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Melancholy as an Aesthetic Emotion

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Abstract

In this article, we want to show the relevance and importance of melancholy as an aesthetic emotion. Melancholy often plays a role in our encounters with art works, and it is also present in some of our aesthetic responses to the natural environment. Melancholy invites aesthetic considerations to come into play not only in well-defined aesthetic contexts but also in everyday situations that give reason for melancholy to arise. But the complexity of melancholy, the fact that it is fascinating in itself, suggests the further thought that it may be considered as an aesthetic emotion per se. To this end, we argue that it is the distinctive character of melancholy, its dual character and its differences from sadness and depression, which distinguishes it as an aesthetic emotion.

Key Words

Melancholy, emotion, aesthetic emotion, depression, sublime, environment

Besides my other numerous circle of acquaintances I have one more intimate confidant-my melancholy. In the midst of my joy, in the midst of my work, she waves to me, calls me to one side, even though physically I stay put. My melancholy is the most faithful mistress I have known, what wonder, then, that I love her in return.

-Søren Kierkegaard [\[1\]](#)

1. Introduction

When discussing the problem of emotions and art, recent philosophers have most often considered it in two contexts-music and fiction. Music, usually lacking an easily definable propositional content, is an art form in which emotions have the most dominant role to play; in our western tradition it is common to describe certain kinds of movements as 'sad' and others as 'joyful', and it is appropriate, in some sense, to feel these emotions while listening to a piece of music. The problem has been how to characterize more specifically the connection between a composition and the emotions it is claimed to express. The question of fiction and the emotions has been in the forefront because of the apparent paradox of our response to fictions; why, for example, are we moved by the fate of a fictional heroine when we know that the object of the emotion is not a real one, but only fictional.

The emotions considered in these contexts have been, typically, fairly straightforward and uncomplicated, for example, joy, sadness, and especially in respect to fiction, fear in its various degrees, with horror as an extreme. These sorts of emotions point to some of the logical and philosophical issues arising from art and emotions, and although not enough attention has been paid to the nature of these emotions themselves, they are sufficiently understood for exemplifying the dilemmas mentioned. This has also meant, however, that many other significant and interesting emotional qualities have been neglected.

The sublime is one of these emotional qualities that has been neglected but it has seen a small revival in neo-Kantian aesthetics. Another emotional quality that in some respects resembles sublimity has been almost completely forgotten. Melancholy is no less complex a phenomenon than sublimity, and it has a role to play in many works of art. Looking further back into the history of philosophy and literature, there are chapters in which the topic is touched upon. There have been many studies of melancholy, but sustained treatments of the concept have been 'clinical', where it is equated primarily with a mental illness or a dominant temperament.^[2] Robert Burton's classic, *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621), is one exception, since its scope is broader than the clinical definition. Still, in these very different and varying accounts melancholy is not explicitly connected to aesthetic considerations (except perhaps in some poetic works).^[3]

We want to show the relevance and importance of melancholy as an aesthetic emotion. Melancholy often has a role in our encounters with art works, and it may also be significant in our aesthetic responses to the natural environment. But the complexity of melancholy, the fact that it is fascinating in itself, suggests a further thought-that melancholy might be considered as an aesthetic emotion *per se*. Melancholy invites aesthetic considerations to come into play not only in well-defined aesthetic contexts but also in everyday situations that give reason for melancholy to arise. It is the special character of melancholy, and that which differentiates it from sadness, sorrow, despair, and depression, which distinguishes it as an aesthetic emotion.

One feature that makes melancholy an aesthetic emotion-like that of sublimity-is its dual nature. There are negative and positive aspects in it which alternate, creating contrasts and rhythms of pleasure. These aspects combine with the reflectivity that is at the heart of melancholy, and the particular refined feeling of the emotion. Like every emotion, melancholy arises out of a particular context, but with melancholy its various aspects come together to create an aesthetic situation around itself that gives the context a new aesthetic dimension. Although we shall not enter into the discussion concerning the educative function of emotions, we think it is reasonable to suppose that these sorts of complex and reflective emotions are particularly relevant in this respect.

Understanding the aesthetic character of melancholy requires a discussion of its objects and causes and the kinds of situations in which it arises, so we shall begin with an analysis of the distinctive aspects of the emotion. Following this analysis, we discuss how melancholy is *prima facie* an aesthetic emotion and illustrate melancholy's role in art and in our aesthetic encounters with nature. All this emphasizes, we think, the relevance of melancholy from the educational point of view. This subtle emotion is crucial in understanding many works of art, and the capability to feel it enriches human life in many ways, as well as giving us a possibility to come to terms with many difficult matters in our lives. As we shall show, melancholy is a mature emotion in which reflection calms a turbulent soul.

2. Distinguishing melancholy from depression

The main reason for melancholy's neglect is that it has often been connected too closely or even equated with sadness or depression. Melancholy is easy to lump together with these

emotions, and the emotional terms are often used synonymously. This tendency masks the distinctive nature of melancholy. It is also necessary to distinguish our analysis of melancholy from the clinical tradition: as we understand melancholy, it is not a mental disorder of any kind. We want to progress beyond these rather narrow meanings of the concept and argue that melancholy is a more refined emotion with qualities of its own.

This clinical tradition begins in Aristotle, continues in parts of Burton's analysis, and more recently we find it in works by Freud, Julia Kristeva, and some psychologists who have considered the problems of artistic creativity.^[4] In the Greek, we find the clinical origins of the term, 'melaina kole' or 'black bile.'^[5] Freud identifies melancholy with the dejection and apathy of depression, and he also links melancholy to narcissism and mania.^[6] Kristeva writes that "the terms melancholy and depression refer to a composite that might be called the melancholy/depressive, whose borders are in fact blurred. . . ."^[7] Although she is right to note the overlap between depression and melancholy, by aligning her analysis with the clinical tradition she overlooks important differences between the two. It is useful and illuminating to retain a distinction between melancholy and depression as well as a distinction between the clinical definition of melancholy and the broader emotion-based use of the term (although there is also overlap between each use of the term).^[8]

One of the clearest differences between depression and melancholy is that depression is an emotional state of resignation, whereas melancholy is not. When we feel depressed we feel unmotivated, unable to complete even the simplest task and unable to see any way forward. It is a pessimistic state that involves pain. By contrast, melancholy is not such a debilitating mood, rather it involves the pleasure of reflection and contemplation of things we love and long for, so that the hope of having them adds a touch of sweetness that makes melancholy bearable (while misery is not). Its reflective or thoughtful aspect also makes it somehow productive. Melancholy is something we even desire from time to time, for it provides an opportunity for indulgent self-reflection. We enjoy this time out for reflection, but the pleasure is also connected to recollecting that which we long for, where this reflective element can be even exhilarating or uplifting.

One feature that connects depression and melancholy is that they can both be experienced as moods. Moods constitute a sub-class of emotions, but they are emotions felt in relation to no explicit object. They seem to come over us without reason, and have the quality of being settled, all-pervasive, and drawn out.^[9] In this way moods contrast with the sharpness, shock and the immediacy of emotions like fear, anger, or in some cases, sadness, which are directed at objects and also lack the long-lasting flavour of moods.

3. The reflective nature of melancholy

Melancholy is an emotion often occasioned by people or places; we feel melancholic about a lover or friend, or a meaningful place in our lives, perhaps somewhere we have once lived. The quality of the feeling resembles and overlaps with sadness, but is more refined, involving some degree of pleasure, although not as much as bittersweet pleasure. Melancholy also shares a family resemblance with love, longing, yearning or missing something, as well as feeling nostalgic or the emotion that accompanies

reminiscing. Although melancholy clearly belongs to this set of emotions, it is also a distinctive emotion in its own right.

As an emotion, melancholy's most distinctive aspect is that it involves reflection. Rather than being an immediate response to some object that is present to perception, melancholy most often involves reflection on or contemplation of a memory of a person, place, event, or state of affairs. This reflective feature is a necessary but not a sufficient condition of melancholy because other emotions, for example, mourning, also involve reflection. Interestingly, contemplation and reflection are states of mind often associated with the aesthetic response more generally; especially in the Kantian tradition, some kind of reflective, contemplative and distanced point of view has been regarded as typical of the aesthetic situation.

Melancholy's reflective feature lies in the fact that its objects are often indirectly experienced through memories, thoughts or imaginings related to an absent object.^[10] The emotion itself seems to grow out of reflection or contemplation, so that melancholy is typically caused by particular memories or thoughts. The melancholic response to a desolate moor might arise from the setting combined with the recollection of particular memories, a narrative of some kind.

The memories that evoke melancholy are, like other memories, vividly real, faint and sketchy or somewhere in between. The reflective aspect of melancholy often involves the effort of recollection, that is, the reflection necessary for retrieving memories that are faint and sketchy. This explains the solitary state of mind that accompanies melancholy and facilitates the attention needed for such retrieval. When the memories are vivid, or become vivid through retrieval, our reflection is characterized more by contemplation rather than the effort of recollection.

But whether actively recollecting or contemplating, the significance of memories is in their role as a narrative for melancholy. It is in the unfolding of the narrative that we find the more specific objects of this emotion. Melancholy can involve shades of other emotions—sadness, love, longing, pleasure and even dread—and each of these emotions may be a response to either a whole narrative or aspects of it. For example, as the narrative of a past love affair unfolds in memory, a negative feeling, a tinge of sadness, comes when reflecting on the bitter end of the affair; longing and pleasure are felt as we recollect the various pleasures of being with that person; while the dread comes in one sharp moment of recapturing the feeling of loneliness felt without that love. The narrative supplies the objects of each emotional moment in reflection. When examining the melancholic response to art we shall see that the narrative of memories is replaced with the narrative of the artwork where, for instance, the narrative of a film becomes the object of melancholic reflection.

There can also be cases, however, in which there is no object of reflection in melancholy. In these cases, a melancholic mood descends upon us and is caused by being in the sort of place that easily invites reflection or a pensive mood, such as a church. Sitting on a hard, wooden bench, with abundant space and light around us, at once evokes feelings of exhilaration and loneliness. A similar case arises in aesthetic contemplation of a desolate moor or the vast ocean, where solitude and a contemplative state of mind bring on a melancholic mood that appears to have no

object.

Why do these places invite melancholy? They are places of reflection because they provide the solitude that forms the characteristic backdrop for melancholy.^[11] Solitude can be both cause and effect of melancholy; when we spend too much time alone, we may suffer from the loneliness and longing for people that is a feature of melancholy. Or, when we find ourselves in quiet, deserted places we may become melancholic. When we already feel melancholy we seek solitude, perhaps to fully feel the emotion. In his analysis of melancholy Burton remarks that:

Most pleasant it is at first, to such as are melancholy given, to lie in bed whole days, and keep their chambers, to walk alone in some solitary grove, betwixt wood and water, by a brook side, to meditate upon some delightsome and pleasant subject, which shall affect them most. . . .^[12]

Furthermore, he observes that people who spend too much time alone-people who study too much-are also prone to melancholy. The link between melancholy and solitude also explains to some extent why we often associate melancholy with nature. We use nature as a retreat from people and problems, and this may explain why many of the Romantic poets used nature to describe and evoke a melancholy mood.^[13]

Solitude also facilitates the imaginative reflection involved in melancholy. Imagination's role in melancholy is twofold. First, imagination makes associations between a present and past experience, and in this sense it has a role in causing melancholy. It connects a quiet beach to an evening stroll with a lover, or a Scottish landscape with the sound of bagpipes. Secondly, imagination is used to embellish or fantasize around the memories of melancholy, perhaps imagining our return to some place. Through fancy, imagination extends memories in a way that deepens reflection, and in turn this deepens the feeling. In these cases it is imagination, drawing significantly on memory, which provides the narrative in which melancholy is anchored. Here it also enables us to prolong the emotion, creating new scenarios as sources of pleasure and meditation. Burton points to the almost inevitable use of fanciful imagination when we feel melancholic:

A most incomparable delight it is so to melancholize, and build castles in the air, to go smiling to themselves, acting an infinite variety of parts, which they suppose and strongly imagine they represent, or that they see acted or done.^[14]

Imagination may become so fanciful that memories are altogether left behind; they exist merely as the starting point of fantasy which may even border on delusion.

Some writers have noted a connection between melancholy and madness, which seem to be linked through imagination. The reflective aspect of melancholy leads to an overly fanciful imagination, resulting in delusions. For example, in *The Taming of the Shrew*, Shakespeare writes, "melancholy is the nurse of phrenzy." This is also reflected in Hamlet's character, which could be described as the sort of melancholy that leads to madness (and that which is more aligned with the clinical tradition).^[15]

Both memory and imagination point to the central role of reflection for distinguishing melancholy as a type of emotion. The reflective nature of melancholy is especially significant insofar as

it makes this emotion more refined than others. This can be shown by comparing it to a companion emotion, sadness. Because of melancholy's reflective nature and the indirectness of its objects, it lacks the immediacy and brevity that typifies sadness. Feeling sad is most often in response to some type of loss, and this is deeply, yet most often immediately felt. Sadness can of course be prolonged, and in this sense it will overlap with depression. Sadness often (but not always) involves crying or looking miserable-not smiling, long in the face, looking lost, or a purging, where nothing is held back. In melancholy we do not cry-it is neither an emotion with this extreme, nor it is exhibited through this type of expression. When we are melancholic our behaviour is pensive. We may ask to be alone, or seek solitude in which to indulge in the thoughts or memories that are making us melancholic. This behaviour stems from the fact that melancholy is not a purging of emotion, but instead a full and ripe emotion.

Here the reflective aspect of melancholy is key to keeping us from falling over the edge into sobbing. We hold in thought memories or imaginings of lost love or distant places; we contemplate them and in this way prolong the emotion. There certainly are cases through in which sadness exhibits most of the features of melancholy; it can be experienced as a mood, it does not always involve crying, and it can involve reflection. But there is a key difference between the two emotions which lies in the positive aspects belonging to both of them. In sadness the positive aspect has to do with the object, that is, the loss that precipitates sadness must be something that we value. In melancholy the positive aspect may also be connected to the loss of something we value, but there is another more important layer to this positive feeling, that is the self-indulgent, almost narcissistic pleasure which is a felt feature of the emotion. This feeling feeds on itself and contributes to the aesthetic experience that arises through feeling melancholic.

4. Melancholy as a complex emotion

The distinctions between melancholy, on the one hand, and sadness, on the other, point up another feature of melancholy. Melancholy is always a complex emotion rather than a simple one. It can be categorized in this way for a few reasons. First, it does not involve a single emotion, rather it is an emotion with various shades: a shade of longing; a shade of sadness; and a shade of feeling uplifted, or even a subtle sense of excitement. Secondly and perhaps most strikingly, it has both displeasurable and pleasurable shades of feeling.^[16] This combination of different aspects constitutes a second necessary condition of melancholy, but which also is not a sufficient condition since other emotions involve both negative and positive aspects. A notable emotion of this type is the sublime, which overlaps with melancholy in ways that usefully articulate how the negative and positive elements function within each different emotion, and how both emotions can be conceived as aesthetic.

Kant describes the sublime as a complex feeling that combines both displeasure and pleasure. The displeasure is caused by the agitation and overwhelming of the senses and imagination which struggle but fail to take in the vastness or power of the sublime object. In the dynamically sublime the displeasure also seems to be caused by a feeling verging on fear. We feel so overwhelmed by the object that we would fear for our lives, except that we are safe and secure, and thus able to experience a sense of awe rather than genuine fear. This feeling on the edge of fear is the point at which displeasure gives way to pleasure from an

elevated imagination in which we have a feeling of being at home in the world. That is, we are not actually overwhelmed by the object so that we lose control, rather, we apprehend our status as autonomous beings. The feeling here is one of respect for both humanity and nature. So the sublime has negative aspects of mental agitation verging on fear combined with positive aspects of a feeling of respect. Generally, sublime feeling is pleasurable, for although it does not involve the immediate delight of the beautiful, its pleasure lies in a feeling of being exhilarated and uplifted.^[17]

With melancholy, the displeasurable or negative aspects lie in feelings of loneliness, emptiness, sadness from loss, and the fear or dread that sometimes accompanies longing. The pleasurable aspect comes primarily through reflection, when we dwell on happy memories or fashion elaborate fantasies. Here melancholy is intentionally sought out by finding solitude in order to deepen the reflection and in turn prolong the pleasure. While the sublime seems to begin in displeasure and end in pleasure, melancholy's negative and positive aspects alternate unpredictably. The enjoyment of a pleasurable narrative may give way to the sudden pain of desperate loneliness or unbearable longing. We might then seek to keep the pain at bay by returning to the sweetness of particular memories.

The differences between the sublime and melancholy are coupled with some interesting similarities. The two emotions share a higher reflective element; a feeling of elevating ourselves above the crudeness of stronger, more immediate feelings. As we have seen, in melancholy we refuse to give in to the urge to collapse into a heap and cry. In the sublime, we never give into the fear of nature's might, and instead we feel the exhilaration of our capacity to cope with an impending obstacle. They also share at least one common cause-nature. With melancholy, nature provides the solitude that serves as backdrop to our mood; while with the sublime, it is most often natural objects that evoke this feeling. The same desolate moor, or indeed a vast, gloomy ocean, may give rise to either melancholy or sublime feeling. Kant points to how sublime objects invite melancholy:

Thus any spectator who beholds massive mountain climbing skyward, deep gorges with raging streams in them, wastelands lying in deep shadow and inviting melancholy meditation, and so on is seized by amazement bordering on terror. . . .^[18]

The various aspects of melancholy sketched above provide a working definition of this distinctive emotion. It is a complex emotion with aspects of both pain and pleasure which draws on a range of emotions-sadness, love and longing-all of which are bound within a reflective, solitary state of mind. It is this special character of melancholy that makes it a more refined emotion and an emotion which engenders aesthetic experience.

5. Melancholy, the arts, and environment

In this section our aim is to show how melancholy can be understood to function in the context of the arts. Melancholy is an emotion that we experience apart from art, as the examples noted above illustrate. But it is also an emotion we experience in a variety of artistic contexts, from the scenes of a Scorsese film to Friedrich's landscapes, or to Wordsworth's romantic images and Chopin's melodies.

In Martin Scorsese's film *The Age of Innocence* the source of melancholy is clear; it is a situation that would be regarded as melancholy also outside the context of the film. In this case it is the love affair between Newland Archer (played by Daniel Day-Lewis) and Countess Ellen Olenska (played by Michelle Pfeiffer). The story told contains the bittersweet aspects referred to above—the joy of two people being in love and the disappointment and sadness of the impossibility of their lives together. Spectators can enjoy the development of their relationship, the different aspects of it, and feel at least in a vicarious sense some of the emotions the characters of the film are experiencing.^[19] The overall emotion, after the basic constituents have been revealed, is melancholy. There is no despair, no depression, only the kind of refined or sublimated mellow sorrow, which through reflection has brighter aspects woven into it, that we have called melancholy. It would not be an overstatement say that the beauty of the film is to a great extent due to its melancholy nature.

This film, as well as other narratives, exemplify cases in which melancholy takes the form of an emotion rather than the more particular species of a mood. There is a narrative of some kind, a sequence of fictional events, in which fictional characters and places become the intentional objects of our melancholy emotions. Sometimes we can specify the source of the emotion to a particular sequence of events or to a particular character. We could point out certain expressions in Newland Archer's face that show his emotions, or we could refer to certain encounters between Archer and Olenska that show the tragic aspects of their affair. But on the other hand we can also feel the happiness and pleasure that Archer and Olenska feel and enjoy when being together. These two, the shadow of a tragic end and the happiness of two people in love, give rise to melancholy.

With a film like *The Age of Innocence* the question concerning the borderline between melancholy and sentimentality arises. One would have to adopt only a slightly more cynical attitude to condemn Scorsese's film as sentimental entertainment. But why is *The Age of Innocence* a melancholy rather than sentimental movie? Sentimentality in art refers to the arousal of emotions that are somehow inauthentic and shallow. Sentimentality is not an emotion or mood in itself, it is rather the way in which emotions and moods are sometimes presented. There can be sentimentality in sorrow and joy, and when these emotions are portrayed in a sentimental way it means that they do not appear to be justifiable in view of comparisons to real life. In real life too there are instances of sentimentality, but in these cases the shade of inauthenticity comes from not being true to one's real feelings. In our characterization of melancholy above, melancholy in its clearest instances does not allow for sentimentality. There cannot be sentimentally portrayed melancholy, because melancholy in itself is such a complex and refined emotion that it excludes any superficiality. Then the question is, rather, whether there is real melancholy in Scorsese's film or only sentimental presentations of the different emotions that go with falling in love and breaking up an affair. In *The Age of Innocence* there is, in our interpretation, a higher level in the film itself that creates complexity, and keeps it from falling into a naive and shallow love story.

Let us now look at a different case in the arts. There is a long tradition of works of art that represent melancholy as a clinical disease, for example, Albrecht Dürer's "Melencolia I" (engraving,

1514),^[20] but there are also works which express melancholy emotion. ^[21] Many of Edvard Munch's works are known for this quality, but he also completed several paintings, and a well-known woodcut, all entitled "Melancholy." Several versions depict a pensive man sitting by the sea (for example, paintings from 1891; 1892), and his woodcut, "Melancholy" (Evening, 1896), presents the man in a gloomy, evening scene. The theme of solitude is carried through in the painting, "Melancholy" (1899), of a woman sitting alone in a room, dressed in dark shades of blue, green and black, in contrast to brightly coloured walls around her.

We have noted above that melancholy is often evoked in the context of quiet reflection. This is particularly relevant in a range of artistic instances that feature solitary persons set amongst the grandeur of nature, a theme commonly found in the Romantic tradition in art and literature. For example, Caspar David Friedrich's paintings often feature landscapes with a single figure with her or his back to the beholder (*Rückenfigur*). The figure beholds nature's awesome beauty, and in many cases, strikes a reflective pose, the pose of a 'halted traveller.'^[22]

These features are the source of a melancholic response to Friedrich's "The Dreamer." In this painting [view at end of article], a man sits on the ledge of the great gothic window of a ruined monastery. The interior of the ruin is composed of dark reds, but bright, golden light pours through the centre of the picture, filling the emptiness of the gothic tracery. One can identify with the relaxed, contemplative perspective of the seated figure. The feeling evoked is one of calm reflection, with the contrast between dark and light suggesting both loneliness and a feeling of hope. Accompanying this there might be a subtle longing for the stillness of the scene.

In many of Friedrich's works we can also locate melancholy's overlap with the sublime. Friedrich's use of the solitary human dwarfed by nature and his dramatic use of light combine to evoke an uplifting feeling, sometimes one that is closer to the sublime, sometimes one that is closer to melancholy. The meeting point between the two emotions emerges in the mixture of agitated reflection. It is a calm, peaceful contemplation mixed with anxiety-whether from fear (the sublime) or from loss or longing (melancholy).

The themes of solitude and sweet sorrow associated with melancholy are also common in Romantic poetry. For example, Wordsworth's poem "Tintern Abbey" shows how closely solitude is linked to nature and to the reflection that accompanies longing:

Five years have past; five summers, with the length
Of five long winters! And again I hear
These waters, rolling from their mountain springs
With a soft inland murmur. -Once again
Do I behold these steep and lofty cliffs,
That on a wild secluded scene impress
Thoughts of more deep seclusion; and connect
The Landscape with the quiet of the sky.
The day is come when I again repose

Here, under this dark sycamore, and view
These plots of cottage-ground, these orchard-tufts...
These beautiful forms,
Through a long absence, have not been to me
As is a landscape to a blind man's eye:
But oft, in lonely rooms, and 'mid the din
Of towns and cities, I have owed to them,
In hours of weariness, sensations sweet,
Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart;
And passing even into my purer mind,
With tranquil restoration:-feelings too
Of unremembered pleasure....[\[23\]](#)

When discussing the arts, the closest we come to finding melancholy as a mood is in music. In cases above, there are visual images, filmic scenes and the representation of a landscape, which convey a set of propositions that, in turn, raise the emotion of melancholy. In music, however, it is easy to find cases that are not connected with any propositional content. Chopin has composed numerous pieces that express sadness or sorrow, the "Death March" being the prime example. But in his compositions we also find instances of melancholy. Many of his mazurkas exemplify melancholy rather than sadness. For example op. 67 no. 4 or op. 33 no. 4, with their subtle changes in tempo create the lingering mood of melancholy. This is especially noticeable when one compares these with more vibrant pieces from the same series, like op. 68 no.1, in which there is no time for reflection or contemplation.

When listening to Chopin's pieces one can imagine suffering and sadness, but the musical qualities that give rise to the mood of melancholy are independent of any actual events. In music it is perhaps the fairly slow tempo combined with episodes of vivacity that create the sense of reflection and indecisiveness which together with the brighter and darker notes constitutes the melancholy mood. This is an emotion that in its complexity and inner conflicts escapes any simple classification.[\[24\]](#)

Finally, we shall step outside the arts, and consider melancholy in respect to our aesthetic encounters with nature. Imagine that you are walking across a desolate moor. The land that stretches out into the distance is empty and spacious, coloured by subdued shades of brown and green against the grey backdrop of the sky. The air is still and mild with a refreshing mist. A reflective mood descends as you settle into the rhythm of a quiet pace. A feeling of longing forever to be in the pleasurable solitude of the moor combines with pangs of loneliness. Specific memories and thoughts may come into play; perhaps memories of living near that place long ago. There is some pleasure felt in recollecting the good times, but along with it, almost in equal measure, comes sadness from missing the place itself. The desire to prolong the emotion is strong, and you indulge in the rich feelings by cultivating the mood and lingering in it.

Particular sounds of nature, as with music, can also evoke the

subtle mixture of pleasure and displeasure associated with melancholy. The curlew's call, heard as you walk in the moor, sounds lonely but at the same time alive and vibrant. Or in a setting more like the one described by Wordsworth, we might hear the incessant and excited, yet mournful melodies of the nightingale's song.

In these cases of the natural environment there is no narrative that we respond to, no artistic content that we interpret as melancholic. However, we are still able to associate melancholy with aesthetic qualities of the experience. The sombre colours of the moor are associated with the negative, sad aspects of melancholy. The downcast tone of the birdsongs, mixed with lighter, more positive sounds suggest a mixture of positive and negative shades of feeling.

In the mixed environments of gardens or the countryside we sometimes come upon ruins (actual ruins or even artificial ruins, which were an architectural feature of picturesque landscapes and gardens). Ruins express the passage of time, and more specifically the qualities of impermanence and transience, all closely associated with melancholy. Ruins induce a contemplative state of mind, suggestive of events and lives from past ages that have come to an end. These decaying structures leave behind only fragments of past lives and events, enticing imagination to reconstruct narratives around, for example, well-preserved ruined abbeys, castles or the overgrown foundations of once-lived in stone cottages. The reflective stance may be part imagination, part memory, but, in any case, melancholy attaches itself to various aspects of the experience: the deserted places of many ruins, the way that ruins generally express the impermanence of culture, or more specifically to, say, the associations made between a ruin and events surrounding it. Here, again, we find shades of both positive and negative feeling in nostalgia for another time and place now gone, for the glory of past times, and so on. As surviving structures, many ruins symbolize human feats, but this is coupled with an awareness that as the forces of nature take control, no feat is immune to the ravages of time. As Shakespeare so poignantly observes in Sonnet #64, "Ruin hath taught me thus to ruminare, That Time will come and take my love away."[\[25\]](#)

6. Conclusion

The emotion of melancholy is not unique in its richness and its dual nature—we have pointed out that the sublime enjoys an analogous position—but it deserves more attention in the context of aesthetics. What is specific, perhaps even unique, to melancholy is the role it can play in our everyday life, in contexts that are not aesthetic in the *prima facie* sense. When mourning transforms itself into melancholy, when the desperation of a loss has calmed down and is mixed with pleasurable memories, then we have an instance of melancholy, which in itself seems to create an aesthetic context of its own. The calmness and reflection involved in melancholy resemble the traditional requirement of contemplation in the aesthetic response. Melancholy in this everyday context may lack the intensity of artistic experience, but its refined harmony is no less a significant aesthetic feature. The pleasure of melancholy does not come from excitement or intensity, but indeed rather from overall harmony we are experiencing. When feeling melancholy in the sense we have outlined, we are in control of the 'lower' emotions; we have won both overwhelming sorrow and joy. The reflection constitutive in melancholy makes it a rational, controllable

emotion. We have been able to take some distance from our previous experiences; we have given them a place in our own history. The result is that we are more in harmony with our past, and we can enjoy the feeling of melancholy, rather than sink into sadness.

This feature, perhaps more than any other, makes melancholy an 'educative' emotion. It is an instance of a mature, reflective emotion, the experience of which provides a way to cope with painful events in human life. It is clear that melancholy is no substitute for feeling sorrow and sadness; when facing loss we have to go through these emotions. But melancholy can step in at a later stage, and do justice both to the dark and bright sides of our existence.

We have also seen that melancholy is not a strange emotion in art, or in our aesthetic encounters with nature. It occurs in many forms of art, both in the modern and in the classical. It is in no way an archaic phenomenon, although in the extremities of the present culture, it easily goes unnoticed. Those looking for joy or sadness-not to mention horror-are not satisfied with the subtle mixture of pain and pleasure in melancholy. But there are those-as the quote from Kierkegaard in the beginning of our paper suggests-who have had a sense for melancholy, and who have been able to enjoy the very distinctive pleasure it brings along.

Endnotes

[1] Soren Kierkegaard, "Diapsalmata," in *Either/Or*, Penguin, 1992, p. 44.

[2] See Jennifer Radden's edited collection, *The Nature of Melancholy: From Aristotle to Kristeva* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), for a representation of the clinical tradition. For the complex history of the concept see her excellent introduction, pp. 1-51.

[3] Theodor Adorno mentions melancholy ('schwermut') as an aesthetic quality, but he does not discuss it in any detail, and in any case, he seems to equate it sorrow and depression. See T. W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. C. Lenhardt, ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedeman (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), pp. 375-376. Walter Benjamin gives a more detailed account in his treatment of the German tragic drama ('Trauerspiel'), but his discussion equates melancholy with sadness and depression even more clearly than Adorno's. He also makes connections with the clinical tradition. See Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of the German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London, New York: Verso, 1998), pp. 140-158. So, neither Adorno nor Benjamin really contributes to the discussion concerning melancholy in the sense we have defined it here.

[4] See Joseph J. Schildkraut and Alissa J. Hirshfeld, "Mind and Mood in Modern Art I: Miró and Melancholie," *Creativity Research Journal*, 8, 2 (1995), 139-156.

[5] See Aristotle, *The Works of Aristotle*, Vol. VIII: Problemata, Books I and XXX, ed. W.D. Ross, trans. E.S. Forster (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1927).

[6] See Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia" (1915, 1917) in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. XIV, ed. J. Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1957).

[7] J. Kristeva, *The Black Sun: Depression and Melancholy*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), p. 10.

[8] In her introduction, Radden points out that melancholy has typically been associated primarily with 'melancholia', a clinical disease, although she notes that in the 19th century melancholy as an emotional quality began to receive some attention in its own right, as we see in some Romantic poetry. See p. 4.

[9] Radden also points to this dominant characteristic of melancholy, see pp. 37-38.

[10] There are some (non-art) cases in which the object of melancholy is present in some sense. For example, if we are somewhere we have been with a past lover, this brings on feelings of melancholy directed upon that person, but they may also be directed upon the place to some extent (where the place is also the object of melancholy, and not merely the catalyst of the emotion). Another case might be when the object of melancholy is out of reach in some way, and in that sense it is absent and unattainable.

[11] Like loneliness, it is possible to feel melancholic in a crowded place. For example, a busy train station or bustling cafe may bring back memories that trigger the emotion.

[12] Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, ed. Holbrook Jackson (London: J.M. Dent and Sons, Ltd., 1978), p. 246. Burton's analysis of melancholy gives it a range of meaning that does not belong to modern usage. For example, it is identified as a disease and equivalent to unhealthy 'black bile'. But alongside this he identifies aspects of the concept that fit with more current usage. In particular, he notes its sweet and sour aspects, its association with solitude, and its overlap and resemblance to sadness, longing, etc.

[13] See A.L. Reed, *The Background of Gray's "Elegy": A Study in the Taste for Melancholy Poetry 1700-1751* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1962), p. 140. She cites the following examples: Wordsworth's "Yew Trees;" Coleridge's "Dejection;" and Byron's "Elegy on Newstead Abbey."

[14] Burton, p. 246.

[15] See Reed, pp. 10ff.

[16] Radden notes this quality too, and she cites Keat's poetry as an example of the dual aspects of melancholy. See p. 220.

[17] I. Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. W. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), §27, pp. 114-115.

[18] Kant, §26, p. 129.

[19] See R.K. Elliott, "Aesthetic Theory and the Experience of Art," *Aesthetics*, ed. Harold Osborne (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 147; and A. Haapala, "The Role of Experience in Understanding Works of Art," *International Yearbook of Aesthetics*, ed. Göran Hermeren, 1 (1996), pp. 27-37.

[20] Dürer wanted to depict one of the four humors. In Panofsky's interpretation Dürer brings together different traditions and combines them with his 'spiritual self-portrait': "Thus Dürer's most perplexing engraving is, at the same time, the objective statement of a general philosophy and the

subjective confession of an individual man. It fuses, and transforms, two great representational and literary traditions, that of Melancholy as one of the four humors and that of Geometry as one of the Seven Liberal Arts. It typifies the artist of the Renaissance who respects practical skill, but longs all the more fervently for mathematical theory—who feels 'inspired' by celestial influences and eternal ideas, but suffers all the more deeply from his human frailty and intellectual finiteness. It epitomizes the Neo-Platonic theory of Saturnian genius as revised by Agrippa of Nettesheim. But in doing all this it is in a sense a spiritual self-portrait of Albrecht Dürer." E. Panofsky *The Life and Art of Albrecht Dürer* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1943, 1955), p. 171. In this interpretation, reflection is the new element that Dürer added to the clinical tradition: "His Melancholia is neither a miser nor a mental case, but a thinking being in perplexity. She does not hold to an object which does not exist, but to a problem which cannot be solved." Panofsky, p. 163.

[21] See Radden's collection of images of melancholy in art throughout her introduction, pp. 1-51.

[22] J. Koerner, *Caspar David Friedrich and the Subject of Landscape* (London: Reaktion Books, 1990), pp. 182-183.

[23] William Wordsworth, "Lines composed a few miles above Tintern Abbey, on revisiting the banks of the Wye during a tour", *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. Thomas Hutchinson (London: Oxford University Press, 1895).

[24] We have stressed that melancholy is not a simple 'negative emotion' in the sense of sorrow. This is why we shall not go into the discussion concerning the 'logic' of negative emotions in the arts, and music in particular. The problem has been widely discussed, cf., e.g., Jerrold Levinson, "Music and Negative Emotions," in *Music, Art, and Metaphysics* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1990).

[25] Quoted by Donald Crawford in his excellent discussion of the dialectical character of ruins in, "Nature and Art: Some Dialectical Relationships," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 42, 1983, p. 55. For an interesting, recent book on the attraction of ruins in human history, see Christopher Woodward, *In Ruins: A Journey through History, Art and Literature* (New York: Vintage, 2002).

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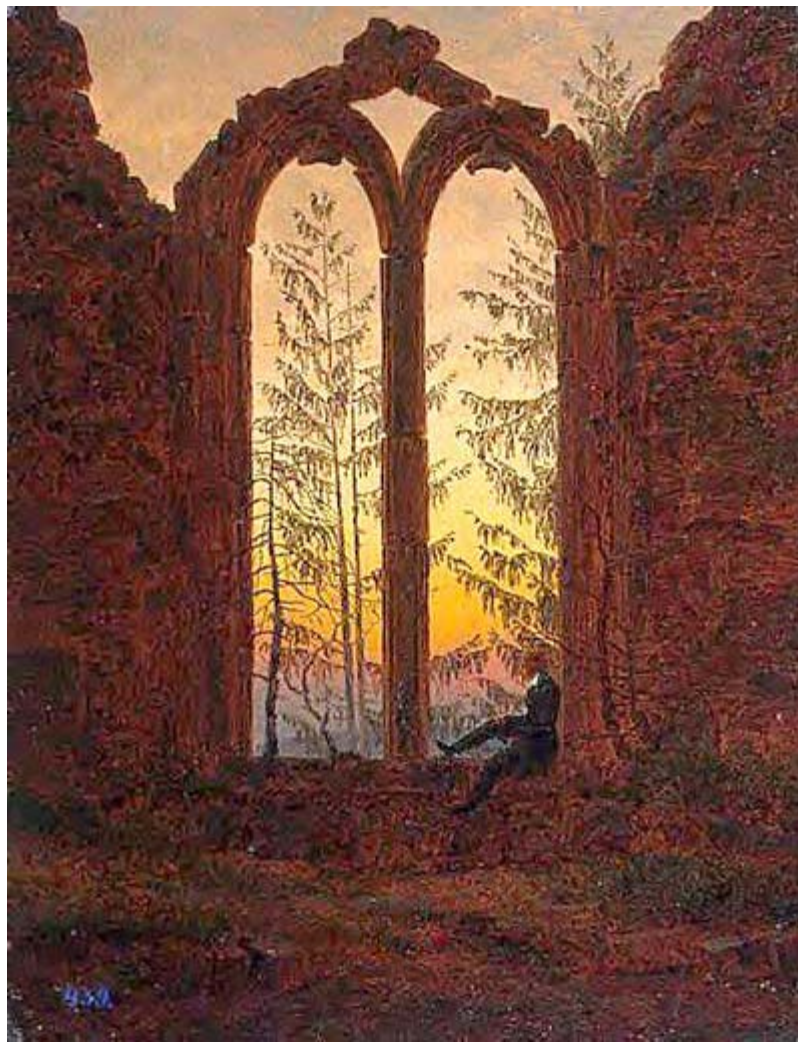
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Caspar David Friedrich, "The Dreamer." Courtesy of the State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia