

Metalepsis Seminar • Virtual Session 6

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THE CASE FOR SINTHOMATIC MELANCHOLY

METALEPSIS SEMINARIANS, 9-ERS, AND AUXILIARY MEMBERS



Albrecht Dürer, [Melancholia I](#), 1514

* no accident, melancholy's the key

In the good old Structuralism days, patterns, diagrams, and schemas were in fashion, and melancholy — that most toxic member of the family of four humors — again stepped on to the academic stage. Things looked good. It's black bile, dangerous in any amount, and it appealed to the Nietzscheans who were ever keen to ally art with apocalypse; its relation to satire and the irrationality of the festival made it the hero of Bakhtin's celebration of carnival and everything below the belt that kept humanity from becoming slave to the concept. Between the phelgm of the tragic ending and the sanguine happy endings of comedy, melancholy as a literary genre could do no wrong. It gave everyone the chance to have a laugh or two while undermining colleagues with more serious concerns.

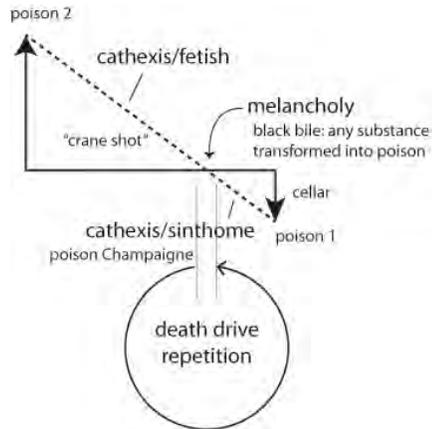
Times have changed. The mere mention of the system of humors is reason for dismissal from the academy. The conceptualists are back, with antagonism to the symptom dare it suggest that the will to power has its limits. The revolution that might have come about thanks to Panofsky, Klibansky, and Saxl's monumental study — [full text available from Scribd](#) — would have combined art history's interest in the unconscious (ever sensitive to the blows dealt to it by semiotics) with a new criticism propelled by an interest in culture and all the arts, not just the highbrow stuff. Smuggled by boat out of Hamburg in the wee hours of World War II to the new location of the Warburg in London, the galleys were translated and published, but Saxl, the project director after the war, in ill health, was quickly overtaken by the ambitious Positivist Ernst Gombrich. Instead of the happy marriage that one could have expected to unite the projects of Memory and Melancholy, Gombrich assigned Francis Yates to "get into the matter" of artificial memory, which she dutifully did. The result, *The Art of Memory*, was elegant and scholarly, but Yates missed so many key clues in Camillo's text ([L'Idée del Teatro](#)) that it was back to square one. Artificial memory became the schoolboy's trick turned into brain storage schemas. The connections to rhetoric, shamanism, and magic were foreclosed. The role of melancholy (re: the death drive) and memory were never to be resumed ... almost never.

Despite Foucault's reminder (*Madness and Civilization*) that the main symptoms of modern psychiatry (mania, depression, etc.) are traceable to the humors — where madness at least had a cyclicity — critical studies have not re-admitted melancholy as more than an attitude of the disaffected, a kind of "what else would you expect" response to dreadful politics, environmental crisis, or social injustice. While melancholy still gives form and substance to the literature of the oppressed, considering it as a symptom, to say nothing of a Lacanian *sinthome*, remains out of the question.

Here's a case for reversing that. As they left it in *Saturn and Melancholy*, Panofsky, Klibansky, and Saxl had a case for returning to Aristotle's famous [Problema XXX.I](#). Connecting the arts with psychiatry — what could be more Freudian? The undone business of *Totem and Taboo*, *Moses and Monotheism*, and *Civilization and Its Discontents* could combine with the new center of psychoanalysis, the death drive, in a single diagnosis. Big project. What's for us? This: (1) Melancholia is a symptom both of the individual and the collective; as such it addresses the centrality of alienation within the Symbolic — the sum total of the networks of symbolic relations — without allowing us the convenience of geographic, ideological, or

social escape to imagined utopias. (2) Melancholy's relation to the arts and philosophy addresses the limits of both of those projects, as projects, and the necessity to take Hegel's advice to "tarry with the negative" to find the real meat of thinking — or, rather, the poison that cures if it does not kill. (3) Melancholy as *sinthome* brings the death drive's logic of repetition to the Lacanian front stage, where looking at the drives, the role of the gaze (freed from misinterpretation at the hands of film theorists), and the acousmatic voice finally get their say. *The pleasure that comes from encountering obstacles* seems just the ticket, since this is the "have your cake and eat it too" point where criticism and the discourse of analysis merge in the *sinthome*. There is no longer a safe Archimedian position from which to leverage conceptual explanations of the human scene. There is only the Möbius band logic of subjectivity, brought to the fore.

OK — isn't melancholy basically the death drive? (That one's for free; pony up your share!)



Notorious's crane shot as the model for the melancholy shift between fetish cathexis and sinthome cathexis

AND, isn't melancholy precisely *the point at which* the "inventory" driven by the cathexis of fetish relationships gives way to the unconscious's program of symptom? Where inventories are maps and plans and political ambitions we move to the public realm, history, and politics. We cannot discuss geo-political realities of capitalism outside the inventories of investment that charge the landscape with hot and cold spots. Melancholy advises us not to take this landscape as a given, but to see the *sinthome* beneath the surfaces (sometimes literally, as in the trip to the wine cellar in *Notorious*). What is missed in the overviews such as Jennifer Radden's *The Nature of Melancholy* or Jacky Bowring's useful ([downloadable](#)) *Field Guide to Melancholy* is that melancholy resists the standard "history of ideas" treatment. The empirical manifestation of melancholy as an emotional dysfunction masks the structure of the *sinthome* that gives it such a versatile role in the arts and philosophy. Melancholy is a blueprint, a cipher book, a time machine. It is a structure for thinking, but in particular, the kind of "Hegelian" negative thinking that leads back to the Freudian-Lacanian "clinic" of the unconscious, the *sinthome*. Without the unconscious, melancholy is just a bad day out.



Champagne tray, *Notorious*, 1945

* how to save a thesis from dying of boredom: the first shall be last

To possibly over-simplify the case, American academia and perhaps academics in general prefers the hyper-cathexed inventory. Like the studies of melancholy cited above, the aim is to "find everything there is to find" in a "subject" (which, defined as a field available for inventory, can only yield to such treatment). The added feature is that every inventory has its "field" (hah hah) and this is the ideal basis for never-finished projects. The problem stylistically and intellectually is that there is no graceful way to bring an inventory to conclusion, apart from assigning special value to the last fact collected.

This indeed a melancholy situation! The need to shift gears begs the question. If the aim is to make nothing more than an inventory, what *could* be a conclusion? This is where the question of what is the "public face" of *thesinthome* becomes very interesting. Again, we are required to re-visit the masters of the *sinthome*, Rabelais, Shakespeare, Cervantes ... Dostoevsky, Poe ... Hitchcock, Lynch ... The lists reveal many "final solutions" but all share the same flip point between the inventory and the ending.

THIS IS COOL: The key is to return to Lacan's template for the discourses. As **Paul Verhaeghe puts it in his introductory essay**, the formulæ (master, hysteria, university, analysis) are empty bags. Begin to interpret them and they use their usefulness. The key is that, when we begin with the position of the agent addressing an Other, the basis of virtually all communications models, we leave out a key detail. The Truth, which has occupied the "fourth" position in the *mathemes*, is really the first element. It is the element that has "dropped out of position" in order for us to enter the Symbolic. Un-symbolizable itself, it had to leave the room in order that conversation could continue.

It is in **the fourth position** of a study/dissertation that the realization of this "**first step**" comes about, this recognition of the un-symbolizable absence. Melancholy is the key because, after all, what could be more impossible than the Real of this True, its inadmissibility? Re-read the ending of *Don Quixote* to see how the absence motif can be managed. Re-think Shakespeare's famous sonnet 116, whose last lines have been profoundly misunderstood throughout the decades where it has been quoted at weddings:

If this be error and upon me proved,
I never writ, nor no man ever loved.

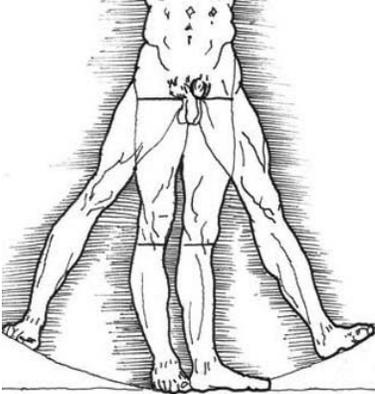
The "impossibility motif," the True, which is last but remembered to be first.



Rodin, St. Jean Baptiste, 1877

* claudio sgarbi in america!

Lucky us — Claudio Sgarbi, educator, architect, and conversationalist *sans pareil*, will be visiting in late March, first in Boalsburg *chez moi*, then to speak at the Frascari Symposium II at the Washington-Alexandria Architectural Center of Virginia Tech. What will he say? Save up your questions to trigger the most amazing responses. Thanks to our already animated and animating correspondence, Claudio has gotten me to think about yet another topic that, like the Cagalibri symposium, is on the edge of polite conversation. [This essay on "The Space between the Legs"](#) is as X-rated as it sounds, though not as daring as Claudio's, which he may share later on. I am scooping him on this just to prepare for his visit and re-think the AMAZING DISCOVERY, that no Vico scholar has recognized the significance of the "two Diana's," despite Vico's employment of two Metafisicas in the front graphic material of his *New Science*, and an explicit passage in *the New Science* (§528 — check it out!) where Vico virtually hammers in the news that history begins with this charming goddess of the moon, the hunt, and so, so many other things. This is an essay that your grandmother might allow and even appreciate, but it's probably over the top for on-the-edge university administrators. Rodin's St. Jean could be adopted as the "master image" of reversed predication. In between stepping from the left leg to the right, the saint points both up and down, >↑<.



I bet you'll want to know the connection with melancholy. Think humors. Think symptoms/sinthomes. Think about the distance between the two centers in Leonardo's *Vitruvian man*. Then, think **woman** (and the not-all).

* a time to share

It seems only right that we use the Internet to do what the CERN founders intended ... share writings (and drawings). Any members who want feedback on their work, or who want to pick a fight (or settle one) can send PDFs to be posted on a special new section of the Metalepsis Seminar web site. One bit of left-over business is about production. Basically, the rule is that if you don't write every day you don't write, you just re-write. And, unless your rate is speedy, you will get stuck on every sentence, every idea, even every word. Our seminar goal of "unlimited semiosis" was not met. You were not give the secret of writing fast and lots. Sorry. It's not hard but it's like hypnosis; you have to think like Camillo did, with spaces rather than "ideas." Unlimited semiosis was his goal as well, and also Vico's. Learn the basics, then practice practice practice. Perhaps the next sessions (Websters/Alexandria) we can go over some first steps.

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remember our motto: "unlimited semiosis!"



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