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, speculate 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 authoritative 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 “spleenetic melancholy.” 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 correspondence 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 correspondence 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.

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Melancholy was one of the four temperaments matching the four humours.[3] In the 19th century, “melancholia” could be physical as well as mental, and melancholic conditions were classified as such by their common cause rather than by their properties.[4]. In astrology it showed the influence of Saturn, hence the related adjective saturnine. Melancholia was described as a distinct disease with particular mental and physical symptoms in the 5th and 4th centuries BC. Hippocrates, in his Aphorisms, characterized all “fears and despondencies, if they last a long time” as being symptomatic of melancholia. During the later 16th and early 17th centuries, a curious cultural and literary cult of melancholia arose in
Charles Baudelaire: French poet, translator, and literary and art critic whose reputation rests primarily on Les Fleurs du mal (1857; The Flowers of Evil), which was perhaps the most important and influential poetry collection published in Europe in the 19th century. Similarly, his Petits poèmes en prose. Early life. Baudelaire was the only child of François Baudelaire and his much younger second wife, Caroline Defayis, whom he married in 1819. Having begun his career as a priest, François had abandoned holy orders in 1793 and ultimately became a prosperous middle-ranking civil servant. A painter and poet of modest talent, he introduced his son to art, or what the younger Baudelaire would later call his greatest, most consuming, and earliest of passions, "the cult of images." For in Baudelaire's poetry (Benjamin argues that with Baudelaire this was possible for the last and thus the only time) the lived events of urban life were given the weight of an Erfahrung: an experience. It is this experience, otherwise obliterated from the urban dweller's consciousness, that constitutes for Benjamin the cultural memory of late 19th and early 20th century urban life. Rather Benjamin acknowledges an historical privilege to particular works, for their ability to register the shocks or anxieties of their times. Benjamin's method is simultaneously historical and aesthetic but the notions of history and aesthetics are transformed in the process. Towering above this literature is Bergson's early monumental work, Matière et mémoire.