

BABEŞ-BOLYAI UNIVERSITY OF CLUJ-NAPOCA  
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THE MELANCHOLY IDENTITY IN  
SØREN KIERKEGAARD

- Summary -

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**KEYWORDS:** melancholy, identity, identification, psychoanalysis, modernity, heavy-mindedness, light-mindedness, anxiety, atmosphere, solitude, exception, negativism, sickness, chronic, *jouissance*, *Nom-du-père*, object *a*, psychosis, Unconscious, lack, loss, guilt, sin, irony, silence, sorrow, pain, autopathy, sufferance, foreboding, secret, mourning, writing, suppletion, death, existence, ek-sistence, acedia, *Bejahung*, body, absence, void, act, sublimation, repetition, ethics, immortality, imaginary, symbolic, real, religious

## SUMMARY

*I now live in melancholia's private berth*

Kierkegaard (Journal)

Relating the inadequacy of the illusion of immortality in the nineteenth century to the epistemological stalemate of an empty identity (that a new type scientism was supposed to take on), Jean Starobinski affirms, at the end of an essay on the Cotard delusion, that the melancholic immortality should be called, from then onwards, both mortal and immortal. However, the melancholic solution does not imply a phenomenological articulation of the finitude, but a division of the subject (*i.e.* of the individual) between the reality of his suffering (pain) and the authenticity of the ideal. The twofold melancholic individual of the nineteenth-century *ek-sists* paradoxically, between the painfulness of its inner possibilities and the "intimate" exteriority of an infinite lived as impossible, anticipating the psychoanalytical transindividual unconscious. The Renaissance, the Baroque and the Enlightenment could easily reconcile the melancholic because of a performative effectiveness of the melancholy, either artistic or politico-religious, by virtue of an eschatology that preserves the illusion of immortality separate from the individual's inner becoming.

"The modernism" (by which we mean the ontological project of modernity in its dynamics of exhaustion) is thus stigmatized by the "clandestine" inheritance of the decline of a living historicity while trying to comprise it. The initial ambiguity of melancholia, a deconstructive pain or a revealing and paideutic pain, splits into a "true tragic sorrow of the self" (Kierkegaard) that internalizes (*i.e.* incorporates) the abyss of an essential trauma in the sense of a personal myth. This indicates an inverted ancient ideal, either of the melancholic genius or of the Platonic frenzy, in Kierkegaard's sense of the ancient drama reflected in the modern one. Hence the melancholic pathogenesis of the "immortal death" (a Lacanian

unsymbolized *entre-deux-morts*), not incidentally offset from the birth of the modern psychiatric science. Certainly, the sinuous paradigm of melancholia contains its genetic dimension of mortification regardless of the *Zeitgeist*, for instance: the artistic motifs reaching the pinnacles with Dürer and Cranach, "the *acedia* constellation" (as Giorgio Agamben calls it), but also the medical imagery from medieval to modern. However, it is only at the end of modernity and at the moment of disintegration of Christian eschatology, particularly of the speculative idealism, that melancholy becomes an emblem of the Western *epos* in the manner of an autonomous *Weltanschauung* of crisis and loss. Yet, this is not a mere static introjection of the melancholic ideal, but, to speak with Freud, a "pure culture of the death drive" which unfolds in the direction of a permanent and reiterated (*i.e.* relived) identity of nothingness – of a "dead immortality" which corresponds to the immortal death of the Cotard delusion.

In this frame, the acute affirmation of a secular melancholy – different from both the dominant paradigm of the melancholic genius as well as the minor ones, like the emerging psychiatric doctrine of melancholy – is due to Kierkegaard's thematization of a poetic subjectivity raised to a philosophical dignity. From a historicist perspective, the romantic melancholy, originated in the Kantianism or in Goethe's *Wertherism*, describes the secular pantheism of the *Weltschmerz* according to which *le mal(aise) du siècle* finds its creative emphasis within its own mortification. Apart from a simple subjectivism that refuses both tradition and progress, the Romanticism raises the idea of a solitary narcissism in solidarity with the void world. If the medieval ontology functioned in the case of the melancholic like a phantasmology impregnated with the illusion of the Christian immortality, the modernist "anti-ontology" breaks the Hegelian paradigm unequivocally, as Taubes remarks, into two asymmetrical endings – two "mortal" idealisms, following the above argument – Marx and Kierkegaard. Certainly, the Kierkegaardian theology of interiority, which, Taubes says, outlines the sources of the atheistic ontology of the twentieth-century especially through the thematization of anxiety, is inscribed in the existential and disillusioned *ennui* of the age. But its ramifications reach much further. Thus, for instance, the Kierkegaardian melancholy does not imply an introjective "vampirization" of the world, but the self-exclusion of the unique – *Den Enkelte* – which differs from the romantic modern(ist) individual through the audaciousness of choosing oneself and through the assumed commitment as an exception to the evil of the crowd. Besides, Kierkegaard can be seen as the ultimate romantic because he radicalizes the morbid "overflow" of the spirit through the "quiet desperation", mentioned both during the exchange of melancholy with the father and in the context of the self-ruination of the aesthetic. We can therefore affirm that the Kierkegaardian melancholy is both *anti* and

*hyper-romantic* in accordance with the mortal immortality that we have sketched – while rejecting the morbid-narcissistic identification with the pure eros and with the aesthetic vitalism that Romanticism conveys, it also indicates an atonic melancholy ("the most faithful mistress"), experienced as a fascination with self-aneantization in the various aspects of the demonic. Moreover, Kierkegaard also refuses any ethical vitalism of the age, detaching himself from the bourgeois melancholy of the baroque interiority in spite of what Adorno alleges. The best example in this regard is the perpetual failure of the (genuine) repetition for Constantin Constantius, as the limit of the ethics in providing therapeutic solutions, thus disavowing the Hegelian *Sittlichkeit*.

In this vast context, our research aims to elaborate the uniqueness of Kierkegaard's melancholy, as the "true (inner) pain", that modern Metaphysics had previously included into a marginal anthropology of passions or had identified it with the Hegelian unhappy consciousness. The originality of Kierkegaard and of his teatropic "non-philosophical" enterprise is self-sustaining, therefore, we will never abandon the Kierkegaardian perspective on melancholy and identity. At the same time, we define this melancholy identity of Kierkegaard as a nexus between the lived melancholy (that should not be mistaken for his own biographical sickness, but should be taken in a specific conceptual-existential sense) and the melancholy of the writing. Our approach is neither properly phenomenological, nor *historial* in the Heideggerian sense. Instead, we aim to establish an original affinity between Kierkegaard and psychoanalysis (mainly that of Jacques Lacan, but in some respects the Freudian one as well) with regards to melancholy. We can even say that Kierkegaard, overlaying the abovementioned emphases of the 19th century and surpassing his own age, doesn't simply anticipate psychoanalysis, but stands for an *avant la lettre* psychoanalytical event. Our primary hypothesis centres around this closely tied interlacing of Kierkegaard's melancholy and the psychoanalytical melancholic psychosis, while trying to thoroughly (re-) grasp the authentic true pain and its function in a non-philosophical version of identity. In this context, our analysis is carried out in three stages: a phenomenology of melancholy from the outside, that follows the outlines of the melancholy identity, a more ample analysis from within melancholy's metamorphoses, encompassing the two levels of true pain and autopathy of suffering and, finally, the possibility to overcome melancholy in the movement towards a second ethics, that develops a non-melancholic identity not quite identical to the religious one, which the knights of faith portray.

The first part of our thesis, entitled *The Continuum of the Melancholy Identity* brings a new light on Kierkegaard's "concept" of melancholy by connecting the lived melancholia to

the melancholy of writing, within the limits of an already visible original guilt. We first draw a phenomenology of melancholy linked to its phenomenological impossibility and to the two aspects of the "hysteria of the Spirit", inspired by Jacques Caron's viewpoint: an atmospheric melancholy that fills the aesthetic and a chronical melancholy that lasts all throughout the existential stages, even in the final (teatropic) development of the eternal man. In the second chapter of this first part, we address and analyse the negativism of the melancholic in Kierkegaard in a more closely psychoanalytical manner. Thus, we proceed from the existential condition of solitude as a melancholic negativity and from Kierkegaard's re-evaluation of the cardinal sin of *acedia* to the more radical negativities of silence and irony.

The second part, the core of our research, elaborates the two main dimensions of Kierkegaard's category of melancholy (we argue that melancholia cannot really be an existential category, like anxiety or desperation) – the *true pain* and the *autopathy of suffering* – from within melancholia's economy. The first chapter of this part focuses on the vast problem of guilt, with all its registres and nuances in Kierkegaard's work, starting from the hereditary turmoil of the father's sin and all the way to the foreboding and the ineffable significance of destiny in the melancholic guilt, for both Kierkegaard and psychoanalysis. The second chapter proposes a Kierkegaardian mourning, considering the role of modern Antigone and of her Lacanian counterpart with respects to the position of *in-between-two-deaths* (*entre-deux-morts*), structuring then the lack of the body as a radical absence, to be perpetually mourned by the melancholic.

The third and last part draws the transition to a non-melancholic identity that always relates to the religious Identity of Christ and also to the archetipal figures of the knights of faith: Abraham and Job. Whereas these religious individuals are out of reach for the existential unique within the world and even for the "poet of the religious", there is, however, an identity beyond melancholia that can persist in the existential act. In this perspective, we approach the suppletion of a symbolic and at the same time real identity – one that the melancholic subject cannot grasp – through writing; we also describe the overall function of writing in Kierkegaard's dynamics of the self and in the sublimation that makes way for an identity of Identity within the existential dialectics. The second chapter takes the concept of *second ethics* to Kierkegaard's movement of repetition and brings it closer to the Christian *kenosis* and to Lacan's *jouissance autre*. The conclusion of our research does not recapitulate all the trajectory covered, but rather gives way to an opening towards the reconsideration of Kierkegaard at the end of and in the decline of modernity with the help of Lacanian psychoanalysis. We argue that the stakes of the contemporary philosophical identity cannot

ignore the pathology of melancholy which the Lacanian psychoanalysis has strived to circumscribe as a "sickness of truth", nor the second ethics of Kierkegaard and Lacan, that re-establishes the existential position of the individual.

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