a young man confronted by melancholy and, later, heavy-mindedness. Kierkegaard presents this narrative as a cautionary tale on what may happen when melancholy tests the human spirit. McCarthy argues that the story of the young man in love from Repetition shows that the girl “has acted as a catalyst in turning him in his sensitivity into a poet, in moving him from an initial Melancholi to Tungsind which demands a higher solution” (74). In reading elements of this narrative, I attempt to show the action-potential of Melancholi and the traps of Tungsind, where Kierkegaard’s schema of melancholia is not only a gateway to a higher consciousness, but also a test of the spirit one may easily fail. Kierkegaard’s narrator, the pseudonym of Constantin Constantius, does not simplify matters of interpretation: the narrator of the story is not only a participant in the tale, but appears to have a stake in its outcome, and a predator’s eyes for the beautiful “young man” who is the narrative’s protagonist.

Kierkegaard’s narrative in Repetition opens with a didactic paragraph that resumes the morality of his tale:

Recollection’s love is the only happy love, says an author who, as far as I know him, is at times somewhat deceitful, not in the sense that he says one thing and means another but in the sense that he pushes the thought to extremes, so that if it is not grasped with the same energy, it reveals itself the next instant as something else. He advances that thesis in such a way that one is easily tempted to agree with him and then forgets that the thesis itself expresses the most profound melancholy, so that a deep depression concentrated in one single line could scarcely express it better. (133)
The “author” referred to is one of Kierkegaard’s other pseudonyms, the one to whom *Either/Or* is attributed.\(^{41}\) To illustrate his point on the authenticity of love in its moment of recollection, Kierkegaard tells a story about a young man with a “soulful expression of his eyes” that the narrator, somewhat predatorily, “attracted him to me and taught him to regard me as a confidant whose conversation in many ways lured forth his melancholy in refracted form, since I, like a Farinelli, enticed the deranged king out of his dark hiding place, something that could be done without using tongs, inasmuch as my friend was still young and pliant” (133-134). One day, the young man tells Constantin Constantius he’s failed in love, and that: “He had been in love for some time now, concealing it even from me, but now the object of his desire was within reach; he had confessed his love and found love in return” (134). The narrator, now a participant in the love story in the role of observer, feels an ambivalence with regards to his position, saying:

> For a long time nothing had made me so happy as to look at him, for it is often distressing to be an observer – it has the same melancholy effect as being a police officer. And when an observer fulfills his duties well, he is to be regarded as a secret agent in a higher service, for the observer’s art is to expose what is hidden. (134-135)

The narrator has offered his ideal role in the narrative of the young man, and yet he will show himself an utter failure in his role as “observer” later on, intervening in the lover’s tale and offering the young man a means to end his relationship. At the same time, the narrator does indeed succeed in exposing what is hidden, in seeing with his eyes the effect of the lover’s melancholy, invisible to the young man. The lover says, “With a

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\(^{41}\) Immediately, in the play of pseudonyms, Kierkegaard has warned the reader to be on their guard, that they may not be able to trust everything they will read. He has also pointed to *Either/Or* as a reference text to this parable in *Repetition.*
charming openness … that the reason for his visit to me was that he needed a confidant in whose presence he could talk aloud to himself” (135). The intensity of the young man’s melancholy is a gateway into a higher consciousness, though this transition is anguished.

Constantin Constantius relates the growing anxiety of the young lover in the throes of a deep melancholy. He relates that the young man would repeat “again and again a verse from Poul Møller” as he vacillated between “blissful joy” and overwhelming anxiety, bordering on irredeemable sorrow:

[The young man’s] eyes filled with tears, he threw himself down on a chair, he repeated [Møller’s] verse again and again. I was shaken by the scene. Good God, I thought, never in my practice had I seen such melancholy as this. That he was melancholy, I knew very well – but that falling in love could affect him in this way! And yet, how consistent even an abnormal mental state is if it is normally present. People are always shouting that a melancholic should fall in love, and then his melancholy would all vanish. If he actually is melancholy, how would it be possible for his soul not to become melancholically absorbed in what has come to be most important of all to him? He was deeply and fervently in love, that was clear, and yet a few days later he was able to recollect his love. (135-136)

The recollection of this love is the climax of the young man’s joy, the essence of his burgeoning *melancolia heroica*. The act of loving the young girl does not make the man nearly as happy as his recollections of that same love. It is the imbalance between the two states that leads to the beginning of the end for the man, as “Recollection has the great advantage that it begins with the loss; the reason it is safe and secure is that it has nothing to lose” (136). In recollection, one risks nothing: in continuing the love-relationship the young man could sour it, become trapped in the bonds of marriage or fatherhood. Such is the risk of love, and the seriousness of this risk has paralyzed the young man. Constantius describes the dialectic of the young man’s anguish, and the aporia of recollection as the
prime object of love, as opposed to the dynamic of the relationship itself, saying that the young man “was essentially through with the entire relationship” (136). The narrator outlines attempts to explain the current state of the young man, and despite a claim of objectivity as “observer,” he is enraptured by the fate of love, and the aporia of its reversal into anguish in the young man. Kierkegaard continues the narrative:

Since against my will I had taken an observational approach to him, I could not refrain from all kinds of attempts to log, as the sailor says, the momentum of his melancholy. I set the tone for possible erotic moods – none. I explored the influence of change in the environment – in vain. Neither the broad bold assurance of the sea nor the hushed silence of the forest nor the beckoning solitude of the evening could bring him out of the melancholy longing in which he not so much drew near to the beloved as withdrew from her. His mistake was incurable, and his mistake was that he stood at the end instead of at the beginning, but such a mistake is and remains a person’s downfall. (137)

The young man stands at the precipice of where his Melancholi may turn into the elevation of his consciousness, or his descent into Tungsind. There is no alternative, and the young man cannot remain suspended in the state of his love as it currently exists: the repetition of his poetic verse is not the repetition that will save him. If he does not choose, time will force the choice upon him. Constantius characterizes the young man dithering in melancholia as a mistake, and notes that the young man is behaving like something at the end of a relationship, a widower before the fact, as if the melancholia of recollecting love was the purpose of the love in the first case. At the edge of the abyss of Tungsind, the young man falls in like a stone.

The young man’s error does not prevent Constantius from noting, in the process of this error coming to pass, that the mood of the young man’s love-melancholy was crucial. He contends:
I maintain that his mood was a genuine erotic mood; anyone who has not experienced this mood at the very beginning in his own love has never loved. But he must have a second mood alongside it. This intensified recollecting is erotic love’s [Elskovens] eternal expression at the beginning, is the sign of genuine erotic love. But on the other hand it takes an ironic resiliency to be able to use it. This he lacked; his soul was too compliant for that. It may be true that a person’s life is over and done with in the first moment, but there must also be the vital force to slay this death and transform it to life. In the first dawning of erotic love, the present and the future contend with each other to find an eternal expression, and this recollecting is indeed eternity’s flowing back into the present – that is, when this recollecting is sound. (137)

The first mood of sorrowful melancholy requires a second mood to complement its energies, to elevate the anxiety of love-melancholy into a lasting mood. For the first time, Kierkegaard introduces irony as a principle to temper the initial erotic mood: the young man’s failure lies in the inability to perceive according to the ironic mode. The recollection of love in the young man’s case, absent of irony, becomes pathological as opposed to revelatory. Harvie Ferguson, in his monograph on Kierkegaard entitled Melancholy and the Critique of Modernity, coordinates Kierkegaardian irony as “equally detached and self-absorbed” and “inconsolable as melancholy”; furthermore, “like melancholy, irony has a ‘weight’ of its own” (34). When Constantius implores the young man to rise above his melancholia, he proposes irony as its ultimate opposite. As Ferguson argues, “Irony seems to ‘raise’ itself above existence, while melancholy ‘sinks’ beneath it” (56). As Kierkegaard would outline in the next steps of the tale, the consequences are dire. Another point to address here, as Ferguson does, is the parallel between this story and Kierkegaard’s broken engagement to his fiancée (102-108).

Constantius marks the passage of time, where the failure of the young man to grasp the irony of his love has ironic consequences on his own life: the missed
opportunity to internalize irony as part of an erotic mood has external effects. While “the misunderstanding” of his failure to love dawns upon the young man, “the adored young girl was already almost a vexation to him” (136). The narrator relates the changes in the young man, just as Blake noted the changes in Urizen during the ages of creation, with a markedly divergent consequence:

During all this, a remarkable change took place in him. A poetic creativity awakened in him on a scale I had never believed possible. Now I easily grasped the whole situation. The young girl was not his beloved: she was the occasion that awakened the poetic in him and made him a poet. That was why he could love only her, never forget her, never want to love another, and yet continually only long for her. She was drawn into his whole being; the memory of her was forever alive. She had meant much to him; she had made him a poet – and precisely thereby had signed her own death sentence. (137-138)

The young man has transformed into a veritable Petrarch, except that in his case, Laura loves him back and is a part of the young poet’s life. One may consider that Kierkegaard intended for the irony of this situation to be palpable to everyone except for Constantius, a buffoon figuration of his own selfhood. The young man becomes a representation of the aesthete, a poet who desires an object. The object in this take is not something that is irremediably lost, which one would conventionally expect, but something the poet hasn’t lost, but that the psychodrama of his own mind convinces him to desire. The recollection of the love-object, in the presence of the object, requires a mightily contrived transfiguration, where the young-girl in actuality represents the negation of the young-girl in recollection, which is the true beloved. The dominance of Tungsind takes over in this state of affairs, with Constantius saying that, as “time went on, his state became more and more anguished. His depression became more and more dominant, and his physical
strength was devoured in mental struggles,” and that rather than confess his falling out of love with her, as the “depression entrapped him more and more,” and so “he decided to proceed with a fabrication” (138). The young man’s poetic energies are put to a creative use, yet this use is thoroughly lacking purposiveness. Rather than moving on from his love, and perhaps memorizing this love in actual poetry, the young man deepens his obsessiveness and is no closer to a solution to his anxiety: “Now he used all his poetic originality in order to delight and amuse her; what he could have provided for many he now devoted entirely to her; she was and remained the beloved, the one and only adored, even though he was close to losing his mind in his anxiety over the monstrous falsehood, which only enthralled her all the more” (Repetition 138).

Over time, the young man turns against his confidant, for “his dark passions had attained total dominance” and “cursed [his] life, his love, the girl he loved” (139). The young man ceases to visit Constantius, avoiding him when they pass (139). Constantius feels deep sympathy for the man, as he relates: “I actually suffered exceedingly with the young man, who wasted away day by day. And yet I by no means regretted sharing in his suffering, because in his love the idea was indeed in motion” (140). In the hopes of freeing the young man from his burden, the narrator proposes a plan to “spread the rumor” of an affair with another woman (142), and the young man “was willing and fully approved of my plan” (144). Constantius relates the result, having gone through all the necessary preparations, which is simply that the young man decided:

He had not had the strength to carry out the plan. His soul lacked the elasticity of irony. He had not had the strength to make irony’s vow of silence, had not had the strength to keep it. Only he who is silent will amount to anything. Only he who actually can love, only he is a man; only he who
can give his love any expression whatsoever, only he is an artist. In a certain sense, it may have been all right that he did not make a beginning, for he would hardly have endured the horrors of the adventure, and from the very first I was a little afraid because he needed a confidant. (145)

What does Constantius mean by “irony’s vow of silence”? What does irony have to do with the young man’s management of his erotic desire and love relationship? What ought he have done differently? The passage is loaded with accusations of the young man’s inauthenticity, for one implies that he was not an actual lover, not an actual poet. It was the young man’s inability, as the child would have been able, to suffer an adventure of the spirit, that has condemned him. He writes: “My young friend did not understand repetition; he did not believe in it and did not powerfully will it. His predicament was that he actually loved the girl, but in order actually to love her he first had to be disencumbered of the poetic confusion he had gotten into” and, furthermore, “If the young man had believed in repetition, what great things might have come from him, what inwardness he might have achieved in this life! (145-146)

Kierkegaard’s conclusion to this tale, as with many passages in his writing, is perplexing. What was the means to extricate himself from the “poetic confusion” besides confessing it to the girl? Constantius is clear in his condemnation of that option. One wonders if Kierkegaard is, in fact, ironic in his characterization of Constantius’ condemnation. Verstrynge, in a different place, argues that the young man’s “foundering mood” fails to accomplish anything for him. Moreover: “The type of melancholy Kierkegaard ascribes to the [young man] seems to balance between a merely substantial and a more conscious form” and vacillates between Melancholi and Tungsind as a demonstration of a crisis – what Verstrynge identifies as “hysteria of the spirit” – where, in the latter term,
the man either allows the melancholy to set in, or, in the former term, he is able to use that melancholy as a stepping stone to greater vistas of consciousness (“Hysteria” 154). Ferguson offers this analysis of the story, saying that the story of Constantius “is, of course, an aesthetically false conception of repetition” and that “in providing such an obviously fallacious view of his own doctrine that the reader is led to formulate, on his own behalf, a more persuasive conception” (104). This reading of the story offers, in the process of its exegesis, “the ethical counterpoint to the aesthetics of repetition” (Ferguson 104). This aesthetics is able to read and interpret the phantasms that the young man had failed to see, despite the temporary heightening of his consciousness. In the fall from Melancholi to Tungsind, the young man could not bolster his own courage, and thus withered. The young man was meant to let go of his self-obsession of recollecting his love: to either let go of the girl completely, such that she would become a part of his memory, or to commit entirely to the relationship (which is an option, but not one the text appears interested in exploring). The counter example of this story, which I imagine would have fascinated Kierkegaard, is that of another young man, who was also a poet, and how he managed his own encounters with Melancholi and Tungsind.

“Mood assails”: Sorrow and joy in Keats’ poetry

As Starobinski opines, in an essay on Kierkegaard, the call to ascension in a stage of life is one “that is possible to misconstrue and refuse,” though one “risks fainting in this life of semblance and shadow, within a facticity of the unreal” (389). He adds:

Authenticity is the always incomplete fusion of contingent existence and eternal truth. It is not sufficient that essence is given, this essence demands
it be rejoined; as such, it does not suffice that eternity exists outside of oneself, one must obtain it; human time, without disappearing, is absorbed into eternity through a sacrifice. In the ethical acceptance of one’s identity, in the acceptance that one is to exist in conformity to one’s essence, humanity affirms in its finitude what is indispensable in its creaturely condition, and for this price receive its infinite value. This new freedom no longer consists in traversing the infinite kingdom of possibility, in passing from one identity to another; it opens to oneself in an axe centered upon identity. From the intensity of religious faith, what is possible will be given, and the repetition will take place. (389)

The young man in Repetition was responsible to give himself up to a power higher than the shadows of his erotic love. Inescapably, as Starobinski says, “humanity gives itself ethically to itself” but acceptance requires “divine support” (389). Authenticity as the window into truth – such as in one apprehension that one’s own life means something, or will have left meaning behind after one dies – represents a challenge from the ideals of Romanticism. Kierkegaard’s melancholy represents a crisis for consciousness in the rediscovery of anxiety. The child’s mind is able, through the blanket of innocence, to withstand anxiety, which becomes a force for self-discovery and adventure. The adult does not have this advantage: when suffering from melancholia, consciousness must either press through and evolve, to learn from the moment of repetition. Keats, like Kierkegaard’s young man, struggled with love, particularly for his beloved Fanny Brawne. How would, how did, Keats process the dialectical struggle with melancholy, and love-melancholy in particular? My reading of Keats is, perhaps, less of a direct answer to this biographical question, and instead, an attempt to stage poetry’s answer to this question on its own merits. For in Keats, sorrow and joy play a key role to the unfolding of his poetic response to the struggle of the young spirit with the waves of love and melancholy.
One wonders what it must have felt like, if one stepped into Keats’ shoes, as the finality of his fatal bout with tuberculosis set in. The poet reaches the height of his powers with *The Fall of Hyperion*, “To Autumn” and his series of odes, those last two years between 1819-1821, only to suffer through, as Nicolas Roe relates in his *Life of Keats*, long stretches of illness and despondency. His third collection of poems, *Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St. Agnes, and Other Poems*, was published in 1820; it included his great 1819 odes and was intended to close with the “Ode on Melancholy.”42 This poem represented a series of “forlorn farewells” (Roe 373). One may appraise Keats’ thought on melancholy, as Verstrynge does, and the tradition to which it belongs, thus:

Figures like Milton’s “Penseroso” and Shakespeare’s dramatic characters – think of Hamlet – or Keats’ “Ode on Melancholy” are the literary expression par excellence of a real cult of melancholy, varying from omnipresent “spleen” and the popular “English malady” to the fashionable “joy of grief” and the “douce mélancolie.” From a popular and romantic viewpoint melancholy pointed at the subjective experience of a great satisfaction in life, since it provided the melancholic with an exceptional state of mind and thus enabled him or her to rise above mediocrity. (5-6)

The “Ode on Melancholy,” unlike the other examples discussed in this chapter so far, represents a concerted attempt to revive the Renaissance tradition of melancholy. It is meant to restore the solemn devotion of poetry to melancholy, which was disrupted during the Baroque and the Enlightenment. Verstrynge’s characterization of Keats’ poem as the expression of a cult to melancholy lends the latter’s enthusiasm to that of a Ficino.

In this third vignette on Romantic melancholy, I take a look at the dialectical relationship of sorrow and joy in Keats, which is a core part of his poetics, through the terms provided

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42 Keats had intended for the collection to end with “Ode on Melancholy,” but his publisher opted to include “Hyperion, a Fragment” against his wishes.
by Heidegger’s influential reading of *Stimmung* from his *Being and Time*. Solemn moods mark many moments in Keats’ poetry, and, as Thomas Pfau’s landmark study *Romantic Moods* illustrates, reading *Stimmung* in the context of Keats’s poetic is productive.

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger theorizes how bad moods, like the ones brought on by anxiety and melancholia, affect Dasein. As Pfau argues: “For Heidegger, the deep-existential melancholy or boredom of a subject ‘thrust’ into a world exhaustively determined both as regards its practical responsibilities and the expressive inventory in which one might wish to reflect on that very predicament lies at the very heart of ‘distemper’ (*Verstimmung)*” (316-317). Pfau reads bad moods as “distemper,” whereby this mood is “an eruption of a melancholia that originates neither expressively from within a discrete subject nor intrudes upon it from without” and, furthermore, “melancholy encrypts a more fundamental ‘situatedness’ [Befindlichkeit]” (317). Eric Santner acknowledges a debt to Heidegger, saying that the latter’s “conceptualization of mood as a primordial mode [of] ‘being with the world’” is essential (45). Santner further argues that “mood in general is a sort of virtual archive in which are inscribed the traces of an originary – and at some level thematic – opening or attunement to ‘otherness’” (45). Dasein is assailed by bad moods when it recognizes the violence of being thrown into the world; it struggles and resists, but it may find itself progressively overwhelmed by melancholy and boredom. Fear, then, so entirely envelops Dasein that it is paralyzed and sinks into the miasma. “Problem XXX” – addressed in the first chapter – speculates on the relationship between fear and melancholic affect. The below passage of *Being and Time* outlines
Heidegger’s position that bad moods, like melancholy, boredom and anxiety, need to be mastered by Dasein:

That a Dasein factically can, should and must master its mood with knowledge and will may signify a priority of willing and cognition in certain possibilities of existing. But that must not mislead us into ontologically denying mood as a primordial kind of being of Dasein in which it is disclosed to itself before all cognition and willing beyond their scope of disclosure. Moreover, we never master a mood by being free of a mood, but always through a counter mood. The first essential ontological characteristic of attunement is: attunement discloses Dasein in its throwness and, initially and for the most part, in the mode of an evasive turning away.

(132-133)

Mood is a more of commonplace, day-to-day instance of Dasein’s consciousness whereas attunement is foundational and grounding. Mood – even in its most commonplace instantiation for Heidegger – emerges or is disclosed pre-cognitively. One does not, then, get rid of a (bad) mood, but rather channels that mood differently with a “counter mood” Heidegger argues. The alternative is this “turning away” from attunement, which is experienced like a loss of meaningful contact with the world.44

Moods disclose to Dasein that it has been thrown into the world, without really knowing why. It is through these torrents of moody emotions that Dasein learns how to take care and become invested in its worldly fate.45 Heidegger notes that the forces and balances involved in moods make the task of Dasein’s mastery of mood difficult:

43 Throughout Being and Time – Heidegger distinguishes between two words in reference to mood(s), Stimmung and Befindlichkeit – which the Stambaugh translation of Being and Time I quoted from renders as mood and attunement. The preferred alternative to “attunement” has been “disposition.” I view either as a valid choice.
44 The third chapter will look to Baudelaire’s turning to and away from the Saturnine disposition.
45 As Matthew Boss argues: “What is characteristic of the way in which mood discloses the world is that it does not in the first instance make entities apparent one at a time, as it were, in their particularity, in consequence of which the ‘world’ would come into view as a totality out of their subsequent ‘combination.’ Rather, mood primarily makes us aware first of all of the whole [das Ganze] to which entities belong” (91).
In bad moods, Dasein becomes blind to itself, the surrounding world of heedfulness is veiled, the circumspection of taking care is led astray. Attunement is so far from being reflected upon that, in the unreflected devotion to and giving in to the “world” of its heedfulness, it assails Dasein. Mood assails. (133)

It is through an attunement (notably anxiety) that Dasein learns to take care, to be invested in the world. A bad mood, such as depression or a depressive episode, assails Dasein, and the concerns of taking care and reflecting upon attunement are led astray. Attunement, as this state of harmony and balance within the chaotic currents of moods, finds itself swallowed and obscured. That “mood assails” suggests that some of the forces in these currents might be sharks in the waters. For Heidegger, Dasein is inundated by a sea and currents of moods. How does Dasein distinguish one mood from another? If Dasein must master its mood or Stimmung; how is this mastery achieved? What does it look like? Ferber suggests Stimmung is an intertwining of subjective feeling with the subject’s environment (190). He writes:

Lars Svendsen confronts the difficulty in trying to translate the words “Stimmung” and “Befindlichkeit” into English. Concerning the latter term, Svendsen emphasizes that one’s attunement or disposition – other translations suggested are “disposedness” and “affectedness” – is the answer of how one is feeling (421). One’s mood, for Svendsen, provides meaning to one’s experience of a given situation, a Grundstimmung, then, is a mood that discloses the entire world; Heidegger privileges “gloomy” moods, such as boredom and anxiety (422). For Leslie Paul Thiele, the encounter with profound boredom “evidences our capacity to experience the nothingness of Being, even if only in the mode of turning away from it” and this informs the how of one’s desire to philosophically inquire about one’s throwness (509). For Agamben, Stimmung is the encounter with limit: “This is why being-there, insofar as it is essentially its own opening, is always already in a Stimmung and always already emotionally oriented” (494). As Flatley argues in an article entitled “How a Counter-Revolutionary Mood is Made,” “Inasmuch as mood is a fundamental medium or presupposition through which we apprehend the world, it also allows certain affects, which are more punctual and more object-oriented than moods, to attach to certain object, while at the same time foreclosing other attachments” (507). Heidegger, notes Flatley, “does not offer much by way of insight into how counter-moods come into being” (507). Flatley provides a series of political examples in his work, whereby one may observe the formation of counter-moods, such as Black Leninism in Detroit. The formation of a counter-mood is not strictly individual or collective: it may originate in a social movement or in the work of a writer.
[When Heidegger] evokes *Stimmung* as Dasein’s primary way of entering the world … [he] argues that mood is neither internal nor external but operates exactly at the intersection between the two states, namely, at the intersection between man and world; in Heidegger’s terms mood is what determines Dasein’s Being-in-the-World. (190)

*Stimmung* is intersectional and interstitial; it is the maintaining of a balance between a variety of divergent forces. The aspect of mastery is finding this illusive middle ground whereby Dasein finds an attunement, or one of its modes.

Flatley argues that Heidegger espouses “a set aesthetic practices concerned with the transformation of one mood, or *Stimmung* (e.g. depression), into another (a mode of vital connection with the world)” (19). Further:

In a real way, our mood creates the world in which we exist at any given moment. In this sense it is objectless: we don’t have a mood about any one thing in particular but, rather, about everything in general. Furthermore, even or especially when a mood seems to be isolating in effect (as in depression) it is always a plural phenomenon; we all only have access to the moods that we find around us, the moods into which we have been educated, and the moods that have been shaped or determined by the concrete historical context in which we coexist. (19)

Flatley goes on to argue that “moods are an atmosphere, a kind of weather, they are not ‘psychological,’ located in some interior space we can reach by way of introspection or self-examination” and that moods “do not shed light on some one thing in particular, but on a whole environment” (22). Mood, then, is experienced socially just as much, if not more, than it is individually. Lepenies’ *Melancholy and Society* discusses this at some length, and, quoting Adorno’s study of Kierkegaard, reminds his reader:

[Gloom] is part of the intérieur to which “mood” – the constellation of the material contents [forms a part] – … the melancholy temperament presents itself here as being historical. But in so doing as dialectical and as a “possibility” for reconciliation. Kierkegaard posits the indifference of the
internal history of melancholy, just as that of subjectivity as a whole, to external history. (Adorno, quoted in Lepenies 105)

As a participant in the history of melancholy, Keats sustains a metamelancholic reflection on what his own contribution to that history may bring about. The poet is able to marry personal suffering to the historical characterization of that same suffering, in the form of melancholia. Keats, as he pens his “Ode on Melancholy” knows he is dying. His poem uses melancholy as an opportunity to stir in his mind, and the mind of his poetic subject, another counter-mood: inspiration. He thus starts writing a stirring love note to Melancholy herself, paying homage to her “sovereign shrine,” delighting in the intellectual gifts she has brought to the poet, despite his physical suffering.

In the case of Keats, as Stephen Gurney argues, if the poet discovers that an idealized transcendence is impossible, then one may seek instead an “immanent transcendence” (47). As Gurney notes: “Keats’ experience of finitude is intensified by his awareness of the potential infinity of beauty, of Being” (52). Keats masters sorrow through its counter-mood – joy. Romanticism, with Blake as its sunrise and Kierkegaard its twilight, has spent much of its energies attempting to master the bad moods of tyranny and revolution. Heidegger’s writing on Dasein needing to “master” its moods is a rephrasing of Romanticism’s insight. Pfau summarizes this elegantly:

With its focus on “anxiety” (Angst) as the quintessential “mood” of Dasein, Heidegger’s Being and Time largely recaptures what romanticism has already come upon in its own figural mode: namely, that the prevailing “mood” of anxiety constitutes the ontological echo of man as a strictly historical phenomenon, a “being-in-the-world” that knows of its utter lack of any transcendent point of reference or “ground.” (16-17)
Keats allies sorrow to an authentic journey on the way to joy. Like Blake (and Kierkegaard), there is a necessary connection between joy and sorrow, for the one may inform the other, and without the one it is nearly impossible to intuit the other: the theme of complementarity between joy and sorrow dominates much of his writing. Keats’s poetry seeks a form of joy mediated by a journey through sorrow, and finds that a joy unmediated by sorrow is illusory. In his poem “Welcome joy, and welcome sorrow” – featuring an epigraph from Milton – Keats balances in many of the lines images of sorrow. He opens the poem by saying:

Welcome joy, and welcome sorrow,
Lethe’s weed and Hermes’ feather,
Come to-day, and come to-morrow,
I do love you both together!
I love to mark sad faces in fair weather,
And hear a merry laugh amid the thunder. (l.1-6, K 231)

Keats’ celebration of joy and sorrow presents first a mythological call to the abyss of oblivion and the open skies of the heavens and continues into the humours of the human expression: the divine world is expressed in human countenance. The harmony of sadness and gladness evokes Milton’s two muses in this passage:

Muses bright and Muses pale;
Sombre Saturn, Momus hale,
Laugh and sigh, and laugh again,
Oh! the sweetness of the pain!
Muses bright and Muses pale,
Bare your faces of the veil,
Let me see, and let me write
Of the day, and of the night,
Both together – let me slake
All my thirst for sweet heart-ache! (l.20-29, K 232)
Keats is able to counter the mood of sorrow with an image of joy throughout the poem, though the counterpoint to this is that in each moment of joy may await a future sorrow. In the “Ode on Melancholy,” then, Keats elaborates the final version of the theory he had tried out in “Welcome joy” and several of his other unfinished poems.

**Do not go to Lethe: Reading the “Ode on Melancholy”**

One’s first editorial decisions, when facing the manuscript text of Keats’ “Ode on Melancholy,” is to evaluate the original “first” stanza, which the poet crossed out from the original, manuscript version of the poem. Helen Vendler, in her important study, *The Odes of John Keats*, writes that “the canceled first stanza [contains] language drawn from at least six sources – the homiletic-prophetic (‘Though you should do X, you would fail to achieve Y’), the religious (‘creeds’), the Petrarchan (a bark, a mast, a sail, groans to fill out the sail, a rudder, cordage), the heroic (the effort of the underworld quest to find ‘the Melancholy’), the gothic (‘dead men’s bones,’ a ‘phantom gibbet,’ a sail ‘bloodstained and aghast’), and the mythological (a dragon, Medusa, Lethe)” (199).

Vendler adds that this confluence of registers “suggest various dispersed aims” for the poem, including “Orphic journey” or a “futile quest like Childe Roland’s” (199). It is ironic that a poem, which in its final form implores “No, no, go not to Lethe,” should

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46 For a particularly virulent assessment on the importance of reading the canceled stanza of the “Ode on Melancholy,” one may turn to Theodore Gaillard, who argues that setting aside this portion of the text leads to “misreadings” of the references made in the rest of the poem (22). Harold Bloom offers this assessment: “This remarkable and grisly stanza is more than the reverse of an invitation to the voyage. Its irony is palpable; its humour is in the enormous labour of Gothicizing despair which is necessarily in vain, for the mythic beast, Melancholy, cannot be thus confronted” (413). Bloom adds, concerning the exclusion of the first stanza, that: “Keats lost a grim humour that finds only a thin echo at the poem’s close. That humour, in juxtaposition to the poem’s intensities, would have been parallel to successful clowning in a tragedy” (413).
decide to strike out, or forget, a macabre sentence that hypothesizes a trip to one of the underworld’s great rivers. It is natural to accept Keats’ redaction, and perhaps, as many scholars have, ask about why Keats ultimately decided to exclude the stanza. It is a magnificent piece of writing, and its inclusion in the final poem, while it darkens the overall tone of the ode, does help clarify some of the figures which appear later in the text. Here is the aforementioned stanza:

Though you should build a bark of dead men’s bones,
And rear a phantom gibbet for a mast,
Stitch creeds together for a sail, with groans
To fill it out, blood-stained and aghast;
Although your rudder be a dragon’s tail,
Long sever’d, yet still hard with agony,
Your cordage large uprootings from the skull
Of bald Medusa; certes you would fail
To find the Melancholy, whether she
Dreameth in any isle of Lethe dull. (K 374)

The stanza illustrates, piece-by-piece, an image of a ship of the dead which would serve to ferry the poet figure, whom the speaker of the lyric addresses throughout the text, across the river Lethe to find “Melancholy.” The melancholic wants to forget the pain of suffering, and Keats’ speaker implores one not to forget pain in the search for inspiration. The traces of the erotic melancholia of the Renaissance in Keats’ poem assist in the construction of a safe place, somewhere his poet figure may escape sorrow and find joy. Keats’ redacted stanza spends the majority of its lines outlining the construction of a figure that the speaker implores an interlocutor not to use, for these are false paths to the “temple of Delight.” The poem’s structural irony – in seeking melancholy (which one normally avoids) and in turning away from a classical image of mythological heroism (seeking one’s love in the underworld) – is strongly emphasized in this first stanza. The
poem, in its earliest moments, invites a resistance to an artificial solution to the poet’s search for inspiration.

KSP – in a passing remark on the poem from their discussion – say that his ode destroys “the whole convention [of romantic melancholy\(^\text{47}\)] at a blow, rescuing the original meaning of melancholy emotion” (238). Barbara Herrnstein Smith argues that, if one reads the canceled and published first stanzas together, one may read a series of “do not” statements which turn, in the second stanza, into what the poet ought to do – glut himself on sorrow and pray to the shrine of Delight (683-684). As William Empson notes in *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, the poem plays with contradiction and ambiguity as it “pounds together the sensation of joy and sorrow till they combine into sexuality” (214).

Learning from Milton’s figures of mirth and melancholy, and the themes from “Welcome joy, and welcome sorrow,” Keats work pairs of opposite and complimentary images. The poem is fashioning a hemlock that is also implores one not to drink. The stanza reads:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{No, no, go not to Lethe, neither twist} \\
\text{Wolf’s-bane, tight-rooted, for its poisonous wine;} \\
\text{Nor suffer thy pale forehead to be kiss’d} \\
\text{By nightshade, ruby grape of Proserpine;} \\
\text{Make not your rosary of yew-berries,} \\
\text{Nor let the beetle, nor the death-moth be} \\
\text{Your mournful Psyche, nor the downy owl} \\
\text{A partner in your sorrow’s mysteries;} \\
\text{For shade to shade will come too drowsily,} \\
\text{And drown the wakeful anguish of the soul. (l.1-10, K 374)}
\end{align*}
\]

The first line summarizes the conclusion of the first redacted stanza, and then proceeds into a series of negative statements: do not go to Lethe, or do not poison oneself, do not

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\(^{47}\) This is likely the “highfalutin” Romantic melancholy tradition, which Keats would have been a counter-example to, that Britton so dislikes (see my first chapter’s discussion on the subject).
fall into hopeless despair. Only the concluding couplet asserts, meekly, what may come to quiet the “anguish of the soul.” The poem’s images cascade one after the next, combining the mythological with the botanical, the divine world with the natural world. As David Perkins notes, the images of poisoned wine “prelude or anticipate an important theme in the poem” (88). This theme, teetering on the edge of oblivion, balances the fantasy of an artificial paradise and a quick, pleasurable release into death. One recognizes that Keats’ knowledge of plants and their properties hold equal weight to his play with myth. Hermione De Almeida offers an astute reading of Keats botanical knowledge, saying that the “specifically chosen botanical poisons … technical knowledge and metaphorical truth in their fraught potion for recognizing the signs of false and true melancholy” (168). Concerning “the philosophical pharmakon” of the ode, De Almeida writes:

Keats may have known enough of medicine and the nature of life not to believe in poison trees, but he did believe in poison fruits or flowers – both literal and metaphorical – and in their compelling attraction and potency. Wolfsbane, nightshade, yew berries, and the globed peony are all poison fruit; they are nerve poisons, narcotico-acrids that act on the nervous system and brain and have the power at once to irritate to intensity and to stupify. They are not sensitive plants so much as fatally sensitizing potions. (168)

The transformation of botany into metaphor is not only a smart way to construct metaphor, but is also a means to communicate a profound insight into the nature of melancholy itself. On the subject of another one of Keats’ odes, De Almeida completes her analysis of Keats’ image of authentic melancholy:

True melancholy is the antidote to false melancholy; it is also an antidote to being “too happy in thine happiness,” as the poet of the “Ode to a Nightingale” discovers. It is an intensity to dull the ache of Pleasure or an intensity more acute than the ecstasy of Joy; it is a bitterness whose taste counters the cloying sweetness of Joy’s grape…. (175)
The antidote to the joylessness of melancholia is to find something, even if its perverse, that brings joy to one’s own melancholy. In other words, the instructive melancholia of Blake and Kierkegaard: a melancholy that leads one out of despair, rather than further in. Melancholy is a pharmakon, a disease that contains its own cure, just as the path to joy is found in an authentic representation and experience of sorrow. This is equally true for the physical body as it is for the mind, which in the poem is represented by the figure of Psyche, the subject of another one of Keats’ odes.

Keats is also indebted to and playing with a number of concepts and theories from Burton’s Anatomy, including love melancholia and religious melancholy. As Podmore notes, in the context of Kierkegaard’s melancholy, Burton “was the first to identify a distinctive category of ‘Religious Melancholy,’” and the latter “notably recognizes it as a variety of ‘love-melancholy’ in a discussion that commences with a consideration of the allure and enticement of divine beauty” – as I covered in the first chapter (Self Before God 64). Podmore contends that:

While a similar interaction of seduction and frustrated longing seems to affiliate love-melancholy and the religious, the Beloved of religious melancholy implies an essentially unobtainable vision that overwhelms the desirous gaze of any prospective lover. As Burton’s Anatomy of Melancholy identifies, this frustration of desire has its biblical precedent and exemplar in the theophany of Exodus 33, since Moses, “when he desired to see God in His glory, was answered that he might not endure it, no man could see His face and live.” (Podmore, Self Before God 64, quotation of Burton 3.4.1.1, 315)
As Keats’ poem outlines the “melancholy fit” of the poet in the second stanza, the speaker captures the little details of an obsessive love-melancholy, akin to the experience of the young man in Constantius’ tale from *Repetition*.\(^{48}\) The poem’s next stanza reads:

> But when the melancholy fit shall fall  
> Sudden from heaven like a weeping cloud,  
> That fosters the droop-headed flowers all,  
> And hides the green hill in an April shroud;  
> Then glut thy sorrow on a morning rose,  
> Or on the rainbow of the salt sand-wave,  
> Or on the wealth of globed peonies;  
> Or if thy mistress some rich anger shows,  
> Emprison her soft hand, and let her rave,  
> And feed deep, deep upon her peerless eyes. (l.11-20, K 374)

This stanza is another demonstration of Keats’ fondness for concatenating lists; in this case he presents an inventory of what his sorrow may feed itself with, gluttonously. One describes depression as an endless abyss of sadness, where the despair one has for the world and the absence of meaning consumes all. It is an apt image, to see a fit of melancholy as a bottomless pit, like the belly of the titan Saturn/Cronos, trapped in his lonely prison. The Saturn figure from Keats’ long poems, evoked in this stanza, but not named, would devour creation itself, all those colourful plants sprouting from the earth. Sorrow consumes in this totalizing manner, left to its own devices, absent of a counter-mood to try and find some joy in the natural and mythological world. As Michael Holstein noted, with regards to the figure of Saturn in Keats: “The fallen Titans, especially Saturn, exhibit what can be called the ‘sublime of Suffering’” (45).

\(^{48}\) As Jane Chambers argues, the inheritances of Burton love-melancholy – notably on display in *Lamia* and *Endymion* – form a textual “thematic unity” in Keats’ otherwise labyrinthine, allusive poetic language.
Vendler pays particular attention to this stanza – sorrow glutting itself on images – and its connections back to Burton’s Anatomy, and argues that Keats’s “appeal … to an exacerbation of consciousness as a cure for melancholy goes directly counter to the temperateness he would have found recommended as a remedy in Burton” (166). As Vendler observes, fear and sorrow are connected as twin causes for melancholy in Burton (Anatomy 1.2.3.4 and 1.2.3.5, 256-262); she also acknowledges the source of the “melancholy fit” from Burton (Vendler 172; Anatomy 175, 1.1.3.4). Keats does not propose to deal with melancholy through temperance, on the contrary, Vendler argues. She writes that the “disordered quest for roses and rainbows and peonies would be reorganized by any psychologist as an attempt to replace a lost love-object with surrogate ones” and that, in fact, Keats is up to something else (166). Vendler suggests that Keats’ ode “offers a therapeutic theory of aesthetic experience … a recourse against depression, an alternate to opiates” for when “the melancholy fit falls” (187). Anselm Haverkamp, in his essay on Keats’ melancholia, argues: “Just as Burton’s descriptive phenomenology served as a pretext for an all-too-ambivalent irony to overcome depression, this very depression now – in a reaction-formation against mere phenomenology – serves as pretext for an almost manic acting out of perverted desire” (700). For Haverkamp, Keats’ “irony of allusion” is a resurrection of the lost phenomenality of the mythological in the form of quotation; in other words, “the application of irony to melancholy retropes, or refashions, another superimposition that was the work of melancholy on allegory” such that the anthropomorphism of Keats’ figures rescues these same figures from before another typecast, just
another allusion (700-701). These figures are given new life, and are allowed to breathe the new air of modernity.

Thomas McFarland praises the compression of the poem, saying that it is “an especial triumph of Keats’ genius” in its “elliptical” form, which “does not explain too much” (94-95). The ode presents its image of melancholy and leaves the reader to engage in the quest for meaning, away from Lethe, through sorrow, and towards Keats’ joyous “temple of Delight.” The conclusion of the ode represents what Eleanor Sickels calls a “profoundly imaginative conviction of the inextricability of joy and plain … in romantic melancholy” (340). The final stanza of the poem, rightly praised by critics, reads:

She dwells with Beauty – Beauty that must die;
     And Joy, whose hand is ever at his lips
Bidding adieu; and aching Pleasure nigh,
     Turning to poison while the bee-mouth sips:
Ay, in the very temple of Delight
     Veil’d Melancholy has her sovran shrine,
     Though seen of none save him whose strenuous tongue
     Can burst Joy’s grape against his palate fine;
His soul shall taste the sadness of her might,
     And be among her cloudy trophies hung. (l.21-30, K 375)

There is a certain hedonism in this self-sabotage. It is seemingly less painful to give in to despair, which melancholia is designed to make easy, than battle back from the abyss into the mediocrity of a “normal” life. Melancholy is a beautiful muse, and this beauty is always already at its twilight. In this moment, the poet has found Joy, at the step of “the temple of Delight” where Melancholy resides. Baudelaire would return to this image, the ancient site of heroic melancholy, at the twilight of Romanticism and the inauguration of modernity. Robert Cummings, in his reading of this passage, frames the figural relations in this way: “Melancholy is with Beauty and Joy and Pleasure,” and further insists that
one ought not “elide” beauty and delight (51). Cummings adds that the “extremity of
delight is generated by a suffering at the center” which “returns to its origin in grief”; for,
in the encounter with Melancholy “Pleasure aches” (52). Cummings recalls the allusion
to Burton in this passage, where the latter quotes Macrobius’ *Saturnalia (Anatomy*
1.2.3.5). In his analysis, the “experience of Delight is offered to a divinity of suffering
and silence” (54).

In other words, Keats’ poem stands before the figuration of the lamentation of
feminized nature, and bows to its sublime majesty. The poem stuns its reader into silence.
As Jean-Marie Fournier has argued, Keats’ poetics is a continual, profoundly ironic
struggle with the representation of silence. “Can the silence of melancholy,” asks
Christian La Cassagnère, “in other words, be articulated?” – only in myth, and only by
the dead, Keats’ poetics replies (¶12). For the “myth of creation” in Keats is “a myth that
defines poetic creation as a problematic interplay between the mobility of desire and the
stasis of melancholy, between speech and silence” (¶20). The irony of the poem, perhaps
unexampled amongst Keats’ other poems, finds its climax. As Anne K. Mellor writes,
“To be vanquished by melancholy or romantic irony is to have known beauty and joy
intensely; it is also to have known the agonizing ‘sadness’ of their loss; and finally, it is
to have experienced the powerful sense of freedom that comes from devotedly serving
rather than resisting that process” (86). Despair has its ultimate aesthetic purpose. Or, as
La Cassagnère puts it: “The poem’s ultimate fantasy, as inscribed in its last utterance,
thus features not so much the symbolic triumph of a subject as the triumph of a death-
mother, of a Thing that takes in a dying self in some melancholic *Pieta*. Once more,
therefore, the Thing will have to be murdered, in a new poem, in a new well-wrought Urn which will nevertheless commemorate the Thing’s eternity, in a vacillation between “heard melody” and melody “unheard”, between song and silence: Keats’s way of making Melancholia shine” (¶29). In this way, Keats, during the last years of his life, did help melancholy shine through his poetry, through a heroic stand in the face of death.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I provided an overview of key textual moments in Blake, Kierkegaard and Keats where the texts, and their authors, staged or experienced a crisis moment in the face of seemingly irremediable melancholy. My interpretation of this crisis was mostly worked out through an analysis of the texts, with only passing references to biographical considerations. The struggle with melancholy, despite it all, is not one in which a victor is ever declared. Spleen will be there long after the flesh of the body will have turned into dust. The dialectic of sorrow and joy, for all three of these writers, is the eternal struggle against sorrowfulness into the hope of finding a measure of contentment. It is not in the eradication of sorrow that one finds a measure of peace, but in the acceptance of this sorrow as a vehicle in the discovery of one’s own personal bliss, in the divine revelation of one’s purpose in life.
Chapter 3 – The Road to Absolute Spleen in Charles Baudelaire

Lecteur paisible et bucolique,  
Sombre et naïf homme de bien  
Jette ce livre saturnien,  
Orgiaque et mélancolique.  

Baudelaire shows us something that no other writer sees so well:  
how the modernization of the city at once inspires and enforces  
the modernization of its citizens’ souls.  

Baudelaire’s spleen is the suffering entailed by the decline of the aura.  
“Adorable Spring has lost its perfume.”

Baudelaire famously claimed to be writing a dictionary of melancholy through his poetry.  
As Florence Vatan, and other critics, note, in the first version of his dedication to Les  
Fleurs du mal, Baudelaire called the collection “un misérable dictionnaire de mélancolie  
[a miserable dictionary of melancholy]” (OC 1:187). Baudelaire was a devotee to the cult  
of melancholy from the Renaissance, some of the time, and at other times would turn away from “the temple of Delight” to gaze further into the interiority of his own spleen.  
The irony of Baudelaire’s oeuvre, when seen from its beginning to its end, can be gleaned from the poet’s acceptation of what I call “absolute spleen.” Spleen, in Baudelaire, is an assemblage of figurations, many of them drawing on the faces and masks of melancholy, its symbols, emblems and images. Spleen is a gateway to melancholizing by a process of metonymic figuration: spleen is a trace impression, something tangible in the writing that

49 Baudelaire, “Épigraphe pour un livre condamné” (OC 1:167).  
50 Marshall Berman, All That Is Solid Melts into Air (137). Also, from the same page of Berman’s text:  
“[Baudelaire’s] best Parisian writing belongs to the precise historical moment when, under the authority of Napoleon III and the direction of Haussmann, the city was being systematically torn apart and rebuilt. Even as Baudelaire worked in Paris, the work of its modernization was going on alongside him and over his head and under his feet. He saw himself not only as a spectator, but as a participant and a protagonist in this ongoing work; his own Parisian work expresses its drama and trauma” (147).  
51 Benjamin, Das Passagenwerk (344 [J64,5]).
suggests the phantasmatic and the melancholic are lurking in the distance. It is an association that echoes from the image itself to what the image evokes and back again. These echoes occur not only within individual texts but also across them. The transfiguration of spleen – its images and metaphors from *Les Fleurs du mal* to *Le spleen de Paris* – forms a metatextual play within Baudelaire’s writing. Moreover, the metalevel at play in Baudelaire influences the development of his figuration of melancholy: one can see within spleen itself an interior theory of *correspondances*. In other words, the earlier phase of Baudelairean melancholy pits spleen against something else, namely *idéal*, which privileges allegorical relationships, a visibility between allegorical terms. There is a progressively turn in Baudelaire towards irony, where the previously explicit relationship between spleen and something else transitions into an examination of mirror images of spleen itself, in its manifold figurations. In taking up the classic “Correspondances,” one ends up locating a dialectic between spleen and *idéal* where spleen, through its manifold allegorizations and personifications, participates in a dance with a conceptually visible and discrete partner. However, in later poems, such as “Spleen” (II), one comes to recognize that spleen does not need a conceptual partner in this “melancholy waltz.” In other words, one begins to see a spleen dancing by and with itself, forsaking the erotic in favour of a cold, phenomenally-grounded intellect. In earlier Baudelaire, the melancholy of the Renaissance played counterpart to the Baroque’s splenetic melancholia. Ideality and despair each applied pressure to subjects through desired and lost objects. By the end, spleen itself is all that remains.
Over time, one notices an evolution in Baudelaire’s poetry, an increase in one mode of representation over another. There is a progression from a poetics grounded in a reverent allegorical practice toward an ironic turn of (Baudelaire’s) language against itself. This turn to irony, I argue, marks the emergence of an absolute spleen in Baudelaire, one in which the idealized *melencolia heroica* no longer exist in the *modernité* Baudelaire helped to inaugurate. The sacrifice of *heroica* is done in service to a search for the *nouveau*. To borrow Graham Robb’s phrase, Baudelaire turns to irony to preserve “the integrity of the writer who is painfully aware that his language is inevitably a *sociolecte*, imbued with the notions of a society he despises” (62). The sacrifice of one’s own self-ideality, or ideals of the self, is the final gamble left to the artist who wishes to preserve the resonance of the aura in an age where its destruction is an everyday occurrence. As Beryl Schlossman wrote poignantly: “The ruin of Aura is a catastrophe for lost love: it leaves traces in nearly all of Baudelaire’s writings” (“Night” 1029). Parisian society had condemned the eroticism of *Les Fleurs* as obscene, and so its second edition and, later, *Le Spleen de Paris* returned the favour in kind. The phenomenality of spleen is redeemed as a slap in the face for a Parisian society obsessed with the facticity of health, the commodification of time, and the trivialization of art. The dialectical analysis that the Renaissance had attempted to extricate the “good” melancholy from the “bad” was fated to failure. The Baroque had declared this intellectual exercise a folly, showing how “bad” melancholia is all that was left to fallen humanity: one ought to suffer nobly, as this is all the grace one may hope to know. Baudelaire’s (Nietzschean) insight was to set aside melancholy’s positive and negative qualities – one may recall the original title of *Les
*Fleurs* had been “Les Limbes” – and inspect the interiority of the “in-between” tension that was its universally defining characteristic. Baudelaire sought out the internal machinations of the dialectic, the liminal boundaries at the four corners of poetic consciousness, consequences be damned. The phantasmagoria of human life, the whispers of the dream world in waking existence, would serve as the guide, as Virgil had guided Dante through hell, and Beatrice in heaven. What is absolute spleen? Echoes from the texts whisper: it is a spleen *sans idéal*, a perfect occlusion of ideality, immanence divorced from transcendence, the oblivion of abstraction, the pure consciousness of phenomenality, an ironic realization of realism’s prophecy that *surface is meaning*. It is the ripping of purgatory from its parents (heaven and hell), and the leaving it orphaned, infertile, impotent and all-alone.

**“Lexiconographies” and definitions of spleen**

Spleen, at its core, has a double nature, which further lends itself to *dédoulement*. It is inexorably an organ, which the medical sciences can locate in the human body; it cleanses the blood and plays a vital role in overall health. Black bile is a physical and metaphorical failure of the spleen to do its normal function: it made the splenetic person lustful, manic, unreasonable, solitary. The scientific anatomical character of spleen comes up against its classical elaboration up to the Baroque. Baudelaire saw an opportunity to aesthetically engineer a collision of the classical spleen with the anatomical one: the organ of the supposedly healthy body smashes against the representation of mental illness and sorrowfulness of character. There is in Baudelaire a reverence to *melancolia heroica*,
represented by his admiration and knowledge of classical beauty and ideality and his figuration of the poet; its counterpoint is the development of splenetic melancholia into the essence of his modernité, whose aesthetic legacies remain even today. The theory of correspondances served the purpose of dialectically arriving at the heart of spleen through an oppositional poetics, fueled by allegorical personifications playing out Baudelaire’s rumination of modern Parisian life. Baudelaire’s original, aesthetic insight reveals to him that spleen itself is at least double. Baudelaire, during his literary career, explores a tension between spleens, the spaces in-between them. Spleen, over time, undergoes a progressive transfiguration, first in its relationship to ideality, then in the disclosure of its interior doubleness. In the process of its transfiguration, the interiority of spleen, which is at first visibly two-fold, folds into itself, slipping into a deeper cavernous abyss of its own resonances and echoes.

Spleen is a reference point for much of Baudelaire’s writing because it most uniquely represents the dilemma of modernity. It is trapped between an idealized in-the-past way of life cut-off by the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, as well as the futures those historico-social events brought into being. Spleen, in the nineteenth century, had long since lost its original conception as part of the humoral theory, and had undergone a necessary, irremediable change. As opposed to being the producer of black bile when the four humours are out of balance, the spleen regulates the circulation of blood; anatomy and metaphor had been inexorably torn apart. By implicating himself in the fate of spleen, a fate that had already been largely decided by scientific advancement, Baudelaire appears to be engaging in anachronism. Baudelaire’s inscription of spleen into the
fabric of modernity rejects what Elizabeth Goodstein calls “the medicalization of malaise that was proceeding apace in the nineteenth century,” and is an insistence “on the spiritual significance of his ‘spleen’” (215). Feeling sick to one’s soul ought to be, Baudelaire’s writing suggests, the reaction to the commodification of everything and the primacy of empiricism in the accumulation of knowledge. This rejection of medicalization, for Baudelaire, deepens over time, for after the 1857 obscenity trial of Les Fleurs du mal he “explicitly rejects the contemporary tendency to reinterpret spleen and melancholy in the terms of a thoroughly unpoetic and unreligious, medical understanding of desire” (216). He can reject, absolve and assimilate the pieces of spleen’s history as his imagination see fits. While Baudelaire’s spleen is always an enigmatic one, his aesthetic ideology in how spleen is figured undergoes, over the course of his literary career, a gradual, yet dramatic, transformation and transfiguration.

What are the dominant characteristics of Baudelaire’s spleen and its figures? Baudelaire’s spleen is not gloominess for its own sake. Spleen is never weepy; spleen is a resolute, sobering stoicism. It is the recognizing that malaise, not health, is primary to Parisian life. It is accepting a permanent form of pain, as opposed to a learned resignation or defeatism. Spleen is a sensitivity which leaves the subject neither a quivering mess of nerves, nor trapped in irreparable dejection. The splenetic mind can withstand the alienation of modernity, through familiar comforts in the phenomena of contemporary times that echo a past way of life, its authentic character. It is ideality, in fact, that suffers the constant disappointments of modernity, whereas spleen has internalized disappointment. Ideality is necessarily an elitism, whereas spleen can see value in all things, as opposed to
only a select few events, people, cultures. The vibrating aura of the poem offers a
glimpse, an insight into another world of possibility. Representations of spleen, which
exemplify impurity, bleakness and lack, like a gateway into one’s own unhappy cons-
ciousness, ironically become a purification of thought. The moment passes and, in its
absence, the subject desperately seeks the path to another presentation. Baudelaire’s
poetry stages this psychodrama. All the while, the word on everyone’s lips is left
unspoken, though it was just there, staring back from the abyss of the poem, in that flash
of auratic insight. The Baudelairean dandy rejects the romantic impulse to take refuge in
the authenticity of nature, and instead, as Philip G. Hadlock argues, aligns himself “with
artifice, or a compelling need to transcend nature; his realm is a highly charged symbolic
domain” (62). At least, that is the dandy’s point of departure, for as I will argue, Baude-
laire does not stay in the realm of the symbolic for very long.

As Benjamin famously puts it, Baudelaire constructs “Spleen as a bulwark against
pessimism” (SW 4:162). What Benjamin does not say, and this is perhaps why he has
surprisingly little to say about Le Spleen de Paris, is that eventually Baudelaire succum-
bed to the pessimism of his own absolute spleen. 52 Spleen is a challenge to the emptiness
of modernity, through its aesthetic voice, modernity can characterize and portray the
essential character of this emptiness. Starobinski, in La mélancolie au miroir, writes:
“Expressing melancholy without saying the word ‘melancholy’ too often requires you to
fall back on synonyms, equivalents, metaphors. It poses a challenge to the poetic task.

52 Though, Benjamin provides glimpses into this threat of pessimism: “Spleen is the feeling that
corresponds to catastrophe in permanence” (SW 1:64).
Adjustments must be made, in the lexical domain first of all” (118). Concerning the place of spleen in Les Fleurs du mal, Starobinski writes:

The placement of spleen in [Les Fleurs du mal] is paramount, for it does not figure in the verses, but rather in the titles. The poem entitled “Spleen” – from the first section: “Spleen et Idéal” – without even uttering the name of melancholy, can be justly considered the latter’s emblems or blazonry. These poems name melancholy in other words, in other images: they allegorize – and it is rather difficult to determine if allegory is the body or the shadow of Baudelairean melancholy. (16)

Melancholy is the mood of Baudelaire’s writing, its influence marks his texts. This mood is a key building block to Baudelaire’s poetics as a whole, form the body and shape of his aesthetic doctrine. Like Benjamin, Starobinski points to allegory as a process, a method of construction, through which Baudelaire’s writing assembles together a figuration of melancholy in these other images and words.

In the case of allegory, Patrick Labarthe helps narrow the field of its significance:

“if allegory defines itself through a logic of double meaning, and if allegory opens a discrepancy between the visible and the hidden, between an image that is given and the essential discourse for reading, then, Baudelaire’s poetry is, in point of fact, a kind of theatre where the ends of an authentic allegorical drama of genres such as emblem, fable or enigma reach a confluence; a scene where all the modes of personification, none of which have lost their univocality, enter into relief” (382-383). As Vatan argues: “Through this singular melancholy, one finds expressed the Baudelairean aspiration for a reconciliation of art and existence. The poet is on a quest of a middle way to escape the exacerbated depression of spleen as well as the fantasizing evasions of the ideal sphere” (221).

53 Starobinski, I think, is being more than a little facetious here. Allegory is both body and shadow, taking turns, each one side of the Baudelairean coin, which sits, as Benjamin noted, in the flâneur’s pocket.
The act of poem making, then, is the attempt to construct the middle way from elements of the extremes. *Les Fleurs du mal* paint a portrait of the world in the colours of spleen and *idéal*, with the colours *between* those two. What is the relationship between them? Are they contradictory, oppositional, or simply different? For Christine Buci-Glucksmann, as she argues in her monograph, *La raison baroque*:

For Baudelaire there is no contradiction between the two concepts [of spleen and *idéal*]. He recognized in spleen the latest transfiguration of *idéal* itself, which in turn the latter is the first most expression of the former. In this title [“Spleen et Idéal”] where the *supremely new* is presented to the reader as something *supremely ancient*, Baudelaire has given the most vigorous form of his conception of modernity. (225)

In this way, the relationship between spleen and *idéal* is a progressive transfiguration from one into the other, and this transfiguration, forever in progress, represents the inner core of modernity. Thinking of Baudelaire’s writing as the chronicle of a transfiguration, from a state of *idéal* towards spleen, may help reveal the inner working of a poetic process that serves as the preparation for modernity, as the construction of one’s bulwark to guard against the imminent threat of pessimism and dejection. Allegory is a major step in the construction of the splenetic figure; however, it would prove to be only the first step, as discussed later in this chapter. First, a look at Baudelaire’s prose, where he speaks more freely, before I address his poetry.

Pierre Dufour – in his 1988 article “*Les Fleurs du mal*, Dictionnaire de mélan-colie” – presents a hypothesis on the workings of melancholy in Baudelaire, with specific reference to *Les Fleurs du mal*. He draws his hypothesis, and its two principal terms, from passages in Baudelaire’s prose work *Les Paradis artificiels*, a work I will turn to
shortly. One can take up Dufour’s hypothesis on its own merits, and then turn to its context from the larger work. In an early paragraph of the essay, he writes:

In opposing “black melancholy” [OC 1:470, 480 “noire mélancolie”] to “poetic melancholy” [OC 1:425 “mélancolie poétique”] … Baudelaire takes “melancholy” in its ancient sense, taken up again by psychiatry of the nineteenth century and psychoanalysis, which affords all the more weight to the rare mentions of the word in [Les Fleurs du mal]. (31)

Much of this dissertation so far has been spent – has been working up to – putting the above quotation in proper context. Baudelaire does not frequently acknowledge the tradition of melancholy reaching back to the Ancient Greeks and the Renaissance, but the mentions are there in his prose works – I cover a few of these references along the way.54 Dufour’s analysis of Baudelaire’s poetic lexicon attempts to measure the interplay of “black melancholy” and “poetic melancholy” and considers the question of the resonance between words, the correspondances between them.55 Dufour observes (as Starobinski does) that melancholy’s “versatility is aggravated,” on the one hand, by its epistemological development in medicine, which requires an empirical standard, and on the other hand, through the literary arts’ embrace of melancholy more ancient (and medically rejected) images and descriptions (Dufour 32). Les Fleurs du mal represent a form of “melancholic writing” that exposes facets of melancholy, through the figuration of spleen, that are more compelling through fiction than they would be as part of a medical treatise on the same subject (Dufour 33). There exists in Baudelaire, Dufour contends, a series of responses to idealized melancholy, handed down by Dürer, where the artist

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54 James S. Patty – in his article “Baudelaire and Dürer: Avatars of Melancholia” – provides a thorough overview of this problematic.

55 This dialectic is the same one I have been working to establish, using the terms sublime melancholy, splenetic melancholy, and in drawing on the phrase melancolia heroica.
“who does not spend a lifetime dreaming” and lives out “an attitude marked by profound ambivalence, of which [the melancholic artist] has a sharp self-consciousness thereof” (35). Dufour points to several poems in which the use of “noir,” “nocturne” and “mort” point back to the overwhelming oppression of a gloomy, melancholy mood (41-42). These moods become poetic opportunities to go places outside the limits of empirical perception, into the vistas made possible by the literary arts.

In other words, the dull round of everyday life can be stretched into an expanse where it is something significant, something different. Later in the essay, Dufour inscribes Baudelaire’s work into its place in literary history:

Present in the melancholy humour in general (from Hamlet to Alceste, from Rousseau up to Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Kafka) this ethos of immoderation also marks [Les Fleurs du mal]. Often dramatized to the point of tragedy, it is expressed in a double tension that is “spatialized” between opposite extremes: the HIGH (the Ideal of “Spleen et Idéal”) and the LOW with the obsession of the “fall” toward “the abyss,” the “chasm” of “Spleen” – melancholy privileging its negative side…. (43)56

Baudelaire shares Alceste’s radical intolerance for everyday life, as well as Hamlet’s concern the (Parisian) ghosts of the past may be leading him astray. This recognition of spleen, in the spaces of where one dreams of idéal, is the melancholic space literature provides. Spleen exposes that fleeting moments of idéal are exactly that: they are fleeting. In being so, they betray the transcendental sphere they were meant to reveal as a falsehood, une vaguerie, a petty lie, a bad joke. In the allegorical playground of Baudelaire’s writing, the two major players are these emblems of these positive and negative melancholies. The ironic mode of Baudelaire’s writing, however, revels not so much in

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56 This summary of the literary historical context of Baudelaire’s “Spleen et Idéal” was influential in determining the topics of my dissertation.
the tension of spleen and idéal, which is a dialectical foil, but rather takes an interest in
the tension within spleen itself. Dufour aptly observes that “the multidimensional confi-
guration one calls “melancholy” in [Les Fleurs] draws out an imaginary that is negative
and nocturnal, of which its most sombre phantasms trace this strange sort of ontological
allegory of the subject” (51). The “key” that melancholy provides the reader comes with
“a price to pay (which many may deem excessive)” – hence the reason Baudelaire encou-
rages the reader to “toss” his Saturnine book (51-52). He is also encouraging them to take
his melancholy allegory and toss it out in favour of an ironic spleen, which is an uncan-
nily Kierkegaardian line of thinking (and also an ironic one, in-itself). Baudelaire’s elabo-
ration of spleen lends itself to a physical wounding of the soul, a permanent blackening of
one’s humeur. This cycle resembles the one of drug addiction, where a temporary joy
(Renaissance humanism, the short glory of the French Revolution) is replaced with per-
manent scarring and the eventual loss of joy (the wars during the Baroque, the rise of the
Second Empire). This may be part of the reason why Baudelaire found the case of De
Quincey compelling, and why he chose to translate and adapt the latter’s work into
French. Les Paradis artificiels chronicle, in its their own way, the turn from allegory to
irony that this chapter establishes more broadly.

The artifices of opium and the unbearable lightness of dreaming
For a time, Baudelaire was content to achieve an aesthetic balance between poetic and
black melancholy, as expressed in the various idealisms of the first edition of Les Fleurs.
Over time, however, Baudelaire turns against poetic melancholy altogether. A version of
this dialectic appears in *Les Paradis artificiels*, a work that converges biography, commentary, translation and fiction. There, Baudelaire constructs another space to see the inner working of melancholy under the influence of narcotics. In reading Baudelaire’s remarks about other people – real and imaginary, biographical and fictional – one might be able to shine a light on his own writing practices, poetics and process of figuration. If one takes up “black melancholy” and “poetic melancholy,” as Dufour has, and looks up the references and read the terms in their textual context, one realizes they appear rather far apart in the sources. Baudelaire also does not introduce these terms and outline their significance at length, which can lead to them being missed upon a first reading. As in many famous Baudelairean literary-critical passages, a term is mentioned with the familiarity of a long-held, yet carefully measured, aesthetic theory, only to seldom, if ever, appear again. One is expected to catch on and keep up. “Poetic melancholy” appears in “Le Poème du Haschich,” whereas “black melancholy” appears in “Un mangeur d’opium” twice. The latter text of the two is Baudelaire’s commentary upon and translation/adaptation of Thomas De Quincey’s classic memoir, *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*. The analysis of hashish, in the former – the first part of *Les Paradis artificiels* – is a more general study than the micro-analysis and reading of De Quincey that Baudelaire effectuates in the second part. David Catani, in a nuanced and insightful article on Baudelaire and De Quincey, contends that the two halves of *Les Paradis artificiels*, each represent opposing discourses. One represents “drugs as an ‘ideal,’ the other as the more negative spleen” with the dialogue between these discourses “betraying [an] ethically problematic cultural prejudice” that artists should be left to experiment with
drugs in the exploration of enhancing their genius (Catani 238). For Catani, contrary to “Romantic literary discourse … Baudelaire proposes a more ethical relationship between genius and opium-taking, one that restores the artist’s moral and creative accountability by actively locating the source of his genius in childhood” (238). These halves appear meant to fold into one another, as if in a gesture to the Baroque.

Baudelaire says that during a hash high, one is not transported away from one’s own body into another world, as one would be during a dream (OC 1:408-409). Rather “le haschich sera, pour les impressions et les pensées familières de l’homme, un miroir grossissant, mais un pur miroir [for the impressions and the familiar thoughts of man, hashish will be an enlarging mirror, and yet a pure mirror]” (OC 1:409). One retains the perspective of one’s own waking consciousness, as opposed to a dream consciousness. The feeling of waking consciousness while high and the image of the mirror become very important later in the text of Les Paradis artificiels. After his opening, Baudelaire proceeds to tell several anecdotes, one of which is the surrounding context to the use of “poetic melancholy.” Baudelaire says he “transcribes literally” (OC 1:421) an account of a woman high on hashish who then dreams of Sleeping Beauty (OC 1:423). The woman telling the story reports feeling extreme fatigue, and furthermore, she has no notion of whether or not she ever fell asleep over the course of the night: one is to presume that she did not. One is bolstered in this presumption by Baudelaire’s insistence that hash highs are not dreams (OC 1:424). At the conclusion of the anecdote, Baudelaire commences his analysis on the significance of her experiences. The paragraph opens with a description of a stressful state endured after eating, during digestion, where the woman is transitioning
from one state of the high into another. The transition occurs over “des visions splendides, doucement terrifiantes et en même temps pleines de consolations [splendid visions, softly terrifying and yet full consoling comforts]” (OC 1:425). Baudelaire writes:

Cette nouvelle phase d’ivresse … n’est plus quelque chose de tourbillonnant et de tumultueux ; c’est une béatitude calme et immobile, une résignation glorieuse. Depuis longtemps vous n’êtes plus votre maître, mais vous ne vous en affligez plus. La douleur et l’idée du temps ont disparu, ou si quelquefois elles osent se produire, ce n’est que transfigurées par la sensation dominante, et elles sont alors relativement à leur forme habituelle ce que la mélancolie poétique est à la douleur positive. (OC 1:425)57

In this *heightened awareness* – which was KSP’s descriptor for melancholy in their study – if the pain has not altogether disappeared, it stands transfigured into a “positive pain” relative to “poetic melancholy.” The journey through the high has been exacting, and these splendid visions have taken their toll on the body, but the moment of poetic melancholy’s beatitude is the payoff. Baudelaire writes that the “moral hallucination” for the woman has a surprisingly “optimistic” quality: “Je ne dirai pas que cette dame a côtoyé le remords; mais ses pensées, momentanément tournées à la mélancolie et au regret, ont été rapidement colorées d’espérance [I will not say that this lady rubbed shoulders with remorse, but her thoughts, momentarily turned to melancholy and regret, were soon coloured with hope]” (OC 1:425). It required almost more effort than it was worth, but the experience left the woman, who had been inexperienced in taking hashish, with a sense of hopefulness. She had come into contact with her *idéal*, and walked away

57 This new phase of the high … is not swirling or tumultuous; it is a calm and immobile beatitude, a glorious resignation. For so long, you are no longer your own master, but you also stopped worrying about it. The pain and notion of time have disappeared – or they have dared manifest only infrequently – they have become merely transfigured by the dominant sensation; therefore, they have taken their habitual form only insofar as poetic melancholy is a positive pain.
somehow improved from the experience. It does not seem an accident, given Baudelaire’s propensity to use a feminine figure in moments when voluptuousness is called for, that Baudelaire choose a female witness to the high corresponding to idéal.

When one turns to Baudelaire’s reading of De Quincey, one sees the hope of inexperience fade into the torment of an agonizing sleep and constant pain. In the English writer, Baudelaire had found a companion not unlike his affinity with Edgar Allan Poe. Baudelaire’s adaptation of Confessions of an English Opium-Eater presents De Quincey’s all-too-real memoir of his pain and struggles with addiction to a French audience. In the “Pains of Opium” chapter that Baudelaire translates and comments upon, De Quincey outlines the crash of his addictive cycle with his muse, his drug (see Confessions, 113-131). Here, De Quincey no longer hallucinates with any meaningful veracity and has slipped into a sleep stripped of any miraculous potentialities; worse still he is haunted by bad dreams in his waking life as well. In his adaptation of the text, Baudelaire routinely changes the first person pronouns to narrate events from the third person, and will at times open quotations to have De Quincey speak directly. There are many illuminating divergences between these two texts (Baudelaire’s and De Quincey’s), though there is space here only to consider a few of these instances. At the beginning of his opium journeys, De Quincey was enraptured by the pleasures of opium, which have not, as yet, turned into pain. Here is the passage, adapted by Baudelaire, with the first reference to “black melancholy” (see footnote for text from Confessions):

Ainsi l’opium n’engendre pas, de nécessité, l’inaction ou la torpeur, puis-quin’au contraire il jetait souvent notre rêveur [De Quincey] dans les centres les plus fourmillants de la vie commune. Cependant les théâtres et les marchés ne sont pas généralement les hantises préférées d’un mangeur
d’opium, surtout quand il est dans son état parfait de jouissance. La foule est alors pour lui comme une oppression ; la musique elle-même a un caractère sensuel et grossier. Il cherche plutôt la solitude et le silence, comme conditions indispensables de ses extases et de ses rêveries profondes. Si d’abord l’auteur de ces Confessions s’est jeté dans la foule et dans le courant humain, c’était pour réagir contre un trop vif penchant à la rêverie et à une noire mélancolie, résultat de ses souffrances de jeunesse. Dans les recherches de la science, comme dans la société des hommes, il rayait une espèce d’hypocondrie. Plus tard, quand sa vraie nature fut rétablie, et que les ténèbres des anciens orages furent dissipées, il crut pouvoir sans danger sacrifier à son goût pour la vie solitaire. (OC 1:470)\(^{58}\)

The opium-eater dreams about the crowd, wanders the busy streets of London, but in the bliss of the drug, De Quincey’s body stays in a closed, private space. The crowd that serves as a high for the flâneur is a buzzkill for the opium-eater. The scene of the crowd and the desire for solitude engage in a crossing of paths. The black melancholy from the past lurks as the impulse that first throws De Quincey into the crowd for refuge. The phrase “black melancholy” is not translated from the De Quincey text, for the latter uses the phrase “hypochondriacally melancholy” – this, one may recall, was a category of melancholy chronicled by Burton in the Anatomy.

Over time, De Quincey begins to succumb entirely to solitary reveries, during and after his opium dreams. Baudelaire opens to another quotation/translation from De

\(^{58}\) Thus I have shown that opium does not, of necessity, produce inactivity or torpor; but that, on the contrary, it often led me into markets and theatres. Yet, in candour, I will admit that markets and theatres are not the appropriate haunts of the opium-eater, when in the divinest state incident to his enjoyment. In that state, crowds become an oppression to him; music even, too sensual and gross. He naturally seeks solitude and silence, as indispensable conditions of those trances, or profoundest reveries, which are the crown and consummation of what opium can do for human nature. I, whose disease it was to mediate too much, and to observe too little, and who, upon my first entrance at college, was nearly falling into a deep melancholy, from brooding too much on the sufferings which I had witnessed in London, was sufficiently aware of the tendencies of my own thoughts to do all I could to counteract them. – I was, indeed, like a person who, according to the old legend, had entered the cave of Trophonius: I and the remedies I sought were to force myself into society, and to keep my understanding in continual activity upon matters of science. But for these remedies, I should certainly have become hypochondriacally melancholy. In after years, however, when my cheerfulness was more fully re-established, I yielded to my natural inclination for a solitary life. (Confessions 99)
Quincey’s meditations that he describes as a “grande allégorie naturelle [qui] s’étendait alors devant lui [a great allegory of nature extending out before him]” (OC 1:471). Here is Baudelaire’s version of this rêverie:

La ville, estompée par la brume et les molles lueurs de la nuit, représentait la terre, avec ses chagrins et ses tombeaux, situés loin derrière, mais non totalement oubliés, ni hors de la portée de ma vue. L’Océan, avec sa respiration éternelle, mais couvé par un vaste calme, personnifiait mon esprit et l’influence qui le gouvernait alors. Il me semblait que, pour la première fois, je me tenais à distance et en dehors du tumulte de la vie ; que le vacarme, la fièvre et la lutte étaient suspendus; qu’un répit était accordé aux secrètes oppressions de mon cœur; un repos férié; une délivrance de tout travail humain. L’espérance qui fleurit dans les chemins de la vie ne contredisait plus la paix qui habite dans les tombes ; les évolutions de mon intelligence me semblaient aussi infatigables que les cieux, et cependant toutes les inquiétudes étaient aplanies par un calme alcyonien ; c’était une tranquillité qui semblait le résultat, on pas de l’inertie, mais de l’antagonisme majestueux de forces égales et puissantes; activités infinies, infini repos! (OC 1:471)⁵⁹

This perception of an urban landscape at peace is the natural phantasmagoria of the artificial paradises at their peak. The immediacy and completeness of De Quincey’s perception paints a livelier vision of the world than before. The body’s eyes can apprehend phantasms meant for the soul. The mirror represents the reflection of this discovery, but also the gateway into this new mode of perception. This enhanced mirror, held up to De Quincey, showing him to the world and reflecting the world back to him, doubles the impressions of his experience. Time is experienced in a fuller way, the unseen

⁵⁹ The town of L—represented the earth, with its sorrows and its graves left behind, yet not out of sight, nor wholly forgotten. The ocean, in everlasting but gentle agitation, and brooded over by a dove-like calm, might not unfitly typify the mind and the mood which then swayed it. For it seemed to me as if then first I stood at a distance, and aloof from the uproar of life; as if the tumult, the fever, and the strife, were suspended; a respite granted from the secret burthens of the heart; a sabbath of repose; a resting from human labours. Here were the hopes which blossom in the paths of life, reconciled with the peace which is in the grave; motions of the intellect as unwearied as the heavens, yet for all anxieties a halycon calm: a tranquillity that seemed no product of inertia, but as if resulting from mighty and equal antagonisms; infinite activities, infinite repose. (Confessions 100)
movements of the world open up to the mind’s eye. The relation between his imagination
and the outer world is a perfect, though fleeting, harmony. Just as in the experience of the
woman on hashish, all the trouble it took to get to that moment of pristine solitude seems
worthwhile. But, shortly after this beautiful passage, the chapter ends, and the memoir
turns to the “Pains of Opium.”

Once the positive pain of De Quincey’s melancholy turns fully into splenetic
melancholia – the inevitable climactic step of the transfiguration – sleep, which was for a
time in perfect unity with the heightened waking life of the opium-eater, becomes a
double experience of pain. Both waking life and sleeping life are torturous. “Black
melancholy,” the threat of opium addiction made flesh, makes its second appearance, as


Couché, mais éveillé, des processions funèbres et magnifiques défilaient
devant ses yeux; d’interminables bâtiments se dressaient, d’un caractère
 antique et solennel. Mais les rêves du sommeil participèrent bientôt des
 rêves de la veille, et tout ce que son œil évoquait dans les ténèbres se
 reproduisit dans son sommeil avec une splendeur inquiétante, insupport-
able. Midas changeait en or tout ce qu’il touchait, et se sentait martyrisé
par cet ironique privilège. De même le mangeur d’opium transformait en
 réalités inévitables tous les objets de ses rêveries. Toute cette fantasmas-
gorie, si belle et si poétique qu’elle fût en apparence, était accompagnée
d’une angoisse profonde et d’une noire mélancolie. Il lui semblait,
chaque nuit, qu’il descendait indéfiniment dans des abîmes sans lumière,
au-delà de toute profondeur connue, sans espérance de pouvoir remonter.
Et, même après le réveil, persistait une tristesse, une désespérance voisine
de l’anéantissement. (480)

60 In De Quincey’s text, “black melancholy” appears as “gloomy melancholy.”
61 [At] night, when I lay awake in bed, vast processions passed along in mournful pomp; friezes of never-
ending stories, that to my feelings were as sad and solemn as if they were stories drawn from times before
Oedipus or Priam – before Tyre – before Memphis. And, at the same time, a corresponding change took
place in my dreams; a theatre seemed suddenly opened and lighted up within my brain, which presented
nightly spectacles of more than earthly splendour. And the four following facts may be mentioned, as
Like Midas, the eater of opium is blessed with a gift of insight that doubles as his curse, a privilege that debases, rather than elevates. They (De Quincey and Midas) can have it all, but the gift – whether it is turning things to gold or transforming painful experience into pleasurable reveries – when it comes to collect, as the debt collector would chase Baudelaire from his different dwelling, the “gift” comes for everything one has. The subject is trapped between a state of sleep and being awake. The processions and rise of ancient, solemn buildings echoes to a lost, desired past. The splendour of the waking dream makes the crash back to daily life overwhelmingly insufferable.

The beauty of the phantasm does escape the correspondance to a splenetic melancholia. The fall into an abyss becomes indistinguishable from that antic beauty evoked before. In fact, Baudelaire’s text makes a callback to the drunkenness of hashish from “Le Poème du hashish.” Baudelaire finds corollary phenomena between the two highs. Space expands infinitely, gathering an overwhelming number objects into the scene (OC 1:480-481). The opium-eater endures an unfathomable suffering:

Mais l’expansion du temps devint une angoisse encore plus vive ; les sentiments et les idées qui remplissaient la durée d’une nuit représentaient pour lui la valeur d’un siècle. En outre les plus vulgaires événements de

noticeable at this time: / 1. That, as the creative state of the eye increased, a sympathy seemed to arise between the waking and the dreaming states of the brain in one point – that whatsoever I happened to call up and to trace by a voluntary act upon the darkness was very apt to transfer itself to my dreams; so that I feared to exercise this faculty; for, as Midas turned all things to gold, that yet baffled his hopes and defrauded his human desires, so whatsoever things capable of being visually represented I did but think of in the darkness, immediately shaped themselves into phantoms of the eye; and, by a process apparently no less inevitable, when thus once traced in faint and visionary colours, like writings in sympathetic ink, they were drawn out by the fierce chemistry of my dreams, into insufferable splendour that fretted my heart. / 2. For this, and all other changes in my dreams, were accompanied by deep-seated anxiety and gloomy melancholy, such as are wholly incomunicable by words. I seemed every night to descend, not metaphorically, but literally to descend, into chasms and sunless abysses, depths below depths, from which it seemed hopeless that I could ever re-ascend. Nor did I, by waking, feel that I had re-ascended. (Confessions 118-119)
l’enfance, des scènes depuis longtemps oubliées, se reproduisirent dans son cerveau, vivant d’une vie nouvelle. Éveillé, il ne s’en serait peut-être pas souvenu ; mais dans le sommeil, il les reconnaissait immédiatement. De même que l’homme qui se noie revoit, dans la minute suprême de l’agonie, toute sa vie comme dans un miroir ; de même que le damné lit, en une seconde, le terrible compte rendu de toutes ses pensées terrestres; de même que les étoiles voilées par la lumière du jour reparaissent avec la nuit, de même aussi toutes les inscriptions gravées sur la mémoire inconsciente reparurent comme par l’effet d’une encre sympathique. (*OC* 1:480-481)\(^62\)

Baudelaire’s passage diverges dramatically from De Quincey in this instance: while taking a similar point of departure, Baudelaire’s veers back to his earlier description of the woman on hashish. The woman’s description of the hash high was the experience of a novice, as De Quincey once was, when the effects of opium were new. The De Quincey reflecting on “The Pains of Opium” is a veteran of drug abuse who now despairs as the elements of his former paradise invade his waking life, alongside repressed memories of the past. The vastness of monuments and landscapes reads as an overture to a monstrous and grotesque sublimity.\(^63\) The expansion of time and space produce a deep anxiety (as above): Baudelaire describes a remembrance of childhood events that resemble a return of the repressed *avant la lettre*. The translation of the experiences from sleep into the horror of waking life drown perception in a sea of memories, real and imagined. Once the body collapses from exhaustion, the experience of normal sleep fails to recover the body

\(^{62}\) But the expansion of time turned into a starker anxiety: the feeling and ideas that filled the length of one night took on the weight of centuries. What’s more, the most crude events of childhood, scenes long since forgotten, would reproduce themselves in his brain, taking on life anew. Awake, he might not have remembered them, but in sleep he could recognize them immediately. Just as the drowning man can see again, in those agonizing moments, his entire life as if before a mirror; just as damned can read, in a second, the terrible account of all their terrestrial thoughts; just as the stars veiled by the light of day reappear at night, just as all the engraved inscriptions on unconscious memory manifest through the effect of an invisible ink. (English translation of the Baudelaire text: conf. *Confessions* 119-121)

\(^{63}\) The echo to Kant, in my characterisation of sublimity, is intentional here.
from the agony of waking life. This translation of a once “poetic melancholy” into a
“black melancholy” is marked by anguish, anxiety, despair and depression. Sanguine red
has turned melancholic black.

In the pleasurable high, suffering is transfigured into a positive pain. The image of
the mirror, which had at first appeared incidental, in its repetition gains a vital signifi-
cance – as emphasized by Starobinski in *La Mélancolie au miroir*. The failures, embar-
rassments and sufferings of daily life, while perhaps not acute at the moment of expe-
rience, can get worse upon reflection, both literally and metaphorically. In his description
of De Quincey’s decline, Baudelaire evokes the image of the mirror at the climax of the
opium-induced agony. De Quincey can no longer escape this reflection, his gateway into
a personal *Paradiso* has become like Auguste Rodin’s *La Porte de l’Enfer* [*The Gates of
Hell*]. In a single moment of time, De Quincey must confront the totality of not only his
own experiences, but also that of the immensity of eternity. Baudelaire is trying to find in
the other’s suffering an authentic reflection of his own spleen, perhaps to avert the same
fate, perhaps to confirm that this fate is unavoidable. The mirror is the figural representa-
tion of repetition – which Kierkegaard and Nietzsche also explored in their own ways –
of an eternal return of pain, where the recollection of the earlier positive pain begins to
fade into pain, *just pain*. That is the torture of opium: the experience of dream time in
waking life, were a few seconds of dreaming can contain centuries of experience. Poetic
melancholy has turned into a black melancholy. The figure of this liminality, which
Baudelaire evokes in both of these episodes on hashish and opium, is the image of a
mirror, which one realizes is the figure of Baudelairean spleen and its *dédoublment* (as
Saturnine Constellations

will be discussed later in this chapter). The comparison of pain with pain, of spleen and spleen, is thus a major theme in Baudelairean poetics. Its effects are felt throughout Les Fleurs du mal, to which I now turn.

The perfume of melancholy in “Correspondances”

Literary critics have long looked at Baudelaire’s poem “Correspondances” as a landmark for both his aesthetic theory as a whole, and to position their own literary/critical perspective on Baudelaire’s aesthetics. Baudelaire’s poetry in Les Fleurs du mal cultivates a reader that is always yet-to-come, and suggests revisions to a reader’s conventional, unconscious reading practices. The idéal one encounters is the dialectical counterpart to spleen, whereby these two reveal their secrets through the movements of a dance. Baudelaire uses idéal as a foil through which he may learn about the essence of spleen: the one leads the “melancholy waltz” with the other following. Benjamin, in a passage from the 1921-1922 Baudelaire fragment, addresses the particular character of the title, and the words, “Spleen et Idéal” saying that “it is not translatable. Each of the two words on its own contains a double meaning. Both spleen and idéal are not just spiritual essences but also an intended effect upon them” (SW 1:362). Concerning idéal, Benjamin laments the absence of a clear German equivalent, that would express “in particular, the sense of a radiant and triumphant spirituality – such as is evoked in the sonnet ‘L’Aube spirituelle,’ among many others” (SW 1:362). Finally, concerning spleen, he writes:

“Spleen … first and foremost, it is that fatally foundering, doomed flight of Icarus – comes crashing down into the ocean [from the weight] of its own melancholy. In both the oldest and most recent foreign word in his language, Baudelaire indicates the share of time and eternity in these two
extreme realms of the spirit. And doesn’t this ambiguous title also imply that archetypal image and intended effect are mysteriously intertwined? Doesn’t the title mean that it is the melancholic above all whose gaze is fixed on the ideal, and that it is the images of melancholy that kindle the spiritual most brightly? (SW 1:362)

Benjamin, in the last sentence of his analysis, hits upon one of the major conclusions of Baudelaire’s figuration of spleen: for it is in the depths of spleen that one sees idéal most brightly, radiating like a star impossibly far away, surrounded by the darkness of night. Icarus wanted to be a solar flare of idéal and so he hurled himself at the sun; instead, he ended up plunging into the dark waters of spleen.

The emphasis on spirituality in this dialectic mediated by the artificiality of these two terms plays out explicitly in Baudelaire’s poem “Correspondances.” The poem is held up to the reader, as if offered like a gift of water to a long-suffering desert wanderer:

La Nature est un temple où de vivants piliers
Laissent parfois sortir de confuses paroles ;
L’homme y passe à travers des forêts de symboles
Qui l’observent avec des regards familiers.

Comme de longs échos qui de loin se confondent
Dans une ténèbreuse et profonde unité,
Vaste comme la nuit et comme la clarté,
Les parfums, les couleurs et les sons se répondent.

Il est des parfums frais comme des chairs d’enfants,
Doux comme les hautbois, verts comme les prairies,
– Et d’autres, corrompus, riches et triomphants,

Ayant l’expansion des choses infinies,
Comme l’arbre, le musc, le benjoin et l’encens,
Qui chantent les transports de l’esprit et des sens. (OC 1:11)

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64 Nature is a temple, in which living pillars sometimes utter a babel of words; mankind traverses it through forests of symbols that watch him with knowing eyes. / Like prolonged echoes which merge far away in an opaque, deep oneness, as vast as darkness and as vast as light, the perfumes, sounds, and colours answer
Baudelaire’s poem is a test and poetic examination of the senses: the sights of the “forêt de symboles,” the sounds of confused speech, the scents of perfume and burning incense. The concluding stanza of the poem provides the reader an extended sniff of *Les Fleurs du mal*, as if the poem were a bowl of potpourri. For as long as the poem is kept in singular focus, as above, its perfume transports the reader to a beautiful poetic space. What are the characteristics of this space? To where is the reader, and/or the speaker of the poem, transported? The first line of the suggests one is in the presence of nature itself, where this personified, allegorized temple of nature mediates an absolute “Nature” that is normally less accessible, or altogether inaccessible.

David Saunders argues that “Correspondances” is one of the few poems where Baudelaire’s “personified abstractions,” which are implied to have “a destructive effect” on ideality, and end up “expressing doubt in terms of an ironic judgement on one or other aspect of some ‘tentative vers l’idéal’” (773). Importantly, “Correspondances” is a poem missing the ironic reversal where the “universal norm” of *idéal* is shown as an “illusion” (Saunders 773). In the tension between *surnaturalisme et ironie* in Baudelaire, a poem such as “Correspondances” trends strongly towards an unmediated form of the former; at least, things seem this way. Saunders concludes that the “frequency, the context, and the inherent expressive potentialities of personified abstractions” should be seriously considered in one’s appraisal of Baudelaire, in particular in one’s assessment of his ironic figuration and use of language (777). Baudelaire may be showing unmediated *surnaturalisme each to each.* / There are perfumes fresh and cool as the flesh of children, mellow as oboes, green as fields; and other that are corrupted, rich, triumphant, / that have the infinite expansion of infinite things – such as amber, musk, benjamin, incense, which chant the ecstasies of the mind and senses. (*CV 67*)
only to reaffirm an ironic conclusion. The reader may experience a fulsome encounter with *idéal* itself, but at the same time, something is lurking. In the apprehension of lack, spleen awaits. Baudelaire’s aesthetics expose qualities through both presence and absence. In the absence of the transcendental, which *idéal* is meant to evoke, spleen can sneak in. Baudelaire’s poetry can communicate in phantasms of lack: spleen can represent the *gap* between ideality and reality, and collapse the falsehood of their duality. One captures the echo of confused speech, but not the speech (the words spoken). Baudelaire performs the echo of *idéal* only to viciously turn upon its supposed presentation. Once the page turns to the next poem and the aroma of “Correspondances” fades from sensory perception, the smell of the rest of Paris – the post-Revolution Paris that Baudelaire’s lyric poetry casts into stark, unforgiving relief – wafts back in, slowly, progressively, decisively. The scent of Paris is muddy, shitty, industrial, dehumanizing, unnatural. Even in the supposed absence of spleen, spleen is there too, waiting.

Hans Rindisbacher in The Smell of Books chronicles the importance of smell in *Les Fleurs du mal*, where the word “smell” itself is not altogether that important, but the occurrences of figures that represent olfactory sensations are both frequent and significant to interpreting the book as a whole. Notably, “parfum” is mentioned with some regularity (33 times by his count), and Rindisbacher argues that Baudelaire’s work has “a sensuousness that does not shun olfactory phenomena” (155). The sequence of pleasant odours from the sequence in the penultimate line of “Correspondances” calls attention to the primacy of olfactory perception as the medium of the poem’s phantasmagoria. The appearance of olfactory sensations is an invitation to experience not just the scent of
those odors – many of which might not be often experienced by a city dweller – but to visualize them, to almost touch them through the cadences of Baudelaire’s verse. Perfume is meant to evoke an eroticism in the soul: the phantasm of a woman’s scent, like a flower, arouses the male gaze. Smell becomes a means of greater sight: the poem invites a synaesthetic mode of perception. Steve Odin calls attention to the line “Les parfums, les couleurs et les sons se répondent [the perfumes, sounds, and colours answer each to each]” as the key example of “the poetic technique of merging various senses through synaesthesia suggests the hidden correspondences and relations among all phenomena” (262). The call to the lost past is a phenomenological path, imagined in the mind of the poet figure, where nostalgia is the road map to something desired, something which the current world lacks, where the beautiful or the pungent odor is out of place, out of joint. The correspondence of scent and history becomes a powerful, serendipitous, figurative vehicle.

The image of the “forêt de symboles” also has the function of reconfiguring perception and assumptions about the relationship between the natural and the artificial. Beryl Schlossman writes that for “Benjamin and Baudelaire, correspondence has a privileged status in the figures of art and interpretation” (“Secret Architecture” 550). One is meant to read in the terms of different, yet related, phenomena in the work of art. Schlossman explains this poetics:

Correspondence operates within a poetics of “croisements” or chance encounters: perfumes, sounds and colors are taken up in a reflexive process of mixing, answering, and mirroring each other (or themselves). In the labyrinth of perception and experience, correspondence is a principle of an invisible constellation, a simultaneous gathering and distancing, a harvesting and disseminating. Benjamin’s understanding of Baudelaire
draws much of its light from these hidden places. Like the strands of sensual perception that are women into the fabric of the correspondances, the secret traces of experienced modernity are at the center of the Baudelairean-Benjaminian stage. (“Secret Architecture” 553)

“Correspondances” and its attendant aesthetic theory represent the cross-stitching in the work of fabric making. The elements of perception are combined into increasingly complex webs of relation. The lasting scent of a perfume from a passer-by is an essential experience in the crowd, even if that crowd is a forest rather than a busy Parisian street. The mixture is formative for one’s temperament, as it had been in the Aristotelian conception: the poetic subject is transported in the same way the scent of perfume, through the air, and for a moment, one believes one could fly into the sky, towards the stars, like Icarus had dreamed.

In the appreciation of the work of art, and in the construction of the modern work of art, one is meant to pull apart the strands of this allegorical fabric and recombine them. One is meant to perceive and participate in the process of allegorizing. One does not spectate and observe Parisian life; one must wade into the flesh, blood and mud of these streets, these gardens. Schlossman writes that “the passages and public gardens, at the Parisian borderlines of nature and artifice, the secret architecture of loss … [are] figured in the widows, the poets without their aureoles, the exiles, outlaws, and prostitutes, and many others” where “authentic experience shrinks to the mere registering of events as the shocks and trauma of city life” (“Secret Architecture” 557). The natural scenery of Baudelaire’s poetry, after all, is not really there: both because one has become an urban subject, trapped in the city, and also because “Nature” in Baudelaire’s poem is an artifice
of the poetry itself. Schlossman continues, taking on the artifice of “Nature” in
Baudelaire’s poem:

Nature in “Correspondances” is not natural; it is a temple, an architectonic evocation of cult. Its pillars are alive, and their live forms compose a forest of symbols. … Nature is given the capital letter of allegory, but its abstract and impersonal form hovers in the poem as a strange temple of living death. The forest does not provide an organic guarantee for the architecture of religion; the forest is already a figure that has renounced the natural qualities of forests. It is a forest of symbols. (“Secret Architecture” 557-558)

Schlossman’s reading throws the reader into the thickets of the forest of symbols, where this natural landscape is not meant to simulate nature, but in fact reveals the artifice in constructions of nature. The reader is surrounded by dead trees, the potpourri simulates an aroma the subject of Parisian life only knows third, fourth, fifth-hand. Jonathan Culler emphasizes the word symbol in the forest of symbols, arguing that forests are marked by all “prior poetic discourse” such that distinguish the physical actuality of a tree from the tree handed down from Dante is impossible (122). Baudelaire exposes the reader to a pre-Enlightenment “Nature” that a post-Enlightenment mind could never hope to square up.

Roberto Calasso in La Folie Baudelaire writes: “The ‘Nature’ that Baudelaire talks about in ‘Correspondances,’ the one woven from analogies like an immense spider web, is that sacred, secret nature whose presence most people never even notice” (18). This nature, after the Enlightenment, has become inaccessible, argues Calasso, making an example that Benjamin (and German Philosophy) are “still burdened by an Enlightenment inheritance that obliged him to see in sacred, secret nature – that of myth – only a Verblendungszusammenhang, a ‘context of delusion,’ as Adorno would have defined it” (18-19). The inability to understand nature in the pre-Enlightenment fashion can only be
expressed as a loss, and in the case of Baudelaire, as a form of spleen. “Baudelaire was the most archaic of the moderns” (Calasso 19). The idéal of “Nature” has trained the modern mind to align itself closer to spleen. Calasso writes about this exposure to natural beauty turns towards darkness and the abyss:

That there is no contradiction between Nature strewn with “forests of symbols” and Nature as man’s fundamentally tainted constitution – insofar as the latter is only one of the many parts of the former – emerged only with complete clarity … where Baudelaire hints how, in the animal kingdom, “baleful and loathsome beasts” could be none other than “the vitalization, the materialization, the blooming of man’s wicked thoughts” into material life. (19)

Humans invented monsters. The forest of symbols is part of what arms the human imagination to invent the she-wolf of Dante’s Commedia, the hounds of hell, dragons who dwell in caves. What does one do to escape the monstrosity of modern life, to flee the demons roaming the city? The poets write the monsters, so where do the poets run to escape them? Baudelaire’s poetry crafted a “Nature” that figures an artificial paradise brought on by synaesthetic perception of smell and sights. Monsters emerging from human thoughts in corporeal form represent absolute spleen’s greatest and most pervasive threat. In his “Tableaux parisiens,” Baudelaire would bring the monsters of modernity to life, as I discuss later in this chapter.

The figuration of nature and its relationship with perfume scent is notable in several poems from Les Fleurs du mal. A notable example – commented upon by Rachel Killick as her essay exploring the formal technique of Baudelaire’s sonnets – is the poem “Parfum exotique.” Killick argues that the connection “created of fragrance, warmth and richness is balanced … by the emergence of the vision of the ideal world” (29). Perfume
drives the reader to these visions of idealized “Nature.” Baudelaire’s first two stanzas from “Parfum exotique” provide another pristine example of perfume’s power to transport waking thoughts to the ideality of nature:

Quand, les deux yeux fermés, en un soir chaud d’automne,  
Je respire l’odeur de ton sein chaleureux,  
Je vois se dérouler des rivages heureux  
Qu’éblouissent les feux d’un soleil monotone;  

Une île paresseuse où la nature donne  
Des arbres singuliers et des fruits savoureux;  
Des hommes dont le corps est mince et vigoureux,  
Et des femmes dont l’œil par sa franchise étonne. (OC 1:25, l.1-8)65

Baudelaire’s poetic subjects, when they are transported into these paradisiacal landscapes, sometimes get to stay there for a little while. Baudelaire’s mode of allegory, as Richard Stamelman writes in an essay, is “unable to synthesize opposites – the way symbol, for example, its will to totality and fusion can – is compelled to present contraries in the full force of their dialectical reality” and moreover, “is always incomplete and imperfect, because it evokes some meaning, some image, some figure lying beyond the horizon of its signification, some ‘otherness’ that it can designate but not join” (“Shroud” 53-54). What Stamelman locates here, with a debt to de Man’s writing on allegory and symbol, is the grounding of Baudelaire’s fantastic imagery. Even across of series of poems, a beautiful, scent-induced reverie in Les Fleurs du mal crashes back into spleen: for every “Parfum exotique” one inevitably arrives at a “Charogne [Carrion]” with its “jambes en l’air, comme une femme lubrique, / Brûlante et suant les poisons”

65 When I lie with both eyes closed on a warm autumn evening, and breathe the fragrance of your sultry breast, I see a panorama of blissful shores a-dazzle with the sun’s monotonous blaze – / a languid island where Nature lavishes strange trees and luscious fruits, men who are lean and virile of body, and women’s eye of astounding candidness. (CV 93)
where “Le soleil rayonnait sur cette pourriture [with its legs in the air like a lewd woman’s, inflamed and oozing poisons … The sun was blazing down on that rotten meat]” (OC 1:31; CV 102) as the corresponding image to Baudelaire’s “Nature” (l.11). Throughout Les Fleurs du mal one encounters a series of inspired images – at times strikingly beautiful, at other times disgusting and horrific – under a common structure and diction. Nature and perfume are two images that in the greater scheme of Baudelaire’s poetics distinguish as much as they confuse. To look at “Parfum exotique,” against “Une Charogne,” allows the divided, assembled nature of the allegory to retain a form of separation between one image and another, as if, for example, the two different faces of the personification of “Nature.” But in other moments of Baudelaire’s poetry, the mode of allegory appears to turn upon itself, as if the two faces of “Nature” are two sides of the same coin. Idéal, in the end, is just the other side of spleen, looking at itself in the reflection of the mirror.

Baudelaire’s turn against the phantasms of idéal is perhaps best chronicled in the poems from “Tableaux parisiens,” whereas his ultimate sacrifice of the erotic side of his melancholy to the monsters of his spleen occurs in Le Spleen de Paris. As Nicole Simek summarizes, certain Baudelaire poems, taking as an example “Correspondances,” favour a presentation of idéal, whereas other ones, like “Harmonie du soir” can evoke “at once both le spleen and l’idéal, further nuancing this opposition and bringing into question both lyric poetry’s role in modernity in general and also Baudelaire’s own poetic project” (45). Images in one poem find themselves transfigured in other, such as the temple from “Correspondances” and its echo, the church from “Harmonie du soir” (Simek 47). In the
case of the two versions of “Le Crépuscule du soir” one may observe that the first poem mediates and evokes a more straightforward allegorical relationship between spleen and idéal, while the second trends into irony and absolute spleen. Corinne Bayle, who in her monograph Nocturne de l’âme moderne argues that Le Spleen de Paris “can be read as an assemblage of ekphraseis with manifold facets, which reveal the front and backsides of the décor of modernity” (90). Bayle also provides a definition through which one may attempt to mark the difference, to perceive the liminal passageways, between allegory and irony: “Allegory clings in the personification of feelings, abstracts objects that haunt one’s memory and are transfigured into visions, sometimes akin to hallucinations, right up until the grotesque” (102). In Baudelaire’s ironic, grotesque mode, instead of having “Nature” or another poetic object take on the likeness of people, people become objectified as if they were bestial. Irony is not the escape from allegory, but allegorical figures are transfigured in the ironic mode. In Le Spleen de Paris, as Bayle argues, allegory remains an important part of Baudelairean figuration; however, “if certain poems from Les Fleurs du mal were the location where [Baudelairean allegory] developed, Le Spleen de Paris destroys their majestic effect” (104-105). The grotesque figures from the prose poems, in rare moments, tease the preservation of ideality, only to intentionally, definitively betray it. The heroes of Le Spleen de Paris, like the heroes of Baudelaire’s time, and the Trauerspiel figures of the Baroque, die in the end. What also dies in Le Spleen de Paris is Baudelaire’s sense of the erotic, the precious voluptuousness that characterized his definition of melancholy and beauty from Fusées.
I **rony and the language of absolute spleen**

In the example I made of *melancolia heroica*, as part of the introduction and first chapter, melancholy is a marriage of the erotic and the heroic, the intellect and the lover’s embrace. In the dialectic – or in Baudelairean terms, the *correspondance* – of spleen and ideality, these two concepts form a seemingly harmonious balance, two partners in the “melancholy waltz.” Baudelaire’s poem “Harmonie du soir” represents this vertigo inducing dance, where the “melancholy waltz” of time passing, the oppressive weight of life slipping past, becomes an unbearable repetition:

Voici venir les temps où vibrant sur sa tige  
Chaque fleur s’évapore ainsi qu’un encensoir ;  
Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l’air du soir ;  
Valse mélancolique et langoureux vertige !

Chaque fleur s’évapore ainsi qu’un encensoir ;  
Le violon frémit comme un cœur qu’on afflige ;  
Valse mélancolique et langoureux vertige !  
Le ciel est triste et beau comme un grand reposoir.

Le violon frémit comme un cœur qu’on afflige,  
Un cœur tendre, qui hait le néant vaste et noir !  
Le ciel est triste et beau comme un grand reposoir ;  
Le soleil s’est noyé dans son sang qui se fige.

Un cœur tendre, qui hait le néant vaste et noir,  
Du passé lumineux recueille tout vestige !  
Le soleil s’est noyé dans son sang qui se fige ...  
Ton souvenir en moi luit comme un ostensoir! (OC 1:47)

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66 Now the day are coming when, throbbing on its stalk, each flower sheds its perfume like a censer; the sounds and perfumes spiral in the evening air, in a melancholy waltz, a slow sensual gyre. / Each flower sheds its perfume like a censer; the violin trembles like a wounded heart, in a melancholy waltz, a slow sensual gyre; the sky is sad and beautiful like a vast altar. / The violin trembles like a wounded heart, a tender heart that hates the huge black void; the sky is sad and beautiful like a vast altar; the sun has drowned in its congealing blood. / A tender heart that hates the huge black void is gathering to itself all traces of the luminous past; the sun has drowned in its congealing blood – and like a monstrance your memory shines in me. (CV 131)
Françoise Meltzer argues that “Harmonie du soir” enacts a “doubling of time” that creates the vertigo of the poem (204). The structure of the poem “is a pantoum, a Malay or Sumatran verse form, properly consisting of repeated lines with interlaced (abab) refrains, each appearing only twice…. The pantoum, moreover, is like an ‘exotic’ dance: two steps back, three forward” which, while it was perhaps most appropriate for satirical poems, has been bent from its more traditional form and repurposed by Baudelaire (229). The dance of the poem and its repetition help “to keep alive a memory that is always recognized as forever lost” (Meltzer 223). Bo Earle writes that Baudelaire’s poem thematizes “the experience of vertigo triggered by the infinite receding into the past” (1020). He adds that the “triumph of memorialization symbolized by the monstrance, together with the incantatory rhythm of the poem … all suggest that the poem is to be read as affirming the power of a certain kind of poetic experience to achieve what conscious memory alone cannot” (1020-1021). The “melancholy waltz” of the poem, writes Earle, “is a dance performed by the ‘sons’ and ‘parfums’ of ‘vibrating’ flowers that inter-mingle” and as a result “the poet is no longer a passive spectator of self-loss but an active participant … what the poet has transcended, finally, is the simply dichotomy of self-presence and self-absence, for he finds himself in the spiraling motion itself in which the one perpetually folds back upon the other” (1022). In other words, the incantation of the poem calls to memory – involuntarily, unconsciously – through its rhythm the experience of melancholy irony and melancholy time. It is the poem, not the doctor or later the psychoanalyst, that reveals the inner core of one’s melancholic experience, as one’s self-
annihilation folds into one’s surviving sense of self. Instead of fleeing the darkness, one wanders further into it.

Benjamin reads this sorrowful dialectic as allegorical, and diverges from previous interpreters who would disparage overt allegory and personification in Baudelaire’s work. My reading of this poetics, and the reading of many critics, is deeply indebted to Benjamin’s interpretation, and is in part also an internalization of de Man’s classic essay “The Rhetoric of Temporality,” especially its first section on allegory. But the highly influential “Allegory and Symbol” (the first half) is followed-up by the – perhaps less-often read – second-half, entitled “Irony.” This latter half takes up irony in the context of Baudelaire’s writing, notably from De l’essence du rire. That text, alongside de Man’s 1967 “Gauss Seminar” lecture manuscript on “Allegory and Irony in Baudelaire,” represent a substantive critique of Benjamin’s reading of Baudelairean allegory and an intrepid discovery of Baudelaire’s definition and practice of irony. Benjamin reads allegory as both surface and depth, where de Man offers – without necessarily fully engaging – a separation between the shallow and deep ends of the waters of allegory. De Man takes up Benjamin’s “cryptic” remarks on Baudelaire and allegory and states one needs to “distinguish between at least two aspects of Baudelaire’s poetry, both of which could be called allegorical” (“Gauss Seminar” 105). In essence, the workings of allegory are not structurally uniform across the breadth of Baudelaire’s writing. The allegory found in a poem such as “Correspondances” differs from the one developed in later works, such Le Spleen de Paris. One wonders – to echo Buci-Glucksmann’s insight – if
spleen represents the latest transfiguration of *idéal*, can spleen, too, undergo its own transfiguration, apart from *idéal*?

In *De l’essence du rire* Baudelaire distinguishes between two kinds of comedy, two variants to describe what one would find comedic or comical, namely “le comique significatif” and “le comique absolu.” Baudelaire comes to his terms after a digressive paragraph on the grotesque and its relationship to laughter, where he writes:

> Le comique est, au point de vue artistique, une imitation ; le grotesque, une création. Le comique est une imitation mêlée d’une certaine faculté créatrice, c’est-à-dire d’une idéalité artistique. Or, l’orgueil humain, qui prend toujours le dessus, et qui est la cause naturelle du rire dans le cas du comique, devient aussi cause naturelle du rire dans le cas du grotesque, qui est une création mêlée d’une certaine faculté imitatrice d’éléments préexistants dans la nature. Je veux dire que dans ce cas-là le rire est l’expression de l’idée de supériorité, non plus de l’homme sur l’homme, mais de l’homme sur la nature. … [Le] rire causé par le grotesque a en soi quelque chose de profond, d’axiomatique et de primitif qui se rapproche beaucoup plus de la vie innocente et de la joie absolue que le rire causé par le comique de mœurs. (*OC* 2:535)\(^{67}\)

While the terms of contrast, “significatif” and “absolu,” only appear later, the distinction between the types of “comique” is already contained in the first sentence. The distinction is one of imitation and creation, where the grotesque is the liminal boundary between one and the other. Once one crosses into the grotesque, one is performing a creative art, as opposed to an imitative art, the radically and uncannily new instead of the recognizable and familiar. In the subsequent sentences, Baudelaire crosses to and from this threshold

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\(^{67}\) Comedy, from an artistic point of view, is an imitation; the grotesque, a creation. Comedy is an imitation mixed with a particular creative faculty, that is to say, of an artistic ideality. What’s more, human vanity, which always takes precedence in the end, and which is the natural cause of comedic laughter, also becomes the natural cause of laughter in the case of the grotesque, which is a creation mixed with an imitational faculty of pre-existing elements within nature. I mean to say that in this case laughter is the expression of the idea of superiority, not just of man over man, but of man over nature. Laughter caused by the grotesque has in itself something profound, axiomatic and primitive that is much more proximate to an innocent and absolutely joyful life than laughter provoked by the comedy of daily life.
between what is grotesque and what is not, while remaining in the broader boundaries of his definition of comedy. Laughter, Baudelaire contends, is a combination of egotism and a feeling of superiority, not only about other people, but over nature itself. The depths of laughter plunge into something ancient and ancestral. Laughter at the grotesque, something one would think ought not provoke laughter at all, certainly amongst polite company, recalls lost memories beyond the world of lived experience. It is unsettling, hard to forget, and haunts the mind.

Arne Kjell Haugen argues that laughter at the grotesque for Baudelaire is “an anti-social force” (16). This laughter draws one away from the conventions of social interaction. The ironic extreme of grotesque laughter is alienating, dehumanizing. Baudelaire at this juncture arrives at his articulated distinction of the two types of comedy:

J’appellerai désormais le grotesque comique absolu, comme antithèse au comique ordinaire, que j’appellerai comique significatif. Le comique significatif est un langage plus clair, plus facile à comprendre pour le vulgaire, et surtout plus facile à analyser, son élément étant visiblement double : l’art et l’idée morale; mais le comique absolu, se rapprochant beaucoup plus de la nature, se présente sous une espèce une, et qui veut être saisie par intuition. Il n’y a qu’une vérification du grotesque, c’est le rire, et le rire subit…. (OC 2:535-536)

The sudden explosion of laughter is the mark of the grotesque. It is a laughter not from the analysis of a turn of phrase, but something provoked by the immediate absurdity of a comedic image. De Man argues that “comique absolu” is a synonym of Baudelairean

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68 I will henceforth call the grotesque “absolute comedy” as the antithesis of ordinary comedy, which I name significant comedy. Significant comedy is articulated in a clearer language, is easier to understand in vulgar terms, it is altogether much simpler to analyse, for its element is visibly double: art and morality; however, absolute comedy, being much closer to nature, presents itself in a unified aspect and can only be seized through intuitively. That exists only one verification of the grotesque, it is through sudden, uncontrolled laughter…. 
“irony” – for de Man, he marks Baudelaire’s emphasis on dédoublement as the core of irony (“Rhetoric of Temporality” 212). In the above section of the passage from De l’essence du rire, one can remark the essential difference between the two types of comedy. The “comique significatif” is a relationship between two subjects one can observe, whereas the “comique absolu” has assimilated, or even annihilated, this intersubjectivity: it has rendered it invisible. The two dancers can no longer be distinguished one from the other, or perhaps the one has consumed the other, leaving nothing but a blackened stain of ashes. The alienation, the depth of absolute comedy approaches the overwhelming qualities of not only the sublime, but also the terrible, the monstrous.

J. A. Hiddleston, in his monograph Baudelaire and the Art of Memory, argues that Baudelaire’s “originality in this remarkable theory [of comedy and laughter] was to put the comic in the laughter instead of the object of laughter, since one laughs at someone not just out of superiority, but also in a sense out identification, the convulsions indicating that the laughter is as threatened as the object” (110). In the analysis of Peirrot in the sixth section of De l’essence du rire, Baudelaire presents, says Hiddleston, “the highest expression of the grotesque,” which for the former “is eminently a mute art that is compromised to the extent that it is involved with words, since laughter depends on an explosion within the instant…. Analysis is hostile to the comic” (123). The complex navigations of allegory, when they are transfigured in ironic terms, find themselves ruthlessly condensed to the point of senselessness. One begins to understand just how deep the two modes of Baudelairean writing, that of allegory and irony, can go. De Man suggests, and one discovers in carefully reading Baudelaire’s latter work, that
Baudelaire’s allegorical mode has turned towards the ironic. This is the result of a process of a double visibility suffering a transfiguration into an interiorized, invisible dédoublement. Commenting on Baudelaire’s essay, de Man writes:

Irony becomes the structural principle by means of which his work develops. It does so in a very specific and concrete way, by the fact that many of Baudelaire’s poems are later, ironic versions of poems that had originally been stated in a nonironic, or only potentially ironic totality. Several later poems are interpretations of earlier versions of the same poems, interpretations that bring out an ironic potential that was always there but had been hidden from the reader’s and perhaps even the author’s consciousness. (“Gauss Seminar” 112)

Over the course of Baudelaire’s writing one can observe a gradual transfiguration from allegory to irony. De Man argues that the early positivity of “Correspondances” undergoes a “demythification” in the poem “Obsession,” whose example is intended to demonstrate the victory of an ironic spleen over an allegorical idéal (“Gauss Seminar” 113-114). The opening quatrain rails against the forest of symbols in a matter opposite to how “Correspondances” had praised them: “Grands bois, vous m’effrayez comme des cathédrales; / Vous hurlez comme l’orgue; et dans nos cœurs maudits, / Chambres d’éternel deuil où vibrent de vieux râles, / Répondent les échos de vos De profundis” [Vast woods, you terrify me like cathedrals. You roar like an organ, and in our condemned hearts – those chambers of eternal mourning in which death-rattles vibrate from gone times – the echoes of your De profundis reverberate responses.] (OC 1:75, l.1-4; CV 180). The echo of the temple from “Correspondances” as the dark cathedral from the later poem transfigures the wistfulness of the first poem into a brooding, foreboding anxiety.

The emphasis on repetition, on a dialectical relationship between an early text and its reprisal later on, is a crucial aesthetic and poetic tactic for Baudelaire. One can see this
most explicitly in *Le Spleen de Paris*, as de Man suggests, but it also begins to occur as early as the second edition of *Les Fleurs du mal*. Just as “Correspondances” demanded the reader to relearn how to read, this ironic turn in Baudelaire is a dramatic transformation of some of his earlier poetic assumptions. It is as if an early Baudelaire, charting the transfiguration from *idéal* to spleen, believed he discovered the ultimate iteration of spleen, only to realize – later in life – there was *much* further yet to go. One is expected to follow in these epiphanies, and discover where they may lead. Within Baudelaire’s writing on laughter, one finds the liminality between a poetics of difference and absolutes. In other words, one can interpret one species of artistic creation that signifies according to the difference between two clarify *different* phenomena: this and that, black and white, you and me, him and her. The other species forces the reader or the audience to distinguish between phenomena that, in both their surface and depth, appear exactly the same. In his interpretations of Baudelaire’s writing on comedy, de Man points to a critical distinction between two modes of writing. In his allegorical mode, which is of the most interest to Benjamin, Baudelaire distinguishes spleen and *idéal*; in the ironic mode, he does not. It is in the ironic mode that Baudelaire’s absolute spleen is manifest. The return to certain *Les Fleurs du mal* poems in *Le spleen de Paris* is the performance of this revelation about the transfiguration “Nature” and related phenomena.

What are the effects of Baudelaire’s adoption of an “original” and “personal” ironic mode when compared of his earlier, more conventional form of allegorizing? Debarati Sanyal locates, in a tension between *surnaturalisme et ironie* (*OC* 1:658), a crux of Baudelaire’s “literary practice that may help us unravel the relationship” the major
components of Baudelaire’s writing (56). This tension, in Sanyal’s precise and perceptive analysis, marks the main difference between Baudelaire’s dominant modes of writing:

Baudelaire’s *surnaturalisme* celebrates the artist’s consciousness as the origin and end of the creative process, an idealizing force that evacuates the world of its materiality, refiguring it through the metaphoric orchestration of *correspondances*. As such, *surnaturalisme* appears to harmoniously cohabit with *ironie*, understood here in its romantic sense as creativity’s conquest of reality. Yet, as “L’Héautontimorouménos” suggests, there is an inevitable tension between the will to creative transcendence and the inscription of critical reflection in the artistic work. Critical reflection mutates into a *vorace ironie* that gnaws into the illusion of imagination’s sovereignty over its material conditions. Irony as parabasis, as the inscription of the process through which the poetic vision is constructed, unveils the gap between ideal and actuality. It keeps the poetic subjectivity in a constant oscillation or “double postulation” between *spleen et idéal*. (56-57)

Baudelaire becomes increasingly taken by a splenetic melancholia unmediated by ideality, where the figures of his earlier writing, which were meant to help the transfiguration of spleen in the context of *idéal*, find themselves in this process. In his analysis from “Rhetoric of Temporality” – in which absolute comedy and irony are synonymous – de Man suggests that Baudelairean irony “is unrelieved *vertige*, dizziness to the point of madness” (215). Moreover, “absolute irony is a consciousness of madness, itself the end of all consciousness; it is a consciousness of a non-consciousness, a reflection on madness from the inside of madness itself. But this reflection is made possible only by the double structure of ironic language: the ironist invents a form of himself that is ‘mad’ but that does not know its own madness; he then proceeds to reflect on his madness thus objectified” (“Rhetoric of Temporality” 216). In this way, argues de Man, the figures of ironic language can survive their extreme “self-alienation” and redeem their madness *through* language (“Rhetoric of Temporality” 216). However, for de Man, this process of
disrupting or alleviating the madness of self-alienation cannot betray the ironic mode in which this madness originated: this would represent an “immediate degradation” into *comique significatif*. The logic of *correspondance*, which is decidedly *intersubjective*, in the case of ironic language or figuration cannot involve two distinct subjects or objects one can see. When Baudelaire’s writing shifts into a sustained ironic mode – as opposed to a passing phrase or figuration – the hermeneutics appropriate to his allegory shift dramatically. The essential factor of this ironic difference is temporality, as de Man argues: “Irony divides the flow of temporal experience into a past that is pure mystification and a future that remains harassed forever by a relapse into the inauthentic” (“Rhetoric of Temporality” 222). Allegory and irony retain a relationship – in a manner similar to the relationship between spleen and *idéal* – through “their common discovery of a truly temporal predicament” (“Rhetoric of Temporality” 222).

**Between two spleens at twilight: the two “Crépuscule du soir” poems**

Can one be aroused – sexually, intellectually or otherwise – by the grotesque, by the monstrous? If so, what is the cost? This problematic is what drives my comparative reading of the two versions of “Le Crépuscule du soir” from *Les Fleurs du mal* and *Le Spleen de Paris*. They represent an interstice between two states of natural, cyclical time: the evening twilight at the edge of the ending day and the beginning of nighttime. The paratextual arrangement of “Le Crépuscule du soir” in “Tableaux parisiens” is of major importance, argues Ross Chambers in his essay “Trois paysages urbains.” Chambers contends that the poem is intentionally placed in a central position in the sequence,
representing the setting sun and the beginning of a nocturnal cycle, such that as the poems move one to the next, one may mark an emulation of the time of day from the poems themselves (372-373). Moreover, as Chambers suggests, the poems of “Tableaux parisiens” are “liminal poems by definition” (374). Chambers, in his analysis of the twilight poems, remarks:

What is readable from the very first verse of [Le Crépuscule du soir] … [is] an act that establishes the evening as referent and announcement by the anticipation of the soul as the recipient of a speech act where “je” is not present as the implicit subject. For what existence can one attribute to an entity whose only manifestation is … a problematic space, somewhere between the world that one talks about and the vital centre, the ‘foyer’ to which one addresses oneself? (385).

The poem does not hint at a light to come after the darkness fails: the twilight is the light of Paris. Even “Le Crépuscule du matin” ends in darkness, the dawn’s light never quite reaching the text, with the lines “Et le sombre Paris, en se frottant les yeux / Empoignait ses outils, vieillard laboureux [and gloomy Paris, rubbing his eyes, laid hold of his tools, an old man doomed to toil]” (OC 1:104, l.26-27; CV 235). The connecting tissue between the two versions of “Le Crépuscule du soir” is highlighted by Benjamin in a note from Das Passagenwerk: he quotes a letter Baudelaire sent to Fernand Desnoyers, where the former explains that “the two ‘Crépuscules [du soir, du matin]’ poems” are reveries of forests, memories of Catholic ritual and a music that resembles the lamentations of humankind (Arcades 445 [M15a,1]). These reveries, while they occur in the mind of the poet, take the poet’s astral body away into distant, ancient landscapes.

“Tableaux parisiens” represents a crucial realization of what Baudelaire’s city had become, how Baudelaire had learned to hate his city, having recognized its monstrosity.
Charles Mauron suggests that in this sequence of poems “romantic desire has practically disappeared” from Baudelaire’s poetry and is replaced by “images of degeneration” and “the desires for wealth and glory are represented by entreaties” (111). The death of eroticism is represented as a progressive decline, an accumulation of symptoms that slowly brings down a disease’s host. There are other features in the poem that diverge from earlier poems, such as Baudelaire’s “je” that used to regularly stand in for an individual person, poet or subject. In “Tableaux parisiens” the voice of the “je” is much more frequently the voice of Paris itself, personified. By the late 1850s, Baudelaire realized it was his city whose spleen he truly needed to study and contemplate, where the speaker in his poetry became a foil for the spleen of Paris itself. And what, for Baudelaire, did the body and soul of Paris look like? What does Baudelaire represent in the world of his texts? Richard Burton provides this answer:

In one way or another, then, the world of ‘Les Limbes’ and kindred texts is an endlessly self-repeating world in which nothing is truly alive or truly dead, wholly asleep or completely awake, a world of phantoms and corpses unable fully to die and of foetal forms like the inchoate artworks … struggling to be born, a no-man’s-land suspended between past and future, between life and death: in short, the twilight world of the dying months of the doomed Republic. (608)

The twilight in the city, as Benjamin points out, is not noticed in a natural way: the stars are absent, the rhythms of nature go on, cut-off and unchecked. “Tableaux parisiens” represents a moment, in between spleen’s departure from idéal and the apotheosis of absolute spleen, where Baudelaire must overcome the deep-rooted sentimentalities that allow his ego to identify with a return to nature, Romanticism and Revolution.
Paris Spleen, literally Paris’ spleen, is the key to this gate, to shattering Baudelaire’s ego-ideal, to unshackling the mind-forged manacles that tie his poetics to an irremediable ideality of and from the past. It is not a question as to whether Paris can or should be saved, but a question of ironically capturing the aura of the city as it crumbles, an aura that only the poet can see, and that the poem seeks to preserve. As Cecilia Enjuto-Rangel argues:

Baudelaire’s “Crépuscule du soir” and “Crépuscule du matin” portray a modern city that devours itself, an overbearing modernity entangled in an endless process of destruction and reconstruction. And in the twilight zone of this modern city, the emphasis is not so much on its reconstruction endeavors as on its dark corners and its desolate, shadowy modern subjects… (153-154)

In the absolute spleen that produces Le Spleen de Paris, Baudelaire finds in absolute negativity the redemption of modernity’s phenomenality, that modernity does not need to be filled with a nostalgia for an irredeemable past. Baudelaire’s skill at personification is applied to his city, with great effect, giving it life, or rather, some kind of un-death. The ecstasy of the narrator from Le Spleen de Paris is the manifestation of a twilight madness, which comes with the knowledge his madness pales to that of the modern world. The absolute spleen of Baudelaire’s later writing leaves no alternative other than the full embrace of twilight, in all of its artificial glory. It is a communion with the aura of a silent, mournful nature at the periphery of the big city, whose laments echo the chants of hell. In the permanent purgatory of human existence, only the madman still knows the old songs of hell, sung by Miltonic, Satanic angels.

Turning to a reading of the two versions of “Le Crépuscule du soir,” I quote the two poems in their entirety, alternating between sections of each, taking breaks for
commentary. The main points of analysis are the points and counterpoints of spleen in the poems. How are the figures in each poem constructed? What is the tone of the language? What is the perspective and worldview built by the texts? Parallel reading opens onto intriguing characteristics of spleen’s evolution in Baudelaire’s writing. The poems begin:

Voici le soir charmant, ami du criminel;
Il vient comme un complice, à pas de loup ; le ciel
Se ferme lentement comme une grande alcôve,
Et l’homme impatien se change en bête fauve. (OC 1:94)

Le jour tombe. Un grand apaisement se fait dans les pauvres esprits fatigués du labeur de la journée ; et leurs pensées prennent maintenant les couleurs tendres et indécises du crépuscule. / Cependant du haut de la montagne arrive à mon balcon, à travers les nues transparentes du soir, un grand hurlement, composé d’une foule de cris discordants, que l’espace transforme en une lugubre harmonie, comme celle de la marée qui monte ou d’une tempête qui s’éveille. (OC 1:331)

The two “Le Crépuscule du soir” poems open at twilight, but express this temporality differently: in the first, the tone of the language is pleasant and playful, whereas with the prose poem it is languid, flat and factual. In the first poem, Baudelaire incorporates fantastic elements, including the transformation of a werewolf. The language is shocking and stark, and yet the depiction of the sky retains a certain beauty. In the second poem, before things have earnestly gotten started, the narrator and the residents of the city are exhausted from doing nothing, with their thoughts having taken a taint of the twilight sky. The chanting from outside the city, in the mountains, is a low hum that offers the poem’s

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69 Here is the delightful evening, the criminal’s friend. It comes like an accomplice, with slinking wolf-like strides. The sky is slowly closing like an immense alcove, and restless man turn into a wild beast. (CV 216)

70 Nightfall. A great sense of peace steals into those poor minds exhausted by a day of toil, and now their thoughts are tinged with the blurred, tender hues of twilight. / And yet, from the mountain top, through the transparent evening mists, a loud uproar reaches my balcony, made of a host of discordant cries, transformed by the distance into a baleful harmony like a rising tide’s or an awakening storm’s. (PB 121)
atmosphere at least some energy. In the first poem, twilight is the signal for the evening’s activity to commence in earnest, whereas in the second, all energy seems about to evaporate. In the verse poem, one sees throughout the text a fairly complete cover of darkness. In invoking the werewolf, one would struggle to imagine a Paris that is overly illuminated. In the case of the prose poem, the descriptions have more of a feel of uniformity, grayness, a lack of striking colour. The twilight is “blurred” and “tender”: this does not betray a hint of colour. Phantasms of the one poem do not obtain in the other.

The poems continue:

Ô soir, aimable soir, désiré par celui
Dont les bras, sans mentir, peuvent dire : Aujourd’hui
Nous avons travaillé ! – C’est le soir qui soulage
Les esprits que dévore une douleur sauvage,
Le savant obstiné dont le front s’alourdit,
Et l’ouvrier courbé qui regagne son lit.
Cependant des démons malsains dans l’atmosphère
S’éveillent lourdement, comme des gens d’affaire,
Et cognent en volant les volets et l’auvent. (OC, 1:94)

Quels sont les infortunés que le soir ne calme pas, et qui prennent, comme les hiboux, la venue de la nuit pour un signal de sabbat ? Cette sinistre ululation nous arrive du noir hospice perché sur la montagne ; et, le soir, en fumant et en contemplant le repos de l’immense vallée, hérissée de maisons dont chaque fenêtre dit : “C’est ici la paix maintenant; c’est ici la joie de la famille!” je puis, quand le vent souffle de là-haut, bercer ma pensée étonnée à cette imitation des harmonies de l’enfer. (OC 1:311)

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71 O evening, pleasant evening, desired by those whose arms can say without lying, “We have worked today!” It is evening that refreshes minds devoured by savage grief, or the poring scholar whose head begins to nod, or the back-bent workman returning home to bed. But now mischievous demons rouse lumpishly in the air like businessmen, and flounder in their flight against shutters and sheds. (CV 216)

72 Who are the unfortunate souls whom evening fails to calm, and who, like owls, regard the oncoming night as a signal for pandemonium? The sinister howling reaches us from the dismal asylum perched on the top of the hill, and at sundown, while I smoke and contemplate the vast vale in its repose, bristling with houses whose every window say “Peace is here now, family happiness is in here,” as the wind blows down I am able to soothe my thoughts, astounded as they are by that replica of the harmonies of hell. (PB 121)
In the second section of the verse version of “Crépuscule du soir” there is a contrast between the fatigued worker and the demons roaming the streets. There is a clear separation of inside and outside, the human world and the demon world. Except for one exceptional image: the demonic businessmen. In this simile, the demonic world meets the world of capitalist commerce: one can imagine a grotesque were-beast dressed in a business person’s attire. Whereas the verse poem sets its scene in the middle of the city, the prose poem follows the perspective of a narrator who appears to be on a balcony, or from some vantage point over the city. The description of the city is sparse, the focus is much more upon the actions and conditions of the people. The voice of the narrator is everywhere, yet nowhere in particular, beyond the perspective of being above everything. The wind continues to the carry the chanting from hell. As the poems progress, one begins to explore the city streets, while the other starts honing in upon an interiority of a mind on the edge of madness.

The texts continue:

À travers les lueurs que tourmente le vent  
La Prostitution s’allume dans les rues ;  
Comme une fourmilière elle ouvre ses issues ;  
Partout elle se fraye un occulte chemin,  
Ainsi que l’ennemi qui tente un coup de main ;  
Elle remue au sein de la cité de fange  
Comme un ver qui dérobe à l’Homme ce qu’il mange. (OC 1:94-95)

Le crépuscule excite les fous. – Je me souviens que j’ai eu deux amis que le crépuscule rendait tout malades. L’un méconnaissait alors tous les rapports d’amitié et de politesse, et maltraitait, comme un sauvage, le premier venu. Je l’ai vu jeter à la tête d’un maître d’hôtel un excellent

73 Through glimmering gas-jets wincing in the wind, Prostitution lights up in the streets, like an ant-heap opening all its entrances and exits; it weaves its furtive passage everywhere, like an enemy planning a surprise attack; it burrows through the city’s filth like a worm filching away men’s food. (CV, 216-217)
In the verse poem, the city explodes to life. The day workers have gone to rest, and now the night workers – prostitutes, alongside the businessmen-demons and werewolves – begin their shifts. For Benjamin, it is the mass of the city that opens up the night industries: “Only the mass of inhabitants permits prostitution to spread over large parts of the city. And only the mass enables the sexual object to become intoxicated with the hundred stimuli which that object produces” (SW 4:33). The burrowing action of the seedy prostitutes, ant-workers personified, lays networks against the urban landscape. Inevitably, the nighttime life of the streets finds itself entering the interior sanctum of the hearth. The promise of sexual promiscuity and monstrous transformation is the threat of the verse poem, whereas the prose poem threatens the sanctity of domesticity itself (which is the refuge from the monsters). In the fourth paragraph of the prose poem, mania breaks out. The narrator – who has a most curious direct, omniscient access into the private lives of the city folk – breaks into a story of two of his friends, as madness grips them in the evening. Their normal dispositions slip into opposite mental illnesses: the

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74 Twilight excites the insane. I remember two friends who began to feel ill at dusk. The first used to forget all the formalities of friendship and politeness, and like a savage ill-treated all those he came across. I once saw him throw a perfectly good chicken at a head-waiter, as he thought he saw some insulting symbol in it. The nightfall, which is the herald of profound delights, could ruin him the most succulent of dishes. / The other, a man of thwarted ambitions, grew more bitter and depressed and sharp-tongued as day dimmed. Completely understanding and sociable as long as the daylight lasted, he became pitiless in the evening, and it was not only against others, but against himself, that his twilight anger vented its rage. (PB 121)
first man becomes an inconsiderate and unbearable hot-head, incapable of the most basic social graces; whereas the second man loses his normal sociability and withdraws into himself, becoming a pitiful wretch. Both men threaten violence, either against themselves or others, and yet they read on the page as a pair of lovable, misguided buffoons, more pathetic than sympathetic. The threat of monstrosity in the verse poem lacks a certain bite, because the poem reads like a reverie appropriate to the fantastic – the poem poses no actual threat. Contrary to this, the two men from the prose poem, while ridiculous in their manners, are painted with a realistic, morose brush. The mental illness of the two friends, which is spiraling the two into misery and despair, is a haunting vision of the twilight madness infecting the totality of the poem.

At this juncture, the differences between the two poems begin to appear in clearer relief. The first “Le Crépuscule du soir” is a phantasmagoria of Parisian nightlife, dark and beautiful. The figures in the poem are threatening and monstrous, but lack any definition in reality – with the notable exception of a couple images, namely of the businessmen-demons and the anthill prostitutes. In those two images, the otherwise balanced and fantastical poem unveils its true terrors: the evil of a real Parisian society infects the dark fantasy of Baudelaire’s “Tableaux parisiens.” In the case of the prose poem, the language is far less ornamented, the perspective of the narrator – the personal “je” of the poem – while it is grounded in the figures described, lacks a corporeal presence. The narrator of the verse poem reads like a more traditional omniscient narrator. The one in the prose poem penetrates the minds of his subject in a manner far more invasive than the narrator of the verse poem. The verse poem is solemn, serious and
loaded with personifications; the prose poem is terse, factual and sparse with its metaphors. The first poem is almost a tribute to the working and bourgeois classes and uses a poetic diction appropriate for the aristocracy; the second poem is in fact a much closer examination of normal people, and takes the perspective of an aristocrat looking down from a château, but all of the participants in the poem are dehumanized buffoons, turned into personified tropes of madness, lacking the fulsome dimensions of a human mind. The first friend reads like a choleric type, while the second is playing a phlegmatic type. While the first poem contains explicit elements of a horror story, it vibrates with an unusual energy, almost optimism. The second poem, defeated before it even gets going, is a kind of croisement of satire and a crushing study of insanity. The second poem is a comedy that is far more terrifying to read than the first, horror-inspired poem, which an outstanding aesthetic accomplishment in its own right. Its consciousness is penetrating, uncanny and deeply disconcerting.

In each poem, to this point, the evening transition is a key moment from one mode of life switching into another. Read on, as one poem breaks out into a symphony, while the twilight ululation of the other text crushes the two friends, and sends the narrator into a frenzy:

On entend ça et là les cuisines siffler,
Les théâtres glapir, les orchestres ronfler ;
Les tables d’hôte, dont le jeu fait les délices,
S’emplissent de catins et d’escrocs, leurs complices,
Et les voleurs, qui n’ont ni trêve ni merci,
Vont bientôt commencer leur travail, eux aussi,
Et forcer doucement les portes et les caisses
Pour vivre quelques jours et vêtir leurs maîtresses. *(OC, 1:95)*

Le premier est mort fou, incapable de reconnaître sa femme et son enfant ; le second porte en lui l’inquiétude d’un malaise perpétuel, et fût-il gratifié de tous les honneurs que peuvent conférer les républiques et les princes, je crois que le crépuscule allumerait encore en lui la brûlante envie de distinctions imaginaires. La nuit, qui mettait ses ténèbres dans leur esprit, fait la lumière dans le mien ; et, bien qu’il ne soit pas rare de voir la même cause engendrer deux effets contraires, j’en suis toujours comme intrigué et alarmé. / Ô nuit ! ô rafraîchissantes ténèbres ! vous êtes pour moi le signal d’une fête intérieure, vous êtes la délivrance d’une angoisse! Dans la solitude des plaines, dans les labyrinthes pierreux d’une capitale, scintillement des étoiles, explosion des lanternes, vous êtes le feu d’artifice de la déesse Liberté! *(OC, 1:312)*

The prose poem kills off the first friend, lost to a choleric rage. The second man has a more complex fate. In the evening he is gripped by such anxiety that *even if*, as the poem says, he was given every distinction by several ruling monarchs, his phlegmatic anxiety would continue to consume him. Then the narrator finally turns to himself: revealing an internal life that had hitherto been absent, he celebrates the evening as an illumination, a celebration. Twilight, for the narrator, brings on a different kind of mania. One is given access to the narrator’s interiority, to the landscape of this mental life and shifts the scene between stony labyrinths of Paris and the solitude of the rural plains: in both places the narrator finds his freedom under the starry night sky. One sees, in the narrator’s case, a fulsome embrace of the twilight’s abyss, neither light nor dark; one sees the face of *Paris*

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*55 Here and there you can hear the whistling from kitchens, the yapping of theatres, the droning of orchestras: the cheap joints whose main attraction is gambling are filling with whores and their crony crooks, and the burglars, who have neither rest nor mercy, will soon be setting to work, tenderly cracking doors and safes, so as to keep themselves for a few days and buy togs for their molls. *(CV, 217)*

*56 The first of them died insane, unable to recognize his own wife and child. The second suffers from a permanent state of unease and anxiety, and even if he were to enjoy every honour that republics or princes can confer, I do believe that twilight would still inflame his mind with a greed for purely imaginary distinctions. Night, which darkened their minds, bring nothing but light into my own; but although it is not unusual to see the same cause result in contrary effects, it never ceases to intrigue and alarm me. *(PB, 123)*
Spleen itself. Meanwhile, as the scene in the verse poem shifts into the night, there’s a paradox outlined in the latter half of the poem’s second stanza. The thieves and creatures of the night emerge, and while these figures mercifully victimize the residents of a slumbering Paris, they too are only trying to ensure the basics of their survival. It is difficult to determine, but the speaker seems to both despise and pity the burglars. The speaker’s ambivalence is able to prevent a moralistic judgment of the night dwellers. They are all victims of the Second Empire’s failure, and they sin only because they must in order to survive. In this way, the poem balances the day workers and the night dwellers, an equilibrium of monstrosity and a certain sympathy. The second poem’s blank prose strives to inspire no such feelings of sympathy. The speaker is exultant for the embrace of the depths and the night itself, as opposed to the embrace of a prostitute or beloved family member.

The poems conclude:

Recueille-toi, mon âme, en ce grave moment,
Et ferme ton oreille à ce rugissement.
C’est l’heure où les douleurs des malades s’aigrissent !
La sombre Nuit les prend à la gorge ; ils finissent
Leur destinée et vont vers le gouffre commun ;
L’hôpital se remplit de leurs soupirs. – Plus d’un
Ne viendra plus chercher la soupe parfumée,
Au coin du feu, le soir, auprès d’une âme aimée.

Encore la plupart n’ont-ils jamais connu
La douceur du foyer et n’ont jamais vécu ! (OC, 1:95)77

77 O my soul, withdraw into yourself at this grave hour, and stop your ear against this roaring din. It is the hour when the pangs of the sick increase in pain. Cheerless Night grips them by the throat, they are reaching their destiny’s end and approach the universal common grave, the hospitals are overflowing with their sighs. More than one will never again return to sup the fragrant soup by the fireside, of an evening,
Crépuscule, comme vous êtes doux et tendre ! Les lueurs roses qui traînent encore à l’horizon comme l’agonie du jour sous l’oppression victorieuse de sa nuit, les feux des candélabres qui font des taches d’un rouge opaque sur les dernières gloires du couchant, les lourdes draperies qu’une main invisible attire des profondeurs de l’Orient, imitent tous les sentiments compliqués qui luttent dans le cœur de l’homme aux heures solennelles de la vie. / On dirait encore une de ces robes étranges de danseuses, où une gaze transparente et sombre laisse entrevoir les splendeurs amorties d’une jupe éclatante, comme sous le noir présent transperce le délicieux passé ; et les étoiles vacillantes d’or et d’argent, dont elle est semée, représentent ces feux de la fantaisie qui ne s’allument bien que sous le deuil profond de la Nuit. (OC, 1:312)

The sick ones are sucked into a common fate, thrown into a pit as the evening turns to night. The first “Crépuscule” poem’s final couplet ends with the melancholy thought that few in Paris are privileged enough to enjoy the warmth of an evening at home, after a long day’s work. The veritably long day is in fact the long night of the sick, criminals, prostitutes and the poor. Victor Brombert says that “Baudelaire is literally haunted by the image of the hospital … [his] particular mythology of love was unquestionably colored by the disease which was slowly eroding his physical and mental health” (102). The small comfort of a familiar soup’s aroma will be lost on a number of unfortunate souls with every passing night, as Night roams and strangles to death the ailing and the sick. In the second twilight poem, under a canopy of stars, the conclusion extends the orientalist image from the preceding paragraph: the dancing dress that lights up the night (which

78 O dusk, how gentle and tender you are. The roseate gleams which linger still on the horizon, like the day’s agony beneath the triumphant onslaught of advancing dark, the candelabra flames which smear their opaque red on the final glories of the western sky, the heavy draperies drawn by an invisible hand from the depths of the East, correspond to all those complex feelings which battle in men’s hearts in the solemn moments of existence. / Or it suggests one of those ballerina’s exotic costumes, whose dim transparent gauze hints at the splendours of a brightly coloured shirt, just as the delicious past shows through the darkness of the present; and the shimmering gold and silver stars which spangle it are the will-o’-the-wisps of Fancy, which only start to shine in the deep mourning of the night. (PB, 123)
Saturnine Constellations

may be the stars the narrator is seeing). Seduced by the night, the narrator ends his rumination with the thought that only in the depth of the black sun can the light of fire be found. The prose poem narrator folds into the true darkness of night.

In reading these two poems, side-by-side, one finds the characteristic of the two spleens I have attempted to establish up to this point. The verse poem, while it threatens the absolute consumption of Paris by its own spleen, has an optimistic conclusion. Paris has changed, to borrow the phrase from “Le Cygne,” but this change is not entirely irredeemable, though it is irreversible. In the monstrosity of modern Paris, the residents – even the social vermin – have a measure of grace, co-existing in a strange, unnatural harmony, complete with an orchestral score. The theme music for the prose poem, by contrast, is a dissonant background chant from the pits of hell. The three figures of the poem, the narrator and his two “friends” are each gripped in a mania that causes them to be less than fully human. The splenetic elements of the first poem have a visible counterpart in the hope of a lingering, through faint, idéal. The spleen is made significant by virtue of stark contrasts and difference. The second poem is monotone and monochrome. The only figure to survive the mania of twilight’s approach is the one who was thrown willingly into the abyss of pure night. The absolute spleen of the poem, its grotesque depiction of madness, pulls consciousness into a spleen which only finds definition through comparisons to other forms of itself: madness defined by other forms of madness. The heroism of the first poem, its sympathetic figures, are nearly completely absent from the second poem. The latter poem, in fact, appears to have staged the death of melencolia heroica itself, losing both the acuity of the intellect and the energy of Eros.
The redemption of the Saturnine through the heroism of death

With *Le Spleen de Paris* the erotic dimension of *Les Fleurs du mal* shows its concealed monstrosity. Take the example of “La Femme sauvage et la petite-maîtresse” where a poet – the poem is entirely “her” quoted speech – castigates another young girl for dwelling overlong in *idéal* (*OC* 1:290; *PB* 65, 67). These two behold a husband and wife, an Adam and Eve in a cage, who shake their bars and howl like mythical demons. The phantasm of spleen, a medusa-like face emerging from a foggy cave, haunted the late Baudelaire. This ghostly image consumes the correspondances between spleen et *idéal*, and leaves only an absolute spleen. The radical originality of Baudelaire’s insight into spleen was terrible for Benjamin. With *Le Spleen de Paris* Baudelaire pierced into poetic consciousness and, instead of trying to bring back his beloved back through the veil, decided it was better to eviscerate this Orphic insight. Why endlessly repeat this mythical cycle? Baudelaire’s willingness to plunge this knife into the gut of ideality was, at least, authentic. It was in Baudelaire’s character to turn his back to the constellation of melancholy. Baudelaire could see clearly – as one of Aristotle’s and Ficino’s men of exception – the phantasms of the Saturnine in the sky (even in daylight). How else could he have conceived of his vision of spleen, and followed it to its absolute end? This spleen undergoes, to my mind, three major transfigurations: the first centered upon the poet, the second on Paris, and the third enters into consciousness itself. Benjamin, for his part, would locate spleen in commodities, lost objects. The consciousness of art, the last transfiguration of spleen, breathes the breath of life into its performance. This is the theme of “Une Mort héroïque.”
Before I turn to Benjamin, there remains one question that haunts the progress of my reading of Baudelaire. It is the same question that tormented me in reading Hamlet: is the heroism that Benjamin steadfastly attributes to these men authentic, or the misread phantasm of a blackened soul? On Baudelairean heroism, Benjamin writes:

The heroic bearing of Baudelaire is akin to that of Nietzsche. Though Baudelaire likes to appeal to Catholicism, his historical experience is nonetheless that which Nietzsche fixed in the phrase “God is dead.” In Nietzsche’s case, this experience is projected cosmologically in the thesis that nothing new occurs any more. In Nietzsche, the accent lies on eternal recurrence, which the human being has to face with heroic composure. For Baudelaire, it is more a matter of “the new,” which must be wrested heroically from what is always again the same. (Arcades 337 [J60,7])

An eternal return does not satisfy Baudelaire. A hitherto undiscovered star belonging to the Saturnine constellation. The star is his own, gleaming in the twilight after his death in 1867, following a final year spent in an semi-aphasic state, in the care of his mother and friends. Benjamin had this to say about the Baudelairean sky, as if writing a dedication for the poet’s tombstone:

Baudelaire – the melancholic, whose star pointed him into the distance. He didn’t follow it though. Images of distance appear [in his poems] only as island looming out of the sea of long ago, or the sea of Paris fog. (Arcades 319 [J50,7])

Baudelaire lived under Saturn his entire life, one of his modes of writing (allegory) occurred with his eyes to the stars, and the other (irony) with his back turned.

When, in the poem “Le Voyage” – the conclusion of the sequence “La Mort” from Les Fleurs – the speaker proposes the voyage, it is done with great enthusiasm:

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79 Nietzsche’s thought has haunted this work (as has the thought of Kant, Foucault, and Derrida – though I have not directly cited them). A personal digression: I can certainly understand Baudelaire’s position as a Catholic whose actual, disclosed beliefs project those of an atheist. The position reflects my own.
Ô Mort, vieux capitaine, il est temps ! levons l’ancre !
Ce pays nous ennuie, ô Mort ! Appareillons !
Si le ciel et la mer sont noirs comme de l’encre,
Nos cœurs que tu connais sont remplis de rayons !

Verse-nous ton poison pour qu’il nous réconforte !
Nous voulons, tant ce feu nous brûle le cerveau,
Plonger au fond du gouffre, Enfer ou Ciel, qu’importe ?
Au fond de l’Inconnu pour trouver du nouveau ! (OC 1:134, l.137-144)

The naval voyage to Lethe that Keats had discouraged (and erased) in the “Ode on Melancholy” is diametrically opposed in the above lines. But Keats’ melancholy was historical and reverential, whereas Baudelaire’s was original and prophetic. In this last proposal for a voyage, Benjamin’s intuition is confirmed: his favourite poet is, par excellence, the one who “wrestles” the new from the old as a form of heroism. The announcement of a voyage into the abyss is not made in jest, or decided upon lightly. It is a descent into a black hole, from which there is no return. What does one discover, in the ink-black waters of absolute spleen? What is left of one’s humanity, when, after gazing overlong into the abyss, one drops to all fours and crawls into it? What monster of the past waits in the depths of the cavern’s labyrinth? I have argued that the theory of correspondances represents the development of a means to stave off the alienating force of splenetic melancholia. What happens, then, when the combatant succumbs to melancholy, falls and says: “I can resist no longer, I submit.”

For Reinhard Kuhn, in his monograph, The Demon of Noontide, states poignantly that the “opposition between ennui and a higher reality, which forms the substance of “Spleen and Ideal”, ends with the draining of the clepsydra, with the running dry of the water clock that occurs simultaneously with the realization that it is forever too late”
(312). The image of Baudelaire’s poem “L’Horloge” is one that Kuhn evokes frequently, and as the last poem in the “Spleen et Idéal” sequence represents a “dismal” ending to this section of the second edition of Les Fleurs du mal (312). For Eugene Holland, the “Spleen et Idéal” sequence ends with the “rejection of memory” in the poem “L’Horloge” (107). The poem’s opening, which exclaims “Horloge ! dieu sinistre, effrayant, impassible, / Dont le doigt nous menace et nous dit: ‘Souviens-toi! [The Clock is a sinister, terrifying, inscrutable god, whose finger threatens us and says ‘Remember!’]’ is an imperative repeated throughout the poem, an accusation that is inescapable (OC 1:81, 1.1-2; CV 189). With each passing second – as the line “Trois mille six cents fois par heure, la Seconde / Chuchote : Souviens-toi!” [“Three thousand and six hundred times an hour the Second whispers, Remember!]” reminds the reader that it is too late (OC 1:81, 1.9-10; CV 189). Like the inevitable ticking by of each second, the poem echoes “Souviens-toi !” – an imperative to remember something which has slipped the mind of the speaker, which never comes into clear focus in the poem – such that the speaker and their anxiety are inexorable. Meltzer argues that the “present is simply the constant recognition of the loss of the past” and so, the “present, then, is like the digit zero of the past” (203). The poem, which is almost entirely the captured speech of the sinister god, the unflinching finger of the clock, portrays the struggle of another subject with the onslaught of time. It is a warning one would prefer to file away in the depths of one’s own consciousness, to forget evermore. The poem represents a vision of spleen that has moved so far past idéal that the latter has almost faded from view. On the road to absolute spleen, the intersubjectivity has begun to recede. The perception of time, second-by-second, brings the
omnipresent threat of every other second that has passed and will pass. It is the perception of “eternity in a grain of sand” gone amok: with each second madness approaches. “It is too late” to do anything but watch the last second tick by.

As Stamelman writes, Baudelaire “identified melancholy with the essential condition of human existence; that he recognized suffering as a permanent, and not an intermittent, state of being” (Lost 394). In the permanence of melancholy, one may begin to observe its place as the fabric which weaves the world, for the scenes of absolute spleen “are the dolorous commonplaces, the saturnine realities of the Baudelairean world” (Lost 394). When the “bulwark” one erected against splenetic pessimism fails, as the waters of melancholy’s ocean rush in, one may find a flash of insight. As Stamelman puts it: “Out of the very negativity that lies at the heart of Les Fleurs du mal and Le Spleen de Paris … emerges a radiance which is that of the poetic work itself; it is the illumination these dark poems written under the sign of Saturn give” (Lost 394). The intense pressure of absolute spleen shapes language into prophecy. In the case of Baudelaire’s poetry, the infinity of time arriving at the passing of every moment becomes not only the absolute limit of perception, but also its refinement into an absolute opacity. Emmanuel Adatte argues that: “Whatever the manner one takes up the problematic of spleen in Baudelaire’s works, it seems obvious that ennui, and its derivatives, obsessively weaves together Les Fleurs du mal and Le Spleen de Paris and transforms the real into an opacity full of sound and fury” (53). The transfiguration of souvenir in Baudelaire’s poetry – the counterpart of Proust’s remembrance – redeems the phenomenality of lost time. Jennifer Bajorek argues that the configuration of Baudelaire’s poetry, as interpreted
by Benjamin, mediates “access afforded to the truth of the event by involuntary memory” with the information of those memories (123). Every memory becomes precious, because it is impossible to cast aside one memory for another, to value one lost object above another. The ending of “Spleen et Idéal” is the triumph of spleen over its counterpart, and marks a transition from the world of an absolute spleen.

“Une Mort héroïque,” an exemplary and crushing prose poem from Le Spleen de Paris, is the site where melencolia heroica suffers its most explicit and decisive defeat to splenetic melancholia. The poem dramatizes the conclusion the Baroque drew about the melancholy Princes of the Renaissance: the power of a melancholy genius is only admirable so long as it is not repurposed by the sovereign power to crush the weak.80 “Une Mort héroïque” is the narrative of Fancioulle, retold as the testimony of a narrator who witnessed the events of a court jester’s last day on earth, performing one last time as a condemned man for the Prince. His final performance becomes the emblem of melancholy made flesh, and, in the moment of its ultimate truth, is immediately destroyed. In this poem, one also finds a convergence of Baudelaire’s thoughts on comedy, a definite enactment in poetry what he had originally theorized in his critical prose. In the case of “Une Mort héroïque,” writes de Man, “the comedian figure of the poet is brought to his immediate death when his performance is brutally interrupted by the deliberate intruding action of another allegorical figure, a ruler who is himself another incarnation of the poet’s consciousness” (“Gauss Seminar” 108). In this instance, the co-presence of an

80 There is not a more dangerous figure than a king possessed by a cruel genius lost to ennui: one ends up with the scenes from Octave Mirbeau’s torture garden.
allegorizing poet (the writer) and the allegorized poet (the figure in the poem) is a form of
self-annihilation: the reflection the poem invites is not one conducive to either unification
or self-reflexive fragmentation. The friendship between Fancioulle and the Prince finds
its irony through the betrayals in which each alternates as perpetrator and victim.

Baudelaire’s story goes like this: Fancioulle, a gentlemen and comedian jester in
the court of the Prince, participates in a conspiracy against the prince, but the conspirators
are arrested in the middle of their attempt, and are condemned to death. Fancioulle and
the Prince have hitherto been friends, and the latter was “presque fâché de trouver son
comédien favori parmi les rebelles [almost cross at finding his favourite comedian among
the rebels]” (OC 1: 319; PB 141). The Prince was a man both possessed of a great love of
the arts, like a Hamlet, but also “il ne connaissait d’ennemi dangereux que l’Ennui [his
only and most dangerous enemy was boredom]” (OC 1: 320; PB 141). It is announced
that Fancioulle will give a performance, and one is unsure if the prince has forgiven his
favourite jester, or has a particular, climactic torture in store. The narrator, who seems
like a person close to the prince but not exactly knowledgeable of the latter’s exact
thoughts, conjectures that it is “probable que le Prince voulait juger de la valeur des
talents scéniques d’un homme condamné à mort [it was … likely that the Prince was
intent on gauging the histrionic abilities of a man under sentence of death]” (OC 1: 320;
PB 143). The description of his performance is the following one:

Le sieur Fancioulle excellait surtout dans les rôles muets ou peu chargés
de paroles, qui sont souvent les principaux dans ces drames féeriques dont
l’objet est de représenter symboliquement le mystère de la vie. Il entra en
In reading this description of Fancioulle, one finds a concentrated microcosm of Baudelaire’s aesthetic theory on laughter. Wordlessly, and in the mode Baudelaire has characterized as the essence of the absolutely comic, the essence of which is inherently grotesque, Fancioulle is perfectly primed to take over the Prince’s stage, and give the performance of his life, right at the end of it. And in the following passage, the themes from *De l’essence du rire* takes life upon the dramatized stage. Fancioulle has become the embodiment of irony, a living statue in the performance of a vision of beauty believed lost to the ages. Baudelaire’s narrator tells it like this:

> Fancioulle fut, ce soir-là, une parfaite idéalisation, qu’il était impossible de ne pas supposer vivante, possible, réelle. Ce bouffon allait, venait, riait, pleurait, se convulsait, avec une indestructible auréole autour de la tête, auréole invisible pour tous, mais visible pour moi, et où se mêlaient, dans un étrange amalgame, les rayons de l’Art et la gloire du Martyre. Fancioulle introduisait, par je ne sais quelle grâce spéciale, le divin et le surnaturel, jusque dans les plus extravagantes bouffonneries. (*OC* 1:321)82

The jester becomes *idéal*, an embodiment of an aesthetic perfection relegated to modern poetry as personification. The abstraction of *idéal*, with its newly found personhood in the form of an actual (though imaginary) person, transcends the process of its figuration. The torture of this perfection is that the reader knows, in all likelihood, Fancioulle

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81 Signor Fanciullo excelled above all in mine or almost mute roles, which are often the main parts in supernatural dramas which aim at a symbolic portrayal of the mystery of existence. Now he took the stage with a light step, perfectly at ease, making an entrance which encouraged the idea of indulgence in the aristocratic audience’s mind. (*PB* 143)

82 But on that evening Fanciullo become a perfect *idealization*, which it was impossible not to suppose alive, possible, and real. The comedian filled the stage, laughing and weeping, fooling and contorting to the top of his bent, with a sort of indestructible aura round his head, a halo unseen by the others but quite visible to me, in which the illumination of art and the glory of martyrdom were strangely blended together. By some rare gift of grace Fanciullo infused the divine and supernatural into even his most extravagant clowning. (*PB* 145)
accomplishes this only to die moments later. The tension of the passage is painful to bear. What ought to be a celebration becomes an anxiety of the next passing moment, when the performance may end. The narrator is enraptured by Fancioulle’s perfect performance:

“Ma plume tremble, et des larmes d’une émotion toujours présente me montent aux yeux pendant que je cherche à vous décrire cette inoubliable soirée. Fancioulle me prouvait, d’une manière péremptoire, irrefutable, que l’ivresse de l’Art est plus apte que toute autre à voiler les terres du gouffre ; que le génie peut jouer la comédie au bord de la tombe avec une joie qui l’empêche de voir la tombe, perdu, comme il est, dans un paradis excluant toute idée de tombe et de destruction. (OC 1:321)³³

This is a celebration of melancholy that Ficino could have penned: it is presented only to be trampled underfoot. Fancioulle’s performance has the crowd and even the Prince erupt in applause before this “chef d’œuvre d’art vivant” – though the applause of the Prince was mixed with other emotions, as if this performance as “[l’étrange boffin qui bouffonait si bien la mort [the jester so cleverly clowning Death]” was somehow weakening him (OC 1:322, PB 147). At the Prince’s behest, Fancioulle’s performance is interrupted, where he immediately falls dead. The poet narrator “recognizes [Fancioulle’s] heroism but gives the victory to his rival, the Prince bored with everything, ‘sovereign of a rainy kingdom’” (Mauron 116).

Sanyal, in her reading of the poem, argues that it “stages what appears to be an antagonistic struggle between the aesthetic and political realms, embodied, respectively, in a jester and a prince” (65). Fancioulle and the Prince, a comedian and a sovereign, both

³³ The pen trembles in my hand and tears of that enduring emotion dim my eyes, while I try to bring that unforgettable evening alive for you, Fanciullo proved to me in decisive, irrefutable way, that the exhilaration of art is more capable that any other of concealing all the terrors of the pit; that genius may enact comedy at the graveside with a joy that protects it from the vision of the grave, transcended into a mental paradise which excludes all idea of the tomb or of annihilation. (PB 145)
“transgress” into their opponent’s domain, with the former participating in a conspiracy and the latter being an aesthete (Sanyal 66). Poetry in Le Spleen de Paris, for Sanyal, is designed to “deflate” the “poet’s idealizing imagination” (66). In the actualization of Fancioulle’s melancholy on the stage, the Prince’s splenetic melancholia, with the snap of a finger, snuffs it out. Despite this, Fancioulle’s aesthetic accomplishment is a significant one, and one Sanyal aptly interrogates: “The central question raised by the pantomime, then, is whether art can provide a lasting symbolic contestation of the ruling order. Does Fancioulle’s utopic fiction allegorize art’s transcendence of official hegemony, or does it instead suggest that art’s resistance to power is a mystification?” (69). Sanyal concludes that while Fancioulle achieves a victory against the Prince, “the transfiguration of life into fiction” comes with a death penalty: “The poem thus offers a shimming vision of aesthetic transcendence only to revoke it” (69). In “Une Mort héroïque” one also finds the staging of le comique absolu and the le comique significatif in the figures of Fancioulle and the narrator, respectively: for one’s access to Fancioulle’s absolute comedy is through the intersubjectivity of the narrator, in part revealed by the latter’s unique perception of the halo over the former’s head (Sanyal 73). Concerning “Une Mort héroïque” Hiddleston argues that the poem “suggests, if not a coincidence of opposites, then at least a kind of equilibrium” (125). Hiddleston sees in the poem the prime example of comique absolu (126). What Baudelaire had started with De l’essence du rire, “Une Mort héroïque” helped complete.
Conclusion

In this chapter, I argued that in the correspondances of dialectically opposite terms, Baudelaire is able to accrue the entries for his dictionnaire de mélancolie. Over time, Baudelaire discovers that his original insight into spleen as a metonymy for the allegorical assemblage of melancholy was even more profound: for spleen itself was capable of its own correspondance, negating the need for a dialectical exploration using antithetic terms. In this way, Baudelaire could modulate not only his approach to spleen, but also the mode and voice of his writing into a new, and original, development of irony. As de Man remarks, Baudelaire’s post-Romantic irony allows him to take the process of figuring a personification, normally an abstraction given a human quality, and reverse it, whereby humans are lent the power of philosophical abstraction. In this mode of metamelancholic reflection, the suffering of humans in society becomes figural, rather than actual. Thanks to this innovation, Baudelaire is able to re-visit his original poems and figures from Les Fleurs de mal and transfigure them into ironic reversal upon Romanticism, revolution and Parisian society at large.
Chapter 4 – Walter Benjamin’s “Saturnine Vision”

La mélancolie est refus radical de la nostalgie pour la terre natale.\textsuperscript{84}

La conscience moderne est celle du passage et du passager.\textsuperscript{85}

Rather than pass the time, one must invite it in.
To pass the time (to kill time, expel it): the gambler.
Time spills from his every pore.
To store time as a battery stores energy: the flâneur.
Finally, the third type: he who waits.
He takes in the time and renders it up in altered form – that of expectation.\textsuperscript{86}

The themes of the preceding three chapters come full circle with the next chapter on Benjamin. The first chapter presented an overview of the theory of melancholy that grew from Aristotle’s Problems and its legacies leading up to the Baroque. The second chapter traced an unexpected return of this theory in a trio of nineteenth-century period writers. The third chapter read the deepening insight on the nature of spleen in Baudelaire, and the transfiguration of melancholy from the poetic sublimity of “Correspondances” through the gloomy streets of “Tableaux parisiens” and into black grotesquerie of “Une Mort héroique” from Le Spleen de Paris. Benjamin touches on all of those themes: one finds in his writing the development of a metamelancholy, an inheritance of tradition of melancholy in art, and an experience of melancholy that is equal parts spectral and visceral. Benjamin was a thinker who located and charted an figural representation of melancholy across a full career of essays and writing projects from the Trauerspiel to the Parisian Arcades. Benjamin is notable amongst his contemporaries for the intensity with

\textsuperscript{84} Angela Cozea, Petit traité du beau à l’usage des mélancoliques (22).
\textsuperscript{85} Sylviane Agacinski, Le Passeur du temps : Modernité et nostalgie (19).
\textsuperscript{86} Benjamin, Das Passagenwerk (107 [D3,4]).
which he pursued melancholy in its manifold faces: his eye for melancholic images and affects was singularly well developed. The development of Benjamin as both a reader of melancholy and as a melancholic reader has two major, intertwining phases. The first is Benjamin’s reading of the Baroque literature, in particular Trauerspiele, during his academic years in the 1920s; the second is his engagement with Baudelaire and his Passagenwerk project, which marked the last decade of his life, as he attempted to recreate the labyrinthine culture of nineteenth-century Paris.

The present chapter opens with an approach to Benjamin’s formative years, including his essay on language and the letters from the period in which he was composing his Habilitationsschrift, Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels. Following this partially biographical look at Benjamin’s work on Trauerspiel, the chapter will turn to the substance of Benjamin’s look at melancholy and its relationship to his reading of the Baroque and its contexts. The second section takes a close look at Benjamin’s relationship with Baudelaire, and in particular at how the poetics of correspondances informs the Benjaminian methodology of criticism by quotation. Most notably, I take a look at how Benjamin redeems the melancholic, poetic consciousness of a Fancioulle, in the moment of his death, which Baudelaire never represents. The lamentation of nature, the suffering of the Baroque hero, the archiving of a culture the Nazis would set ablaze, these are the representations of a melancholy constellation Baudelaire’s absolute spleen would not suffer. One cannot embrace the abyss, as Baudelaire did, and come out of it alive.

Benjamin, though he died by suicide, is trying to redeem Baudelaire’s insight without succumbing to despair. The chapter’s concluding section examines Benjamin’s reading
practice in the work of his *Arcades Project*, where he is at the height of his powers, yet in the deepest pits of his despair. By 1940, the last year of his life, Benjamin is a collector and redeemer of vast historical phenomena, a philosopher of absolute phenomenality.

**Towards a methodology: Productive spleen and “Saturnine vision”**

In concentrating on the dialectic of positive and negative melancholic affect, rather than a result of philosophical contemplation, Benjamin offers interpretations of melancholy that are unique amongst his contemporaries (Adorno, Heidegger, Freud). Benjamin does not define *the end* – as would be the case for other contemporaries – of his melancholy methodology, the latter is the end in itself. Could one experience melancholy *through* things, objects, quotations, and so on? Does the stone impart to one who picks it up an insight into the Saturnine? Can the stone found in the *written word* do the same? The difference between Baudelaire and Benjamin’s melancholies depends on how one views their respective transfigurations of melancholy. In the case of Baudelaire, his particular heroism was sacrificing poetic, positive melancholy to the interior *correspondance* of spleen. Benjamin, instead of sacrificing sublime melancholy to the power of its splenetic counterpart, found a means to transform the latter melancholia into a personal form of modern heroism. This heroism is the secondary feature of melancholic Eros, and for Benjamin is the absolute embrace of the intellectual powers.\(^{87}\) Absolute spleen for Benjamin is an untenable proposition: part of his Baudelairean project is the redemption of melancholic affect that helped produce “Tableaux parisiens.” Benjamin’s thought is a

\(^{87}\) Benjamin’s angelic vision (formed from both Klee’s and Dürer’s angels) is one that perceives each moment as a “catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at his feet” (*SW* 4:392).
practiced form of melancholic meditation, one that the thinker learns, progressively, to extend and increase in intensity and magnitude over the passing of time.

In his essay “Saturnine Vision and the Question of Difference,” Rodolphe Gasché remarks that while the early Benjamin steeps himself in philosophical texts and considerations, he is not turning into a philosopher – at least, not in any conventional sense one may recognize. Benjamin’s development as theorist of language, which in many ways is his philosophical development, cannot be easily called either a philosophy or a theology, for it is both and neither. Another term is required. Gasché has a cogent suggestion, borrowed directly from the source:

For such a position as the one [Benjamin represents], a position based on a tension between philosophy and theology, there is, it seems, to be a name in Benjamin’s writings. In The Origin [of German Tragic Drama] it is called “Saturnine vision.” Such vision, or theoretical glance, realizes reference to the Absolute, to that which is completely separated from the embroilments of myth and the mythical interconnectedness of language, not through cognitive abstraction, but in “close touch” with what is, namely, by violently tearing its texture to shreds. (23)

Benjamin’s writing about and through the “Saturnine vision” becomes the emblem of his own theory of knowledge. This vision becomes a means through which Benjamin can recognize the essential details in texts other aesthetic doctrines would miss. It reaches into the astrological expanses of the universe, reading the world of art as if all of its ephemeral ambiguities were tactile, rich with immediate sense experience. It is this vision that informs Benjamin’s Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels, which, in the later part of the first chapter – “Trauerspiel and Tragedy” – contains the extended elaboration of

88 Benjamin, Origin (179).
Benjamin’s theory of melancholy. On my side, I will not aim at more than an analysis of two specific passages from the Trauersetpiel book: one concerning Benjamin’s brief dialectical reading of the Saturn/Cronos figure and the other on the example of the stone as an emblem for melancholy.

Before turning to the reading of these passages, I will examine a key moment in Benjamin’s life during which, I claim, he transfigured his personal melancholia into a metamelancholic theory. This transfiguration was inspired, in particular, by theTrauersetpiel plays of the German Baroque. The expression of Benjamin’s theory of melancholy coincides with one of the most tumultuous events of his life. The story of his Habilitationsschrift – its inability to see a defense and Benjamin’s corresponding failure to enter academia – is well known, yet worth reconsidering here. Having completed his first dissertation, The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism, Benjamin proceeded to embark on the required habilitation dissertation to earn an academic post. Starting in the fall of 1923, Benjamin wrote enthusiastically in his letters about his project. He was, however, far less enthused about certain aspects of academia: “the difficulties associated with a scholarly position are evident in the context of such a decadent way of life and living conditions and they strike me as inexorable and unavoidable. Even now, these difficulties unceasingly occupy my thoughts” (Correspondence 212). As 1924 proceeds, the complexity of Benjamin’s ambition grows proportionally to the hindrances associated to his project’s successful completion and reception. Allegory and melancholy are critical

89 The general objectives of the Trauersetpiel study have been covered elsewhere – particularly well by Samuel Weber in “Genealogy of Modernity: History, Myth and Allegory in Benjamin’s Origin of the German Mourning Play,” where the American critic provides a brisk and complete overview.
to Benjamin’s project from the very beginning. Notably, his earliest chapter divisions provide equal weight to Trauerspiel, melancholy and allegory (Correspondence 238).

Excited by the work, yet dreading the threat of disaster, Benjamin works, reading plays few of his contemporaries found very interesting.

By the Summer of 1925, it is suggested that Benjamin should withdraw his habilitation dissertation rather than fail the defense. Benjamin explains the situation, and his feelings about it, to Hugo von Hofmannsthal – from whom he hoped to receive assistance in seeing the Trauerspiel book published:

Looking back on the twisted course of this affair, I have every reason to be glad about the internal and external conviction that increasingly kept me from respecting the contemporary university as a place for productive and, above all, disinterested activity. In any other situation, the kind of treatment to which I was subjected would have aroused in me much unproductive indignation and spleen. (Correspondence 281)

One could, instead, reread the last sentence of this quotation as: in this situation, Benjamin experienced much productive indignation and spleen. The melancholia of his resistance had value beyond persevering in the face of a hostile academic environment.

He was challenged by his work to locate in the Trauerspiel something vital, essential, inescapable. There had come the point in 1924–1925 where Benjamin knew his dissertation was destined to failure, yet this knowledge did not discourage the work, or redirect its energies to a topic that might have helped Benjamin to succeed academically. The rejection of his dissertation was only surprising by virtue of the manner in which it was ultimately done. His engagement in his project, and his refusal to adopt the ideologies of his contemporary academia, had decided his work’s fate. In the face of that futility, Benjamin found pain and dejection, but also inspiration and resolve. This dual encounter
with melancholia as a personal experience (the frustration with academia, the failure of the project) and as a historical development in the art of the Baroque (Trauerspiel, the aftermath of Renaissance’s fetishisation of melancholy) is the locus of a singularity that will transform Benjamin’s reading practices. Benjamin’s splenetic melancholia is able to identify with the melancholy of the Trauerspiel characters, to find in their suffering his own pain. Benjaminian melancholy is the marriage of the Renaissance intellectual powers with the “bulwark” coping mechanisms the Baroque mind, without resorting to sadism.

The Trauerspiel book could not have been possible without Benjamin’s transformation of his personal melancholia into a reflection of its structure in a broader, impersonal treatise on the history of art. Two divergent moods – one that arises from a mindset suitable for writing at the highest intellectual level, and the other that represents the dejection of failure within a particular series of norms – enter into correspondence. Flatley argues that:

For Benjamin, melancholia is not a problem to be cured; loss is not something to get over and leave behind. However, he is concerned to show that there is more than one way to be attached to loss – all melancholias are not the same – and everything depends on the how of one’s melancholic attachments. Thus, he persistently critiques a melancholia that leads to inaction and complacency. (44)

Benjamin’s thought led him to value the experience of melancholy, not as something that arrested action – this indeed was to be resisted as Burton had warned about idleness – but as something which should profoundly deepen the creative potential of thought. This attachment to loss, as Flatley describes it, represents the polar antithesis to Freud’s conception of melancholia. In Benjamin’s world, one is expected to see melancholia as an opportunity, as a trigger to heighten one’s consciousness and elevate one’s thought. In
this way, one realizes Benjamin could never be compelled to abandon the *Trauerspiel* project until its completion and publication. One also realizes that the project represents at its core a profound deviation from contemporary conceptions of melancholy. Instead of trying to get away from the past, Benjamin brings the past into the fulsome experience of *Jetztzeit*. Flatley continues:

Benjamin’s counterintuitive contention is that it is precisely by dwelling on loss, the past and political failures (as opposed to images of a better future) that one may avoid a depressing and cynical relation to present. What emerges is the picture of a politicizing, *splenetic melancholia*, where clinging to things from the past enables interest and action in the present world and is indeed the mechanism for that interest. (65, emphasis mine)

The affective life of the melancholic subject is precious for Benjamin, just as it had been for Baudelaire: the two share in this melancholic intuition, though their conclusions on a specifically splenetic melancholia end up diverging.

Baudelaire’s reaction to melancholy was, at first, to enter spleen and *idéal* into a *correspondance* and discover that, in fact, spleen in itself was the proper reaction to personal, social, and political failure. In the beginning, Benjamin’s initial reaction is similar to Baudelaire’s: the former takes up failure as the driving mechanism to persevere despite his melancholia. Rather than focus upon the magnified, exaggerated character of one’s conception of melancholy, such as spleen in Baudelaire’s case, Benjamin opted to attempt a mapping of the entire constellation of melancholy. Benjamin sought all of the stars in the constellations, and studied the various ways in which the constellations have been constructed in history. The Baroque becomes one such site to discover schemas of melancholy; Baudelaire’s Paris would become the other one. Contrary to engaging or developing a talking therapy or cure, Benjamin proposes the exploration of the historical
moments where melancholy was at its strongest, and then examining the material conditions that allow melancholy to thrive. What is proposed represents an embrace of past failure and dejection in exchange for eliminating a cynicism and defeatism about the present, even when – especially when – one is faced with an imminent calamity. Melancholy, transformed in the way Benjamin could transform it, is the bulwark against pessimism. “Spleenetic melancholia” – a term I have borrowed from Flatley throughout this project – is the fusion of Benjamin’s melancholy with the spleen of modernity, allowing a heightening of conscious experience and protection against pessimism in the face of difficult circumstances. In this Jetztzeit, the repetition of conditions that lead to failure, such as furthering the Trauerspiel project’s clear path to rejection, becomes an inspired, actual victory. With his book on the German Baroque, Benjamin sets the stage for his own “minor” revolt. The subject of the Trauerspiel book relates to the representation and staging of death in baroque German drama; the act of the book’s composition is Benjamin’s active preparation of career suicide (in the German academia). In writing his Habilitationschrift Benjamin had a clear cut choice: wear the ideology imposed upon him by his evaluation committee and lose his intellectual soul, or find an alternative. The habilitation project, as the “Epistemo-Critical Prologue” boldly and defiantly declares, announces this new way. This new method, for Benjamin, must begin with a sustained reflection on the nature of language, in the inauguration of his “Saturnine vision.”

As example of this vision occurs in the later third of his “Trauerspiel and Tragedy” chapter from the Origin of the German Tragic-Drama, where Benjamin
outlines at length the vital role the dialectic of melancholy as idea has played out in history as a constellation of splenetic images:

If melancholy emerges from the depths of the creaturely realm to which the speculative thought of the age felt itself bound by the bonds of the church itself, then this explained its omnipotence. In fact, it is the most genuinely creaturely of the contemplative impulses, and it has always been noticed that its power need be no less in the gaze of a dog than in the attitude of a pensive genius. (*Origin* 146)

It is not by accident that the animal sitting near the feet of the angel in Dürer’s “Melencolia I” is a hound. In a way, the divine human figure and the animal form at its feet are suspended together. The manner in which a dog can remain eternally present in *Jetztzeit* [now-time], as if each moment of existence were expressed absolutely, without loss, this is perception of the melancholic person. The angel can remember the entirety of history and has, in a manner entirely different than a dog’s, a similar capacity to blend all the moments of the future together. The angel’s perception of melancholy is that of all of its instantiations all at once, and yet all different. In the figure of the (feminized) angel from Dürer’s engraving, one may also locate Baudelaire’s vision of *Beauté* personified. This angelic face, for Christine Buci-Glucksmann, is the shadow of Eve’s melancholia, passed on to Adam, history’s first melancholic (*Au-delà de la mélancolie* 127). Sin is the representation of spleen *par excellence*, it represents the inability to forget one’s first trespass against god, burned into one’s flesh, an organic brand. This angel has lost something, and this something in communicable only in the form of a silent, wordless lamentation. This is the sin of human life, played into the phantasmagoria of love and loss. Spleen as the melancholic brand of humanity that is central to Baudelaire’s poetics.
In the figure of the dog lies the genius of the human mind; moreover, the *dog is the genius of the human mind.*

As Pensky writes: “Benjamin rips passages of *Trauerspiele* out of their context in order to destroy the continuum of transmitted history in which they are embedded and to illuminate the moment of objective truth contained in the genre itself” (60). The mode of reading and interpretation that interested Benjamin had to rid itself of contaminants. Benjamin is as much interested in the literary genre of *Trauerspiel* as he in in the essence of the Baroque mind itself and, by extension, the essence of its particular, post-Renaissance melancholy. As Pensky cogently writes: “Tragedy arises from myth; *Trauerspiel*, however, is embedded thoroughly within historical time, and this embeddedness, so complete that it rarely need be expressed manifestly by the baroque dramatists themselves, underlies and generates the catastrophic violence and lamentation so characteristic of the genre” (74); furthermore, “the *Trauerspiel*, the translation of the muteness of fallen nature into the chatter of human tongues, is Benjamin’s critical Rosetta stone” (76). Pensky’s claim that this muteness, which represents a codex through which Benjamin interprets, essentially, all language acts, is correlated to another of Benjamin’s early works. The theme of nature in perpetual mourning and the pathetic, mute lamentations of nature emerges early in Benjamin’s writing. In his essay “On Language as Such and the Language of Man” – henceforth, “Essay on Language” – the young Benjamin’s particularly acute, yet highly enigmatic, reading skills outline a vision of language that lends equal weight to biblical exegesis and the material conditions of
language’s coming into being. The stakes of Benjamin’s essay are significations of language’s origins and the totality of its influence in human and non-human experience.

A lamentation trickles out from the forest of language

In the opening paragraph of the “Essay on Language” Benjamin writes that “all communication of the contents of the mind is language” and that the “existence of language ... is coextensive not only with all the areas of human mental expression in which language is always in one sense inherent, but with absolutely everything. There is no event or thing in either animate or inanimate nature that does not in some way partake of language, for it is in the nature of each one to communicate its mental contents” (SW 1:71) In this sense, “language as such” forms the very basis of all nature and everything in it, whereas the “languages of man” are the result, in the first case from the fall of Adam and in the second case from the Tower of Babel. In his analysis, Benjamin’s hermeneutics of language (and all of its metaphors), philosophy and theology are inseparable one from the other. The following passage, which occurs later in the “Essay on Language,” serves as a ground to explore the relation of human language and nature’s language. Benjamin tells a parable of the origin of language within the narrative frame of the Bible:

The life of man in the pure spirit of language was blissful. Nature, however, is mute. True, it can be clearly felt in the second chapter of Genesis how this muteness, named by man, itself became bliss, only of lower degree. (SW 1:72-73)

Benjamin’s opening is a mixture of exegesis and parable, taking on the forms of both literary criticism and allegoresis. It is as much founded in considerations of biblical interpretation as it is a radical expansion of the influence of language in the early days of
the biblical creation and fall of humanity. One’s commentary on Benjamin’s expansive
glosses has to consider, at the same time, the concerns Benjamin’s reading of the Bible as
*its own* act of creation and storytelling, while also taking seriously the literal act of
reading and interpretation that is at work. To read Benjamin’s glosses solely as biblical
interpretation is only half of the story, as it misses that “Saturnine vision” characteristic
of Benjamin’s reading and writing. The fulsome experience of language as such for
Adam and Eve before the fall was this first degree of that bliss; the fulsome absence of
that language, nature’s muteness, was the second degree. When the potential for language
is stripped from nature, in one sense, and endowed upon humans, in a completely
different sense, this is a tragedy. But, in the beginning, they were united both in the bliss
of these absolute potentialities, and it was good.

Benjamin then turns to the curse of God upon the earth, done in language, where
the orders of divine and human existence complicate and separate irreremediably:

> After the Fall, however, when God’s word curses the ground, the appear-
ance of nature is deeply changed. Now it begins its other muteness, which
is what we mean by the “deep sadness of nature.” It is a metaphysical truth
that all nature would begin to lament if it were endowed with language….
(*SW* 1:72-73)

Beginning with the last sentence: it is conditionally true for Benjamin that *if* in a
postlapsarian world nature could express itself in language, this speech act would be
lamentation. The curse from God affects nature with language, without giving nature
access to language. Benjamin engages nature as a personification, one he sustains in the
entirety of his analysis. In this way, just as the first humans became aware of their
nakedness and were ashamed, nature too has learned something that has corrupted its
intention and origin. The experience of the Fall is as much, perhaps more, a trauma for nature as it is for the first humans. Nature has learned, in essence, that it is mute. Humans can talk, nature cannot. The metaphysical component of this “truth” for Benjamin differentiates the immediacy of muteness in the prelapsarian world from the reflexive muteness of the postlapsarian one. The deep sadness of nature becomes its default state of existence: this is the essence of what Benjamin would analyse in the Trauerspiel. The distance between the Renaissance and the Baroque, in this reading of language, is that linguistic contact of humans and nature, or the lack thereof. The Baroque acknowledges this loss of contact. Humans share this experience of nature when one becomes saddened to the point of complete speechlessness – something Benjamin will address later in the passage. Of course, a human could still speak, and is choosing not to.

The “speech” of nature, which is always already an inability to use language, has a series of consequences. Benjamin writes:

It means, first, that she would lament language itself. Speechlessness: that is the great sorrow of nature (and for the sake of her redemption the life and language of man – not only, as is supposed, of the poet – are in nature). This proposition means, second, that she would lament. Lament, however, is the most undifferentiated, impotent expression of language. *SW* 1:72-73

Benjamin writes that while speechlessness is nature’s great sorrow, nature’s redemption is found in the “life and language of man” which is contained in nature itself. Benjamin indicates that while the poet has a role in this redemption, poetic language or expression cannot make an exclusive claim. Ferber, who also reads the “Language” essay closely, argues that “Sorrowful, mute nature would use the language that it lacks only to lament – that is, to express its own inherent linguistic loss. It would use language only to
communicate its own melancholy over the loss, and in that sense, it would communicate the essence of nature” (143). “Just like the ghost,” lamentation “is always in-between” (Ferber 151). In the previous chapter I argued that Baudelaire’s personification of “Nature” functions as a counterpoint to spleen, a feeling that in modernity one cannot directly commune with nature, as the Romantics had championed. One can read, in Baudelaire’s “Nature” a simultaneous rejection of nature’s ideality and the symbolic resonance of urban spaces, which take over as the nature in which fallen humanity must survive. Benjamin reads nature as a resonance, a mute lamentation that infects the language of man, because the latter is meant to redeem the phenomenality of the former.

What an intrepid Benjamin discovers in this interpretation is that poets become the agents most sensitive to the melancholy lament of nature, for while the beasts in the forest of symbols are not talking creatures, the beast named “man” is fraught with language. In language, in the representation of nature in a literary space, one may lend mute nature a voice. This license is not only granted to poets, but also, one surmises, it is granted to painters, sculptors and performers. However, only in representation, only in the aura of artworks, can nature gain an artificial capacity to vocalize its languid lamentations. Benjamin continues his pathetic description of nature recognizing its muteness, in the former’s allegorical parable of latter’s worsening melancholia:

Because she is mute, nature mourns. Yet the inversion of this proposition leads even further into the essence of nature; the sadness of nature makes her mute. In all mourning there is the deepest inclination to speechlessness, which is infinitely more than the inability or disinclination to communicate. That which mourns feels itself thoroughly known by the unknowable. (SW 1:72-73)
Saturnine Constellations

Not only because “she is mute, nature mourns,” but also because her sadness “makes her mute.” Admittedly, infants have the closest contact to that perfect muteness in their early months of life. Fallen nature inherits a deep melancholia from the curse of God’s words; nature mourns that it now carries language as such, but its mourning is silent. The muteness of mourning recalls the muteness and sadness of nature.

It is strongly implied, but not quite stated, in Benjamin’s “Essay on Language,” that nature and humanity have a common ground in language, but a ground which cannot be expressed in the same terms. In representing nature through art, humanity lends nature a voice to express its lamentation. What does humanity gain from this exchange? In the translation of the muteness of nature, humanity gleans an insight into the origins of postlapsarian existence and the barred gate to prelapsarian ideality. In the Trauerspiel Benjamin finds the interplay of these languages expressed in not only biblical terms, but also in astrological ones as well. The muteness of nature extends to the universe, as does its lamentation. What Benjamin finds in the Trauerspiel is an intensive, though not exclusive, concentration of this translation from the muteness of nature into the speech of humans. The work of reading the Trauerspiel becomes the analysis, in the first case, of its historical entanglements: the (mis)reading of tragedy, the history of melancholy, the sadness of the natural world expressed in the human one. This reading is rooted more in the immanence of history and experience than in the concerns of myth and transcendental categories. As the treatise progresses, Benjamin takes up concerns represented in the Baroque that extend far beyond the seventeenth century.
Just as one can locate in Baudelaire two spleens, one may locate – as Pensky does in one of his penetrating glosses of Benjamin’s critical theory – two discrete, yet intertwining, histories of melancholy:

Melancholy has, accordingly, both a “profane” and a messianic history. Its profane history consists of the progressive course whereby the word and the syndrome plod through their succession of historical forms. Its messianic history, however, consists in discrete, individual historical moments where, as a result of nonrepeatable, unique sets of circumstances, a “motorial reaction” between subject and objects enacts a dialectic so precise that the critic can recognize within this structure the elements for a redemptive construction. The baroque depiction of the devastating melancholy of a religiously shattered world is one such structure. … Trauerspiel, the allegory of Baudelaire, the motions of Proustian memory – radiate messianic energy like beacons, because they promise to reveal themselves as sites where critical work can find images in which the whole of historical time, of an epoch, or of an era is compressed. (94)

In the Trauerspiel, one can locate melancholy on a map, in the act of its passing into history. In these moments, the instances of melancholy are not grouped by concepts: they are unique and vital points on this map. A reader can engage the texts of the Trauerspiel genre and locate with them something essential about melancholy, something which never occurs again and had never occurred before. The view of the complete constellation changes. As Pensky adds later: “Understood as a dialectic … melancholia is the schema of alienated messianic consciousness. Melancholia achieves its messianic content precisely insofar as it is at the farthest remove from ‘faith’ in the redemptive power of God, and instead is entirely transfixed by the earthly spectacle of God’s infamous absence. The intensity and persistence of the melancholy mind is always described within the negative space of the absent deity” (107). The biblical authors telling the story of the Fall composed an explanation for the unexplainable. One wonders why human existence
lends itself to strive, toil and suffering. An imaginative explanation, and a compelling one, is that an ancestor to the entire human race committed an error, something that transitioned human existence from one state of existence into another one; and that this transition was immutable, irremediable, and ironically tragic. The biblical story posits the Fall. Heidegger, and others, expressed it as being thrown into the world. What is essential is the act of translating the absence into the illusion of plenitude, and the earnestness with which the translation is accomplished.

The purpose of Benjamin’s melancholy treatise – similarly to KSP’s treatise – is to draw out the correspondances between the natural world and the human world in the shape of history. Benjamin, as philosopher-critic, must train himself to suspend the dialectic long enough to engage that correspondance, in the refusal to absolve the loss of time and the experience of history. It is as if Benjamin must learn how to stop time, in a messianic mode of contemplation, yet, at the same time, Benjamin cannot resort to a series of transcendental categories or terms of analysis. Benjamin cannot set out to philosophize on melancholy and then turn into either a theologian or a Marxist, exclusively. He must engage the Trauerspiel in its own terms. The allegory of death in the mourning play provides an experience of death one cannot otherwise access: not just the experience of being “dead” or dying, but of not being able to die – a living death. Bainard Cowan writes that for Benjamin in “the melancholy allegory of the Baroque, causal chains (and signifying chains) can only lead away from life, at first glorifying the natural object with the radiance of intellectuality but ultimately leading to the end of the mind’s life in death” (119). Just as melancholy is sadness without a cause, so too is the
drama of the Trauerspiel suffering without a cause, where the dramatic figure can sustain
otherworldly torment. In the literary experience of Trauerspiel, Benjamin has located an
unhappy consciousness that engages in the dialectic that would form the essence of his
critical perspective, or rather – to recall Pensky’s apt phrase – Benjamin discovers his
critical Rosetta stone.

The figure of Saturn/Cronos in Benjamin’s theory of melancholy

Benjamin’s Trauerspiel book’s first chapter, “Trauerspiel and Tragedy” has a concluding
section, which recounts a history of melancholy and its relation to the Trauerspiel form
and genre. It is as compelling as it is tightly packed and condensed. As Ferber argues,
Benjamin’s reading of the Trauerspiel “inevitably entails an absorption in the baroque
period itself and its Zeitgeist or Weltanschauung, its fundamental mood or ambience” and
further “the abyss of the baroque state of mind [is] a state of mind or mood that is
repeatedly and explicitly designated as melancholic” (67). Moreover: “the instability of
boundaries in the case of the melancholic – that between the internal and the external, as
well as between life and death – has implications beyond psychological pathology”
(Ferber 73). The psychoanalyst may be leery to blur the lines of health, pathology, and
death, but “in the Trauerspiel, however, this becomes the norm” (73). Ferber – recalling
Freud’s depiction of melancholy as an open wound – writes that “pain, for Benjamin, is a
river that never dries up”; furthermore, “in its chronic form pain is continually present in
such a way that even if it once had an identifiable cause, this cause has disappeared” (81).
The Trauerspiel, under Benjamin’s analysis, portrays an allegorical reconstruction of loss
that is not meant to be internalized inasmuch as the representation of tragedy exposes the
caracter of lack itself, the abyss between representation and meaning, in both life and
art. Ferber outlines an analogy, referring to the classic discussion of symbol and allegory:

The mirror image of allegory is symbol. Symbols contain intrinsic and
comprehensive meaning. They are replete with meaning; they exhibit a
stability totally contrary to that of allegory’s structure. In Benjamin’s
analysis symbols thus show none of the indecisive, unstable movement
identified with allegory’s repeated attempts to hold on to meaning. The
theatrical equivalents of these mirror images, symbol and allegory, are, of
course, tragedy and Trauerspiel, respectively. It follows that if tragedy is
the keen manifestation of immaculate closure and the stability of meaning,
the Trauerspiel is all about indeterminacy. (87)

And Ferber adds, concerning the distinction between the “genres on death,” that “[if]
tragic death marks an excess of determinacy, a finalized and conclusive ending, then
death in the Trauerspiel heralds the opposite. It is incessant and indefatigable” (104);
furthermore, the “theme of thresholds is strongly present in the Trauerspiel book. It
focuses mainly on the figure of the ghost but is more generally related to the blurred
boundary between life and death as they appear in the plays” (109). In reading
Benjamin’s history of melancholy, which appears in the midst of the analysis of the
Trauerspiel, one locates two images upon which our author is firmly, almost obstinately,
fixed: Saturn and the stone.

In writing about the work of Warburg, Gielhow and later Panofsky and Saxl,
Benjamin positions Saturn as a centrepiece to his dialectic on melancholy. Benjamin
writes that “the introspection of the melancholy man is understood with reference to
Saturn,” where this reveals “a dialectical trait in the idea of Saturn, which corresponds
astonishingly to the dialectic of the Greek conception of melancholy” (149). Later, drawing from Panofsky and Saxl’s study:

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 and manic ecstasy. (149, Benjamin quoting Saxl and Panofsky)  

Benjamin, like others before him, follows in the wake of Aristotle’s analysis with the duality of melancholy transfixed between the elements of sin and salvation, madness and genius. In the metonymy between Saturn and melancholy, Benjamin locates – thanks to Panofsky and Saxl – the immense powers of melancholy when one is under the constant threat of despondency. Saturn has its partner in the cosmological configuration, that of Cronos. Benjamin continues, quoting Panofsky and Saxl again:

As far as this dialectic of Saturn is concerned, it requires an explanation “which can only be sought in the inner structure of the mythological Cronos as such … The idea of Cronos is not only dualistic to such an extent and to such a degree that Cronos could be described quite simply as a god of extremes. One the one hand he is the ruler of the golden age … on the other he is the mournful, dethroned and dishonoured god … This immanent polarity of the Cronos-concept … is the ultimate explanation of the particular character of the astrological idea of Saturn.” (150, ellipses are Benjamin’s)  

Here Benjamin assembles a vision of melancholy that internalizes these aspects of Saturn/Cronos as a suspension of dialectically opposed extremes. As Beatrice Hanssen argues in her seminal essay “Portrait of Melancholy (Benjamin, Warburg, Panofsky)” Benjamin seizes upon the Saturn/Cronos opposition and transforms “this melancholic

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90 Panofsky and Saxl authored a tract, in German, on “Melencolia I,” which would much later (1964) grow into Saturn and Melancholy, their collaborative opus with Klibansky.
ambivalence, turning it into nothing less than the operations of the dialectic” of mourning, *Trauerspiel* and melancholy (1002). In the *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, Benjamin gathers the phenomena related to its central idea and topic, like a collection of emblems from across the history of art. As Hanssen writes, “the *Trauerspiel* book was a broadly conceived philosophico-theological tractatus, which furnished Benjamin’s first sustained analysis of modernity, filtered through a study of the Baroque, in terms, precisely, of the predominant moods of mourning and melancholia” (994). The construction of the dialectical image of *Trauerspiel* takes on the related but different theory of tragedy and speaks of “*Trauerspiel* and Tragedy” as if the former were not a weak form of the latter; and moreover, as if the form of the *Trauerspiel* were emblematic of the Baroque. At the core of Benjamin’s book lies the coin with the figure of death and melancholy personified, the image of which is immortalized in Dürer’s most famous engraving. This coin has returned and emerged in the flâneur’s pocket. Hanssen argues that the image of “Melencolia I” is folded into the pages of the *Trauerspiel* book (999-1000). A short while later, she adds that:

Seizing upon Panofsky and Saxl’s diagnosis of melancholy as a state dominated by polarities or *extremitas*, whose dualities derived from the “inner structure of the mythological idea of Cronos as such,” Benjamin further transformed this melancholic ambivalence, turning it into nothing less than the operations of the dialectic. The seeming incongruities, even paradoxes, between the vignettes that make up the central mourning chapter of his habilitation dissolve, once one recognizes them as the transitional moments of a dialectical logic. Transposed from the pages of art history to the *Trauerspiel* book, Dürer’s engraving appeared encased, secured between multiple frames, as melancholy was defined now phenomenologically and psychologically, now historically, now politically or theologically, and, not unimportantly, epistemologically. For melancholy, as Benjamin suggested, truly opened up onto a new methodology and theory
of knowledge, which required the cultural historian’s immersion in natural and cultural objects. (1002)

Benjamin’s experience of melancholy folds into his methodology and theory of knowledge. More than this, Benjamin discovers in the Saturn/Cronos dynamic his methodology: how to read in terms of complimentary opposites and, crucially, how to see these oppositions as more productive when left unresolved. It is in the suspension between extremes – neither exclusively in philosophy nor in theology – and with “Saturnine vision” that one reads the manifestations of melancholy. Its constellation governs the stars which form its image, and over time, an authentic epistemo-critical apparatus may help discern new stars within that constellation.

In this correspondance the astrology of Saturn finds its ground in the Baroque. As is often the case in the Trauerspiel book, Benjamin spends several of the opening pages on the section dedicated to melancholy quoting the words by others. “The history of the problem of melancholy unfolds” in the series of quotations from Giehlow, Saxl and Panofsky to locate the character of the Saturn/Cronos constellation of melancholy. After Benjamin has lined up the key figures and commentators, he begins his contribution to the discourse:

The history of the problem of melancholy unfolds within the perimeter of [the Saturn/Cronos] dialectic. Its climax is reached with the magic of the Renaissance. Whereas the Aristotelian insights into the psychical duality of the melancholy disposition and the antithetical nature of the influence of Saturn had given way, in the middle ages, to a purely demonic representation of both, such as conformed with Christian speculation; with the Renaissance the whole wealth of ancient meditation re-emerged from the sources. (150)
Benjamin’s position on the Renaissance in the *Trauerspiel* book is a convoluted one.\(^91\) As Jane Newman writes, Benjamin invents a Baroque in the “Epistemo-Critical Prologue” that is meant to undercut the literary-critical traditions of his time, which devalued and largely ignored the German Baroque period (33-36). There are, for Benjamin, clear and distinct aesthetic developments between these periods – and while the Renaissance is undersold in order to oversell the Baroque – Benjamin observes and relates in the above passage the conclusion of a dialectic evolution of melancholy from Aristotle through the Middle Ages to the Renaissance.

“Problem XXX” observes the particularity of the co-presence of genius and madness in the melancholic. The Renaissance not only rediscovers the sources of melancholy as a form of genius, but also attempts to purify its intention into a form of magic. Heroic melancholy, as the energy of genius, reaches its apotheosis in the Renaissance. The contemplative power of melancholy becomes a focal point of Renaissance idealisms, celebrated in particular by Ficino. The emergence of melancholy, a concrete aesthetic ideal from the hazier characterisation in Aristotle, is a key turning point as history turns from the Renaissance to the Baroque. For the problem with melancholy was its correlation with the other, pernicious melancholy, manifest in the malcontented. Benjamin continues:

> [In the age of the Renaissance], which was bent at all costs on gaining access to the sources of occult insight into nature, the melancholic posed the question on how it might be possible to discover for oneself the spiritual powers of Saturn and yet escape madness. The problem was to

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\(^91\) The bird’s eye view I have provided of Renaissance melancholy in the first chapter helps to account for a portion of this position.
separate sublime melancholy, the [Melencolia] ‘illa heroica’ of [Ficino], and of Melanchthon, from the ordinary and pernicious kind. A precise of body and soul is combined with astrological magic…. (151)

In this analysis, Benjamin presents the apotheosis of melancholy’s extreme idealization in the Renaissance: it is the ambition to access Saturn’s immense intellectual power without succumbing to madness. The solution for the Renaissance thinkers was turning to magic, which makes sense in a pre-Enlightenment epistemology. Benjamin’s emphasis on Saturn/Cronos as dialectical is not accidental. The constellation of Saturn/Cronos can withstand intense contradictions without having to collapse or commit to a synthesis. All along I have argued that the opposition between melancholia and ideality is the essential character of melancholy. In the Saturn/Cronos constellation one cannot separate the madness of Cronos from the celestial energies of the sign of Saturn. The Trauerspiel represents the realization that pure, unmediated melancholy is an impossible ideality. The Baroque is the realization of Renaissance idealism’s falling into ruin. Romanticism could only engineer a partial redemption of this ruin, before also succumbing to the failures of its own idealisms. This conclusion is the same one that Baudelaire would take into modernity. Then, as now, the problem is always to gain access to melancholy without suffering from the setbacks. In identifying the complementarity of the Renaissance and the Baroque with regards to melancholy, Benjamin is able to move forward on his general theory.

Newman, in her monograph on Benjamin, explores his “discussion of Baroque melancholy in the Tragic Drama book in dialogue with [another] ‘Renaissance’” (139). In this other, German Renaissance, a legitimate peer to the Italian one, “several key
figures and doctrines of the Lutheran Reformation in Germany in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries” enjoyed a considerable revival (139). When Benjamin reads the history of melancholy, and the tension it suffered between the Renaissance and the Baroque, he appears to be giving this history a new context. In the elaboration of the other “Renaissance,” Benjamin attempts to affix the former into a correspondance with his articulation of the German Baroque. As he had “ripped” passages out of their context from the Baroque Trauerspiel in order to redeem them, so too was he ripping a new “Renaissance” in an assemblage of quotations. In order to do this, Benjamin has to contrive a symbol, an image, an emblem that connects the two periods. Newman argues that, “it is against the backdrop of a specifically ‘Lutheran’ melancholy that his famously obscure observations on the allegorical logic of Baroque emblematics can be best understood” (140). Benjamin is both indebted to and critical of this Lutheran attitude: “The key moments in the Tragic Drama book that signal Benjamin’s reversal of Warburg’s upbeat reading of Lutheranism’s afterlives are, ironically, marked by a return to the Albertinus text he had encountered….” (Newman 168). For Newman, “Benjamin describes how the Baroque melancholic, instead of ‘escap[ing] madness’” thanks to Melanchthon’s melencolia illa heroica, instead “‘goes mad and fades into despair’” (Newman 168; Origin 151, 145). The point of melencolia heroica was to balance the intellectual powers of melancholic affect against the erotomania. In redeeming melancholy through the Baroque, the period in which the Aristotelian/Ficinian conception of

92 “The great dramatists of the baroque were Lutherans” (Origin, 138; quoted in Newman, 139-140). After all, Philip Melanchthon stood at Martin Luther’s side during the Reformation.
melancholy had met its end, and lost its power, Benjamin has discovered a melencolia heroica all his own. This version of the Saturnine was one that warded against the forces that turned Hamlet and Alceste into malcontents. It is a melancholy that looks into phenomena and object as the markers of the messianic.

This section of the “Tragedy and Trauerspiel” chapter includes the second passage I wish to examine at length, which is Benjamin’s writing on the stone as an emblem of melancholy. The stone is a cypher in the language of nature, a language marked by absolute silence. It is also the emblem through which Benjamin ties together the Renaissance and the Baroque. He writes:

[One] symbol which seems to have been passed over in the re-discovery of the older symbols of melancholy embodied in [Dürer’s “Melencolia I’”] and contemporary speculation…. This is the stone. Its place in the inventory of emblems is assured. Aegidius Albertinus writes of the melancholic: “The grief, which otherwise moves the heart to meekness, only makes him more and more obstinate in his perverse thoughts, for his tears do not fall into his heart and soften its hardness, but he resembles a stone which, when the weather is damp, only sweats outwardly”; and in reading these worlds one can barely restrain oneself from seeing, and following up, a special meaning. (154-155)

Benjamin’s insistence on the stone as an emblem of melancholy is as compelling as it is mysterious. The constellation of images from the stone as part of natural phenomena and astrological phenomena float around the pages of Benjamin’s Trauerspiel book, waiting for the reader to reach for them. As has been Benjamin’s practice throughout this section, his quotations are meant to stand in for his own arguments. Through the quotation, one reads that melancholics are those affected by grief whose hearts harden rather than soften. The stone of melancholia is dry and cold, corresponding to the characteristics of black bile under the humoral theory. It is also through the emblem of the stone that the
characteristic of melancholy from the Middle Ages and the Renaissance find a way to coalesce. The following section of “Trauerspiel and Tragedy” offers one view of the stone as part of melancholy’s constellation. Benjamin writes:

   It may be that all that is to be seen in the emblem of the stone are the most obvious features of the cold, dry earth. But it is quite conceivable and, in the case of the passage from Albertinus, by no means improbable, that in the inert mass there is a reference to the genuinely theological conception of the melancholic, which is to be found in one of the seven deadly sins. This is acedia, dullness of the heart, or sloth. The feeble light and the slowness of Saturn in its orbit establish a connection between this condition and the melancholic…. (155)

The emblem of the stone carries the weight of planets. The hardened heart is a burden akin of Atlas holding the earth upon his weary shoulders. In the Saturn that holds an orbit around the sun, somehow the allegories of the old world survive: the sign of Saturn represents both a sinful inertia of the soul and an impossible, longing gaze to the stars.

   Astrology, as Benjamin discovered for himself in the Trauerspiel study, is the realm of myth and ideas. The stone, as an emblem of melancholy, is like holding the natural and astrological order in the palm of one’s hand – even the smallest stone becomes the burden of Atlas.93 I read Benjamin’s stone as a ghostly yet heavy stone, which carries massive weight but cannot be manipulated or destroyed. Ferber remarks on this Benjaminian stone:

   The image of the stone that Benjamin identifies as a neglected emblem of melancholy can likewise be understood as embodying such stillness. ... I suggest reading the role of the stone in these somewhat esoteric references

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93 Lars von Trier’s 2011 film Melancholia illustrates the relationship between Saturn and the stone. In that film a strange blue and ghostly planet named “Melancholia” has emerged from the behind the sun and is headed toward Earth. Some believe that Melancholia will pass by the Earth, others that the apocalypse is imminent. The figure of “Melancholia” as a planet and melancholy itself is the analogue which reminds us that while Saturn is both a planet and a god, ultimately it is a stone.
Saturnine Constellations

[by Benjamin] not only through its cold dry features, resembling traditional melancholic traits, but also through its intimations of stillness. Here again the stone can be read as parallel to the ghost, as its equivalent. (117)

The burden of the melancholic is always already frustratingly invisible, because it is never actually the stone itself, for the stone is a metonymy of trauma and history. It is like the burden of guilt from Yorick’s skull, an emblem of Hamlet’s melancholia, and also of the Saturnine. The melancholic, while sad or mad, feels unbearably heavy, but cannot point to a specific cause, otherwise that cause might be laid to rest. Benjamin locates the stone as a gathering of meaning; its presence represents a landmark in a journey across literary space and time. The nature of this stone permits manifold possibilities; it is a Babel script, a world script. The Rosetta stone was our initial access to the world of Egyptian languages, a stone that was both literally and figuratively an entire world. Melancholy as a (key)stone is the representation of pure possibility and pure mourning. Like Saturn, the stone of melancholy is at once part of the planet and the star. Yet, as a hardened heart or a stony tear, melancholy refuses to allow experience to fade into the past: this recalls Benjamin’s insistence on libraries as the baroque site of melancholic contemplation, and an early form of writing on stone tablets or walls. Freud’s pathological melancholia is the counterpoint to the “noble melancholia” that grew out of Aristotle, just as acedia and splenetic melancholia are the counterpoint to a “heroical” or sublime melancholy. Melancholy is the complex and contradictory correspondance of the two without either being negated and resolved by a dialectical synthesis. Saturn, as the emblem of this non-resolution, is a fitting allegorical canvas upon which to affix the
collected meanings from melancholy’s manifold instantiations, so ecstatically gathered by Benjamin’s *Trauerspiel* reading of the stone and Saturn.

One discovers in the Baroque, in the place of a sublime melancholy, a melancholy that echoes forth from the primordial essence of nature:

[Bad] dreams come from the spleen, but prophetic dreams are also the prerogative of the melancholic. As the common lot of princes and martyrs they are a familiar element in the *Trauerspiel*. But even these prophetic dreams are to be seen as arising from geomantic slumber in the temple of creation, and not as sublime or even sacred inspiration. For all the wisdom of the melancholic is subject to the netherworld; it is secured by immersion of life of creaturely things, and it hears nothing of the voice of revelation … the downward gaze is characteristic of the Saturnine man. *(Origin* 152)*

Where the Middle Ages and the Renaissance attempted to separate and oppose the negative and positive aspects of the melancholy type, and then to sublimate an interpretation of that negative, the Baroque attempts something new. The *Trauerspiel* – along with Burton – assists in the inauguration in art of a metamelancholic tradition, where the reflections of the melancholic upon melancholy become its own primary concern. Where Renaissance Neoplatonism used melancholy as a celebration of the genius and intellectual life, the Baroque, overwhelmed by time (and its loss), aesthetically suspended chronological time in order to assess melancholy as not a mark of the distinguished individual but of the human condition. In this drama of European literary history, the Renaissance and the Baroque have become figural characters in Benjamin’s own stage play, conjoined actors sharing a single spleen.
**The melancholy ar(t)chivist visits the Bibliothèque Nationale**

What the Baroque introduces, for Benjamin, as a constellating element to melancholy is the importance of time, in part accomplished by a stalling or denial of the transcendental. Self-reflexive awareness of temporality, and the aesthetically explicit manipulations of this temporality, represent one characteristic of this mode of thought. Melancholy continually upsets the unity of time. Modernity would take these two elements and build an historical age: the enactment of melancholy through its reflection in the artistic subject. The artist is represented in the work of art struggling in the process of creation, the “meta” of artmaking, as it were. The artist has trouble letting go of a nagging souvenir/Andenken, an intuition of what art used to be like. Freud’s view of melancholy would bring together the melancholy type and melancholic time and make explicit the relationship between the melancholic subject (patient as type) and mourning (the end of melancholy as measured in time). Baroque Trauerspiel makes time a continual problem.

In their general introduction to *Depression and Melancholy, 1660-1800* – an anthology of religious, medical and literary texts on melancholy from this period – Leigh Wetherall Dickson and Allan Ingram state that: “The years from 1660 onwards witnessed a literary outpouring of nonconformist texts that emphasized the anxiety, despair and melancholy that was felt by many of those excluded from preaching or from bearing witness to their faith. Often such works were written from prison, or were concerned with the imprisoned hero in a state of psychological and/or physical torment” (xxvii). In prolonged suffering the suspension of time is conducive to a metamelancholic reflection.
The *Trauerspiel* and other forms of drama focused on imprisonment and torment. This could be made into narratives of escaping social or bodily forms of confinement. Melancholy, then, was an interaction integral to this conflicted dialectic of freedom and imprisonment. Melancholy time represented the suspension of normal, chronological time in order to engage the conditions of entrapment. Rainer Nägele provides a reading of just such an example in his monograph on Benjamin. The descriptions of torture in Gryphius serve as examples for Benjamin and Nägele of the “radical secularization of the medieval mystery play that empties all transcendence and leads toward a cancellation of all transcendence” and moreover the “manifest Christian religiosity and rhetoric of Gryphius seem to contradict this interpretation, and yet they confirm the strength of Benjamin’s reading” (*Theatre, Theory, Speculation*, 9). Nägele continues and argues that “Gryphius’ *Catharine von Georgien* is a paradigm for the *Trauerspiel* as the staging of an unfathomable pleasure in the imagination and (re-)presentation of torture” (10). This loss of an object is staged, for Nägele, in the process of mourning (10). Throughout his work on the *Trauerspiel* Benjamin makes the manipulation of time and chronology part of the method of his treatise. Moreover, the choice of the *Trauerspiel* as the subject of the book, as Pensky writes, relates to a specific concept of time:

The embeddedness of the *Trauerspiel* within historical time means that the genre becomes the aesthetic expression of the reality of historical catastrophe, above all the unparalleled physical violence and devastation, and social and political chaos, of the Thirty Years War. The *Trauerspiel* does not offer some manifest commentary on these historical events. Rather, the experience of historical catastrophe itself is incorporated into the structure and the content of the work, becoming the controlling premise of dramatic action, the fixed metaphorical referent for the generation of dramatic language. Lamentation is thus not merely the subject matter of the *Trauerspiel*; it is the *Trauerspiel*. (75)
Pensky adds that for Benjamin the *Trauerspiel* does subscribe to the enduring nature of transcendental art, as it is always already turned into ruins on a path to its own demise and enacting that demise (76-77). As Ferber argues, “Benjamin’s preoccupation with baroque theater … entails an absorption in the baroque period itself and its *Zeitgeist* or *Weltanschauung*, its fundamental mood or ambience” (67). Further, argues Pensky, the baroque “state of mind” (*Befindlichkeit*, attunement, or fundamental mood) is “repeatedly and explicitly designated as melancholic, by Benjamin himself, as well as a long line of other historians and philosophers” (67). Exiled in his “Capital of the Nineteenth Century” with little money and few possessions left to his name – as Patrick Hutton remarks – “Benjamin made of Paris the best refuge he could” (5). Fully engaged in his final project, the *Passagenwerk (The Arcades Project)*, Benjamin’s ambition is to make a history of the mood and culture of nineteenth-century Paris in an attempt to see this period of history whole. It is as if the Paris written around in Charles Baudelaire’s writing, especially his poetry, could exist and might redeem Benjamin’s own times. The figure of Benjamin in the archive takes on a double meaning. As Benjamin melancholically broods over stacks of books, his own experience energizes and transforms his project. He quotes the past, unwilling and unable to abandon it, with the mind to redeem their phenomenality. Benjamin has gone from surveyor of the Baroque to collector of modernity’s commodities. In looking at a few passages from the *Passagenwerk* and related texts of this late period on Baudelaire, I outline a phenomenological portrait of melancholy as method taken to its fully realized conclusion.
Françoise Proust writes that, for Benjamin, the “twentieth century is the ruin of the nineteenth. This destruction is inscribed upon the heart of its construction, and its violence is in the image required by its foundation: the revolutions revealed themselves to be counter-revolutionary, the State is decomposing” (54). She calls Benjamin’s *Arcades Project* “the book of the twentieth century’s prehistory” and his historical materialism takes the image of “tableau,” “table,” and “chessboard” (56). Richard Sieburth in his article “Benjamin the Scrivener” provides a recap of what Benjamin’s magnum opus is, and what it was meant to be:

Conceived in Paris in 1927 and still in progress when Benjamin fled during the occupation of the capital in 1940, the text that has come down to us as *Das Passagenwerk*, or the *Arcades Project*, is in no sense a finished work; its specific gravity, rather, is that of a massive fragment or monumental ruin meticulously constructed over the course of thirteen years. … Shrouded by his habitual veil of secrecy, Benjamin’s undiscovered magnum opus had long been rumored to exist among his unpublished papers. But the manuscript would not see the light of print until 1982, three and a half decades after its rediscovery at the Bibliothèque Nationale, where it had been deposited in the safekeeping of Georges Bataille for the duration of the war. Published as volume five of the Suhrkamp *Gesammelte Schriften* and impeccably edited by Rolf Tiedemann, the two hefty tomes of the *Arcades Project* comprise over a quarter of a million words laboriously transcribed from hundreds of tiny folios covered in Benjamin’s minuscule hand, the entire manuscript, according to Bataille, standing no more than fifteen or twenty centimeters high. (7)

Until nearly the end, when Benjamin was forced to flee for his life, he laboured on this massive ruin, collecting the stones in the form of quotations painstakingly researched and copied into his fine, microscopic handwriting. Benjamin’s editor, Rolf Tiedemann, in his seminal essay “Dialectics at a Standstill,” outlines the significance of these drafts, which collected so much of Benjamin’s late work:
Most of the more important texts [Benjamin] wrote during the last decade of his life are offshoots of the *Passagenwerk*. If it had been completed, it would have become nothing less than a materialist philosophy of the history of the nineteenth century. The exposé entitled “Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century” (1935) provides us with a summary of the themes and motifs Benjamin was concerned with in the larger work. (929)

The task Benjamin had set for himself, then, was a monumental one. The *Passagenwerk* was nothing less than the history of nineteenth-century Parisian culture and art in the form of quotations and aphorisms. The method of quotation and digression – tested with the *Trauerspiel* book – through the collection and presentation of vignettes, appears in the *Arcades Project* in its most singular, rarefied form. It represented the ultimate manifestation of Benjamin’s methodological practices. As James Rolleston argues, for Benjamin the “concept of quotation rearticulates the relations between the three master concepts – dialectic, materialism, and history” whereby presenting language of the past in the structure of well-organized quotations breaks the endless repetition of the same that allows the myths of history to perpetuate endlessly (20). The method of his writing was intended to preserve that moment of history, sometimes lost in the narrative retelling, by quoting it, one text at a time, within a predetermined structure and organization, to help make the ideas flow. This assemblage of allegory, this attempt to reveal a constellation of the mood of a period, is nothing less than one of the most ambitious projects ever undertaken in the history of thought.

The figure and writings of Charles Baudelaire represent for Benjamin a crucial focal point in the total work of the *Passagenwerk*. A book project on Baudelaire was meant to introduce and serve as the companion piece to the *Arcades Project*. In the “J” Convolute of the *Passagenwerk*, dedicated to Baudelaire, Benjamin writes:
What I propose is to show how Baudelaire lies embedded in the nineteenth century. The imprint he has left behind there must stand out clear and intact, like that of a stone which, having lain in the ground for decades, is one day rolled from its place. (*Arcades* 321 [J51a,5])

The emblem of the stone migrates from the Baroque and finds its way to Baudelaire. In turning to Baudelaire and other themes in his “Exposés,” Benjamin is engaging in a radical act of his imagination, and tries to follow the spectre of spleen, gathered from Baudelaire’s writings. The ability to contemplate the death of events in history and to redeem its phenomena, which could otherwise pass into oblivion, is an almost impossibly taxing act. In the 1935 and 1939 “Exposés” on “Baudelaire, or the Streets of Paris” Benjamin opens with an epigraph from Baudelaire’s “Le Cygne”: “Tout pour moi devient allégorie” [Everything for me becomes allegory] (*OC* 1:86, l.31; *Arcades* 10, 21).

Benjamin writes:

Baudelaire’s genius, which feeds on melancholy, is an allegorical genius. With Baudelaire, Paris becomes for the first time the subject of lyric poetry. This poetry of place is the opposite of all poetry of the soil. The gaze which the allegorical genius turns on the city betrays, instead, a profound alienation. It is the gaze of the flâneur, whose way of life conceals behind a beneficent mirage the anxiety of the future inhabitants of our metropolises. (*Arcades* 21)

The opening paragraph dives into the mood of this figure that feeds on melancholy and constructs a vision of a city of assemblages from a world order that erodes, like a dream fades in the morning twilight.

What does Benjamin mean by “allegorical genius” and how does such a construct “feed on melancholy”? In this allegorical anatomy of Baudelaire’s imaginative body, the burning of bile into black bile becomes a function of spleen. In this image, the classical function of spleen is reversed. In Baudelaire’s schema of the human body, as read by
Benjamin, the spleen produces black bile as a form of psychical fuel. This absolute spleen takes the refuse of modern existence and makes of it the energy for modern art. In the absence of this energy, capitalism would utterly drain the artist until only a dried up scrap remained. In this mess of the ruins of the past and the ruining of the future, the flâneur is the anchor, the ground that never stays in one place. Wandering across the city, spell-bound by the mirage of capital and technology, anxious about the threat of prophecy around each street corner, the flâneur glues together the pieces of this allegorical bricolage. Benjamin continues:

The flâneur seeks refuge in the crowd. The crowd is the veil through which the familiar city is transformed for the flâneur into phantasmagoria. This phantasmagoria, in which the city appears now as a landscape, now as a room, seems later to have inspired the decor of department stores, which thus put flânerie to work for profit. In any case, department stores are the last precincts of flânerie. (Arcades 21)

Benjamin juxtaposes the contrast between the landscape of the city and the interior space of a room to the mirage of reality and slipping into a dream, a waking-dream when one walks within a crowd, looking to connect to something auratic, authentic. “For it is precisely the deluded investment in all such mythical ‘correspondences’ that Benjamin identifies as a tell-tale symptom of the phantasmagoric resistance to material reality” (Newmark 274). For Benjamin, the images of ruins, the abyss, the arcades, wine, poverty, carcasses, the sun (of Icarus) gather around a moving archive of melancholy. The ideal has become entirely impermanent, a phantasm of life on earth. The flâneur is a vagabond that circles endlessly around the periphery of a city, in its centre, through the noises and safety belts of crowds. The phenomena of Parisian life gather around flâneur, with a movement that is both inward and outward. The move inward is the brooding alienation
the flâneur feels: the metropolis is cut off from nature, and has become a nature onto itself, jumbled and noisy. The move outward, into the crowd, is the wandering into a dreamscape, where commodity has replaced phenomena, and everything’s use-value has replaced the corresponding forest of symbols.

In this phenomenological act of following along these trails of spleen, Benjamin gazes around the city of Paris, as it exists in the allegory of Baudelaire’s poetry, and tries to recognize his position by looking at the constellations, shapes he can recognize in those spaces. Benjamin writes:

The attraction which a few basic situations continually exerted on Baudelaire belongs to the complex of symptoms associated with melancholy. He appears to have been under the compulsion of returning at least once to each of his main motifs. (Arcades 328-329 [J55a,2])

The dominant motif in Baudelaire’s writing is spleen. Spleen in Baudelaire’s writing is a gathering point for the stars that comprise the total constellation of melancholy – this has been covered at length in chapter three. The order of knowledge to which melancholy belongs is as old as thought, new like the stars. As Baudelaire writes, and as Benjamin reads, spleen gathers the phenomena of Parisian life as its substance. Spleen does not grasp these phenomena in order to simplify their conceptualization; it gathers these phenomena as a constellation groups a series of stars. Benjamin describes the process of gathering phenomena in another passage:

There are weighty historical circumstances making the Golgotha-way of impotence trod by Baudelaire into one marked out in advance by his society. Only this would explain how it was that he drew, as traveling expenses along the way, a precious old coin from among the accumulated treasures of this society. It was the coin of allegory, with the scythe-wielding skeleton on one side, and, on the obverse, the figure of Melancholy plunged in meditation. (Arcades 334 [J58a,2])
Benjamin draws with his images the two sides of his figural coin in Baudelaire’s pocket. The figure of Baudelaire’s flâneur wanders and travels the urban landscape. With this simultaneous inward brooding and outward gazing, the flâneur carries and represents this coin of death and melancholy. Benjamin too, carries this coin as a reminder of his method and his alignment with his prophetic angels, including Dürer’s.

Hanssen argues that the figure of Dürer’s angel is matched by that of Benjamin’s portraits from his days at the Bibliothèque Nationale. She writes:

Mourning the loss of one of the [twentieth] century’s most influential intellectuals and critics, these pictures depict a brooding, gloomy Benjamin, born under the sign of Saturn, whose languid pose and language of gestures – that is, downward gaze, chin leaning on a clenched fist – seem to quote from an ancient pictorial archive of mourning and melancholia. (992)

The archive of quotations from the Arcades is to Benjamin what spleen is to Baudelaire: a gathering of phenomena, experienced as a form of reality, wandering in a phantas-magoria. As Seamus Deane reflects, a constellation represents “a previously unrecognized structure of a network of relations that was always there, like the unconscious, and appears to us, like it, in articulated images, laden with the weight of the past and yet haloed in the light discovery and recognition” (10). This structure becomes in him, as it is in Baudelaire’s writing, an opportunity to brood inwardly about the past and engage the modern age outwardly, at once. With the Passagenwerk that method takes the act of collecting quotation as fundamental act of gathering phenomena from the nineteenth

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94 Constellations are always right above our noses, and in that sense, finally recognizing it in the night sky of the mind often feels like a slap to one’s own face: “Why didn’t I see that earlier!” So often during this project, I found myself finding these connections and clusters of meaning in Benjamin’s ambitious, fraught and dense writing.
century. Hanssen writes: “it is not hard to discern in ‘Melencolia I’ a personification of the collector – the physiognomist of objects – sitting amidst a sprawl of collectibles” (1003). When Benjamin turns his attention, a decade later, to “Passage/Passagen” he has expanded his ability to imagine the mood of a century, without trying to possess that mood and reduce it to a concept.

As a collector, Benjamin is trying to save and redeem phenomena that the (fascistic) forces of history would just as soon see wiped from the Earth. Benjamin’s collection of quotations becomes so impossibly large because, in a sense, the entirety of nineteenth-century culture is redeemable, especially when compared to the homicidal twentieth century. A method of art-making is essentially allegorical in nature, and so Benjamin fixates on elements of a culture he might stitch together into a book. Susan Buck-Morss notes in her monograph:

> When Benjamin conceived of the *Arcades* project, there is no doubt that he was self-consciously reviving allegorical techniques. Dialectical images are a modern form of emblems. But whereas the Baroque dramas were melancholy reflections on the inevitability of decay and disintegration, in the *Passagenwerk* the devaluation of (new) nature and its status as ruin becomes instructive politically. (170)

The structural principle and method of the *Trauerspiel* book and the *Passagenwerk* are essentially the same, the scope is much, much larger in the case of the latter. In essence, as Ackbar Abbas suggests, “Benjamin studies art history from the point of view of the collector” (220). Benjamin as archivist, as collector, finds in these quotations the essence of Parisian life, and redeems these phenomena in an attempt to give that history, lost to the times, a material experience and existence. Paul Holdengräber argues that Benjamin’s “interest in this figure [of the collector] is both a theoretical and a personal one” and “is
strewn throughout Benjamin’s work, appearing, *en passant*, disguised, but sharing in his gait, as ‘Sandwichman,’ ‘Lumpensammler,’ ‘Flâneur,’ … [one] may say that collecting is the master-trope of Benjamin’s work” (100-101). For Susan Sontag, Benjamin’s “argument is more daring” than attributing to melancholia an “outward” projection of “torpor” (119). Rather, in Sontag’s description of why Benjamin is consumed by the act of collection, the latter “perceives that the deep transactions between the melancholic and the world always takes place in things (rather than with people); and that these are genuine transactions, which reveal meaning. Precisely because the melancholy character is haunted by death, it is melancholics who best know how to read the world. Or, rather, it is the world which itself to melancholic scrutiny” (119-120). To rewrite an earlier quotation from Hanssen: it is not hard to discern in the *Passagenwerk* a personification of the collector – in the figure of Benjamin in the archive – sitting amidst a sprawl of collected quotations. Quotation in Benjamin becomes a pure form of creativity. Melancholy, as method of knowing the world, assists in the act of finding and parsing quotations, which when placed in a sequence become a materialized form of history. Benjamin’s own words, then, represents the clue to transition from one quotation to the next. The massive archive of the total possible shape of history, if it is in any way possible to see it whole, can respond to these methodological tactics. The *Passagenwerk*, and what it has to say about Baudelaire and Paris, becomes a conduit into a rarefied, precious vision of the history of melancholy.
“Je me souviens” … of that journey into the cave of spleen

Benjamin in his last decade alive was an obsessive, speculative and imaginative reader of Baudelaire and his city of Paris. Benjamin’s reading is as much the art of interpretation as it is a pure act of creation. He is as engaged in an authentic reading of Baudelaire as he was enraptured by his performance of a version of Baudelaire’s idealisms. During the 1920s, Benjamin translated some of Baudelaire’s “Tableaux parisiens,” the sequence added to the second edition of Les Fleurs du mal. One of his most famous essays, “The Task of Translator” is the preface to this collection of poems, including the influential lyrical poem “Le Cygne.” Benjamin would return to these poems routinely throughout his writing life. In one particular passage from “The Task of the Translator,” perhaps its most famous paragraph, appears a telling allusion to Baudelaire’s poem, “Correspondances”:

The task of the translator consists in finding the particular intention toward the target language which produces in that language the echo of the original. This is the feature of translation that basically differentiates it from the poet’s work, because the intention of the latter is never directed toward the language as such, at its totality, but is aimed solely and immediately at specific linguistic contextual aspects. Unlike a work of literature, translation finds itself not in the center of the language forest but on the outside facing the wooded ridge; it calls into it without entering, aiming at that single spot where the echo is able to give, in its own language, the reverberation of the work in the alien one. (SW 1:258-259)

Gasché notes that the allusion “to the ‘wooded interior’95 of the symbol” along with “the image of the language forest serves to stress the literary works’ symbolic aspect, which is to say, its being constituted by a natural unity based on natural relations between sign and content,” which the intellectual act of translation, in Benjamin’s view, strives to

95 Quotation from Benjamin (Origin 165).
overcome the naturalism of this unity (13-14). Ferber notes, about the echo, that it “is a presentation of dispersion, emptiness and lack” and that the echo “restages the process of loss” (152). Lloyd Spencer argues that Benjamin sees “the whole notion of the correspondances, and its centrality for Baudelaire, as a datum urgently in need of decoding” (60). In the act of translation, one’s recollection of the original is always in play. One must look at the page of Baudelaire’s poem in French, capture the essence of the words in the mind, not only their letters but also their phantasms, and render the verses into the target language, in a manner that evokes the echo of the original.

The process of echo location from a distant periphery, as is embrace of the unobtainable, is a melancholy exercise, an engagement with the impossible. Benjamin’s metamelancholic anguish as translator is clarified within understanding of Baudelaire as the stone of the nineteenth century. For, as Benjamin writes:

Spleen lays down centuries between the present moment and the one just lived. It is spleen that tirelessly generates “antiquity.” And in fact, with Baudelaire, modernity is nothing other than the “newest antiquity.” Modernity, for Baudelaire, is not solely and not primarily the object of his sensibility; it is the object of a conquest. Modernity has, for its armature, the allegorical mode of vision. (Arcades 336 [J59a,4])

For Benjamin, melancholy is a conduit through which he can target complimentary phenomena from different historical periods, just as the translator targets one language to be transmitted into another language, and its attendant complications. Modernity is a visionary mode, because it is the recognition of a historical reset, of the founding of a new world that can no longer find its connection to the old world order. Only in words,

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96 In the passage from “Central Park” I quoted in the introduction, Andenken is defined as the deployment of souvenir as a form of prophetic vision.
words like *spleen*, can one commune with the dead spirits of the Ancients. Translation is one such mode of communion, of paying reverence of the words of the old gods. The problems of translation open themselves in Benjamin’s analysis to broader methodological concerns.

The capitulation to this impossibility and failure brought on by melancholy is not a surrender to pessimism for Benjamin. Benjamin was profoundly fascinated and influenced by Baudelaire’s transfiguration of spleen, particularly in the “Tableaux parisiens.” Spencer draws the connection between the classical theory of spleen and Baudelaire’s affinity with it: “*Spleen, the taedium vitae, Saturnine melancholy: Baudelaire knew his condition to be related to that suffered by kindred spirits in the declining Roman Empire*” (Spencer 123). Benjamin, as Spencer writes, “set out to show that one can understand his *spleen* as an expression of the temper of his own age, as genuine historical experience, only by relating it to and distinguishing it from the kind of *spleen* which has its most widespread manifestation … in Baroque Saturnine melancholy” (123). As a translator of “Tableaux parisiens” Benjamin would have to grapple with the meanings of spleen, and this encounter would influence his last works from the *Passagenwerk* in a profoundly significant way. The commodity and the corpse, like Leopardi’s dialogue on fashion and death, tie together thanks to a correspondence between the relations of their respective signs. What is of importance, here, is the transfiguration of memory into the act of collecting, an act which is Benjamin’s greatest contribution as literary critic, curator of history. Memory, under the sign of *mémoire involontaire*, and its development in Proust, Freud, and Rank was an important theme for
Benjamin (*SW* 4:316-318). The traces in memory, like the phenomena of history left in trace form through books, may be collected to form material constellations of historical ideas. It is through Benjamin’s collections of quotations and comments that new readings of art have been made possible, including new readings for Baudelaire. In some ways, the figure of the collector is Benjamin’s correlate to Baudelaire’s absolute spleen: the collector represents a figure who sees a value to all objects, and serves as the redeemer of time, lost objects and phenomenality itself. Benjamin’s melancholy, unlike Baudelaire’s ironic turn against it, represents the sacrifice of one’s mind to the sublime totality of all phenomena across all of time. As Benjamin was passing through, he opened his hands to reach out towards the stars and never, ever closed them.

The four “Spleen” poems in *Les Fleurs du mal* form a part of sequence within a sequence.97 Holland emphasizes that the “spleen poems and the cycle centered on them are crucial to the new [second edition] ending of ‘Spleen and Ideal’” starting from “Sépulture” to “L’Horloge, from poem LXX to LXXXV (86). Holland suggests that “we infer the condition of the (disappearing) Poet – boredom, ennui – from the emblems of that condition which comprise the surroundings” (94). This inference is necessary, because the separation between the figure of the poet and the forces that would annihilate the latter become harder to distinguish. The “Spleen” poems are key representations of this erasure. Starobinski explains the purpose of the “Spleen” poems this way:

The form poems of *Spleen* – and especially the second one (*Les Fleurs du mal*, LXXV) – render visible, with a particular acuity, the motif of living

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97 Jauss, in his reading of “Spleen” (II) in *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, provides a penetrating analysis of this line, and of the poem line-by-line.
death. The latter is one of the components of a psychical wound – whose literary designation, borrowed from English, that is to say, from the same linguistic repertoire as the word dandy – well enough represents the seductive, defensive mask that covers up one’s distress. This experience, in its depths, traverses to a perilous apprehension of the discourse and mutism of melancholic psychosis. The word spleen represents here the indication of a figuration, of a distancing, of a “literalization” – confirmed by the aesthetic accomplishment of the text, by the dynamic of its images and its allegorical inventiveness – that conjures a psychical disaster through poetic enunciation. (437)

Starobinski hits upon the impression of absolute spleen upon the poet’s body; this impression is a psychological wounding of the poetic process, a wound upon the possibility of poetry that can only be marked in the literary space of poetry itself. Anything less would be the betrayal, the missed apprehension, of this sublimity. Baudelaire’s writing found a new mode of poetry, the entrance to modernity, through spleen; however, it was not enough to observe spleen as a form of contrast. Over time, it became necessary to explore the spaces of spleen on their own terms. For Starobinski, “the coexistence of death and immortality” in the second “Spleen” is expressed in a series of new “homo-logies” of images, a “unity of opposites” (coïncidentia oppositorum, “coïncidence des opposés”). The correspondances have closed the distance, where the liminal space between opposites has closed to an impossible degree. The possibility which “Spleen II” opens, argues Starobinski, is “situated above poor, monotone melancholic brooding” and instead exposes “an experience of melancholy, equivalent of such mimetic richness that the latter, so often voiceless, is given as the source of poetic activity” (444).

The second “Spleen” poem takes up the challenge from “L’Horloge” where the call for “Souviens-toi” has gathered in the mind of the poetic speaker into an impossible
collection of memories, all of which are vital, all of which are unwillingly hoarded into a single, torturous instant of languid time:

J’ai plus de souvenirs que si j’avais mille ans.

Un gros meuble à tiroirs encombré de bilans,
De vers, de billets doux, de procès, de romances,
Avec de lourds cheveux roulés dans des quittances,
Cache moins de secrets que mon triste cerveau.
C’est une pyramide, un immense caveau,
Qui contient plus de morts que la fosse commune.
– Je suis un cimetière abhorré de la lune,
Où comme des remords se traînent de longs vers
Qui s’acharnent toujours sur mes morts les plus chers.
Je suis un vieux boudoir plein de roses fanées,
Où git tout un fouillis de modes surannées,
Où les pastels plaintifs et les pâles Boucher,
Seuls, respirent l’odeur d’un flacon débouché.

Rien n’égale en longueur les boiteuses journées,
Quand sous les lourds flocons des neigeuses années
L’ennui, fruit de la morne incuriosité,
Prend les proportions de l’immortalité.
– Désormais tu n’es plus, ô matière vivante !
Qu’un granit entouré d’une vague épouvante,
Assoupi dans le fond d’un Saharah brumeux ;
Un vieux sphinx ignoré du monde insoucieux,
Oublié sur la carte, et dont l’humeur farouche
Ne chante qu’aux rayons du soleil qui se couche. (OC 1:73)²⁸

²⁸ I am fuller of memories than if I had lived a thousand years. / Not even an enormous chest of drawers stuffed with accounts and verses, love-letters and law-suits, drawing-room ballads, and heavy plaits of hair rolled in receipts, has fewer secrets to hide than has my unhappy brain. It is a pyramid, a vast burial-vault, more packed with dead than any charnel-house. / I am a graveyard that the Moon abhors, in which long worms crawl like remorse, always battenning on those dead I hold most dear. I am a bygone boudoir full of faded roses, in which a medley of old-fashioned dresses lie scattered everywhere, with only the plaintive pastels and pale Boucher canvases to breathe the fragrance of a scent-bottle left uncorked. / Nothing could be as long-drawn-out as the limping days, when under under the heavy flakes of the snowy years, boredom, the fruit of sullen indifference, takes on the proportions of immortality. Henceforth, O living matter, you are but a granite form shrouded in vague horror, listlessly sunken in the depths of a mist-bound Sahara, an old Sphinx unknown to the uncaring world, forgotten on the map, and whose grim humour is to sing only in the rays of the setting sun. (CV 175, 177)
The opening line of the poem, for its speaker, is a plain statement of fact. If every perception that passes into memory is never forgotten, the accumulation and expansion of the mind is colour-blind to the value of one memory or remembrance over the other. James R. Lawler praises the “theme of melancholy excess” of the opening line, saying that: “the poet no longer has time or space for the bitter or the bittersweet or the wryly humorous, but conjures up the past like a paralyzing fullness” (108). The space of this accumulation, as the second stanza opens, is greater than, more expansive than and hides more secrets than the large dresser of curiosities described in the first four lines. Katherine Elkins refers to this type of memory as “non-archival memory” in her article on Proust and Baudelaire. The remainder of the stanza gathers the dead matter of a mass grave, a veritable boudoir of regrets, in the brain of the speaker. The third and final stanza immortalizes the “ennui, fruit de la morne incuriosité” into figures of stone and the twilight of the setting sun. The poem rebukes the theorization of memory into the systems inherited by cognitive psychology; instead the “Spleen” poems erect monuments to the cultures and lives of spleen. The remembrance of spleen, its preservation in the form of poetic experience, demonstrates its power even as the medical sciences rewrite its anatomical function. It does not matter that black bile is a metaphor of a classically configured spleen, black melancholy lives on in the experience of the “sad brain” of the poem, its speaker a representation of the subject held down by the weight of loss.

The fundamental character of melancholy is not something one can prove or disprove through an empirical method. Knowing the inner workings of the human psyche does not change the social, historical and material conditions of human sadness. In his
poetic explorations of melancholy, argues Starobinski, Baudelaire has hit upon a crucial aspect of spleen, which medico-psychological discourses would only begin to realize generations later:

It is not that Baudelaire set off on the task to poetically translate what the medical knowledge of his age understood as the “graph” of spleen, ennui or of melancholy. His experience, which was undeniably influenced by the cultural image of spleen, is more direct and immediate. He happens to formulate feelings which will not be taken into account “scientifically” until a much later date. Therefore, one can say that Baudelaire’s poetic intuition, on several occasions, anticipates what clinicians would learn to recognize. (444)

The absolute spleen of Baudelaire’s poetics is the apotheosis of metamelancholy; this revealed to him a fulsome expansion of his poetic register. The images of perfume, twilight, blood, poverty, and stone statues become not simply a reconfiguration of the past into modern poetry, but the register through which the ultimate irony of Baudelaire’s poetry is knowable. Benjamin could completely follow Baudelaire, in how the latter had turned away from the Saturnine, in the search for nouveau. In the past of Parisian life, Benjamin had found a homeland. Benjamin was too attached, too anchored to the world of phenomena, especially Parisian phenomena, to walk away from his archive. Only when there was no alternative left would Benjamin flee. No poem, for Benjamin, better represented the longing for a home than “Le Cygne.”

**Survival and Baudelaire’s “Le Cygne”**

Benjamin aspires with his Baudelaire book, and its companion project on the Parisian arcades, to translate and reconstruct the total context of Baudelaire’s Paris. Nägele writes, “Benjamin’s essays and notes on Baudelaire are part of an ambitious project to develop a
theory and praxis of historical materialism” (“Poetic Ground” 147). A reading of Baudelaire’s poem “Le Cygne” from “Tableaux parisiens” intersects with and frames Baudelairean spleen, a figure which constellates a great deal of allegorical phenomena in Les Fleurs du mal. Pensky highlights Benjamin’s aphorism: “Spleen is the feeling that corresponds to the permanent catastrophe” as a definition to start from (Arcades, 346 [J66a,4]; quoted in Pensky, 170). A look at Benjamin’s reading of this spleen as a map to the mood of Parisian culture expands one’s view of his thought, especially in the Passagenwerk. Pensky argues that spleen “refers specifically to the mode of melancholia in which the subject can no longer mournfully ‘observe’ the permanent catastrophe of natural history, but rather, in a quite literal sense, is this catastrophe” (170). Baudelaire’s figures embody catastrophe as an allegorical metaphor; their represented experiences, then, all gather around spleen and can be identified, if one is willing to enter into Baudelaire’s synesthetic phantasmagoria. Baudelaire’s (and Benjamin’s) experience of melancholy seeks out emptiness, voids, lacks: the voyage into the abyss of the past is an active, purposive contemplation of disaster and ruin. As Kevin Newmark argues, the experience of poverty/lack, in its manifold real and imagined dimensions, becomes a central theme for Baudelaire and Benjamin’s modernity (272). Newmark writes: “Modernity is this poverty of experience, one of whose symptoms is the empirical experience of lack – of food, clothing, money – that grows increasingly discernible everywhere around us,” and therefore, poetry “allows the lack constitutive of modern

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99 Michael Jennings – a scholar routinely involved with English language collections of Benjamin’s writings and a recent English biography of his favourite subject – provides an excellent summary of the Baudelaire book project in his essay “On the Banks of a New Lethe: Commodification and Experience in Benjamin’s Baudelaire Book.”
experience to become ‘visible’” insofar modernity has allowed visibility to subsist (272). This permanent catastrophic consciousness, a version of Hegel’s unhappy consciousness taken to a dangerous extreme, becomes the necessary condition for reading. Benjamin’s precarious circumstances threatened disaster at every moment: when Benjamin reads the nineteenth century, he reads with the urgency of a man at the center of the maelstrom.

Karlheinz Stierle has said, about the opening of second part of “Le Cygne,” that Baudelaire is acknowledging the “necessary, internal correlation between allegory and melancholy” inaugurated by Dürer, which Baudelaire confirms by rhyming the words (524). Baudelaire, for Stierle, was “inspired by Dürer’s visionary work” which was a “veritable cult-object of the French poets at the end of Romanticism” (525-526). There exists a small trace of a projected work related to “Melencolia I” which Stierle notes, as I do: Baudelaire had a list of titles for future poems, one of which was “Melencholia” (525, OC 1:369). Stierle writes:

As is so often the case in Baudelaire’s poems, recollected perception allies itself to a pictorial Andenken, transferring it thus into the specific universe of an imaginary synthesis. The recollection construction site [of “Le Cygne”] is under the sign … of Dürer’s “Melencolia I” (522).

Stierle adds that: “If the proximity of the image, given by Dürer’s melancholic darkening, remains hidden still, inside the Andenken the carousel under construction … this proximity is clarified in the first stanza of the poem’s second half” (523). Fleeing Paris and his work on the archive, during his last days on earth, I imagine Benjamin reciting
those from “Le Cygne”\textsuperscript{100} one the last time, with a black cloud of locusts enveloping the
city he has called home during his exile from Berlin:

\begin{center}
Paris change ! mais rien dans ma mélancolie
N’a bougé ! palais neufs, échafaudages, blocs,
Vieux faubourgs, tout pour moi devient allégorie
Et mes chers souvenirs sont plus lourds que des rocs.\textsuperscript{101}
\end{center}

These lines immobilize Paris as a mentally constructed eternity, thought fueled by a
melancholic force that extends and expands the possibility for contemplation to almost
impossible, absurd limits. This melancholy of resistance suspends a vision of Paris from
the past, even as the busywork of post-Revolution, Second Empire capital cuts and pastes
the new over the old: this vision is dreamt as a uniform symbol of Paris held aloft over
itself. This vision is no symbol, it is a translation of Paris from one language into another
language, from one French into another, and its construction is Baudelaire’s considerable
intellectual powers lifting and suspending large stones, slabs of this Paris, from the earth,
as if by a form of telekinesis. This is the power Benjamin, as a reader of Baudelaire and
his city, most desires above all others. He wishes to locate a Paris similar to Blake’s own
New Jerusalem over the streets of London. Benjamin is looking for the eternal city of
Paris, its ancient ruins underneath its rooting, modern skin.

As Ross Chambers writes, “Le Cygne” “presents itself self-reflexively as allegory
– or, more accurately, as the locus for a \textit{process of allegorization}, since the poem … says
‘tout pour moi \textit{devient} allégorie’” (162). The process of reading this Paris, for the poet

\textsuperscript{100} Quotations are from the second part of Baudelaire’s poem (\textit{OC} 1:86-87).
\textsuperscript{101} Paris is changing, but naught in my melancholy has moved. These new palaces and scaffoldings, blocks
of stone, old suburbs – everything for me is turned to allegory, and my memories are heavier than rocks.
(\textit{CV} 200)
figure (and for Benjamin), becomes a transformation of the desire to view Paris in its former glory into a desperate race to allegorize what is left behind before it too disappears. The immobilization of that melancholic urge becomes what weighs down the poet. About the poem, Newmark writes that it “is so rich in terms of the formal, thematic and historical pageantry it mobilizes – apostrophe, myth, mimesis, prosopopoeia, allegory, memory, thought, mourning, melancholy, urban alienation and revolt, empire collapse and re-building, colonial and military expropriation, racial and sexual difference” (279). Chambers argues that “what is constant, what does not change in the ever changing world, is melancholy itself,” moreover, “the *immobility* of melancholy that causes it to be experienced as an oppressive weight” (168). The collection of these purely mental images, Chambers opines, makes memories heavier than the biggest rocks (168). This remembrance of the past instills in the “present a feeling of repetition and inauthenticity” (Chambers 159). In the poem, allegory is what makes this construction of the ruin possible, but one then needs to carry this ruin around, just as the figure of Sisyphus pushes the boulder up a hill endlessly.

Baudelaire’s poem continues:

Aussi devant ce Louvre une image m’opprime :
Je pense à mon grand cygne, avec ses gestes fous,
Comme les exilés, ridicule et sublime
Et rongé d’un désir sans trêve ! et puis à vous,

Andromaque, des bras d’un grand époux tombée,
Vil bétail, sous la main du superbe Pyrrhus,
Auprès d’un tombeau vide en extase courbée
Veuve d’Hector, hélas ! et femme d’Hélénus !

Je pense à la nègresse, amaigrie et phtisique
Piétinant dans la boue, et cherchant, l’œil hagard,
Les cocotiers absents de la superbe Afrique  
Derrière la muraille immense du brouillard (OC 1:86)

This image of a melancholy Paris is infinitely expansive: it opens into an immense art gallery, echoing the Baudelairean line of having a thousand years of memories at once.

As Newmark writes: “Time becomes a mirror from the moment thought reflects upon the kind of memory that makes it possible in the first place, recollecting the past in the shape of allegorical figures that each in its own way and all of them taken together can signify the grief and melancholy of lost time that is necessarily reflected in the thinking subject’s self-consciousness” (284). The imagination takes to the sky, like the swan, with the boots of the speaker planted upon the ground. The sublime dreams of the exile are all that remain to sustain the body. The next two stanzas suspend scenes over top these remembrances of Paris, as if they are parts of the present moment. Baudelaire’s poet, in collecting these memories, has transformed into a Funes with not only a perfect memory, but one that reaches into ancestral depths of human knowledge and experience. The poem concludes by raising the stakes of these accumulations, these remembrances into the anguish of the poet for those who forget their remembrances in the haze of the present, leading to his exile into the ancestral forest of symbols:

À quiconque a perdu ce qui ne se retrouve
Jamais, jamais ! à ceux qui s’abreuvent de pleurs

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102 And so beside the Louvre I am oppressed by a vision: I think of my great swan with his frenzied gestures, like all exiles ridiculous and sublime, gnawed by an unremitting nostalgia: and then of you, O Andromache, fallen from the arms of an heroic spouse to be a vile chattel in the hands of proud Pyrrhus, bent in ecstasy before an empty tomb; widow of Hector, alas, then wife of Helenus. / I think of the lean consumptive negress trudging through the mud, with her haggard eyes peering in vain through the huge wall of fog for the absent palm-trees of her noble Africa; (CV 200-201)
The speaker mourns for the lost beloved object, and recalls now a rapid-fire series of
remembrances, each cascading and constellating one atop the other, each “orphans
withering away like flowers.” The desire to grasp and possess these phenomena is
overwhelming, but if one’s hand reached out, nothing would return, as if a child tried to
hold a star from the night sky in the palm of their hand. And so the speaker takes refuge
in the “forêt [de symboles]” but the memories of Paris also find refuge amidst the trees.
The accumulation of memory, raw and uncontrolled, has the poet-flâneur of the poem
overwhelmed.

The themes of Baudelaire’s poem resonate throughout Benjamin’s late writing.
What does the latter have to say about the poem? Benjamin offers this dense passage
about Baudelaire’s “Le Cygne”:

It is no accident that this poem is allegorical. The ever-changing city
grows rigid. It is brittle as glass – and as transparent, insofar as its
meaning is concerned … The condition of Paris is fragile; it is surrounded
by symbols of fragility – living creatures (the black woman and the swan)
and historical figures (Andromache, “the widow of Hector and wife of
Helenus”). What they share are mourning for what was and lack of hope
for what is to come. In the final analysis, this decrepitude constitutes the

103 I think of those who have lost what they can never, never hope to find again; of those who quench their
thirst with their own tears and suck the breast of Sorrow like a good mother-wolf’s. I think of the starved
orphans withering away like flowers. / Thus, in the forest where my mind is exiled, an old memory winds
its horn: I think of sailors abandoned on a desert isle, of those who are captive, those who are defeated –
and of many another. (CV 201)
Saturnine Constellations

closest link between modernity and antiquity. Wherever Paris appears in *Les Fleurs du mal*, it gives evidence of this decrepitude. (*SW* 4:111)

Benjamin views “Le Cygne” not only as an allegorical poem, but also as a cypher for the Baudelairean process of allegory as a whole. The city of Paris ceases its constant movement, as if turning to stone under the poets’ Medusa-like gaze. As the same time, the city in this vision is not made of stone at all, its monuments, both physical and figural, are like glass. What is ancient is fragile, what is modern appears ruined, decrepit. The building blocks to allegorize antiquity are made from objects that are not meant to last. Buck-Morss asks, “Why does the most modern face of Paris remind [Baudelaire] of a city already in ruins?” and argues that Benjamin’s answer is “intrepid” because it is the process of allegory makes a new nature out of things, commodities (179). The purpose of Benjamin collecting phenomena of the nineteenth century represents the redemption of these phenomena from the powers of capitalism and commodification. The nostalgia for a seemingly lost Paris is a point of departure to the collection and redemption of these phenomena. It is the poet’s melancholy that suspends time in this perception of Paris, and allows for its poetic allegorization. The remembrance begins in nostalgia, but this *souvenir* opens into a contemplation of the past, as if its phenomena could still be experienced in the now-time of the present moment. The city of Paris, suspended in the dialectical mind of the allegorist, suspended over the abyss by melancholic spleen, confronts the glory of antiquity with the desolation of modern times. Benjamin, in his remarks, moves on rather than engaging in a full analysis of the “decrepitude” of Paris.

The sustained contemplation of an impossibly, allegorically resonant Paris is a show of melancholic force. Chambers writes:
The way the “carousel” of the poem leads us from memory to melancholy and then from melancholy to work no doubt constitutes a discreet tribute to the values of February and the uprising of the working class. Since the poet-flâneur is also up “at the hour when Labor awakes,” however, the poem is about another kind of work as well: that of Trauerarbeit, the work of grief-stricken thought the poem calls melancholy…. (170-171)

Melancholy, as a mode of thought, is a state of constant labour. This labour, for the most part, is unseen by society, but it is felt collectively. As Chambers writes: “poetic [labour] – which ‘Le Cygne’ both illustrates and embodies – is defined as a tireless activity of thought that goes on and on, cut off from any beginning and advancing to no end” (171). Over top of the classical Paris, the worker fashions the arcades and department stores the bourgeoisie and the elite can enjoy. After the revolt of the working class explodes, and is eventually silenced, their efforts are erased. Through this mental output, the force of the workers’ social melancholy, those experiences linger, and make the air heavy. The face of a modern city is experienced as a ruin, crumbling around its sleeping subjects. These, often displaced, workers dream of a past where their labour in nature was not exploited; they dream of a future where their labour may yet transcend their weakened, fading bodies and spirit – dreams of an eternal return. Prophecy and nostalgia have long been good friends.

Starobinski takes up the question of nostalgia in Baudelaire through the image of Paris destroyed in “Le Cygne”:

Before the new Paris that exposes a vast theatre of exile to the viewer’s gaze, the poet’s thoughts express a meta-nostalgia, which cannot be appeased by the eventuality of whatever kind of return. To what location would such a return be directed, in any case? For it is precisely that location itself which has suffered the destruction, whereas the poet, which never left this place, undergoes in his own life – in his heart – this selfsame work of the destruction. “The old Paris exists no longer.” This
mourning is irremediable. The poet evokes his own, now petrified “dear remembrances,” which have become “heavier that the rocks,” and he romanticizes his own exile into the forest where “an old Memory sounds the horn with a full breath.” But there can be no return from this exile … the loss is simply too radical to seek out a remedy from anywhere other than a universe of signs, allegories and music. (302)

Everyone is an exile in a Paris that never was, and was always already an imagined landscape given by the poets and artists. Benjamin made of Baudelaire’s Paris the epicenter of his Passagenwerk. The change of the historical and capitalized Paris that quickly invades and takes over the memories of the imagined or envisioned glory of a Paris always already past. This clash Benjamin stages as the encounter of antiquity and modernity, as the abyss of nothingness that holds these two together like opaque molasses, an encounter that plays out in the allegorical musings of the flâneur. The melancholy desperation to stop Paris from change is palpable, but in the aftermath of “Spleen et Idéal” only allegory can sustain its existence, retain its temporal relevance, and stop the architectural and capitalist development of Paris from erasing its own history. The history of Baudelaire’s Paris forgets its own grand highlights, that is, the ones it cannot count, sell or manufacture. Nor can it recognize, even in its museums and art galleries, the mythology that characterizes its shifting identities, its ungrounded potential. Baudelaire’s artist is partly this melancholic agent, the flâneur whose urban and suburban wanderings, literal and figural, historical and mystical, have attempted to sustain Paris’ aura, the here and now of its originality, that moment of relevance, even if that must be done in its moment of death and decay. Melancholy is both the power of the allegorist and their eternal plague: the continual dissatisfaction and inability to capture the object and it could be, as it ought to be. That energy of dissent, in the distance
between ideal success and pathetic failure, somewhere in the aura emerges the work of art. It is the indentation of Baudelaire as being beyond his own age’s aesthetics, yet exemplary of its material, historical conditions.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have presented Benjamin’s reading of several periods of literature and thought as successive ages in which melancholy underwent several epistemological and ontological transformations. Under the eyes of ancient Greece, the Middle Ages, the Renaissance and the Baroque, melancholy survives as a series of concatenating symbols and metonymies. In Benjamin’s reading of his history, the successive ages represent characters in his own *Trauerspiel*: criticism transmutes into the writing of fiction, truth is held to a standard of storytelling, rather than a standard of philosophy. In this reading, melancholy emerges at times as a stone, at others a god, in other still a planet in orbit. The composition of this melancholy is heterogeneous and yet retains several characteristics, which allows the viewer to recognize it from other planets, god, natural phenomena. As the 1920s passed into the 30s, and as Benjamin’s time on earth drew nearer to its end in 1940, his gaze turned, almost singularly, to the life and times of one man, one writer – and his city – who would more than almost any other define Europe’s identity after the French Revolution. When Benjamin moves from the lessons of *Trauerspiel* and advances into nineteenth-century history and literature, in particular with his engagement of the Baudelaire, he knows what to look for. The project of the *Passagenwerk* is the gathering of phenomena, the collection of precious quotations. This
is both to redeem these phenomena from the past, but also to save them from the Nazi fires. Benjamin works with the urgency of a man out of time; he scours the archives of Paris’ Bibliothèque Nationale in the desperate hope that Baudelaire’s Paris might still be saved from the coming wave of the twentieth century’s descent into absurdity, mass murder and technological apocalypse.
Concluding Remarks: On Depression, Sorrow[fulness], and “Melancholizing”

Melancholy: when we have sorrows without a name.

The soulless have no need of melancholia.

Depression is melancholy minus its charms.

Melancholy is the pleasure of being sad.

Melancholy: an appetite no misery satisfies.

A heart without music is like beauty without melancholy. 104

Kierkegaard once pondered: “What if everything in the world were a misunderstanding; what if laughter really were weeping!” (Either/Or 1:21). Baudelaire has shown that some species of laughter, that of the grotesque, are not the mere laughter at a stimulus, a feeling of superiority over the other: it is the marking of the disturbance of one’s soul. The comedy of George Carlin, with its profound willingness to openly slander American exceptionalism, generates a laughter that probes the inner disturbances of an at-times grotesque culture. That same culture is the one that espouses the right to “the pursuit of happiness.” It has been a constant temptation in this work to refrain from debating the issues of depression and the pharmacy. These final pages are meant to provide a brief commentary in this direction. Having myself suffered a great deal from anxiety and depression, I offer these concluding remarks as my position on the contemporary landscapes of melancholy and its cousin depression, bolstered by the argumentation in the previous chapter of this work. The current climate concerning depression and the struggle to find contentment in one’s life remains consistent with the position of Peter

104 The aphorisms’ authors, in order of appearance: Joseph Joubert, Vladimir Odoevsky, Susan Sontag, Victor Hugo, E.M. Cioran (the last two).
Kramer (*Listening to Prozac* and *Against Depression*) which emerged in the 1990s. Kramer, in his books, advocates for avenues that assist in attaining a generalized emotional and mental equilibrium, anti-depressants are the best intentions towards that goal. Depression threatens one’s path to a happy life, and so the end justifies the means. At the same time, one does not need to look for to see that taking anti-depressants can help as much as they may hinder (if not worsen) the problem. There are no easy answers. Kramer’s advocacy of an emotional equilibrium is equal parts – and somewhat ironically – impossible and undesirable.

The rise of depression, as Matthew Bell has observed, has sent the word *melancholia* – and this *is* ironic – to “the margins of psychiatry, as, for instance, in psychoanalysis” (33). The marginalization of melancholia has been concurrent with the construction of depression, though “core psychological symptoms” observed by Hippocrates have remained largely the same (Bell 35). While it is always well-intentioned to seek pharmaceutical solutions to a serious problem like depression, the potential for profit has proven too much of a temptation for many corporate entities. How can one accept a pharmaceutical solution that helps some and increases the suffering of many others? The work of Gary Greenberg (*Manufacturing Depression* and *The Book of Woe*) has begun to substantively critique the money-making machine of the pharma-copeia and its desire to grow its profit margins by expanding what falls under the spectre of depression. Greenberg, a practicing psychotherapist, advocates for a therapeutic discipline less reliant on arbitrary, insurable categories (like “depression”) such that clinicians can do their jobs to *actually* help people. Depression, a word with its own long-
standing history, has become associated pervasively with its elaboration in DSM (*The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*) and the pharmacological industry to medicate sorrow. Depression is a word, I fear, that find itself so entirely corrupted by malfeasance that it will so lose all meaning. One can observe how this process of *depression* as meaningless has already taken its root, has lost the ability to *mean* more, to retain nuance in the face of sameness.

Melancholy, I have tried to argue, expresses a tension between states: it reveals in the temporalized concept of melancholia, such as in the figuration of spleen, the silhouetted outlines of a figure, likened in my analysis to a Saturnine constellation. Its polysemy and ambivalence has ensured its survival for thousands of years. Contemporary culture has forgotten about the constellations and has instead invested itself in the forsaking of the soul in order to perfect the body. Slavoj Žižek\(^{105}\) writes that while Freud opposed mourning to melancholy according to a structure of normalcy and pathology, saying that, in counterpoint to the tradition inaugurated by Freud, “one should assert the conceptual and ethical primacy of melancholy” (658). Mourning, Žižek continues, “is a kind of betrayal, the second killing of the (lost) object”; that in the midst of one’s melancholy “the melancholic remains faithful” (658). Being melancholic honours and preserves the value of experience, even if this experience is devastatingly sorrowful. Further, melancholy interprets *lack* as a *loss*, “as if the lacking object was once possessed and then lost” and that “what melancholy obfuscates is that the object is lacking from the

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\(^{105}\) Žižek is a theorist about whom I have deep reservations, and whose work I regard with ambivalence, and at times contempt. That said, my work and his thought share much common ground in his essay “Melancholy and the Act.”
very beginning” (Žižek 659-660). The artists must create because the world in which they have been thrown is missing one or more of its vital components, and always had missed the thing the art seeks to complete or fill. In a North-American society where so much is lacking, the role of the artist to attempt filling this lack is crucial. The melancholic act towards a vision of change – even if this vision is impossible – through art marking, is a release of accumulated energy, generated from one’s own profound sorrowfulness. I had noted, at the beginning of this dissertation, that melancholy embraces the unobtainable. As Žižek put it, “The melancholic subject thus elevates the object of his longing into an inconsistent composite of a corporeal absolute” that is possessed only in the feeling of loss (660). While one has to let go of loss, one also has to sustain meaning in what was lost, and in what has gone missing.

The question of melancholy has always been also one of legitimacy. “Melancholy is a state of the psyche. Either it forms itself, or a form of it is already given in advance once resignation takes on the character of being ‘finitely’ valid; in this way, the question of legitimation has already been ‘finitely,’ from the point of view of the person who poses it or to whom it is addressed. Melancholy appears to be enduring and indissoluble” (Lepenies 164). For it is always that “the most significant form of melancholy is that form which is simultaneously a rigidified type of reaction to ‘something’ that ‘happens to’ the person. In terms of psychopathology, one could speak here of ‘exogenous’ melancholy. The inhibition of action is either cause or effect, sometimes both at once, in the sense that the enforced inhibition of action extends into areas completely beyond the reach of ‘external’ power. In this connection, the urge to reflect on things becomes
excessive” (Lepenies 164). The “something that happens to” becomes the corporeal life of melancholy itself, called something else. The images of constellations, Saturnine dispositions, spleen pumping out black bile, brooding dogs and sorrowful nature after the curse by god in Genesis all represent facets of melancholy. A radically finite instance of melancholia would cast these images aside, seeking a singular, objective figuration.

When Freud and Kristeva speak of melancholia (and depression), they are respectfully mediating a long history of thought attempting to come to terms with sorrow. Melancholia represents the distillation of melancholy’s negative aspects and its historical tradition as an illness or sin, from black bile through aedia to spleen. This definition of melancholia is congruent to Jackson’s assessment of the term, which he outlines in both his monograph *Melancholia and Depression: From Hippocratic Time to Modern Times* and the article “A History of Melancholia and Depression” – which is a summary of the longer work. Radden, for her part, takes a concerted approach to distinguish melancholia and depression, to attempt a decisive distinction between them, if one is possible. Her answer, she admits, is “not… easy or conclusive” (88). From a clinical perspective, a neat distinction between melancholia and depression is nearly impossible: “If, on balance, today’s depression resembles the melancholia of old, then the equation between them is warranted” (88).106 Emily Brady and Arto Haapala, contrary to Kristeva’s position, have argued that melancholy and depression are distinguished in that “depression is an emotional state of resignation, whereas melancholy is not” (3). Brady and Haapala further

106 Somogy Varga has attempted to establish a continuity between melancholia and depression. Kay Redfield Jamison is one of the few, practicing post-WWII psychoanalysts who displays explicit knowledge of the heroic and erotic traditions of melancholy, with particular focus on Lord Byron.
argue that melancholy, as allied to the tradition inherited from the Renaissance, “involves the pleasure of reflection and contemplation” with “a touch of sweetness that makes melancholy bearable”; furthermore, what connects melancholy and depression is how they are “experienced as moods” (3). Finally, they state that melancholy is a “complex emotion,” whereas sadness is a “simple” one – complex is defined in Kantian terms, such that it combines “displeasure and pleasure” (5). This complexity is vital.

Frye often said that the concerns of artists are always tied up with primary concerns for the world and the essentials for ensuring and preserving life. The melancholic artist expresses the concern that the world is missing something essential to the affirmation and continuation of life. The notion that melancholic mood contributes to social cohesion, that one can only respond to the world by being a participant in its collective discourse, is not new. In his essay, “Civic Melancholy: English Gloom and French Enlightenment,” Eric Gidal provides a comprehensive assessment of melancholy in its eighteenth-century cultural context. Therein he writes: “To modern readers, [the] conjunction of civic harmony and melancholic gloom may seem counterintuitive. As the disposition of the autonomous self par excellence, melancholy would seem to belong more to the realm of the private spirit than to the public sphere.” Gidal goes on to say, that, while that our traditional view of the melancholic is subject is of someone who isolates themselves and refuses to participate in the world, the “civic melancholy” of the eighteenth century “understands melancholy as the dark undercurrent of political identification, removing the individual from vain aspirations and luxurious self-indulgence[,] while simultaneously promoting civic ideals and public engagement” (25).
In other words, it was understood in the eighteenth century that melancholy helped citizens be engaged with their culture and politics, instead of the reverse: another Enlightenment tradition turned upside down. Current trends may be proving this thesis all too true, though no one knows how the story will end. Sorrow, the perception of a lack in the world as the lost object of desire, a desire for a complete life, represents today’s hope.

“Melancholia drains the world of meaning and plunges the subject into not only a descent of despair, but of contemplation as well; the moment when melancholy gives way to Grübelei [brooding] marks the moment when the specific cognitive features of the melancholy disposition emerge. Brooding is oriented toward a world that melancholia perceives as fragmentary or ruined” (Pensky 161). The usual response to that fragmentation of the word is the desire to restore this perceived loss, to fill the gap manifest in the world. The political activist attempts to restore this loss in the embrace of social ideals, perceived to be true and lacking in the world. The activist, authentic in their sorrow, demands a similar authenticity from the world, and is willing to reach for it. Gidal, in another essay, writes that melancholy is the sober response to concerns of imminent catastrophe, such as the response embodied by ecocriticism for example, and as a counter to Romanticism’s misguided, all-encompassing enthusiasm (“Utopia” 76). He explains that the “utopian impulse knows no such resignation to a fallen world, insisting upon institutional reform and social engineering as means of banishing melancholy and perfecting the human condition” (81). The peddler of the pharmacy, as dystopian literature has characterized them, are the true antagonists pushing back against the energies of change, transfiguration, redemption and renewal.
“Burton affirms the knowledge that might be produced by the creative contemplation uniquely facilitated by melancholy states: ‘They get their knowledge by books, I mine by melancholizing.’ The word Burton uses here, *melancholize*, long since out of use, suggests that melancholy might not just be a mood state into which one falls, or which descends on one like bad weather. Instead, melancholizing is something one does: longing for lost loves, brooding over absent objects and changed environments, reflecting on unmet desires, and lingering on events from the past. It is a practice that might, in fact, produce its own kind of knowledge.” (Flatley 2). Artists perceive deep value in our experience of the world, especially because that experience is always already incomplete, fragmentary and sorrowful. In short, they *melancholize*. The melancholy which accumulates in the inspired artist is also the energy and drive for its eventual, hopeful release; the production of art helps make this possible. Not all artists draw from melancholy, however; and not all melancholics are artists. Yet melancholy art transforms the world, creates new forms of expression, literary/artistic genres and makes possible what had hitherto not even been conceived. Melancholy is a perceptive lens to recognize what is missing in the world. It grants one an eye for perceiving loss, lack. Its accumulation manifests as moroseness and cynicism, but upon its release, and art making is one possible form of release, one finds life fundamentally *affirmed*. Melancholy ought never be eradicated, for it is a veritable source of what makes life interesting and worthwhile in the first case. It becomes a measure to what degree our social spaces are worthwhile places to inhabit and provides the impetus to enact necessary changes.
Works Cited / Bibliography

Primary sources


Secondary sources


Saturnine Constellations


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