

Mirrors of Melancholy: Models, History and Reception

The mirrored reference

In the introduction to his *Histoire du traitement de la mélancolie des origines à 1900*, Jean Starobinski speaks of “melancholy’s long career”: from Hippocratic medicine to psychoanalysis and modern ways of expressing malaise, sadness, lassitude, depression or acute intelligence, the meanings and transformations of the notion seem to play on numerous and indeterminate associations between sciences, texts and arts; beyond the melancholic humour, personality, sentiment, and artistic inspiration, the concept acquires new paradigms and layers of meaning appear without ever excluding one another. This long “first” phase has been followed by a rich “second” one of studies and commentaries, which sometimes enriched the corpus by finding new sources, extending throughout history to our time.

Hazy reflections

As soon as we start looking beyond the surface of the words, however, we realize that the success of the notion seems to be accompanied by contradictions, deviations, adjustments and approximations. The uniqueness of melancholy has developed from a multitude of histories. Yet the different accounts all have in common the reference to an ancient, supposedly well known, ideally limited original, whereas subsequent use of the term would be composed of misuses, semantic shifts and derivations from the original meaning on which all are assumed to agree implicitly: melancholy can be recognized both in the model and in the image. Thus after Hippocrates and Galen, with little emphasis on the nuances brought in by other classical physicians and the Aristotelian *Problem XXX* (which states that the man of genius is melancholic), the variety and multiplicity of interpretations in scientific, philosophic, literary, religious, and dramaturgical contexts are all attributed to one cause: the derivation from a unique and common source. According to these interpretations, the cause is to be found in the derivation and not in the multiplicity of the original. The word “melancholy” alone is sufficient to bring an apparent unity to the humoral fluxes, temperaments, emotions, conceptions and potential of humanity. The recent success of the notion of melancholy, reflected in books, exhibitions and catalogues, is no different from the revivals and the

recreations narrated in histories, such as those proposed by Jean Starobinski, Raymond Klibansky, Erwin Panofsky, Fritz Saxl, Rudolf Wittkower, Jackie Pigeaud, and Patrick Dandrey.

Mirrors of melancholy?

The persistent existence of a concept with an open meaning and the recurrent search for conceptual purity was well in place already in Antiquity and is yet another mirror of melancholy. The use of word in itself postulates a definition: it implies entering a referential system as much as it means going past this same theoretical system. It may even imply from the start an implicit comment on the gap between a primary and correct meaning, and the use which is made of it. But where then is the mythical line between a [given word](#) and its usage? It may be that by wanting to establish literal and figurative meanings, there is a great risk of creating imaginary etymological narratives, of inventing episodes through the centuries and of recreating an original purity that never was. It seems thus that the original meaning of “melancholy”, always given as the first one in dictionaries, never had the closed and stable unity that the lexicographers claim it had; it seems rather that the second meaning of “sadness” could have preceded — as is the case with French *mélancolie* — the etymological meaning of black humour, [rediscovered](#) after having being forgotten and having undergone transformations in the hands of those among the learned who were [besotted](#) by the notion of returning to origins. Despite the contradictions and the reiterations, it seems that artists, poets and physicians provided the notion with various directions and domains, from the end of Antiquity until the adjustments and the recapitulations of the Renaissance, without disrupting the idea of a pure, original definition, as if there were a fixed basis, given as a first stage, and subsequent variations: a close examination of sources and comments forbids to keep this linear explanation. Where can we place the origin and where can we place the deviation? In the manner of the purist, must we interpret the changes as losses? In what way does the follow-up define its own beginnings? In short, do the lexicographers of the Renaissance rediscover or reinvent theories and systems for a notion they claimed to be [classical](#)?

Within the [framework of this project](#), the description of cases and the analysis of particular systems will, then, [refer to the historicity](#) of the notion, of ways of reading,

of the reception and the transformations of the concept. Historians, and art historians, specialists in literature, the history of ideas or history of medicine are all invited to discuss their methods and their cultures regarding the question of the reception of melancholy, in Europe, from Antiquity until the end of the 18th century.

The workshop

The proposed workshop does not have as its goal to describe the different usages of the notion, but to follow and analyse its modifications, transmissions, deformations and reception. The workshop will explore the ways in which the historical shifts of melancholy were commented on as well as the discourse on these changes. Thus, the encounter cannot dispense with a solid study of the notion in the Greek medical corpus, which is commonly presented as the original reference and opens the first debate on the possible extensions outside of the medical field. A precise study of commentaries, medical, moral and philosophical texts will demonstrate the flexibility of a notion derived from different fields and with different meanings. Above all this study will allow us to concentrate on the fascination that the term produced. One of the fields of study will be the “critique of melancholy” before 1800 (the distinction from depression in the modern period neatly simplifies the dividing line between misuse and correct meaning).

A study of personal and theoretical variations on the notion will provide an opportunity to analyse the reception of an ancient concept and the uses of scientific material considered as a “commonplace” of medical discourse. To follow the “career” of melancholy in this perspective will take us away from attempts to identify the successive shifts in disciplines and meaning, since, before us, historians of melancholy have already done this adequately. Taking their work into account, we will be studying the recurrences and discourses over the long term. In this context of contradiction, paradox, derivation, extension, the purist’s resistance to shifts and the capacity of the notion to cross from one field of knowledge to another, from one discourse to another is a perfect subject of study in terms of mirrors* since the primary characteristic of this notion is its ability to surpass its original definition. These effects of reflection and mirror, in their continuity and discontinuity, will be the topic we will attempt to grasp: how, in what terms, what is at stake? In what context do polysemy, scientific, intertextual or philosophical references

outline a poetic career for melancholy? In what way can the will to stick to tradition or inventions trace an epistemological journey? What are the reflexive discourses that frame and contain the plurality of melancholies?

Studying the reception of the notion and its variations in different contexts also allows us to read the current keen interest for melancholy: the study will provide us with tools of comparative analysis of representations and of anthropological conceptions. The meeting between Canadian and Swiss research centres will enable us exchange methods, bibliographical references and traditions of thought: to us this confrontation of perspectives seems essential for a rigorous study and reopening of debates which have been discussed time and again.

Methodological limitations

The project is concerned with the career of a notion and not with its scientific, literary or psychological validity. We are therefore not asking in what way the modern or ancient notions are true, valid or useful in relation to the understanding of reality or history; the project is not about confronting critical discourse in order to gain from it a truth that would transcend historicity nor is it to discover correct readings of ancient works: for this project we are interested in the complexity and the reflexivity of the discourse and the practice related to melancholy. Therefore from one period to another or from one author to another, revival and rupture* will be the subject of our investigation and not the result. Our focus will thus be the process: comparison of cultures — particularly between Eastern and European medicine, ancient and modern, or the recognition of ancient psychological models in modern discourse — should refer to the model of reception and not be a description of content.

Similarly, although it may seem tempting to raise the question of permanence within diversity and of the *longue durée* of transformations, such an approach seems to us to boil down to an essentialist interrogation of the world and would not open a discussion of the critical perspective on modes of inclusion and superposition of the work on the history of the notion. Indeed, if our proposal is centered on the mirrors of melancholy, its critical reception, the discourse and commentaries held on its history, then it cannot organize itself around a fixed concept of melancholy. The proposed workshop will not

either apply itself to a diagnostic of melancholies before or after the definitional periods: the identification and the recognition of melancholies, the inspiration or the personality of artists, are thus placed outside of our field of study. Aside from the mirror, these analyses will provide us with material for our research but will not provide us with its subject.

Suggested areas of study

- Melancholy in Antiquity: from humour to pathology, sources, definitions, descriptions, fields, debates among the disciplines, literary models of medical treatises; retrospective elaboration of models for melancholy; symptoms and differentiations; the notion of temperament.
- Sources and shifts in the medical corpus: mediaeval and modern readings of classical texts, rewritings of classical theories, demarcations* of the notion, the literature of symptoms, systematisations and remodelling of classical sources; diversity and exclusion of interpretations; lovesickness, “book sickness”, religious melancholy, geniuses and melancholy, modes of interpretative readings.
- Shifts in use: the notion outside the medical field, in the medieval as well as modern period, reflexive commentaries on the practise of loanwords and semantic shifts, ways of crossing disciplinary divisions, commentaries on the historicity of the notions, purisms and condemnations of expansions as misuses, the means of shifting.
- Rhetoric of discourses: construction of a scientific, philosophic or anthropological commonplace, ways of shifting the meaning and reactions in scientific writings, structures of trans-disciplinary loan words; shortcomings and successes of the etymological model; what is at stake in a historical narrative based on coherence with the model and deviations from it.
- Anatomies of melancholy: the invention of a modern trans-generic type of writing, the literary question of the analysis of melancholy, the Burton case, theatrical melancholies, the discourse on melancholy in specific genres; the narrator* in melancholic discourse; memory and melancholy.

- Learned traditions: confrontations of notions and national knowledge, national rewriting of historic continuity, temperament and culture; specific studies of national, personal, and thematic receptions.