Perverse History: Fetishism and Dialectic in Walter Benjamin

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.... this project—whose method may be compared to the splitting of an atom—releases the prodigious historical energy which is bonded in the "once upon a time" of classical historical narrative.

—Passagenwerk

From Melancholia to Fetishism

Is it possible to acknowledge loss without thereby surreptitiously disavowing it? For both cultural and historical reasons, melancholia—the subject's unappeasable attachment to an ungrievable loss—would seem to have a peculiar resonance today. It might indeed be tempting to see in the stubbornness of the melancholic passion—the "loyalty to things"—a certain ethical dimension: the refusal to perform the mourning work of symbolic mediation would seem to involve the encrypting of alterity within the interiority of the subject, which would as such divest itself of its very interiority or self-containment. Freud's "open wound" would, on this reading, be the site of an originary traumatic extimacy—the subject's own opening to an infinite responsibility. Buried alive within the vault of a self fractured by the persistence of what cannot be metabolized, the lost object would assert its continued claim on those still alive. Melancholia would articulate this claim. Its tenacity would be thus the very
measure of the immeasurability of a loss whose persistence points both to the infinite need for and to the final impossibility of all restitution.

The issue proves to be somewhat more complicated. Simply to invert Freud’s notorious hierarchy between “normal” mourning and pathological melancholia is to ignore that the antithesis between mourning and melancholia finds an echo within the structure of melancholia itself, which displays its own internal conceptual self-division. For the history of the concept of melancholia shows a systematic oscillation between denigration and overvaluation—a split that suggests that whatever the resonance of the concept today, it may not be a question simply of insisting on the privilege of melancholia as somehow most responsible to the historical demands of an epoch devastated by the cumulative horror of its losses. Typically stigmatized in the medical tradition from Stoicism through Scholasticism (where, by the way, its perils were typically coded as feminine), valorized in the Renaissance and Romantic traditions (where its benefits were correspondingly coded as masculine), melancholia has from the beginning been burdened with a double valency. Linked both to debilitating pathology, on the one hand (the “noonday demon” of the middle ages), and to ecstatic creativity, on the other (the “divine mania” of Ficino or Tasso), the concept of melancholia is fissured by a crucial ambiguity.

The aporia is not simply that the emphasis on the opacity of the lost object deflects attention from the object to loss as such, and from here, eventually, to the subject of loss—a movement of idealization that paradoxically aggrandizes the subject in its very abjection. Freud, who was to observe the inevitable grandiosity of the melancholic’s self-lacerations, was thus led to draw the conceptual link between melancholia and a certain narcissism. More precisely: the very notion of an originary loss (“as such”) preceding the loss of any determinate object could function equally as a preemptive denial of loss that would mask the real inaccessibility of its object by determining it in advance as lost—thus negatively appropriable in its very absence. The melancholic insistence on “unknown loss” would in this way function apotropaically as a defense against the fact that the object “lost” was in fact never mine for the having. Melancholia would thus be a way of staging a dispossession of that which was never one’s own to “lose” in the first place—and thus perversely to assert a relation with the nonrelational. Trauma would itself in this way turn into a defense against an impossible desire: the melancholic derealization of the real here functions, as Giorgio Agamben has compellingly argued, not only to aggrandize the subject of fantasy, but ultimately to hypostatize what is unreal (or phantasmatic) as a new reality.

The example of Baudelaire will suffice to clarify this recuperative logic of gain through loss. The strange coalescence of doleful emptiness and ecstatic plenitude that can be observed in so very many poems—Andromache, for example, “bent in ecstasy” near the empty tomb of Hector (“Le Cygne”)—