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## Unnameable Loss: Melancholy and Postmodern Writing\*

To know that writing compensates for nothing, sublimates nothing, that it is precisely *there where you are not* – that is the beginning of writing.<sup>1</sup>

There can be no language for unity; there is only language for separation.<sup>2</sup>

Language is a labyrinth of paths. You approach from *one* side and you know your way about; you approach the same place from another side and no longer know your way about.<sup>3</sup>

From the moment we take notice of the world around us, we become painfully conscious of the loss that shadows all human activity: absent homelands, destroyed objects, and eroded images of the past. For to be human is to know loss and to struggle with it. It is particularly true about the postmodern times which have filled their subjects with the unprecedented feeling of loss: loss of perceivable reality, objective truth, unalterable laws. Our faith in the purposeful sense of history has been shattered, hopes for the better future ruined, so greatly cherished myths and set of beliefs debunked. Yet, we do not plunge into despair, grieving for lost innocence, but frantically search for the ways to fill the hole that loss has opened in our world with something meaningful.

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<sup>1</sup> Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), 116.

<sup>2</sup> Edmond Jabés, *El, or The Last Book*, trans. Rosemarie Waldrop (Boston: University of New England Press, 1990).

<sup>3</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §203, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1958), 92.

Thus, we strive to overcome loss by naming it, by finding language which could retell, recall and resuscitate what has disappeared. Yet, the inexorably widening gulf, separating us from the past, from the world, from Being, is, and will forever remain, unbridgeable, since each of our verbal or visual forms of expression, aimed at compensating for the loss, is doomed to provide only inadequate representations of the objects of our desire. They are inadequate because the referent, that lost object or being, becomes part of the lack that loss establishes; it is swallowed up by the “hole in the real,” as Jacques Lacan calls it, gaping void, which death, exile, loss create.<sup>4</sup> To make what is lost *re-present* itself, endowed with the immediacy and fullness that it once possessed is beyond the powers of imagination. It is beyond the power of language and of mimetic representation. Any attempt to make a transition from living in the world to speaking or writing about it turns out to be fatal to the immediacy of being. No words, figures of speech, artistic images or pieces of music are able to restore the lost object in the here-and-now reality, shaping an irreversible absence into tangible presence. The poet for whom the highest goal of poetry is, according to Paul de Man, “not only [to] speak of Being, but to say Being itself;”<sup>5</sup> recognizes eventually the sad truth that “as soon as the word is uttered, it destroys the immediate and discovers that instead of Being, it can only state mediation.”<sup>6</sup> The fundamental consciousness that language expresses is, de Man writes, the consciousness of loss; it is the presence of nothingness, which language tries to name: “Poetic language names this void with ever-renewed understanding and, like Rousseau’s longing, it never tires of naming it again. The persistent naming is what we call literature.”<sup>7</sup> Since language is born of loss and has nothing that is truly its own, it must, in order to live, “incorporate” everything: it seduces, it moves, it wounds, it anesthetizes, it overwhelms – it seems to have all the powers. However, in its constant shift from seemingly absolute mastery and mesmerizing magic to the consciousness of its own essential emptiness, it alternates between manic triumph and melancholy.

This way of thinking is parallel to the analyses of Julia Kristeva, who in her study *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, discusses melancholia and loss in relation to art and literature. Loss is for her the unique precondition for language. Behind our words are a wound, a deprivation, a pain, which in themselves make speech possible:

Our ability to speak, to situate ourselves in time for another person, could not exist anywhere else but on the other side of an abyss. The be-

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<sup>4</sup> Lorenzo Chiesa, *Subjectivity and Otherness: A Philosophical Reading of Lacan* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2007), 133.

<sup>5</sup> Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 256.

<sup>6</sup> De Man, *Blindness and Insight*, 259.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

ing who speaks – from his or her capacity to live in time to his or her enthusiastic, clever, or simply amusing constructions – must have, as the basis for existence, a rapture, an abandonment, a malaise.<sup>8</sup>

The Bulgarian-French philosopher and literary critic argues that the denial of loss is the origin of melancholia; consequently, “the most efficacious way of overcoming the latent loss”<sup>9</sup> is to name it and so exert a certain amount of control over it. Through the “sublimational activity of writing,”<sup>10</sup> one can find some antidote to melancholy and ameliorate the loss.

Since the notions introduced by the French philosopher could offer an apt theoretical starting point for examination of the strategies by which contemporary culture copes with the “abject experience of loss,” in other words, melancholia, the reader might find it convenient to have a brief outline of Kristeva’s theory before we proceed to the discussion of the relation between melancholy and writing. On the basis of her reasoning, the subsequent argumentation will aim to prove that in the works of postmodern writers the attempts to ward off melancholy can be traced in violations of “identity, system, order,”<sup>11</sup> found not so much in the subject matter of their writings but in the language itself and the forms used.

In *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Kristeva, following Sigmund Freud’s findings, calls attention to the relation of fear and phobia to the object: “From the start, fear and object are linked.”<sup>12</sup> She distinguishes between different kinds of fear, especially between nameable fears and archaic, unspeakable fear. Fear is aroused in the phobic subject by the failure of language to symbolize or name what he/she is afraid of – the void or lack. It is also the sign of the paternal instance to put the prohibition of the mother firmly in place. In desperation, the phobic subject resorts to language to fill the gap. In *Black Sun*, Kristeva explains this state in different terms and here she connects it to melancholy as well as to fear. Again, she describes the phobic subject’s fear of the unnameable – engulfment, dissolution, the void, the “Thing” or “loss which has no name”<sup>13</sup> – but the reaction to the loss or, as she calls it here, disinheritance, is ambivalent. Besides causing fear, it becomes the source of melancholy: “[T]he depressed narcissist mourns not an Object but the Thing. Let me posit the ‘Thing’ as the real that does not lend itself to signification.”<sup>14</sup> The “Thing” is a loss which precedes all other

<sup>8</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 42.

<sup>9</sup> Kristeva, *Black Sun*, 129.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 200.

<sup>11</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 4.

<sup>12</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 34–35.

<sup>13</sup> Kristeva, *Black Sun*, 13.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

losses and which can never be recuperated because it lies outside the “symbolic” side of language, where objects can be identified and named and therefore lose their strangeness. It is a loss which is necessary so that “this ‘subject’ separated from the ‘object’, might become a speaking being.”<sup>15</sup> In order to keep both fear and melancholy at bay, the subject, especially the writing subject, resorts to language in a desperate attempt to name everything and bring it under control. Speaking the object is a way of coming to grips with it rather than being controlled by it. In these terms, writing can be seen as a continuous struggle to bring those things into signification which otherwise cause anxiety. But this only succeeds at a price, and the price is the loss of the “Thing”: “To speak, to venture, to settle within the legal fiction known as symbolic activity, that is indeed to lose the Thing.”<sup>16</sup>

At the close of *Black Sun*, Kristeva emphasizes the great power of the concept of melancholia: while the psychological-literary syndrome of melancholy is articulated, transformed, or suppressed by the textual swings of cultural history, melancholy itself remains “essential and transhistorical.”<sup>17</sup> The deathly fixation of melancholia, “the most archaic expression of the unsymbolizable, unnameable narcissistic wound,”<sup>18</sup> with all its deep longing for the prelinguistic Thing, obsessive-repetitive, necessary, and impossible search for the metalinguistic in language, for the unpossessible in desire, for meaning beyond any significance – articulates itself within texts, guides the productive imagination of authors, sinks out of sight only to emerge again. Melancholy has attached itself to the characteristic forms of literary expressions of every epoch. It has invaded the very capillaries of the text. Its latent operations have left ineffaceable traces in the minds and works of numerous writers.

Presumably, one of the most extreme examples of how melancholy asserts its rights over any writing that intends to deal with it is Robert Burton’s *The Anatomy of Melancholy*. Burton explains his life-time involvement in the process of writing by his desire to distract himself from the torments of melancholy: “I write of melancholy, by being busy to avoid melancholy.”<sup>19</sup> However, it turns out that it is melancholy which gets control of him. Burton’s torrential prose becomes melancholy’s “playground” where the malaise governs autocratically. Both the impressive analytic apparatus and the welter of authorities Burton cites and incorporates into his text serves as an artifice through which it expands, unobstructed, to touch every aspect of life. Readers of Burton’s *The Anatomy* lose their way in this labyrinthine text because it is as fluid and restless as its author’s affliction. Liliana Barczyk-Barakońska, while analysing *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, notices that,

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 145.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 146.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 258.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>19</sup> Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, ed. Holbrook Jackson (New York: New York Review Books, 2001), 20.

paradoxically enough, writing which, according to Burton, is to have a therapeutic function and postpone melancholy, illustrates rather “the way melancholy spreads itself, stigmatizing and leaving traces in human imagination and body. Melancholy appears as writing whose operations are indelible.”<sup>20</sup>

While revealing the ubiquitous nature of melancholy, Kristeva admits at the same time that the melancholic imagination as a source of literary creativity turns out to be particularly acute in “epochs of crisis,” such as our own times, which are witnessing the collapse of all the political, social and moral ideals. “In times of crisis,” writes the French theorist, “melancholy imposes itself, lays down its archaeology, produces its representations ...”<sup>21</sup> In the postmodern context melancholy occupies the space that is carved between the subject and the object by a question concerning the possibility of meaning; a space the postmodern writers have sought to fill with a storehouse of images constructed in their frequently shocking, but at the same time healing, writing. In the course of the subsequent analysis I shall attempt to trace the link between melancholy and postmodern writing through an exploration of this space and examination of some formal literary characteristics – enumeration, heterotopia, allegory, fragment, quotations, allusions or textual wanderings – which, as I intend to demonstrate, may be perceived as constituents of postmodern aesthetics of melancholy.

### Overnaming: “the linguistic being of melancholy”

Over the centuries melancholy has proven to be intrinsically ambiguous concept, and its unstable, fleeting and inconsistent nature has eluded any attempts at arriving at an ultimate, irrefutable definition of this phenomenon. The numerous scholars who took a risk of making melancholy a subject of their investigations and provided a plethora of divergent, often mutually exclusive descriptions, nominations and meanings ascribed to melancholy, would certainly repeat after John Donne: “if I were asked again, what is a *vapour*, I could not tell, it is so insensible a thing, so neere *nothing* is that that reduces us to *nothing*.”<sup>22</sup> Liliana Barczyk-Barakońska maintains that the vagueness pervading melancholy and its inaccessibility to the senses make it particularly susceptible to utter annihilation;

<sup>20</sup> Liliana Barczyk-Barakońska, *The Melancholy Discourse in the Baroque. A Reading of Robert Burton's "Anatomy of Melancholy"* (Katowice: PARA, 2009), 13.

<sup>21</sup> Julia Kristeva, “On Melancholic Imagination,” in *Postmodernism and Continental Philosophy*, ed. Hugh J. Silverman and Donn Welton (New York: State University of New York Press, 1988), 13.

<sup>22</sup> John Donne and Neil Rhodes, “12. Meditation,” in *John Donne: Selected Prose*, ed. Neil Rhodes (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1987), 119.

yet there will always remain a narrow, unmeasurable line which would render it detached from nothingness and would provoke further linguistic investigations:

Dislocated into the language of “so neere *nothing*,” but still keeping its distance, melancholy regulates all attempts at approaching, circumscribing or formulating this almost negligible though irreducible distance separating it from nothing by creating a need for diversity of languages, terms, idioms, contradictory even, required to evoke the otherwise inarticulate distance. Melancholy generates a need for surplus, excess, profusion of names to mark its difference from nothing: it calls for overnaming.<sup>23</sup>

Overnaming thus becomes a useful device of dealing with melancholy in the field of language. However, we shall see as well that in the postmodern context it serves even more fundamental role as “the linguistic being of melancholy.”<sup>24</sup>

In his 1916 essay “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man” Walter Benjamin articulates his theological linguistics in which the fall of Adam and Eve instituted the fall of language, the arbitrary split of signifier and signified. Since Adam was charged with naming the animals, he originally spoke the divine language of names, which stood in an immediate relation to the creative Word of God. There was no difference of word and thing, appearance and essence; it was pure, transcendental speech. The Fall is the catastrophic end to this paradisiacal state of naming. It begins a descent into “the empty word, into the abyss of prattle”<sup>25</sup> and spurs the multiplication of human languages, the profusion of signs. Things no longer have one name guaranteed by God, but many, based on convention. Benjamin writes of postlapsarian – that is historical – nature: “Now begins its other muteness, which is what we mean by the ‘deep sadness of nature.’ It is a metaphysical truth that all nature would begin to lament if it were endowed with language.”<sup>26</sup> The source of this sadness is fallen human language, which has ceased to be original and unique, in which name has already been “withered.” In the postlapsarian epoch, human beings continue to name things but they do so arbitrarily, without reference to the Word. Any relation between the name and the world has been supplanted by a confusion of names, which, appearing in excess, achieve overprecision and, at the same time, inevitably fail to name the thing *per se*. The proliferation of human languages results in a multitude of names with things being misnamed and “overnamed.” This is the source of their sorrow, for

<sup>23</sup> Barczyk-Barakońska, *The Melancholy Discourse*, 20.

<sup>24</sup> Walter Benjamin, “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man,” in *Walter Benjamin: Selected writings, Vol. 1: 1913–1926*, ed. Michael W. Jennings and Marcus Bullock (USA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996), 73.

<sup>25</sup> Benjamin, “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man,” 72.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

Benjamin perceives “overnaming as the deepest linguistic reason for all melancholy and (from the point of view of the thing) of all deliberate muteness.”<sup>27</sup>

Although, as the example of Benjamin’s reflections shows, the question of the inadequacy of language, meaning and expression is not a new one, it has never before gained such wide currency as in the postmodern times. The impossibility of a fixed, clear meaning, the slippage of the signifier from the signified, and the figurality of language that cuts across the entire process of verbal expression, constitute a central theoretical project in the discourse of postmodernism, which at the same time tells the story of a departure from traditional culture, the decline of classical metanarratives of legitimation, or the breakdown of the Western humanist heritage. Fredric Jameson, who has written extensively on postmodernism, often speaks of it as a cultural break. In Jameson’s reading, the Lacanian conception of schizophrenia as “a breakdown in the signifying chain” becomes a precise simulacrum of this postmodern condition, a linguistic-psychoanalytic interpretation of the cultural break that characterizes the contemporary, postmodern and poststructuralist, cultural scene. “When that relationship breaks down, when the links of the signifying chain snap,” says Jameson, “then we have schizophrenia in the form of a rubble of distinct and unrelated signifiers.”<sup>28</sup> Indeed, break and breakdown seem to be the appropriate words for describing the postmodern condition – a condition of fragmentation and fundamental discontinuity in culture and in history. Separation of the language from the world opens up a wound, tearing, rupture, which the contemporary culture finds difficult to come to terms with. The postmodern literature being ushered in the idiom of loss, distance, disruption becomes evocative of melancholy. Longing to return to its innocent state and mourning for the past wholeness, it attempts to restore the unity which has fallen apart. Thus, the postmodern writers imitate, with “all” the possible words, the lost totality and coherence of the world, create illusions of the inviolate whole, which is already irretrievable, and hastily reconstruct the world in ornate depictions, all-encompassing definitions, pseudo-epistemological metaphors, sayings and proverbs expressing the universal laws of nature, but first and foremost in the imaginary collections of words created by the figure of enumeration.

Enumeration, catalogue structures, lists are recurrent devices of the postmodernist style. These contemporary forms of Benjamin’s overnaming endeavour to grasp eternity and infinity of things in the fictional infinity of words. Yet, they ineluctably bear the traces of loss. The never-ending sentences enumerating countless things and people eventually circulate only around itself, speak only their own words, behind which there is invariably nothing. Brian McHale pinpoints the cause of this emptiness and meaninglessness of language in the fact

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>28</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism; or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 26.

that the words listed in enumerations are detached from syntax. While analysing catalogues from the ontological point of view, he observes that their nature is paradoxical, namely, they can “appear to assert the full presence of a world” and “seem to project a crowded world ... that defies our abilities to master it through syntax; the best we can do is to begin naming its many parts.” But it can also “have the opposite effect, that of evacuating language of presence, leaving only a shell behind – a word-list, a mere exhibition of words.”<sup>29</sup> For McHale, postmodern catalogues tend to gravitate towards the pole of the word-list. What is more, these are often hypertrophied lists or mock-Homeric catalogues, examples being Gilbert Sorrentino’s *Mulligan Stew*, Donald Barthelme’s *The Dead Father* or Borges’s short stories.

What markedly differentiates postmodern enumerations from traditional lists, for example blazons – devices of classic or realist texts, which are used by Roland Barthes in *S/Z* to refer to the inventory, or the attempt to “capture” a predicate (Barthes uses the example of Beauty) through a systematic and exhaustive enumeration of its parts, attributes, characteristics<sup>30</sup> – is their over-totality as well as the confusing disorder, in which completely inappropriate things are linked together. In *The Dead Father* Barthelme supplies the reader with a number of blazons: the inventory of the musicians and animals slain by the Dead Father; the inventory of the progeny from the Dead Father’s affair with Tulla, the inventory of the types of fathers.<sup>31</sup> Barthes argues that “as a genre, the blazon expresses the belief that a complete inventory can produce a total body, as if the extremity of enumeration could devise a new category, that of totality.”<sup>32</sup> But Barthelme’s lists are hardly classical:

First he slew a snowshoe rabbit cleaving it in twain with a single blow and then he slew a spiny anteater and then he slew two rusty numbats and then whirling the great blade round and round his head he slew a wallaby and a lemur and a trio of oukaris and a spider monkey and a common squid.<sup>33</sup>

Here, the inventory is over-totalized; there is an information overload. This list draws attention to itself as simply that, a device; what is embodied in this passage is not reality but discourse itself, its infinite lexicon. In the postmodern assemblages of associations words circulate chaotically around things and create the space not for one essential meaning but the void which can be filled with any

<sup>29</sup> Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 153.

<sup>30</sup> Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), 113–14.

<sup>31</sup> Donald Barthelme, *The Dead Father* (New York: Penguin Books, 1986), 11, 52–53, 36–37, 136–37.

<sup>32</sup> Barthes, *S/Z*, 114.

<sup>33</sup> Barthelme, *The Dead Father*, 52.

meaning; words bombard things with its excess, torment them with their imprecision, overname and misname them.

Related to this device is Barthelme's treatment of the telling detail, the bit of superfluous information that in the classic text serves to reinforce the mimetic effect, linking the fiction to reality and validating the text. In *The Dead Father*, the significant detail is blatantly overdone, for instance, "Small gifts to the children: a power motor, a Blendor."<sup>34</sup> It is so incredible, so absurd, that it serves to countersignify; the material becomes simply the lexical. The detail's incompatibility, its implausibility, its excess subvert the reality effect, rupturing the continuity between fictional and real worlds.

This state of aesthetic incongruity may be even more aptly captured by the word *heteroclite*, whose sense is explicated by Michel Foucault in *The Order of Things*:

That word should be taken in its most literal, etymological sense: in such a state, things are 'laid', 'placed', 'arranged' in sites so very different from one another that it is impossible to find a place of residence for them, to define a *common locus* beneath them all .... *Heterotopias* are disturbing, probably because they secretly undermine language, they make it impossible to name this *and* that, because they shatter or tangle common names, because they destroy 'syntax' in advance, and not only the syntax with which we construct sentences but also that less apparent syntax which causes words and things (next to and also opposite one another) to 'hold together' ... heterotopias (such as those to be found so often in Borges) desiccate speech, stop words in their tracks, contest the very possibility of grammar at its source; they dissolve our myths and sterilize the lyricism of our sentences.<sup>35</sup>

The words in the postmodern texts remain in the perplexing disorder, emphasizing heterogeneity and separation of their locations (*hetero-topoia*). Disengagement of words from syntax leads to the foregrounding of the ontological difference between the stratum of words and the stratum of the world. Words are contours, seemingly empty, although interestingly shaped, containers that gain significance only by means of their relationship with other words on the page. They approach the status of objects in their own right, tangible *things*, having no reference to the outer reality. By means of a repertoire of stylistic strategies, examples being lexical exhibitionism, introduction of words which are "rare, pedantic, archaic, neologistic, technical, foreign"; "back-broke" and invertebrate sentences, "rambling, apparently interminable, shape-shifting constructions"; or heterotopian catalogues made up of fragments of a number of incommensurable

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>35</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), xvii–xviii.

orders,<sup>36</sup> the reader is constantly alienated and distanced from the world, and left facing the empty words on the page.

Litanies, catalogues, enumerations are laments over the world which has been reduced to an assemblage of incoherent *membra disiecta*, a heap of discrete fragments, impossible to be linked together into one logic whole. Disappearance of a higher sense, destruction of this metatextual (*metaphysical*) syntax results in illegibility of the world which has become an unclear mosaic, where nothing speaks but everything only leans towards diffusion of sense. The beings are irreducibly disintegrated not by any inner decay of matter and its mortality but by enigma of the uniting principles of the world. Since reality has ceased to be a book to be deciphered and the problem of the meaning of the world has become insoluble, melancholy rhetoric of loss suppresses any phenomenology or hermeneutics and can at most indulge in “the only pleasure melancholic permits himself”<sup>37</sup>: allegory.

### Allegory as the Ruinous Language of Melancholy

“Allegory” derives etymologically from the Greek *allegoria* which literally means “to speak otherwise” (from *allos*, other, and *agorein*, to speak).<sup>38</sup> It became immensely popular throughout the Middle Ages and into the age of the Enlightenment in a more satirical form (e.g. *Gulliver’s Travels*), finally losing favour with the rise of realism and Romanticism until its resurgence in the modern era. At its simplest, allegory may be understood as a figure of speech in which an element or object comes to signify or stand for something else. Gold as an object or a colour, for instance, might be used to represent wealth. This process of signification may be subject to proliferation, and thus allegory emerges as a complex trope. Depending upon the context, gold can also, or instead, signify nobility, purity, beauty, pomp and splendour, ostentation, artifice, decadence, greed, or the vanity of earthly riches. As the example demonstrates, allegory may, as referents multiply, suddenly reverse direction to act as the negation of its other possible meanings. Walter Benjamin notes that within allegory “any person, any object, any relationship can mean absolutely anything else.”<sup>39</sup>

<sup>36</sup> McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, 151–56.

<sup>37</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London and New York: Verso, 2003), 185.

<sup>38</sup> Victor E. Taylor and Charles E. Winquist, eds., *Encyclopedia of Postmodernism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 6–7.

<sup>39</sup> Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 175.

In his attempt to appreciate the richness of allegory as a mode of expression, Benjamin, a key thinker in the allegory revival, juxtaposes it with a symbol, whose supposed merits were privileged and elevated by the nineteenth-century commentators. Whereas the meaning of an allegory depends upon an oscillation between two discrete terms, the power of a symbol resides in the unity and immediacy with which it expresses an idea. The full meaning of the symbol has to do with the connection between the material thing (word, image, or other) and the metaphysical idea to which the thing refers. The result of this unifying connection is that, as the mind comes to a comprehension of what is being symbolized, the material thing itself disappears into the greater idea beyond the thing. The meaning of a symbol is not dispersed across a plethora of disparate referents, but is concentrated intensively in a single image as a “momentary totality.”<sup>40</sup> Full, complete, self-contained, the symbol encapsulates the virtues of clarity, brevity, grace and beauty, so much extolled by Romantic writers. Benjamin quotes, among many others, Friedrich Creuzer’s eulogy of the symbol: “it is like the sudden appearance of a ghost, or a flash of lightning which illuminates the dark night. It is a force which seizes hold of our entire being ...”<sup>41</sup> Overlapping with the universal as well as uniting essence with appearance, the symbol asserts that meaningful transcendence of polar opposites exists and an image of the divine is able to be captured and preserved in a historically situated text.

In contrast, allegory was perceived to be a feeble imitation of the symbol and denounced as a mere mode of clumsy, crude and convoluted designation. Rehashing the suggestions made by Romantics such as J. W. Goethe – who first distinguished and consequently dismissed the allegory – or Arthur Schopenhauer, Benjamin seeks to rescue allegory and rethink it as a potent mode of criticism. The German philosopher is interested in allegory because of its mutating character, its assertion of the precariousness of any relation between form and content and its subversive nature.

It might be reasonably argued that the almost theological idea of symbol leads to a mythology of presence. This is particularly visible in Creuzer’s introduction of temporal distinctions in his characterization of the symbol: “the momentary, the total, the inscrutability of origin, the necessary,”<sup>42</sup> against which allegory, with its repetitiveness, brokenness, conventionalism and arbitrariness, was perceived as a failed symbol, an expression of endlessness and displacement of the absolute meaning. But it is exactly in these features denigrated by Romantics that Benjamin sees the great value of allegory and its latent critical potential. The natural immediacy and completeness of the symbol creates an image of a divinely ordered and meaningful cosmos, however, “this image is rendered mythic and

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<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 163.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

deceitful by the objective state of fallen nature."<sup>43</sup> According to Benjamin, only allegory, dispersed into historical happening, can provide a genuine expression of the nature of the world and is capable of deconstructing myth promulgated by the symbolical.

Max Pensky seeks the source of the allegory's counteractive power in its "heterogeneous mode of expression and cognition," in its "paradoxical relationship to knowledge and question of meaning."<sup>44</sup> In contrast to the mythical evocation of unity and simplicity, allegory retains its dialectical impulse between the extremes:

The measure of time for the experience of the symbol is the mystical instant in which the symbol assumes the meaning into its hidden and, if one might say so, wooded interior. On the other hand, allegory is not free from a corresponding dialectic, and the contemplative calm with which it immerses itself into the depths which separate visual being from meaning, has none of the disinterested self-sufficiency which is present in the apparently related intention of the sign [i.e., "symbol"].<sup>45</sup>

The symbol, pointing to a transcendental ideal, existing out of time, in the "mystical instant," leads to an esoteric knowledge held in the "wooded interior" and thus dissolves the dialectical relation between object and meaning, while the allegory keeps it open and remains always ready for destruction/deconstruction that would reveal what is kept within the hidden forest.

For Benjamin, allegory potently conveys the worldview of those thinkers, writers, artists who are not interested in creating coherent, neatly-ordered theories or works which lay symbolic claim to totality, but respond to what they see around. They find in allegory a true expression of history as an irreversible process of decay and dissolution:

... in allegory the observer is confronted with the *facies hippocritica* of history as a petrified, primordial landscape. Everything about history that, from the very beginning, has been untimely, sorrowful, unsuccessful, is expressed in a face – or rather in a death's head ... this is the heart of the allegorical way of seeing ... secular explanation of history as the Passion of the world; its importance resides solely in the stations of its decline.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Max Pensky, *Melancholy Dialectics: Walter Benjamin and the Play of Mourning* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001), 114.

<sup>44</sup> Pensky, *Melancholy Dialectics*, 114.

<sup>45</sup> Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 165–66.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 166.

The allegorical way of seeing is, by this theological metaphor, intertwined with the melancholy vision of the emptied, dead world that has been drained of all its meaning, coherence and order. As Pensky points out, “[m]elancholy vision ... necessarily precedes allegorical technique.”<sup>47</sup> Any attempts to reconceptualize the abyss and assign one’s own, subjective meaning onto unredeemed elements of “a petrified, primordial landscape” presupposes devaluation of an immediate, unproblematic relation to the sensuous world, which results in a crisis of meaning, and recognition of the world as a heap of discrete fragments.

Presumably, never before has this interweaving of melancholy and allegory been more conspicuous than in the postmodern times. Postmodernism with its sense of loss, discontinuity, fragmentation or disconnected, floating signifiers may speak only in the language of allegory, the language of cacophony and disruption. “We seem in the last quarter of the twentieth century to have reentered an allegorical age,”<sup>48</sup> writes Maureen Quilligan. This renewed interest in allegory is partly due to the critical insight of such theorists as Angus Fletcher, Theresa Kelley, Paul de Man and Maureen Quilligan,<sup>49</sup> but also even more important is the resurgence of the practice of allegory in the number of postmodernist narratives, including Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow*, John Barth’s *Giles Goat-Boy*, Jerzy Kosinski’s *Being There*, Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*, Donald Barthelme’s *The Dead Father* or “The Balloon,” and many others. Fredric Jameson maintains that this revival or reinvention of allegory is significant and symptomatic of the present cultural and theoretical moment because it reveals “a generalized sensitivity, in our own time, to breaks and discontinuities, to the heterogeneous (not merely in works of art), to Difference rather than Identity, to gaps and holes rather than seamless webs and triumphant narrative progressions, to social differentiation rather than to Society as such and its ‘totality’, in which older doctrines of the monumental work and the ‘concrete universal’ bathed and reflected themselves.”<sup>50</sup>

Since allegory has traditionally been understood as a discourse that exists not in and of itself but one that reveals a higher order of things, an order not directly present in the text of the allegory itself, there has always been in allegory a self-conscious recognition of the impossibility of direct presentation, but only an indirect re-presentation, of something other than what the text literally says.

<sup>47</sup> Pensky, *Melancholy Dialectics*, 116.

<sup>48</sup> McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, 141.

<sup>49</sup> Angus Fletcher, *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986); Theresa M. Kelley, *Reinventing Allegory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979); and “Rhetoric of Temporality,” in *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983).

<sup>50</sup> Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 167–68.

The meaning of allegory exists, as it were, on the other side of the signification, and so there is always the sense of a gap between the sign and the meaning it signifies, the sense of the need for an act of deciphering and uncovering. And it is this sense of gaps and discontinuities, this self-consciousness of the need for interpretation, for the reader's full and active participation in the production of meaning, that has made allegory one of the favourite tropes of postmodern criticism.

In his probably best-known essay on the subject of allegory, "The Rhetoric of Temporality," Paul de Man, in a way following the argument of Benjamin, presents a historical survey of the relation between symbol and allegory and by deconstructing the basic tenets of Romantic aesthetics makes allegory the triumphant figure over the symbol. It is de Man's conviction, argues Christopher Norris, that language is "radically incapable" of transcendence and that "allegory is the more 'authentic' mode in so far as it accepts and perpetually rehearses the fact of this negative knowledge."<sup>51</sup> That is to say, de Man has undertaken to correct the Romantic mystification by accepting the existential truth of temporality, by rigorously asserting the impossibility of language to coincide with empiric reality, or the impossibility of representation. The relation between sign and meaning is a matter of arbitrary linguistic structuring, which is deceptively concealed in the illusion of identification in the symbol but is honestly disclosed by the dissonance of the allegory.

The allegorical sign, explains de Man, can only "refer to another sign that precedes it. Therefore the meaning constituted by the allegorical sign consists only in the *repetition* (in the Kierkegaardian sense of the term) of a previous sign with which it can never coincide, since it is of the essence of this previous sign to be pure anteriority."<sup>52</sup> What is crucial in de Man's argument is, firstly, that the sign does not refer to anything outside the linguistic system but only to another sign that precedes it, which deconstructs the usual commonsense notions of reference, mimesis, or representation; and secondly, that the relationship between signs, the repetition of one sign of another, is not coincidence but modification, that is to say, it is always a break, a discontinuous continuity. It is precisely on the grounds of such an overt acknowledgment of discontinuity that de Man prefers allegory to symbol:

Whereas the symbol postulates the possibility of an identity or identification, allegory designates primarily a distance in relation to its own origin, and, renouncing the nostalgia and the desire to coincide, it establishes its language in the void of this temporal difference. In so doing, it

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<sup>51</sup> Christopher Norris, *Paul de Man: Deconstruction and the Critique of Aesthetic Ideology* (New York, Routledge, 1988), 10.

<sup>52</sup> De Man, *Blindness and Insight*, 207.

prevents the self from an illusory identification with the non-self, which is now fully, though painfully, recognized as a non-self.<sup>53</sup>

The preference for allegory in de Man's writing thus takes on a moral significance as an honest, though painful, recognition of the disconnectedness of things, the temporal reality of discontinuity, change, and death in the human world, what de Man calls "the fallen world of our facticity."<sup>54</sup> The "authenticity" of allegory turns out to be rooted in the melancholic vision of the world which reveals the actual human condition, hence, it transpires once again that allegory is "a creative cognitive mode inseparably connected to the melancholic disposition: melancholics need not be allegorists, but allegory arises from melancholia."<sup>55</sup>

Allegory, capturing the world not in its illusory fullness and perfection, but in its collapse and fragmentation, finds its key emblem in the ruin:

In the ruin history has physically merged into the setting. And in this guise history does not assume the form of the process of an eternal life so much as that of irresistible decay. Allegory thereby declares itself to be beyond beauty. Allegories are, in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things.<sup>56</sup>

In the chaotic cosmos of desultory, miscellaneous fragments, *membra disiecta* deprived of its own essence, the allegorist alone is a sovereign. He is responsible for bestowing meaning in the ruined world, in which "any person, any object, any relationship can mean absolutely anything. With this possibility a destructive, but just verdict is passed on the profane world: it is characterised as a world in which the detail is of no importance."<sup>57</sup> The melancholic gaze of the allegorist is focused on the fractured object world, and recognizes the capacity of things to point beyond themselves in the act of signification, but can discern no particular sense within them. Hence the brooder (*Grübler*) endlessly accumulates fragments whose meaning eludes him. Benjamin writes: "That which lies here in ruins, the highly significant fragment, the remnant, is, in fact, the finest material. For it is common practice in the literature of the baroque to pile up fragments ceaselessly, without any strict idea of a goal."<sup>58</sup> Incapable of restoring the original meaning of the fragments, the brooder begins to fit them together arbitrarily. In its very arbitrariness, the constructed allegory might point toward the "sacred" mean-

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>55</sup> Pensky, *Melancholy Dialectics*, 117.

<sup>56</sup> Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 177–78.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 175.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 178.

ing but this meaning is deferred in the very act of constructing it. This requires more allegories, supplements which add new arbitrary meanings to the antecedent ones, but are unable to fill the void of sense. “Deferral becomes a mournful subjection to the written, to the image of historical decay, the eternal postponement of the sensuous bliss that is encoded within it, to an ever-deepening concentration on the gap between meaning and image.”<sup>59</sup>

The *modus operandi* of the baroque based on accumulation and arrangement parallels the postmodern practice of constructing, assembling the works out of quotations, allusions, references – the broken pieces of other texts. Robert Burton, whose *The Anatomy of Melancholy* is itself a compilation of citations, presents his method of writing by evoking the images of “a good housewife [who] out of divers fleeces weaves one piece of cloth” and “a bee [which] gathers wax and honey out of many flowers, and makes a new bundle of all.”<sup>60</sup> However, unlike in the case of the exemplary bee and the good housewife, both baroque and postmodern allegorists do not proceed from diversity to unity, but produce writings which inevitably turn out to be “a rhapsody of rags ... confusedly tumbled out.”<sup>61</sup> They persist in collecting diverse pieces, shreds, molecules, combining them into new configurations, but a unified structure cannot be (re)built, since they cannot transcend the disjointed fragmentariness. Their process is ruinous because it consists in accumulating ruins.

Recapitulating the argument of this section, it may be stated that allegory, which does not operate in the world of ideas, totality and transcendence, but remains in the realm of the fragment and the incomplete, reveals itself as meaningless verbosity, as the broken, arbitrary, and thus truly authentic language of fallen humanity and mournful nature of postmodernity. There is no lofty flight of thought, but rather the allegorical struggle is one of stumbling over ruins, of limping, and, finally, of breaking the inevitable fall.

Fragments and ruins play here a fundamental role, because they are situated at a liminal site, a site of transposition between something and nothing. They arrest, however fleetingly, the process of death and decay, and offer an image to be melancholically contemplated:

The ruin, awakening in the observer the desire to fill in its rifts, gaps and absences, at the same time frustrates the realization of the desire as it both inspires thought to perform the impossible work of completion and teaches ... the lesson of the inevitable ruin, decay and ultimate loss, which is the lesson of the Baroque meditation: “Ruin hath taught me thus to ruminate.”<sup>62</sup>

<sup>59</sup> Pensky, *Melancholy Dialectics*, 124.

<sup>60</sup> Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, 24.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>62</sup> Barczyk-Barakońska, *The Melancholy Discourse*, 175.

The brooder, whose “conventional” image of reality has been shattered by melancholy, recoils with horror from the vision of an ensemble of unrelated and discrete pieces, dead ruins, but at the same time understands that the inability to oblige the elements of the appearance world to conform to their old, comfortable totality may correspond to a higher truth about the nature of things that had been concealed before: the world as shattered and meaningless is truer.

## Textual Wanderings

“There is a specific kind of melancholia called in Arabic, kutabuk. This is the name of an animal known to run on the surface of water, back and forth, from one side to another side. The prey of the kutabuk are wanderers and vagabonds”<sup>63</sup> – we can read in *The Encyclopedia of Diderot and d’Alembert* under the entry “Melancholia.” Although, on the face of it, the connection between Arabic type of melancholia and vagabonds might sound a bit exotic, a theme of wandering turns out to be a recurrent motif in the melancholic context. According to the astrological imagery from the period of the Renaissance a vagabond is one of Saturn’s children. “I was born under the sign of Saturn – the planet of slow revolution, the star of hesitation and delay”<sup>64</sup> – writes Benjamin, a great witness of melancholy. This aimless and eternal wandering, conditioning the mode of existence of the melancholic, is also negotiated in the contemporary writing. The postmodern text, in/through/around which the postmodern melancholic wanders, emerges as only a provisional path that constantly constitutes itself and lacks any definite destination, as it ceaselessly modifies its directions.

One of the central metaphors for wanderings of postmodern fiction is a labyrinth, which makes the *signum* of narratives of Jorge Luis Borges (*Labyrinths. Selected Stories & Other Writings*), Thomas Pynchon (*Gravity’s Rainbow*), John Barth (*Lost in the Funhouse*) or Italo Calvino (“The Count of Monte Cristo”) among others. Umberto Eco claims that the labyrinth can assume three different forms: the linear, the maze and the net.<sup>65</sup> The first, the classical one, built by

<sup>63</sup> Denis Diderot, “Melancholia,” in *The Encyclopedia of Diderot & d’Alembert Collaborative Translation Project*, trans. Matthew Chozick (Ann Arbor: Scholarly Publishing Office of the University of Michigan Library, 2007), accessed December 5, 2010, <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.did2222.0000.808>, 308. Originally published as “Melancholie.” *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, vol. 10, Paris, 1765.

<sup>64</sup> Walter Benjamin, “Agasilaus Santander (First Version),” in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Vol. 2: 1927–1934*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland and Gary Smith, (USA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 713.

<sup>65</sup> Umberto Eco, *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 82–84.

Dedalus, was unicursal, with no dead ends, leading unflinchingly to its centre. The second is characterized by the binary choices between right and wrong turnings, but the process of trial and error is based on a definite code that enables finding the way out. The maze, including the possibility of failure but not the suspension of dualities and values, might be regarded as an image of the modernist novel; whereas the postmodern literature finds its embodiment in the third type of the labyrinth proposed by Eco, that is, the net. The net has no way out and no single correct design of the route. It often evolves into its most complex and radical form, the “rhizome,” which takes its name from Deleuze and Guattari’s conception:

A rhizome as subterranean stem is absolutely different from roots and radicles. Bulbs and tubers are rhizomes .... Burrows are too, in all of their functions of shelter, supply, movement, evasion, and breakout. The rhizome itself assumes very diverse forms, from ramified surface extension in all directions to concretions into bulbs and tubers.<sup>66</sup>

The rhizome’s basic principles provide key features of its labyrinthine parallel. It creates an open-ended configuration with no single, linear channel. The decentred, non-hierarchical lines connect with all other lines in random, unregulated relationships and shapes. They build a system of ramifications, a flow in a myriad of directions. There is no beginning and no end, but only the middle of dynamic movement and continuous change. “The rhizome is so constructed that every path can be connected with every other one. It has no centre, no periphery, no exit, because it is potentially infinite.”<sup>67</sup> At first, the rhizome may appear to be a distortion of the maze concept. Since it has no periphery and no exit or entrance, one may wonder if there is a point to the decisions it asks its participants to make. With the literary rhizome, it is the process rather than emergence (that is, total completion of the novel) that is important. Consequently, rhizomatic novels are often cyclical. They provide unending paths, infinite twists and rewindings, offer endless possibilities of branching out, turning, reversing the direction; thus rendering the maze as a narrative structure inexhaustible and preventing an absolute conclusion of the story.

The plot construction of the postmodern fiction is often compared to Chinese boxes:<sup>68</sup> in every box there is another box there is another box etc.; or in each labyrinth there is another labyrinth there is another labyrinth and so on. A good illustration shall be once again provided by Borges’s stories, where the linearity and end-directedness of the labyrinthine plots, for instance the quest,

<sup>66</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (London, Athlone Press, 1988), 6–7.

<sup>67</sup> Umberto Eco, *Reflections on The Name of The Rose* (London: Secher & Warburg, 1983), 57.

<sup>68</sup> McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, 112.

are always translated into open-endedness by means of multiplying and superimposing motives, clues and directions in such a way that they become contradictory, diffused, ultimately unrecognizable, or at least attain an equal status of (non)probability for the reader, who finally finds himself or herself in a decentred maze without end. Consolation, however, always lies in the infinity of possibilities on the way; actually the way is the end. In John Barth's words, Borges "need *not* rehearse its [labyrinth's] possibilities to exhaustion"; what he needs is the awareness of the infiniteness of its possibilities to succeed in his "heroic enterprise, with salvation as its object."<sup>69</sup> Hence, it may be reasonably argued that it is the process that is the content of many postmodern novels, in which plots are practically deprived of beginning and end, or at least of the end; it is the *middle* that counts and provokes readers to explore.

The labyrinth emerges also as a central theme in Mark Danielewski's debut novel *The House of Leaves* with its conceptual focus, the Ash Tree Lane house, which takes on the terrifying traits of a maze: dark corridors, shifting unknowable proportions, and often-inescapable depths.<sup>70</sup> However, what seems to be even more worthy of note is the fact that the conceptual space of the house, its spatial confusion, is conveyed and mirrored by the structural foundations of the book. Danielewski organises the layout of his text on the page so as to emulate the motif of the labyrinth, treating the page as an omnidirectional writing plane on which text can go in many different directions. As if enacting what it names, chapter nine (titled "The Labyrinth" in the appendix) occurs to be a visual mosaic in which text bursts apart into fragments scattered around the page, written upside down, backward, horizontal or arranged in different columns and boxes telling two or three stories at the same time. Footnotes are nested within other footnotes and appear not only at page bottoms but in the middle or upper portions as well.

Exposed to the choice of multiple pathways in this new kind of textual space, readers must decide themselves how to navigate their ways through the maze of words. Danielewski seems to encourage them to find some exceptional routes, ignoring the order of the pages. Therefore, he uses a series of footnotes stemming from a single footnote, spiralling successively away from its main track and overcoming the main narrative. Furthermore, the footnotes direct readers to various sections, entangling them in labyrinthine movement through the book. For instance, footnotes 175 and 176 refer the reader to appendix E and B respectively, sections which provide insight into the main protagonist's character. The reader's choice of which direction to take, either moving to designated sections or reaching them according to the page numbers, changes his/her comprehension of the novel.

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<sup>69</sup> John Barth, "The Literature of Exhaustion," in *Postmodern Literary Theory: An Anthology*, ed. Niall Lucy (Oxford and Malden: Blackwell Publishers), 321.

<sup>70</sup> Mark Danielewski, *House of Leaves* (New York: Pantheon Books), 2000.

Danielewski's experimental designs place *House of Leaves* in a tradition of books which test new spatial orientations and transform the written page into the labyrinth, some of the more spectacular examples being Derrida's double-column text *Glas* or Raymond Federman's novel *Take It or Leave It*, which opens with "Pretext" subtitled tellingly "a spatial displacement of words." Brian McHale, who argues that the common denominator of the postmodernist fiction is the foregrounding of ontology and the raising of the questions about the world (or worlds) we live in, notices that not only semantic and narrative discontinuity but also its physical "objective correlative," the *spacing* of the text, reflect the postmodern experience of brokenness, fragmentation and all-pervading sense of loss.<sup>71</sup>

To travel without reaching your destination, to wander around and meander in constant deferral of the purpose and aim, to linger within the ambiguous space of the border, the edge, the margin, to stray and lose your way by tracing the labyrinthine and circuitous route – this is the journey of melancholy which writes; and, like every real voyage, it does not want to know its end. And maybe during this long wandering, while probing beyond the veneer of the pages, searching for some secrets within the covers, pages, words, exploring the gaps and empty spaces left in the path and between points of direction, the melancholic vagabonds will discover some hidden levels below the surface they walk on, mysterious dimensions of the labyrinth which have so far been expressed only in their absence, as the void. And then they will behold this "something else, something beyond it all, a greater story still looming in the twilight which for some reason [they are now] unable to see."<sup>72</sup>

## Conclusions

The present paper has proposed to approach the postmodern melancholy from the perspective of issues concerning writing. Postmodern works, produced from the condition of loss, fragmentation and discontinuity, have turned out to bear the ineffable traces of melancholy, whose presence are clearly visible in various literary structures, strategies, forms, analysed in the preceding pages. Enumeration with its subversive *heterotopias*, incessantly contesting any desire for wholeness, allegorical aesthetics of the broken and ruinous, and textual wanderings on the borders of the text or in the confusing space of labyrinth – all they have unravelled the latent operations of melancholy.

From the foregoing analysis, I hope, one might draw the conclusion that melancholy still remains "the ailment of our age," not only because, as Kristeva

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<sup>71</sup> McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, 181–82.

<sup>72</sup> Danielewski, *House of Leaves*, 15.

claims, it corresponds to the very ground of our emergence as speaking and acting persons, but first and foremost, because the postmodern persists in penetrating those spheres of life which are close to *gravitas*. The crisis of meaning does not appear solely as an occasion for a good time, for comic dances of representations within the exhilarating space that dead meaning has left behind, but drives our culture into the secrets of its own inner illness. It is melancholy that instigates postmodernity to explore cracks, gaps, fragments, waste, antinomies, aporias, in which the inescapable truth about our illegible and sinister world is hidden. It is melancholy that is capable of reproducing also in us this troubling "affect" of malaise which brings our attention to the fact that we will not survive in this "heavy" world, in this postmodern life, in which ambiguity rules over clarity, uncertainty has taken place of comprehensibility and the sense of separation from the world forms the centre of experience, unless we respond to its call for action. This action, directed against the horror of complete silence and nothingness, is literature. Yet it is not literature which struggles to eradicate all the traces of loss by mythologizing, domesticating and enframing the meaningless world within the familiar intellectual concepts, but the one which works through the loss and is engaged with it. It is literature which does not limit itself to theoretical movements but takes roots in the world whose ambiguity and incomprehensibility is both the source of anxiety and of hope. This broken, fragmented, ruin-like world has gaps, where nothingness lurks and which cannot be pasted up, even with the most elaborate and beautiful rhetoric. Undoubtedly, the greatest achievement of postmodern writers is that they are not afraid of talking about these gaps.

Agata Wilczek

W obliczu tego co nienazywalne:  
ponowoczesna melancholia a estetyka tekstu

Streszczenie

Pojęcie melancholii cieszy się od dawna w kulturze europejskiej ogromną popularnością, stając się przedmiotem dogłębnych naukowych, psychologicznych, socjologicznych czy kulturowych badań. Niniejszy artykuł, wpisując się w tę długoletnią tradycję, podejmuje próbę zastanowienia się nad obecnością i statusem melancholii w ponowoczesności. Proponowane rozważania ukazują, że jednostronna interpretacja kultury ponowoczesnej jako beztroskiej, ludycznej, wesółkowej, ekstatycznej – jednym słowem wybierającej „lekkość” w miejsce „ciężaru” bycia – nie jest do końca uzasadniona. Postmodernizm podszyty jest bowiem melancholią i nie cofa się przed egzystencjalnymi poszukiwaniami, penetrując obszary bliskie tradycyjnie pojmowanej *gravitas*.

Analiza podejmowanych przez wieki prób jednoznacznego zdefiniowania melancholii ujawnia złożoność i nieuchwytność jej natury. Melancholia pojmowana była jako choroba psychiczna, uciążliwy temperament, acedia, czyli duchowa ociężałość i obojętność, ale też skłonność ludzi genialnych, by ostatecznie uzyskać status doświadczenia metafizycznego i stać się podstawowym rysem człowieczeństwa. Zmieniające się warunki społeczno-historyczne towarzyszące kształtowaniu się nowego paradygmatu ponowoczesności w sposób szczególnie przyczyniły się do tego, że świat, byt i człowiek jawią się jako istnienia z gruntu melancholiczne. Z doznania nieciągłości historycznej, poczucia straty i przeświadczenia o niejasności, zakryciu bądź braku fundamentu, na którym wznosi się nasza rzeczywistość, zrodziła się ponowoczesna melancholia. W rzeczywistości odartej z wartości, naznaczonej brakiem i pozbawionej sensu człowiek współczesny stał się wiecznym tułaczem, przemierzającym nieprzyjazne trakty tego świata bez znajomości kierunku i celu swej włości.

W sposób najbardziej wyraźny ponowoczesna melancholia dotknęła estetyki tekstu. W porządku pisma odpowiadają jej takie figury i techniki pisarskie jak alegoria, fragment, wyliczenie, dygresja, skłonność do wędrowania po peryferiach i marginesach tekstu czy błądzenie w przestrzeni labiryntu. Język melancholii ponowoczesnej zanurza się w przypadkowości, belkocie, niewyraźności, pomieszaniu, tworząc formy szczątkowe, fragmentaryczne, dwuznaczne, tym samym pozwalając dostrzec, że nasz świat pełen jest dziur, pęknięć, sprzeczności, których nie da się zatuszować nawet najsubtelniejszą metaforyką.

Agata Wilczek

## Devant l'innommable : mélancolie postmoderne et esthétique du texte

### Résumé

La notion de mélancolie jouit depuis longtemps dans la culture européenne d'une popularité immense tout en devenant l'objet des études scientifiques, psychologiques, sociologiques et culturelles. Le présent article, tout en s'inscrivant dans cette longue tradition, essaye de s'interroger sur la présence et le statut de la mélancolie dans la postmodernité. Les réflexions proposées dans l'article montrent qu'une interprétation unilatérale de la culture postmoderne comme celle qui est insouciance, ludique, enjouée, extatique – en un mot choisissant la « légèreté » au lieu du « poids » d'être – n'est pas tout à fait justifiée. Or, le postmodernisme cache en lui la mélancolie, et il ne recule pas devant les recherches existentielles tout en explorant les terrains qui sont proches à *gravitas* traditionnellement saisie.

L'analyse des tentatives – entreprises depuis des siècles – consistant à définir la mélancolie d'une façon univoque dévoile la complexité et l'insaisissabilité de sa nature. La mélancolie était perçue comme une maladie psychique, un tempérament pénible, l'acédie (c'est-à-dire pesanteur et indifférence spirituelles), mais également comme un penchant des personnes géniales, pour finalement acquérir le statut d'une expérience métaphysique et devenir le trait fondamental de la nature humaine. Les conditions sociohistoriques changeantes et accompagnant la formation du nouveau paradigme de la postmodernité ont contribué d'une façon particulière à ce que le monde, l'existence et l'homme apparaissent comme des êtres entièrement mélancoliques. La sensation de discontinuité historique, le sentiment de perte et la conviction d'imprécision, la dissimulation ou l'absence du fondement sur lequel se dresse notre réalité ont contribué à la naissance de la mélancolie postmoderne. Dans une réalité dénuée de valeurs, marquée par la carence et

dépourvue de sens, l'homme contemporain est devenu un vagabond éternel parcourant les chemins hostiles de ce monde sans connaître ni la direction ni le but de son errance.

C'est bel et bien l'esthétique du texte qui a été le plus explicitement marquée par la mélancolie postmoderne. Il faut énumérer des figures de style et techniques littéraires telles que : allégorie, fragment, énumération, digression, tendance à déambuler dans les périphéries et en marge du texte, ou encore errance à l'intérieur du labyrinthe. Le langage de la mélancolie postmoderne se plonge dans le fortuit, le bredouillement, l'imprécision, la confusion en créant des formes rudimentaires, fragmentaires, ambivalentes et, par conséquent, permettant de voir que notre monde est plein de trous, de fissures et de contradictions que l'on ne peut pas voiler même par la métaphore la plus subtile.