



Research Article

UDC 130.2

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.26176/mosconsv.2022.48.1.05>

Modernity and Melancholia

Jonathan Flatley

Wayne State University,
42 W Warren Ave, Detroit, MI 48202, USA
jonathanflatley@wayne.edu

Abstract: This essay proposes that the sense of a collective melancholia as a shared experience of difficult loss may be paradigmatically modern, but that it may or may not be depressing. Indeed, such a melancholia might be the basis for extraordinary actions or events. It pursues this proposal by placing what I see as the two key modern thinkers of melancholia—Sigmund Freud and Walter Benjamin, both of whom connect melancholia to loss—in relation to the long history of thought about melancholia.

Keywords: melancholia, aesthetics, loss, psychoanalysis, Walter Benjamin, Sigmund Freud

For citation: Flatley, Jonathan. “Modernity and Melancholia.” *Nauchnyy vestnik Moskovskoy konservatorii* / Journal of Moscow Conservatory 13, no. 1 (March): 170–77. <https://doi.org/10.26176/mosconsv.2022.48.1.05>.

МУЗЫКА И ЭСТЕТИКА

Научная статья

УДК 130.2

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.26176/mosconsv.2022.48.1.05>

Современность и меланхолия

Джонатан Флэтли

Университет Уэйна,
42 W Warren Ave, Detroit, MI 48202, USA
jonathanflatley@wayne.edu

Аннотация: В данном эссе выдвигается тезис, что чувство коллективной меланхолии как общее переживание тяжелой утраты, будучи парадигматически современным, не обязательно ведет к депрессии. В действительности такая меланхолия способна служить основанием для выдающихся поступков и событий. Развивая это положение, автор эссе помещает идеи Зигмунда Фрейда и Вальтера Бенджамина — двух ключевых современных философов, связывающих меланхолию с утратой, — в контекст долгой истории осмысления меланхолии.

Ключевые слова: меланхолия, эстетика, утрата, психоанализ, Вальтер Бенджамин, Зигмунд Фрейд

Для цитирования: Flatley J. Modernity and Melancholia // Научный вестник Московской консерватории. Том 13. Выпуск 1 (март 2022): С. 170–177. <https://doi.org/10.26176/mosconsv.2022.48.1.05>.

The moment of the pandemic is certainly a melancholic one. Indeed, my personal slogan throughout has been “just try to keep the depression mild.” Anytime social life changes in such dramatic fashion, there are a lot of losses. Lately, at least among people I know in the US, the structure of feeling has shifted in a more decidedly melancholic direction. Losses are piling up, a certain feeling of isolation increases as we see people in person less and less frequently, we may be anxious about becoming sick or we are sick, we may be grieving the deaths of loved ones. And there is something else, something hard to discern — a whole way of life, perhaps, a whole sense of the world.

I want to suggest today, 1) that this sense of a collective melancholia, a shared experience of difficult loss, may be paradigmatically modern, but also 2) that this melancholia may or may not be depressing. Indeed, it might even be the basis for extraordinary actions or events.

I will pursue this suggesting by placing what I see as the two key modern thinkers of melancholia — Sigmund Freud and Walter Benjamin, both of whom connect melancholia to loss — in relation to the long history of thought about melancholia.

Melancholia has not always been connected to the experience of loss. As we know, the discourse of melancholy has a long history, originating in the Greek understanding of the humors. *Melan-kole* literally referred to one of the four humors — black bile — of which there could be both temporary or characterological excesses. This excess would produce the symptoms which have, since then, consistently described melancholia. Sadness, grief, fear, loss of interest, and emotional withdrawal from the world.¹ Over time, whether melancholy was seen to stem from physiological imbalances (too much black bile), astrological misfortune (born under the sign of Saturn), failures of faith (the sin of acedia or sloth) or unmourned losses — four separate paradigms there! — across all these paradigms is the sense that there is something *valuable* in this condition. Thus, for example, we can observe a consistent sense that geniuses in philosophy or politics or literature or the arts are often melancholics.

In part this positive evaluation of melancholia is connected to the idea that there can be melancholic forms of *activity*. In “The Anatomy of Melancholy,” for example, Robert 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” [7, 22]. The word Burton uses here, to melancholize (меланхолизировать) no longer in use in English, suggests that melancholy might not just be a mood state into which one falls, or which descends on one like bad weather. Instead, it 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. *These are activities* that might, in fact, produce their own kind of *knowledge*. (I see a similarity to how Andrei Platonov uses the word *toskovat*, a kind of activity essential to the friendship that he presents as the basis of communism itself. But that is a whole other story.)

¹ According to the Hippocratic treatise called “On the Nature of Man,” “the human body contains blood, phlegm, yellow bile and black bile. These are the things that make up its constitution and cause its pains and health. Health is that state in which these constituent substances are in the correct proportion to each other, both in strength and quantity, and are well mixed. Pain occurs when one of the substances presents either a deficiency or an excess, or is separated in the body and not mixed with the others” [15, 262].

One key activity long associated with melancholia is aesthetic activity itself — writing and reading, composing and listening to music, appreciating natural beauty, painting. And here, there are two key ideas:

First, the temperamental melancholic may be inclined to engage in intensely creative activities precisely as a way to fend off the descent into full melancholia. The temperamental melancholic who knows what Julia Kristeva called “the abyss of sorrow” [14, 3] would engage in impressively productive activities precisely in order to avoid that abyss. As Burton (and later also Walter Benjamin) emphasized, the melancholic “being busy to avoid melancholy” is a force to be reckoned with.

Second, which we see in British and German Renaissance and Romantic thinking and writing in particular is the idea of melancholic withdrawal from the world offers an opportunity for the contemplation of beauty. Melancholic aesthetic contemplation is thus a kind of *escape* from the world. Although such withdrawal might be seen as passivity, Walter Benjamin also sees a possible dialectical reversal of this withdrawal from the world. Because melancholy involves seeing the world as a set of objects with no necessary function, meaning, or affective charge, it prepares the way for those objects to mean something else. By emptying the world, melancholy prepares it for allegorical transformation.

The whole discourse around melancholia shift somewhat when it comes to be defined around loss, an internal loss. The question then is: how can we develop a non-depressive relation to loss. How might melancholia still connect us to the world and to other people?

The connection between depressive melancholia and the problem of loss — widely explored in modernism after Baudelaire — is crystallized in Freud’s now famous argument first outlined in his 1917 essay “Mourning and Melancholia.” Freud’s proposition that the failure to mourn a loss was the cause of melancholia represents a substantial departure from previous theories. Freud picked up on a literary tradition connecting loss and melancholy. But whereas Hamlet or Goethe’s Werther may have suffered from melancholias occasioned by loss, these losses were not depicted as phenomena also interior to subjectivity. The ghost of Hamlet’s father circulates in the world; for Freud, the ghosts populate the psyche. And it is *this* aspect of his argument — that in melancholia an emotional tie is replaced by an internalization of the lost object — that makes the paradigm Freud proposes an apt image for modernist subjectivity more generally.

The initial insight of “Mourning and Melancholia” concerns an association Freud made as early as 1895, when he noted that “the affect corresponding to melancholia is that of mourning — that is, longing for something lost” [8, 200]. This is his beginning insight, and he starts the essay with mourning itself, which he presumes to be more easily understood. The withdrawal we see in mourning, Freud proposes, is due to the energy demanded by what he calls the “work of mourning.” It entails the painstaking work of disattaching and carefully repairing “each one of the memories and expectations in which the libido is bound to the object” so that the strands of attachment can be used again [9, 244–45].

At first glance, Freud notes, melancholia looks like mourning — except for one additional element: strong self-criticism. He writes, “in mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself” [ibid., 246]. Freud sees at the source of this devaluing of the ego an internal splitting: “one part of the ego sets itself over against the other, judges it critically, and, as it were, takes it as its object” [ibid., 247]. In the key move of the essay, Freud argues that the criticism of the self is really a criticism of the lost object that has been transferred to the ego. “The shadow of the object fell upon

the ego, and the latter could henceforth be judged by a special agency, as though it were an object, the forsaken object” [ibid., 249].

This produces a “cleavage” (as Freud writes) in which one part of the ego “rages” against the other. The source of this critical raging, Freud proposes, is an ambivalence present in the original emotional tie. The internal splitting therefore is one in which one part of the ego identifies with the loved part of the object, and the other with the hated part — that is where the shadow falls, and this is where the internal rage is directed. In essence, in melancholia the emotional tie to the lost object is withdrawn into the ego in order to keep it alive. By “taking flight into the ego love escapes extinction” [ibid., 257]. But once there, it causes trouble.

In this essay he is uncertain about how melancholias can be cured. He proposes that there may be a “work of melancholia” where the lost object, now internal, is denigrated so much that the ego is persuaded to let it go. Maybe.

A few years later, he kind of gives up on the idea of mourning as a simple process of detachment. In “The Ego and the Id,” he proposes that all losses are dealt with through a form of melancholic identification, and indeed that our very characters, our personalities, are made by the residue of those lost objects [12, 20–21]. We are our losses. The way we deal with loss is through a kind of mimetic identification. We model ourselves after the objects we have lost.

Freud *also* suggests, around the same time, that identification is the first emotional tie. We identify with our parents, as infants.² If (1) identifications come after losses, and (2) identification is our first form of an emotional tie, then might we conclude that this first emotional tie comes after a loss?

The suggestion is that it is only because we can melancholically imitate an object that we are able to emotionally engage with objects in the world. If so, (and this is me, now, extending Freud’s theory) we can say that in order to be able to cope with the absence of our first caretaker — on whom, after all, our life literally depends — and to recognize that person when she or he returns, we imitate this first other in order to preserve something of him or her “in” our “self” (as our initial self). This is not simply a process of taking an image of the other inside us, because, at this moment, the distinction between the self and other is not yet in place; our first way of preserving the other in his or her absence is to model ourselves after that person. We are all miming what we lack. This melancholic process creates the very possibility of relationality. The “self” is at once the instrument and creation of this imitative incorporation provoked by a primary experience of absence.

There is much more we can say here, but I want only to emphasize that Freud’s theory of melancholia is not just about melancholia as a temporary aberration, but becomes a theory of subjectivity which places loss at its center.

Walter Benjamin took this insight in another direction. He saw melancholia as a definitely historical problem related to the experience of modernity. In his view melancholia is no longer a personal problem requiring cure or catharsis, but is evidence of the historicity of one’s subjectivity, indeed the very substance of that historicity.³

² “...identification is known to psychoanalysis as the earliest expression of an emotional tie with another person” [13, 46].

³ The problem of melancholy recurs regularly in Benjamin’s work, from “The Origin of German Tragic Drama” up through his writings on Baudelaire and his reflections “On the Concept of History” [4; 5; 6].

We need not look far to see evidence for a fundamental connection between modernity and loss. It is not difficult to see how modernity — in its meanings as a particular experience of time and as a set of concrete transformations of the material world of everyday life — is related to the experience of loss. The very origin of the word “modernity,” from “modernus,” meaning “now” or “of today” (as opposed to “of yesterday”) implies a problematic sense of anteriority, the sense that the past was lost and gone. But then think about “modernization” as such — wage labor, industrialization, urbanization, declining power of religion, forcing peasants off their lands, the destruction of the natural environment, new technologies of movement and communication, imperialism, the slave trade, modern warfare, the holocaust, Stalinist camps — we could continue — all of these processes and events brought with them new scale, scope and quality of loss itself. When we remember that one of the central problems of modernity is the attempt to grapple with these losses, Freud’s theory of melancholy, composed amidst the horrors of World War One, begins to look like a symptomatically modern text.⁴

Unlike Freud, who was looking for a universal theory and a cure, Benjamin does not see melancholia as 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 that everything depends on the *how* of one’s melancholic attachments.

For instance, he is very critical of what he calls “left melancholia,” a melancholia that leads to inaction and complacency, that finds pleasure in the cynical reflection on the impossibility of doing anything. In this mood, political struggle becomes something to consume, as culture.⁵ The question for him is how melancholia might lead to political thought and action.

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 the present. What emerges is the picture of a politicizing, splenetic melancholy, where clinging to things from the past enables interest and action in the present world and is indeed the very mechanism for that interest.⁶ Benjamin saw such a melancholy at work nowhere more emphatically than in the poetry of Baudelaire.

⁴ Freud wrote several texts dealing with the war and death more directly during the period in which he wrote “Mourning and Melancholia,” in particular “Thoughts for the Times on War and Death,” and “On Transience” [10; 11]. It was not only the sheer quantity of deaths that was shocking, but also the unexpected and complete refutation of the Enlightenment and ideas of progress offered by the human capacity for mass violence.

⁵ In his short 1931 review essay “Left-Wing Melancholy,” Benjamin subjects influential satirist during the Weimar Republic Erich Kästner to a blistering attack in which he accuses him of promoting the cynical and indulgent pleasure of a political radicalism without the possibility of any “corresponding political action” [3, 425]. In Kästner’s hands, political struggle becomes an object of pleasant consumption, one with which the bourgeois public can enjoy a “negativistic quiet” [ibid.]. This “tortured stupidity,” Benjamin argues, inevitably leads to “complacency and fatalism” [ibid., 426].

⁶ “The contemporary who learns from books of history to recognize how long his present misery has been in preparation (and this is what the historian must inwardly aim to show him) acquires thereby a high opinion of his own powers. A history that provides this kind of instruction does not cause him sorrow, but arms him” [2, 481].

His “Fleurs du Mal” (1857) indeed represents a turning point in the history of the relationship between melancholia and aesthetics [1]. With Baudelaire, we see the emergence of a decidedly antitherapeutic melancholic poetry. Its aim is not to make you “feel better” or to redeem damaged experiences but to redirect your attention to those very experiences. One leaves Baudelaire’s poetry not relieved of grief but aggrieved, clearer about what the losses at the origin of one’s grief might be and what or whom may to be to blame for them. At the same time, however, as in “To a Passerby” (“A Une Passante”) for example, we are shown how one’s losses might be a secret source of connection, interest, and perhaps even pleasure. Baudelaire’s could be called a splenetic modernism, for it is his task to transform ennui, that “monstre delicat” that renders the world incapable of sustaining emotional involvement, into spleen: a state in which one is exceedingly aware of, angry about, and interested in the losses one has suffered. For Baudelaire, it would seem, feeling those losses, losses that have penetrated into the very structure of subjectivity, is the only way to be attuned to the unavoidably melancholic nature of modern life.

There is much more to say here. But, I would conclude this survey with the proposition that Benjamin’s Baudelairean splenetic melancholy is the one that we need now. Indeed, I have the feeling that the losses of the present moment, losses piled on previous ones, may already be animating the political resistances of our current moment. The point is not to get past our losses nor to dwell on them in ways that distance us from the world, but to direct attention to those losses as a way to come together with each other and to fight for a world which redeems those losses, a world that we no longer feel the desire to escape from.

References

1. Baudelaire, Charles. 1857. *Les Fleurs Du Mal*. Paris: Poulet-Malassis et De Broise.
2. Benjamin, Walter. 1999. “N [On the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress].” In Walter Benjamin. *The Arcades Project*, translated by Howard Eiland and Kevin Mclaughlin, 456–88. Cambridge, Mass., and London, Engl.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
3. Benjamin, Walter. 1999. “Left-Wing Melancholy.” In Walter Benjamin. *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, part 2, 423–27. Cambridge, Mass., and London, Engl.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
4. Benjamin, Walter. 2003. “Central Park.” In Walter Benjamin. *Selected Writings*, vol. 4, 161–99. Cambridge, Mass., and London, Engl.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
5. Benjamin, Walter. 2003. “On the Concept of History.” In Walter Benjamin. *Selected Writings*, vol. 4, 389–400. Cambridge, Mass., and London, Engl.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
6. Benjamin, Walter. 2019. *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*. Translated by Howard Eiland. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
7. Burton, Robert. 1977. *The Anatomy of Melancholia: What It is, with All the Kinds, Causes, Symptomes, Prognostickes and Several Cures of It*. Edited with an introduction by Holbrook Jackson. New York: Vintage Books.
8. Freud, Sigmund. 1954. “‘Draft G’ (Jan. 7, 1895).” In *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, translated and edited by James Strachey, vol. 1, 200–206. London: The Hogarth Press.

9. Freud, Sigmund. 1957. "Mourning and Melancholia." In *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, translated and edited by James Strachey, vol. 14, 243–58. London: The Hogarth Press.
10. Freud, Sigmund. 1957. "On Transience." In *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, translated and edited by James Strachey, vol. 14, 305–7. London: The Hogarth Press.
11. Freud, Sigmund. 1957. "Thoughts for the Times on War and Death." In *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, translated and edited by James Strachey, vol. 14, 275–300. London: The Hogarth Press.
12. Freud, Sigmund. 1961. "The Ego and the Id (1923)." In *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, translated and edited by James Strachey, vol. 19, 12–66. London: The Hogarth Press.
13. Freud, Sigmund. 1959. *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*. Translated and edited by James Strachey. New York: Norton.
14. Kristeva, Julia. 1989. *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*. Translated by Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press.
15. Lloyd, Geoffrey Ernest Richard, ed. 1983. *Hippocratic Writings*. New York: Penguin Classics.

Received: January 25, 2022

Accepted: February 27, 2022

Author's information:

Jonathan Flatley — Ph.D. (1996, Duke University, Graduate Program in Literature), Professor of English at Wayne State University (Detroit, Michigan)

Использованная литература

1. *Baudelaire Ch.* Les Fleurs du Mal. Paris: Poulet-Malassis et De Broise, 1857. 248 p.
2. *Benjamin W.* N [On the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress] // Walter Benjamin. The Arcades Project / trans. by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin. Cambridge, Mass., and London, Engl.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999. P. 456–488.
3. *Benjamin W.* Left-Wing Melancholy // Walter Benjamin. Selected Writings. Vol. 2. Part 2. Cambridge, Mass., and London, Engl.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999. P. 423–427.
4. *Benjamin W.* Central Park // Walter Benjamin. Selected Writings. Vol. 4. Cambridge, Mass., and London, Engl.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003. P. 161–199.
5. *Benjamin W.* On the Concept of History // Walter Benjamin. Selected Writings. Vol. 4. Cambridge, Mass., and London, Engl.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003. P. 389–400.
6. *Benjamin W.* Origin of the German Trauerspiel / trans. by H. Eiland. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2019. XXIII, 308 p.
7. *Burton R.* The Anatomy of Melancholia: What It is, With All the Kinds, Causes, Symptoms, Prognostickes and Several Cures of It / ed. with an introd. by H. Jackson. New York: Vintage Books, 1977. XX, 547 p.

8. *Freud S. Draft G. Melancholia (Jan. 7, 1895)* // Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud / translated and edited by James Strachey. Vol. 1. London: The Hogarth Press, 1954. P. 200–206.
9. *Freud S. Mourning and Melancholia* // The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud. Vol. 14 / trans. and ed. by J. Strachey. London: The Hogarth Press, 1957. P. 243–258.
10. *Freud S. On Transience* // The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud. Vol. 14 / trans. and ed. by J. Strachey. London: The Hogarth Press, 1957. P. 305–307.
11. *Freud S. Thoughts for the Times on War and Death* // The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud. Vol. 14 / trans. and ed. by J. Strachey. London: The Hogarth Press, 1957. P. 275–300.
12. *Freud S. The Ego and the Id (1923)* // The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud. Vol. 19 / trans. and ed. by J. Strachey. London: The Hogarth Press, 1961. P. 12–66.
13. *Freud S. Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*. Translated and edited by James Strachey. New York: Norton, 1959. VIII, 85 p.
14. *Kristeva J. Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia* / trans. by L. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press, 1989. VII, 300 p. (European Perspectives).
15. *Hippocratic Writings* / ed. by G. E. R. Lloyd. New York: Penguin Classics, 1983. 380 p.

Получено: 25 января 2022 года

Принято к публикации: 27 февраля 2022 года

Об авторе:

Джонатан Флэтли — Ph.D. (1996, Дьюкский университет), профессор кафедры английской словесности, факультет свободных искусств Университета Уэйна (Детройт, Мичиган, США)