

On Melancholy and Allegory (Kristeva and Benjamin)

Abstract

In this text I focus on the notion of melancholy in the work of Julia Kristeva, mainly in *Black Sun* (1987), in relation to Walter Benjamin's concept of allegory developed in his 1928 monograph *Origin of the German Trauerspiel* as well as in his later work, the *Arcades Project* (1927–40). This essay is an exploration of how Kristeva's theory of artistic practice as a way out of melancholy's abyss relates to Benjamin's idea of an allegorical mode of expression. Both artistic practice and the allegorical are situated in an intermediate realm between the absence of language and the never-ending accumulation of signs.

Keywords

melancholy, allegory, language, Julia Kristeva, Walter Benjamin

In “Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century,” Walter Benjamin claims that “Baudelaire’s genius, which is nourished on melancholy, is an allegorical genius” (Benjamin 2002, 39). Benjamin may here be focusing on the ultimate modern allegorist, and a central figure in Benjamin’s unfinished *Arcades Project*; however, Benjamin had previously linked melancholy and allegory in his *Trauerspiel* book, *The Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, which examines the relationship between nature and history in Baroque art through his theory of allegory. In *Black Sun*, Kristeva herself notes that Benjamin’s work on allegory best exemplifies the melancholy “tenseness of meanings between their depression/depreciation and their signifying exaltation” (Kristeva 1992, 102). With this in mind, we can see that, for Kristeva, Benjamin’s theory of allegory maintains a specific dialectical tension which is in its very essence related to language and imagination and has one aim – to signify the mute.

Language and Melancholy

In *Black Sun*, Kristeva reflects on the subject of speech and argues that the increasing disappearance of language can be seen as a sign of melancholy. At the beginning of the chapter “Life and Death of Speech,” Kristeva draws attention to the distinctive features of the melancholic’s speech – it is fragmented, retarded, shattered, and alienated. She writes: “The speech of the depressed is to them like an alien skin; melancholy persons are foreigners in their maternal tongue” (Kristeva 1992, 53). The harrowing collapse of language forms an important trait of the state of melancholy – the gradual sinking into what Kristeva calls “the abyss of sorrow.” As a consequence of that pressure language is experienced as artificial or even empty. For Kristeva the act of withdrawing into silence, where language is absent, is related to the impossible mourning for the lost maternal object. This kind of sadness, she argues, is “the most archaic expression of an unsymbolizable, unnameable narcissistic wound” (Kristeva 1992, 12), and requires specific treatment for the melancholic to be able to return to language. Because of the unwillingness to speak, the melancholic occupies an intermediate realm between the absolute absence of language and the symbolic.

The main question that Kristeva raises in her work on melancholy and depression is whether there is a way out of the abyss other than psychoanalysis or prescription antidepressants. And the answer is yes: through artistic practice. Literary creation transforms this affect into articulate expression, which still remains melancholic – the creation of rhythms, signs, forms. This kind of transposition is in a way a translation of muteness into language. Dostoevsky, Holbein, Nerval, and Duras, who figure in the second part of Kristeva’s book, serve as an example of that idea. Her theory shows that a possible way out of impossible mourning is artistic practice. Kristeva elaborates: “artistic *style* imposes itself as a means of countervailing the loss of other and of meaning: a means more powerful than any other because more autonomous [...] but, in fact and fundamentally, analogous with or complementary to behavior, for it fills the same psychic need to confront separation, emptiness, death” (Kristeva 1992, 129–30).

Kristeva shows that an individual artistic expression or style can help counter the absence of language and therefore of meaning. The melancholic, however, never truly returns to language, but remains

between silence and signification. The devices indicated by art, “without simply turning mourning into mania, secure for the artist and the connoisseur a sublimatory hold over the lost Thing” (Kristeva 1992, 97).

In the sublimatory activity of artistic creation, the melancholic has the opportunity to invent a particular *language of salvation*. More importantly, Kristeva sees the act of writing as a practice that promises the return of meaning. Through poetic expression, especially through rhythm and alliteration, as a language beyond language, disowned meaning can reappear. The main question, a question Kristeva herself asks in *Black Sun*, is whether the imaginary is allegorical. Can this second language be seen as a type of allegorical language?

Kristeva’s analysis explores the notion of allegory, not as a rhetorical figure, but rather through Walter Benjamin’s concept of allegory as a *mode of expression*. For Kristeva this mode is inscribed within the logic of the imaginary which, through idealization, weaves a hypersign around the depressive void.

So, in this view, allegory is a non-unitary form, torn between two poles of opacity and the ideal. In a similar way, melancholy is not necessarily the absolute absence of language, but rather its fragmentation into ruins of meaning. In *Head Cases: Julia Kristeva on Philosophy and Art in Depressed Times*, Elaine Miller notices a specific aspect of Kristeva’s asymbolia: “Words and forms and meaning occur not as parts of a seamless whole, disappearing in the service of a unified meaning that brings the work together in the oneness of its significance, but as fragments, runes, part of a petrified landscape” (Miller 2014, 37). We can clearly see that in Kristeva’s work allegory is the very form of an “infinite possibility of ambivalent, polyvalent, resurrections” (Kristeva 1992, 101) of meaning, of that which no longer is, but which regains a higher form.

As a result the *allegorical as a mode of expression* figures as a new form of communication that rests on a shattered language and transforms it into another – the language of creative art.

Benjamin’s Theory of Allegory

Benjamin develops his allegorical project most fully and in greatest depth in *The Origin of the German Trauerspiel*. At the basis of his theory

is a reconceptualization of the notion of allegory, which contrasts with the Romantic theory of the symbol. Benjamin's method is dialectical and historical and establishes allegory not simply as a rhetorical figure but as a method of the literary and cultural production of meaning. In the forgotten *Trauerspiel*, and in Baroque literature in general, the essence of an allegorical mode of expression can be seen: "Allegories are in the realm of thoughts what ruins are in the realm of things. Hence the Baroque cult of the ruin" (Benjamin 2019, 188). Neither allegory in language nor the ruin on stage, however, are self-contained elements. Ruins and allegories are seen as part of a never-ending accumulation of fragments.

In later critical analyses, in his unfinished Arcades Project, Benjamin pursues the claim outlined in the *Trauerspiel* book in a series of texts on Charles Baudelaire. His analyses provide insight into how the allegorical mode of expression relates to the social background of the late nineteenth century: the market, the experience of the commodity, and so on. These are all considered part of the general disunity of capitalist modernity, and a critical factor of the melancholic character of the modern city. The specific experience brought about by the devaluation and fragmentation of the world is captured by the reemergence of so-called "allegorical intuition." In *Melancholy Dialectics*, Max Pensky claims that the devaluation of the world provokes a creative response, a specific form of expression, to articulate the absence of inner unity. Benjamin writes: "In the nineteenth century, allegory withdrew from the world around us to settle in the inner world" (Benjamin 2003, 183). The world is no longer merely our physical surroundings but becomes a growing pile of fragments.

One of the main causes of the emergence of *allegorical intuition* in the late nineteenth century is the feeling of decay. On the basis of the never-ending accumulation of commodities, along with the ruins of the past, Benjamin develops his concept of the souvenir – material proof of the collapse of time and memory. In his 1939 essay "Central Park" he elaborates: "The course of history, seen in terms of the concept of catastrophe, can actually claim no more attention from thinkers than a child's kaleidoscope, which with every turn of the hand dissolves the established order into a new array" (Benjamin 2003, 164).

Furthermore, at the end of the nineteenth century, the market and the ever-expanding circulation of commodities form a different order of signification, inevitably leading to a crisis of representation.

Allegory, according to Benjamin, is the form that best captures the experience of both the fragmentation of the material world and the multiplication and modification of signifying bonds. In *Philosophy and Melancholy*, her study of Benjamin's philosophical and linguistic aspects, Ilit Ferber notes that "Benjamin's grasp of allegory is quite far from its traditional understanding. Instead of treating it as a form of literal narrative, he views it as a system of signifiers that does not maintain a stable, or codified, relation to what it signifies" (Ferber 2013, 86).

Thus, the most important characteristic of the allegorical mode of expression is that it grasps the sudden change of reference and the destruction of established relations – resulting in a shift in the production of meaning. The abyss that slowly emerges between the melancholic and disowned meaning is where, out of the fragments of the world, allegory is born. In order to return to language, the melancholic must become an allegorist.

The Deep Sadness of Nature

Benjamin's early work on the philosophy of language undoubtedly illuminates his work on allegory. Two 1916 texts, "The Role of Language in Trauerspiel and Tragedy" and "On Language as Such and on Human Language," give us as great insight into this aspect of his theory of allegory.

According to Benjamin, language is a means of expression; more particularly, it is the expression of the content of the mind. This applies not only to human word-language, but to the language of things, language in general, a distinction Benjamin makes in the very title of his second text. In his theory, language is an expression of the mental essence of a thing. The language of man, however, is different from every other kind of expression, as man is gifted with the role of name-giver. "The linguistic being of things is their language; this proposition, applied to man, means: the linguistic being of man is his language. Which signifies: man communicates his own mental being in *his* language [...] Man therefore communicates his own mental being (insofar as it is communicable) by *naming* all other things [...] *It is therefore the linguistic being of man to name things*" (Benjamin 1996, 64; emphasis in original).

The act of name-giving is the very characteristic of man's language and is the basis for communication between man and nature. However, the "language of things" is different, because marked by an inherent absence of words. The only way that nature communicates its mental essence to man, according to Benjamin, is through translation of the mute into the sonorous. Benjamin notes that before the Fall the muteness of nature was blissful. But with sin, nature loses its connection with man. The muteness of nature is therefore twofold. Firstly, it consists of an initial lack of a word-language of its own. Secondly, the disconnection between man and nature after the Fall results in destitution and nature retreats into silence – Benjamin refers to this as "the deep sadness of nature" (Benjamin 1996, 72).

Gershom Scholem's 1918 text "On Lament and Lamentation," influenced by Benjamin's linguistic theory, develops the idea of the silence of nature. Scholem argues that language has an inner core of inexpressibility and an outer level of expression. Through expression, language emerges from its initial retreat into silence. But in this movement from silence to expression, language fragments and transgresses itself. Language emerges and unfolds out of the inexpressible, and the only way for meaning to become present is in allegories-ruins.

For Benjamin, art is only partly founded on the word-language of man. The allegorical language of things can be seen as the foundation of the language of sculpture, painting, or poetry – "an infinitely higher language" (Benjamin 1996, 73). So, going back to Kristeva's theory, the exit from the melancholic's traumatic withdrawal into silence is made possible by artistic production. Art creates a specific kind of language beyond language – which can be used to express, and at the same time preserve, loss. This language, however, is marked by the very grief that it tries to transform. Benjamin sees allegory as the best articulation of the crises of representation, a way out of melancholy. In both Kristeva and Benjamin, the reinvention of language, in an allegorical mode related to artistic expression, provides a way out of melancholy silence – a salvation born out of sadness.

References

- Benjamin, Walter. 2019. *The Origin of the German Trauerspiel*. Translated by Howard Eiland. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- . 1996. *Selected Writings, Volume 1: 1913–1926*, edited by Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge, MA and London: Belknap Press.
- . 2002. *Selected Writings, Volume 3: 1935–1938*, edited by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge, MA and London: Belknap Press.
- . 2003. *Selected Writings, Volume 4: 1938–1940*, edited by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge, MA and London: Belknap Press.
- Ferber, Ilet. 2013. *Philosophy and Melancholy: Benjamin's Early Reflections on Theater and Language*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Kristeva, Julia. 1992. *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*. Translated by Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Miller, Elaine. 2014. *Head Cases: Julia Kristeva on Philosophy and Art in Depressed Times*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Pensky, Max. 2001. *Melancholy Dialectics: Walter Benjamin and the Play of Mourning*. Cambridge, MA: University of Massachusetts Press.
- Scholem, Gerschom. 2014. "'On Lament and Lamentation'. Gerschom Scholem (1917–1918)." Translated by Lina Barouch and Paula Schwebel. *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 21, no. 1: 4–12.