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*Melancholy*

Edited by Valentina Serio

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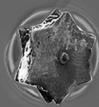
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# Introduction

Valentina Serio

The topic of melancholy is at the crossroad of a variety of branches of knowledge such as literature, medicine, fine arts, music, and psychology. As simply exhibited by lexicon, the notion of melancholy is rich of meanings: black mood, Sloth, spleen, *mal de vivre*, boredom, nausea, hysteria and depression. The protean nature of melancholy is, in fact, the result of a long tradition of reflection on this theme that can be traced back to Ancient Greece. It won't be useless, then, to provide a *very* brief sketch of its history.

The verb *melancholao*, indeed, is attested already in the IV century b. C. as a generic designation for «being mad», while within the so-called *Corpus Hippocraticum* words related to melancholy were gradually assuming a more specific – if not univocal – medical meaning, indicating corporeal humor, a particular disease or a symptom related to other illness. Only at a later stage melancholy – from ancient Greek *mèlaina cholé*, i.e. «black bile» – became part of an established system of four fundamental body moods (together with blood, phlegm and yellow bile), where the different combination of these moods was responsible for different *temperaments*, or dispositions, and, ultimately, for the health or the illness of human body.

In this scenario, black bile was held responsible for the worst physical and psychological features: ugliness, dullness, idiocy, sadness, foolishness, and so on. This same conception of melancholy as a malady or temperament survived during the Middle Age but, in addition, assuming a new religious meaning, flirting with the vice of *acedia*.

In many respects, it was the Renaissance to constitute a turning point for the history of melancholy: at this point, in fact, black bile began to be widely associated with *genius*. The Florentine humanist Marsilio Ficino played an important role in the spreading of such a new conception of melancholy: in fact, he retrieved and extensively recast Aristotle's *Problemata* XXX.I, where excellence in art, letters and politics is directly linked to black bile.

This idea is further developed in the Modern Age by a great number of thinkers and writers (for instance, think of Lawrence Sterne's use of Burton's study *The Anatomy of Melancholy* for justifying the setting out of his *Tristram Shandy*).

Between 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, some historians of art devoted their studies to Albrecht Dürer's *Melencolia I* and its legacy in the history of modern culture: think, for example, of Carl Gielhow's *Dürers Stich "Melencolia I" und der maximilianische Humanistenkreis*, Heinrich Wölfflin's *Die Kunst Albrecht Dürers*, and Aby Warburg's *Heidnisch-antike Weissagung in Wort und Bild zu Luthers Zeiten*. In this way, they ushered a new metamorphosis of the understanding of this mood, which is developed in the works of thinkers such as Sigmund Freud,

Walter Benjamin, Thomas Mann, Samuel Beckett, and Julia Kristeva.

The historical path and critical debate about melancholy testify the complexity and richness of such topic, deeply rooted in Western culture. For this reason, the present issue of «Odradek» is devoted to collecting contributions focused on black bile as defined in different ages and cultures.

To begin with the Ancient world, Rozenn Michel's article *Les métamorphoses d'Oreste: lectures mélancoliques de la tragédie d'Euripide*, represents an exploration of the poietic function of reading. Starting from a comparison between the text of Euripides' *Oreste* and some references to it in works of late antiquity, Michel analyzes the cultural process that led Oreste's madness to be interpreted as a melancholic condition, thanks to both medical and moral developments in both Greek and Roman literature. Here, in fact, the melancholy of the hero is interpreted on the ground of the stoic understanding of madness as a lack of wisdom.

Thereafter, my article devoted to John Marston, *Melancholia e disincanto in John Marston*, explores the controversial moral stance driven by Elizabethan melancholy, nestled between a quest for reform and freedom and the corrupting experience necessary to achieve secular wisdom – which in turn is needed to concretely reform the world.

In the article *Maine de Biran's conception of melancholy. Between medicine and philosophy*, Alessandra Aloisi explores the link that exists in Main de Biran's work, with special attention to the Journal (1814-

1824), between medicine, philosophy and the writing of the self. Aloisi holds that in Maine de Biran there are two different understandings of melancholy. The first conceives melancholy as a sentiment enabling intelligence and self-reflection. The second describes it as a disorder of the nervous system.

Fabio Camilletti's contribution, *Lutto e melanconia dell'antico in Leopardi*, investigates the meaning of melancholy in both poetical and prosaic works of the great poet from Recanati. In Leopardi, Camilletti argues, melancholy corresponds with the sense of loss and nostalgia related to an indeterminate object, coinciding with an ineffable past. Antiquity, in fact, is graspable by the modern subject only through the awareness of its absence, while any chance of definition remains excluded. In this scenario, poetry – a song or *canto* – represents the only possible remedy to heal such melancholic loss.

In the article *Melanconia ed ebraismo. Walter Benjamin e Agesilaus Santander*, Luca Crescenzi examines Benjamin's brief manuscript, which appeared posthumously thanks to Gershom Scholem, by insisting on the idea that at stake here is an allegorical representation of a philosophical vocation rooted in Dürer's depiction of melancholy, which Benjamin takes into account by starting from Gielhow's and Warburg's studies.

In the article entitled *La melanconia messa in scena. Finale di partita di Beckett e le tesi sul tragico di Benjamin*, Danilo Manca compares Beckett's depiction of melancholy in his masterpiece *Endgame* with the theses on the nature of the tragic that Walter



Benjamin elaborated in the essay on *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* and related manuscripts. The aim is to establish what kind of role melancholy plays in the modern tragic drama and to explore the meaning of Beckett's notion of "dianoetic laughter".

In the article *La Singorina Else. Arte, scienze e malinconia nella Vienna primonovecentesca*, Elisabetta Vinci focuses on the notion of "historical melancholy" characterizing the *fin de siècle* Vienna. Vinci, in fact, develops her investigation around Schnitzler's *Miss Else* on a double level: on the one hand, the aim is to underline how the character and condition of Else reflects a melancholic symptomatology as defined by Sigmund Freud; on the other hand, Vinci claims that Else's malaise is in a direct correlation with the general feeling of decay prevailing during the turn of the century in the Continental context.

Thereafter, Jelena Reinhardt's article, *1934: vedere la bellezza attraverso gli occhiali della melancholia. Moravia e l'influenza di Thomas Mann* provides a detailed analysis of the web of references between Moravia's work and the German tradition of melancholy, with the main reference to Thomas Mann and Albrecht Dürer. In *1934*, thus, it is possible to recognize the influence of the idea of melancholic genius, in a perspective where melancholy is both the disease and – when supports the artistic inspiration – the remedy.

Finally, the present issue contains an article by the Greek philosopher Panagiotis Kondylis (1943-1998), *Melancholy and Polemics*, commented and translated into English by Raymond Petridis. Here

Kondylis develops a reflection on melancholy which goes beyond the pure psychopathological dimension and extends it to fields such as anthropology, history and history of culture. The multiple levels took into account allows Kondylis to articulate a complex analysis of the relationship between melancholy and individual and social pursuit of power.