

THE PLAGUE, MELANCHOLY AND THE DEVIL

The advent of science brought about a radical division between the means of expression it made possible and the one it disavowed: in the centuries preceding its establishment such a break was not possible, even though it was often desired.

Medical treatises of the Renaissance that analyze the plague and melancholy used categories that were not different from those used by theologians (and sometimes doctors) as far as their reference to the Devil was concerned. Since it is no less a question of the imagination in one case than in the other, we can try to associate these three “objects”—three figures of misfortune—and treat them as though they belonged to the same level of expression. Such a decision is not at all arbitrary; it proceeds, completely *a posteriori*, from the observation of a noticeable proximity between them, aside from their diversity: it is as though they offered variations on a certain number of themes, variations requested by a logic of the imaginary that we shall try to elucidate here by showing the several categories that serve as a point of departure for the functioning of that logic.

Translated by Jeanne Ferguson.

If we go from the perceived to the conceived, it will be first of all the color black that the Devil, melancholy and the plague have in common. There is no doubt that blackness is proper to and the symbol of all forms of horror, but in this case the attribute of black is more than a metaphor. In the three cases, it can be shown that it is the result of a specific process and not just a manner of speaking, as when we say “black” designs.¹

There are at least three ways of producing black, each of which is particularly suited to one of the three cases we should like to compare in the present analysis.

The first and most obvious is the one that *dries*, *condenses* or *concentrates* a given matter. Here, black is the result of a process of extreme densification and concentration. It is opacity to the maximum degree or, if you prefer, “diaphanous” to the minimum degree.² In this identification of the color with the degree of transparency, air—diaphanous by definition—would obviously be related to the color white, while at the other extreme, where light seems totally unable to penetrate, we should find earth, the paradigm of blackness because it is “at all points opposed to air, that gives whiteness to mixed things, rending them transparent.”³ However, if the extreme opacity of the earth is the reason for its color, we would not be surprised to be able to produce it, artificially, by expelling from a body the humidity it contains, then, by diluting the concentrated humidity, we would obtain a lighter color. We would then be dealing with a collected substance, concentrated by a process of drying and thus related to the earth. Such an evaporation of all humidity would be achieved to the highest degree by a “cooking,” a reduction by heat, and the best and most constant example of this is obviously

¹ See J. Céard, “Folie et Démonologie au XVI^e,” in *Folie et Dérailson à la Renaissance*, Brussels, 1976. The author devotes several quite suggestive pages to the proximity by color of melancholy and Satan.

² J.B. Montanus, *Methodus ΘΕΡΑΠΕΥΤΙΚΗ ex sententia Galeni et Ioannis Baptistae Montani...*, scripta a Iohne cratone de Crafftheim, in Crato von Krafftheim, *Ad artem medicam isagoge*, Venice, 1560, p. 85. Cf. also G.B. Della Porta, *De refractione optices parte Libri Novem*, Naples, 1593, Vol. IX, Proposition 3.

³ J. Guibelet, *Trois discours philosophiques...*, Evreux, 1603, p. 226. Bachelard quotes (in *La terre et les rêveries de la volonté*, Paris, 1948, p. 75) this fine image from Virginia Woolf: “The earth slowly drinks color as a sponge absorbs water.” We find here the same idea of *concentration*, which produces the color black.

the color of charcoal. "Black, which is generally said to be horrible, like anthrax, that is, like charcoal, because it is proper to charcoal."⁴ Combustion thus yields a dried, concentrated, opaque, black body. Blackness is first of all the result of calcination.

On the evidence, this first way of producing the color black is suitable for *melancholy*. Of the four humors, it is the one that corresponds to earth because of its coldness, dryness and concentration. Without going into detail here on the elaboration of the pathogenic melancholic humor, we will say that in general it is described as the product of burning, that is, the residue from calcination. The successive reductions that refined the humors might not be effective, if they were too violent⁵ or if the melancholic matter was refractory.⁶ In both cases, a product was obtained that was "more compact and dense in all its parts."⁷ We should note in this regard that the black color of the melancholic humor is less a sign of a natural specificity than the result of a process. This is proved by the fact that all humors could become black bile when they underwent this change by burning. For example, yellow bile became black through reduction: "This way, the

⁴ O. Brunfels, *Onomasticon medicinae*, Argentorati, 1534, not paginated, under the word "ater." Cf. also G. Peucer, *Les devins ou Commentaires des principales sortes de divinations*, Antwerp, 1584, p. 434; M.-T. Melanelius, *De Melancholia, sive atrae bilis Morbo*, Antwerp, 1540, not paginated: "Nam urentibus carbonibus ei quid simile accidit, qui durante flamma pellucidissime candent, ea extincta, prorsum nigrescunt."

We must keep in mind that it is a matter of charcoal here, from wood, and not coal. Medieval tradition distinguished three acceptations of fire: *lux*, *flamma* and *carbo*. Cf. for example Barthélemy de Glanville, *De proprietatibus rerum* (1250), 1601: "Carbo est ignis actualiter incorporatus terrestri materiae et unitus, unde ignis per sui incorporationem partibus grossioribus terrestribus admixtus, per quadam violentiam interius detinetur," 10.6, p. 478. *Carbo* is therefore a terrestrial form of fire that implies the color black. We are grateful to Michel Lemoine for having suggested this reference to us, as well as some others from medieval authors.

⁵ G. Peucer, *op. cit.*, in note 4, p. 440. If the heat is "too intense, extraordinary, acrid and burning."

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 436. "Heat cannot penetrate it nor change it: then it is called black bile, black blood and melancholic humor."

⁷ H.-J. Pilet de la Ménardière, *Traité de la mélancolie...*, La Flèche, 1635, p. 92. J. Starobinski has very well described the nature of this residual product: "Pathological black bile is a residue of combustion, a sort of thick tar, that may catch fire in its turn. It is a humoral coal. What is not the toxic power, the destructive aggressivity of a substance capable of catching fire for a *second combustion!*" *Histoire du traitement de la mélancolie des origines à 1900*, Basel, 1960, p. 28 (see also pp. 14 and 44).

last kind of yellow bile, is the one that is perfectly black...In its consistency and color, it resembles pitch; but in properties and effects it is incomparably worse than the other that is made from burnt melancholic juice.”⁸ In other words, it is the color that guided the analysis: melancholy is dangerous because it is black, and yellow bile, once it has blackened, is still more dangerous.⁹ The qualitative analysis by color was so great that Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa, when he wanted to describe, in the wake of Marsilio Ficino, the beneficial effects of the melancholic temperament, felt constrained to ascribe them not to “black bile, that is such a horrible and bad thing,” but to “natural and white bile.”¹⁰

The extreme concentration of this residual product thus implies blackness. We may follow the coherence of this image in a text in which Ficino arrives at putting together the metaphor of intellectual concentration, melancholy and the earth: in order to “attain the sciences” the mind must withdraw from the outside and remain at the center of a man; “now, to withdraw to the center and remain fixed there is mainly proper to earth, to which the black humor is certainly very similar.”¹¹ The *studioso* is thus a melancholy man, since he himself achieves this austerity that characterizes earth, since he is constantly oriented toward his own center.

It would be a mistake, however, to believe that heat is the only means for producing blackness. Cold is just as capable of creating the contraction and dessication necessary to that color. “Cold and burning by contraction expel superfluous humidity, amass terrestrial parts.”¹² Thus it is that black bile may be the result of a sort of congelation as well as of calcination.¹³

⁸ Peucer, *op. cit.*, p. 450.

⁹ This is also true of blood: “...mutaturque sanguis in slavam bilem, aut atram, aut succum alioqui crassiozem, nigrioremque,” Melanelius, *op. cit.* in note 4.

¹⁰ H.C. Agrippa, *La philosophie occulte ou La magie*, French translation of 1727, Paris, 1973, Vol. I, Ch. LX.

¹¹ Marsilio Ficino, *Trois livres de la vie*, French translation, Paris, 1631, p. 4, Verso.

¹² J. Guibelet, *op. cit.*, p. 226 verso.

¹³ Melanelius, *op. cit.*, “Hiisce carbonibus quid adsimile, in claro sanguinis colore frigiditas operatur.” This notation is as old as the theory of melancholy, since it is found in Aristotle’s *Problem XXX, I* and in Rufus of Ephesus. Cf. on this subject R. Klibansky, E. Panofsky and F. Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy*, Cambridge, 1964, pp. 31 and 52.

Most of all, however, if the property of producing the color black can be attributed to cold, it is because coldness is identified with the absence of vital warmth. Now, if cold is the manifest sign of death to most of the living, blackness is its traditional indication and symbol. This is why blood, fire-colored while it is circulating, becomes black when it flows from the body and loses its natural warmth.¹⁴ “And they say that death is black: because the corpse, when this vital warmth that nourishes the body is extinguished, becomes as black as coal.”¹⁵

Here we divine the blackness of Satan; it is undoubtedly also explained in other ways. Is not Satan the Prince of Darkness, the image of evil, the negation of light?¹⁶ But he is also the principle of death; his body is as cold as a corpse, and his blackness is perhaps no less linked to this absence of vital warmth than it is to the fact that he is the incarnation of evil. The most significant example in this regard is that his semen is as cold as ice.¹⁷ The accused women who confessed diabolical copulation agreed unanimously on this point. Now, the property of semen is warmth, since it transmits life;¹⁸ a cold semen is the very sign of a diabolical and mortal parody.

For all these reasons, then, it is not surprising that Satan is invariably pictured as black. His skin and beard are black, he is dressed in black, his hat and his hose are black, the animals he most often chooses for his incarnations are a black cat, sheep or ram. At the witches’ Sabbath all the objects are black, from the altar to the host, the chalice, the water and the ointments.¹⁹ Satan’s color is the same as that of melancholy, by which we sense that

¹⁴ O. Brunfels, *loc. cit.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ H. Boguet, *Discours exécration des sorciers*, Paris, 1602, p. 47. The author attributes the predilection of the Devil for this color to the fact that he is “the ruler of darkness and his kingdom is in the shadows.” In fact, this is the traditional opinion.

¹⁷ Boguet, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

¹⁸ Cremonini, *De calido innato* (No. 30), quoted by J. Roger, *Les sciences de la vie dans la pensée française du XVIII^e siècle*, Paris, 1971, p. 56: “Semen... has several qualities, thickness, viscosity, whiteness..., fecundity and most of all warmth and spirit.”

¹⁹ All these particulars have been taken from the interrogatory of Magdeleine des Aymards, Riom, 1606, re-edited by R. Mandrou, *Possession et sorcellerie au XVII^e siècle*, Paris, 1979, pp. 21-31.

Satan is willingly involved in the obscure vapors of the black bile.

If blackness appears when life and heat depart from the body, we shall not be surprised to see it accompanying that particular form of putrefaction that is the *plague*. Such is the third way of obtaining black, by a regression to the formless that is decay. Jacques Aubert defined putrefaction in this way: "Putrefaction... is nothing other than the destruction and corruption of humid matter and of the natural warmth that is proper to it, such corruption proceeding from a strange heat."²⁰ While blackness from combustion was characterized by dessiccation and that from the destitution of vital warmth by coldness, this third way is defined by its humid quality. Putrefaction, however, is also a "cooking" even though it is done with a "strange heat." Now, this particular burning brings about the formation of coals "that are made of thick, burnt and putrefied blood": this blood "through putrefaction is made black and burnt."²¹ The color black thus appears as one of the eloquent signs of the plague: "black and dry" tongue, "blackish lips," "black nails."²² Finally, when the disease is in a sufficiently advanced stage, the entire body becomes black.²³

Melancholy, the Devil and the plague all appear in black masks. In the three cases, a specific process of alteration renders an account of the production of this color. If our three "objects" are represented as black, it is no doubt because they arouse an uneasiness of which this color is the symbol—in this sense the imaginary is the rule of the *perceived*. More deeply, it is also the rule of the *conceived*, since it gives rise to the invention of specific processes that give an account of each of the three but are also valid in a general way.

However, if putrefaction is only one of the three ways to obtain the color black, from another point of view this concept may be extended so that its field covers all three areas. In a way, melancholy, the Devil and the plague are three modalities of the

²⁰ J. Aubert, *Traité contenant les causes, la curation et préservation de la peste*, Lausanne, 1571, p. 7.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

²² E. Labadie, *Traité de la peste*, Toulouse, 1620, p. 28. See also A. Paré, *Traité de la Peste*, in *Oeuvres complètes*, Ed. J.-F. Malgaigne, Vol. III, Paris, 1841, p. 351.

²³ J. Cardan, *De Causis, signis, ac locis morborum*, Basel, no date, p. 59: "... Et totum corpus nigricans."

infected, of the *corrupt* and of the *putrid*. With these qualificatives based on the imaginary properties of an odor are associated the concepts of *venom* and *contagion*.

Let us use Ambroise Paré's definition of venom: "Venom or poison is something that, introduced or applied to the human body, has the ability to fight and win." Venom is an anti-vital power. However, what is specific is its action: "Verom ... transmutes the body and its members that it touches into a particular and venomous nature."²⁴ The special property of this poison is its diffusion, its extension throughout the subject it penetrates. Venom is a sort of putrefaction that overcomes by corrupting an organism. For the authors of the Renaissance, all evils were not due to venoms; they rigorously applied this denomination to the plague and to sorcery.

Both are venoms;²⁵ first because they are mortal enemies of human life,²⁶ but also because they proceed in a similar way: pestilential infection and diabolical infection insidiously and insensibly penetrate, make rapid gains, and when they are recognized, it is too late. Pierre Pigray's description of the progress of the plague could also apply to the assaults of Satan: "...we will now speak of those [diseases] that enter into us furtively and obscurely, and with their very touch ruin and injure us, being so contrary and inimical to our nature, that their pure malice slowly and little by little undermines us without manifesting itself, until they have achieved their strength and vigor, through which they dissipate, ruin and abolish the faculties of the entire body."²⁷ This is an admirable text, eloquent for the richness and accuracy of its disquieting images. It is also one that could just as well be used to illustrate the current feelings about cancer. Satan and the plague spread like venom, converting the *milieu* in which they are diffused into a substance that is as corrupt and infected

²⁴ A. Paré, *op. cit.* in note 22, p. 285.

²⁵ J. Grévin, *Deux livres des venins*, Antwerp, 1568, p. 31; L. Vair, *Trois livres des charmes...*, Paris, 1583, p. 72 *et seq.*; Paré, *op. cit.*, p. 350; Ficino, *Antidote des maladies pestilentes*, Cahors, 1505, p. 11, verso.

²⁶ Paré, *op. cit.*, p. 350.

²⁷ P. Pigray, *Epitome des préceptes de médecine et chirurgie*, Paris, 1606, p. 528. Cf. also P. Pomponazzi, *Les causes des merveilles de la nature ou les enchantements*, Ed. H. Buisson, Paris, 1930, p. 141. On the callousness of the Devil's actions, see L. Vair, *op. cit.*, in note 25, p. 77.

as they are.²⁸ In the plague and in sorcery there is a tendency to maximum expansion and proliferation that the terms *contagion* and *epidemic* aptly designate. What in Satan is a deliberate and evil intent—to convert as many as possible to his anti-religion—is in the plague a tendency of nature.²⁹ Contagion is “a sort of putrefaction,”³⁰ “a corruption of composite substance itself,”³¹ and because of this we can well understand that what defines the plague is precisely its highly contagious nature. Francisco Franco said we could not define as plague “a pernicious illness of which only one or two people would die.”³² However, the same could be said for the Devil’s schemes that infect the air surrounding the subject, then reach the heart through the arteries: “and then this contagion spreads through the entire body, and in this way the poor human race is bewitched.”³³

Thus it was with good reason that Renaissance doctors likened the plague and the Devil’s acts to putrefaction. Besides, did not Satan have a predilection for corpses, cesspools and manure piles?³⁴ Did he not at times leave in his wake the odor of carrion, “of an extreme stench”?³⁵ Was not the breath of witches “so

²⁸ L. Vair, *op. cit.*, p. 72; F. Valleriola, *Traité de la peste*, Lyon, 1566, p. 21: “This disease proceeds from the venomous corruption of the humors and spirits of the body infected by the attraction of corrupted or infected air because of bad vapors, having the property of altering the human body and spirit in strange and dangerous qualities.”

²⁹ Many examples exist of the comparison for their epidemic nature. Cf. J. Maldonat, *Traité des Anges et des Démons*, Paris, 1605, p. 158 verso; J. Bodin, *La démonomanie des sorciers*, Paris, 1580, p. 122.

³⁰ G. Fracastoro, *De contagione et contagiosis morbis et eorum curatione*.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

³² F. Franco, *Libro de enfermedades contagiosas, y de la preservación dellas*, Seville, 1569, folio III.

³³ Vair, *op. cit.*, p. 76. Cf. also p. 419: “Sometimes in an entire family there were very few who exercised this damnable profession of witchcraft, and very often another family would inherit it; and even at times the entire population of a town was sullied by this pestilential crime, the contagion of which being afterward diffused and spread through the malicious astuteness of the Demons, it began to overcome everybody.”

³⁴ N. Remy, *Demonolatriae libri tres*, Lyon, 1595, p. 94, quoted by E. Delcambre in *Le concept de la sorcellerie dans le duché de Lorraine au XVI et au XVII siècle*, Nancy, 1948, Vol. I, p. 43.

³⁵ *Histoire prodigieuse d’un gentilhomme auquel le Diable s’est apparu, et avec lequel il a conversé, sous le corps d’une femme morte* (1613), in Lenglet-Dufresnoy, *Recueil de Dissertations anciennes et nouvelles sur les apparitions, les visions et les songes*, Avignon, 1751, Vol. I, Part. II, p. 78.

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strong and so foul” that it could “infect children of a tender age”?³⁶ As for the plague, we hardly need to be reminded that it was born of the exhalations “from cemeteries, small, infected and confined, as well as from lakes, marshes, ponds, swamps, stinking mud and slime, stagnant water, infected, fetid caves,”³⁷ from “stinking vapors that sometimes come from dead unburied bodies.”³⁸

If the humor of melancholy was not properly speaking a venom, this does not prevent it from being a rottenness. The burning of the humor was not exclusive to its putrefaction, or, more precisely, it seems that the melancholic humor could putrefy for lack of heat, in which case it went directly from the crude to the putrefied,³⁹ or excessive heat.⁴⁰ We are thus dealing with a matter in putrefaction whose exhalations bring on delirium. Thus, according to a 17th-century doctor, if it decays rapidly it causes madness, but if the process of decay is a slow one, it causes melancholy.⁴¹ As for hysteria, it is due to “a melancholic humor that has concentrated and become spoiled toward the womb; shortly afterward it becomes altered, perhaps gradually decaying and through numerous fermentations and changes from worse to worse has become completely strange.”⁴² The melancholic humor is frequently likened to a discharge collected by appropriate organs: the uterus in women, the spleen in men, which serves, according to the felicitous expression of Plato, to “keep the liver shining and clean” “like a sponge, expressly intended to clean this mirror and always at hand.”⁴³

Consequently, the black bile, which is not by nature a venom,

³⁶ P. de Lancre, *L'incrédulité et mescréance du sortilège plainement convaincue...*, Paris, 1622, p. 73. On this theme, see also M. de Certeau, *La possession de Loudun*, Paris, 1970, pp. 49-53.

³⁷ N. de Nancel, *Discours très ample de la peste*, Paris, 1581, p. 69.

³⁸ Labadie, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

³⁹ Peucer, *op. cit.*, p. 435, where it is compared to wild plums, unripe apples and pears, partly sour. Cf. also Melanelius, *op. cit.*, *ibid.*

⁴⁰ Peucer, *op. cit.*, p. 452. Cf. also Klibansky, Panofsky, Saxl, *op. cit.* in note 13 p. 53.

⁴¹ *Lettre d'un médecin anonyme à M. Philibert de la Marre, conseiller au Parlement de Dijon* (1647), in Mandrou, *op. cit.* in note 19, p. 203 *et seq.*

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 206.

⁴³ Plato, *Timaeus*, 72c. The same thesis is found in J. Fernel, *La méthode générale de guérir les fièvres*, Paris, 1655, p. 10.

through the putrefaction that it implies may serve as a substrate for an infection or even be transformed into a kind of venom. This second case is illustrated by rabies, which is “atrabilious” and forms its venom, “contagious,” “worse than the venom of the plague,” from small atrabilious impure bodies, present in the humors of dogs and wolves.⁴⁴ Rabies (of which lycanthropy is a variety) is intermediary between the plague and melancholy: “The rabid person is like a plague-stricken person in delirium, like a melancholic in his error.”⁴⁵ On the other hand, melancholic decay furnishes a propitious terrain for the “taking hold” of the pestilential infection. Marsilio Ficino states it precisely: “Such a vapor takes hold only in those bodies that are full of humors that create fever and are inclined to inflammation and decay.”⁴⁶ Elsewhere he specifies the action of the melancholic that easily establishes the infection because of its earthy nature.⁴⁷ In his famous theory of contagion, Fracastoro will say the same thing when he shows that the germs of the infection, because of their viscosity, adhere “to the humors to which they are analogous,”⁴⁸ particularly to the black bile.⁴⁹ Is it surprising, therefore, that some authors see melancholy as a contagious disease?⁵⁰

The plague, melancholy and Satan thus have in common the involvement of putrefaction, in varying degrees. As far as the first two are concerned, their status is defined by reference to the two antithetical terms, *raw* and *cooked*. Lévi-Strauss has used a number of myths to show the role of the cooking fire—*cuisson*—in the removal of two symmetrical dangers: the decay and the calcination of food. “By its presence, the cooking fire prevents a total disjunction; it *unites* the sun to the earth and preserves man

⁴⁴ J. Ravelly, *Traité de la maladie de la Rage*, Metz, 1696, p. 24; 17, 20.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

⁴⁶ Ficino, *Antidote des maladies pestilentes*, p. 12.

⁴⁷ Ficino, *Théologie platonicienne de l'immortalité de l'âme*, Vol. II, Paris, 1967, p. 234.

⁴⁸ *Op. cit.*, p. 103.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 147. Cf. also F. Vallerioli, *Traité de la peste*, Lyon, 1566, p. 21; Paré, *op. cit.*, p. 361: “Thus melancholy and other humors, being intermingled and perturbed, infect the blood and dispose it to decay and venomousness from which the plague is often generated, as well as other putrefactions.”

⁵⁰ J. Wier, *Cinq livres de l'imposture et tromperie des diables*, Paris, 1570, p. 150. Cf. also Starobinski, *op. cit.* in note 7, p. 40; de Certeau, *op. cit.* in note, 36, p. 202.

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from the *decayed world* that would be his lot if the sun should actually disappear, but this presence is also *interposed*, which means that it averts the risk of a total conjunction, from which would result a burnt world.⁵¹ The plague and melancholy oscillate between *decay* and *calcination*. The melancholic humor is never correctly “cooked”: it either resists heat and rots from lack of heat or it burns and decays because of over-cooking. As for the plague, we have seen that it also involves a cooking, called “strange heat,” but one that engenders putrefaction. The plague and melancholy are thus two *unsuccessful cookings*. The black color that characterizes them is the sign of this failure, as the colors red and white are the signs of the *successful cooking* of pus or blood: the latter corresponds, in the cooking of chyme, to temperate “sweet and pleasant good liquor”;⁵² as for pus, it shows the victory of nature over disease, the “cooking and maturity” of the putrid matter;⁵³ it is quite exactly symmetrical to the plague.

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Putrefaction is a regression to the formless, a disorganization. In its own right, it qualifies the plague in which the most original and strong terrors are invested, those that the absence of form and a visible adversary arouse.⁵⁴

However, if the plague is the negation of all forms—since it implies the power to dissolve them all—melancholy and Satan

⁵¹ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Le Cru et le Cuit*, Paris, 1964, p. 299.

⁵² Quoted by Céard, *op. cit.*, p. 132.

⁵³ Aubert, *op. cit.*, p. 9. As far as the meaning of colors is concerned, we note this example of the values given to white and red: “The color white, red...signifies a man who is extremely good-natured and friendly, but courageous and brave in any warlike activity”; J. Belot, *Familieres instructions pour apprendre les sciences de Chiromance et Physionomie*, Paris, 1624, p. 344.

⁵⁴ M. Schneider, *Le Féminin expurgé. De l'exorcisme à la psychanalyse*, Paris, 1979, p. 71. Recalling that at Loudun possession began just after the departure of the plague, the author very aptly writes: “In fact, it is after having suffered the terror of the plague, a figuration of death leading to formlessness and disintegration...that the need was felt to give a form to this faceless evil. Compared to the anonymous burials proper to the plague, the Devil appeared, to a certain degree, as reassuring.”

because they represent the most attenuated degrees of putrefaction, manifest a power of *formation*, *deformation* or even *metamorphosis* that it would now be appropriate to consider.

The polymorphism of melancholy has its basis in a nature proper to this humor, that is, its *inertia*. Contrary to blood,⁵⁵ the melancholic humor “does not concentrate nor coagulate outside the veins.”⁵⁶ When Michel Marescot wanted to explain, without bringing in Satan, that in some cases an injection given to those suspected of having a pact with the Devil did not bleed, his justification was that such blood is terrestrial, thick and melancholic, and for this reason does not flow from the puncture.⁵⁷ If we now go to the psychological description of the melancholic, we find again the same inertia, “a man who is slow in his actions,”⁵⁸ to be compared to iron that must be exposed a long time “to a very hot fire” before it can be forged.⁵⁹ When a melancholic has had too much to drink, he remains intoxicated for a long time and tends to overindulge, again no doubt drawn by the heavy inertia of the black bile.⁶⁰ This initial property of the melancholic humor has its equivalent, with regard to Satan, in the definition given of the nature of his body. We know that the general opinion on this subject attributes an “aerial” body to the Demon that is at the same time invisible to humans and deprived of any definite form. This is the reason he must shape his body from the “heavy vapors rising from the earth”;⁶¹ otherwise, the air from which he is made would have no form: “because their [the demons] body is not solid, and by nature suitable to retain an assumed figure for long.”⁶²

Now, the amorphous may take any shape, even though, as we

⁵⁵ Peucer, *op. cit.*, p. 433.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 435.

⁵⁷ M. Marescot, *Discours véritable sur le fait de Marthe Brossier, de Romorantin, prétendue démoniaque*, Paris, 1599, p. 25.

⁵⁸ Belot, *op. cit.*, in note 53, p. 343.

⁵⁹ L. Lemnius, *Les secrets miracles de nature*, Lyon, 1566, p. 252. Cf. also Ficino, *Les trois livres de la vie*, Vol. I, p. 5.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ H. Institoris and J. Sprenger, *Le Marteau des sorcières*, French translation A. Danet, Paris, 1973, p. 338.

⁶² Ronsard, *Hymne des Daimons*, critical edition, A.-M. Schmidt, Paris, 1939, verses 151-152.

shall see, the melancholic humor gives rise to some *rather than* to others.

The polymorphism of melancholy is well known. This is why Jacques Primerose said that there is no strict definition of this multiple and disconcerting affection;⁶³ some think they are “earthen vessels,” others fear death, imagine themselves guilty of some crime, suspect that Atlas will “drop his burden.”⁶⁴ The melancholic is usually sad and frequents cemeteries, but he may also be friendly and pleasant in society.⁶⁵ In short, melancholy accommodates itself to the temperament of each and arouses the delirium that corresponds to the disposition of the body it afflicts.⁶⁶ Now, this essentially pliable quality that Pigray accorded to melancholy is only the transposition, in terms of humor and nature, of the power—no less pliable—that all demonologists accord to Satan. Everyone knows that Satan is an expert in disguises, that he can assume “whatever face and body he desires”⁶⁷ and appear equally in the form of a woman, a sheep, a dog, a cat,⁶⁸ or even the angel of light.⁶⁹ Polymorphism and the absence of definition are the definition itself of Satan and of melancholic delirium. In the initial absence of form that characterizes them there is a potentiality, a disponibility and even an appeal to infinitely various forms. Something *ingenious* is at work in these two powers, even if it is under the maleficent or pathological form envisaged here. And we know that Romanticism, renewing relations with the Renaissance after two centuries of Neo-classicism, again found this obscure connection between genius, melancholy and the demoniac.

Is there not the risk that such a polymorphism, since it produces new forms, might bring about the deformation of those that already exist? The aptitude to acquire—or bring about—va-

⁶³ J. Primerose, *De Mulierum morbis et symptomatis libri quinque*, Rotterdam, 1655, p. 198.

⁶⁴ Wier, *op. cit.*, p. 128 *et seq.*

⁶⁵ Brunfels, *op. cit.*, see under word “ater.”

⁶⁶ Pigray, *op. cit.*, p. 325.

⁶⁷ P. Crespit, *Deux livres de la hayne de Satan et malins esprits contre l'homme et de l'homme contre eux...*, Paris, 1590, p. 23 verso.

⁶⁸ Boguet, *op. cit.*, pp. 18-19.

⁶⁹ A. de Montalembert, *Histoire merveilleuse de soeur Alice de Thésieux, religieuse de Saint-Pierre de Lyon...*, Paris, 1580, not paginated.

rious figures is in danger of being deceived by them, as a child is who believes in his dreams.

All the humors have what may be called a morphopoetic quality: they tend to create figures that agree with their predominant nature. The vapors that are exhaled by them are like the colored glass that deforms the reality that is viewed through them.⁷⁰ However, if this power exists for blood, the pituitary or the yellow bile, it is particularly strong where black bile is concerned. The fumes that rise from it and mount to the brain completely obscure it; they create a thick mist, a “swampy substance” that encloses the mind like a dark dungeon. From this come all the mistakes, terrors, delirium of the melancholics, condemned to see reality—as well as their emotions—through this screen of blackness.⁷¹ Jean Belot put it very well: “all fantasies are phantoms to them,” “their fingers are mountains to them, the slightest unaccustomed spectacle becomes a Hell inhabited by furies.”⁷² The vapors of the black bile not only have an affective charge that is particularly dreaded but even more, because of their specific color, they evoke diabolic forms even before Satan comes into it: “Through the melancholic and black fumes appears something horrible, almost the figure of the Devil; for this reason the Devil willingly becomes involved in this matter, as being the most suitable for his illusions.”⁷³ It seems as though the fumes given off by the melancholic humor tend to organize themselves sponta-

⁷⁰ The image occurs frequently. For example, it is found in Pico della Mirandola, *De Imaginatione*, Latin text and English translation by H. Caplan, New Haven, Conn., 1930, p. 51; Wier, *op. cit.*, p. 131 verso; Vair, *op. cit.*, p. 138.

⁷¹ T. Bright, *A Treatise of Melancholy containing the cause thereof, and reason of the strange effects it worketh in our minds and bodies...* London, 1613, p. 122. All of this strictly conforms to the Galenic tradition: cf. Starobinski, *op. cit.*, p. 26. We also find in a curious text an example in which melancholic delirium, instead of being black, transforms black into white: “If they [melancholics] see a coated throat, whitened and rough, a breast that is spotted like a leopard, goats’ teats in the middle of which appear two large, livid, lead-colored buttons, they will imagine that it is a snowy throat, a flow of milk, a breast full of carnations, two little alabaster apples...in the middle of which shine two pale flesh-colored buttons.” J. Ferrand, *De la maladie d’amour*, Paris, 1623, p. 28.

⁷² Belot, *op. cit.*, p. 344.

⁷³ Wier, *op. cit.*, p. 131. Here again the liaison between Satan and melancholy is an old story: we find it certified in the exhortations of St. John Chrysostom to the monk Stagirus (380 or 381). Cf. on this point Klibansky, Panofsky and Saxl, *op. cit.*, p. 77.

neously into the form of the Devil in which he had only to insert himself, as into a suit that was all laid out for him. The resemblance between the demoniacs and the melancholics is so great that we could ponder a long time over whether melancholia is the disguise of the Devil or the Devil is the illusion of the melancholics. When in the second half of the 17th century Willis definitely abandoned humoral pathology and reference to the Devil at the same time,⁷⁴ he nevertheless attributed to the animal spirits of the melancholic the same properties of darkening and thickening that his predecessors accorded to vapors from the black bile. The same metaphor of the deforming glass was used by him to account for illusions.⁷⁵

The Devil and melancholic vapors thus have the redoubtable privilege of acting, between the mind and the body, at the place where the imagination is located, by upsetting the game of images and appearances. Ordinarily, it is only a question of shuffling the cards of reality and deforming things.⁷⁶ However, the question also arises to know if such a power could not go so far as to *metamorphose* one being into another. Is lycanthropy a variety of melancholic delirium, as Castelli, Beauvois de Chauvincourt and Nynauld thought⁷⁷ or does it manifest the disturbing power of Satan really to transform a man into a wolf?⁷⁸ Whatever the answer may be to this question, we hold that adversaries and partisans of lycanthropy agree on the fact that, at the limit of the creative power of the Devil or the black humor, we find this strange illness in which man would almost exchange his nature for that of an animal.

⁷⁴ See the article by Y. Conry, "Thomas Willis ou le premier discours rationaliste en pathologie mentale," *Revue d'Histoire de Sciences*, Vol. XXI, No. 3, July, 1978.

⁷⁵ T. Willis, *De Anima Brutorum*, English translation by S. Pordage, London, 1683, Ch. XI, pp. 188-189.

⁷⁶ P. Le Loyer, *Quatre livres des spectres ou apparitions et visions d'esprits, anges et démons...*, Angers, 1586, p. 505; Vair, *op. cit.*, p. 322.

⁷⁷ B. Castelli, *Lexicon Medicum*, Basel, 1628, p. 217; Beauvois de Chauvincourt, *Discours de la lycanthropie ou de la transmutation des hommes en loups*, Paris, 1599, p. 21; J. De Nynauld, *De la Lycanthropie, transformation et extase des sorciers*, Paris, 1615, p. 64.

⁷⁸ J. Bodin, *La démonomanie des sorciers*, pp. 101-102.

Up to this point, we have described the plague, melancholy and Satan in their manifestations, their properties and their powers. Now it remains to understand what unites them at the level of their constituents: the four traditional elements.

We must first of all observe that water is absent from these speculations. On the contrary, fire plays a multiple and plurifunctional role, which we will discuss later. Thus air and earth remain, always present, in varying degrees, in the three figures.

In a general way, we would say that air is here the element of the *circulation* of the infection and forms, and earth is the element of their *consistency*. According to whether the emphasis is put, in each of the three cases, on the importance of circulation or on that of consistency, it is the proportion of air and earth that will vary.

The Devil's body is made of air; to this it owes its "lack of mass."⁷⁹ He is subtle, infinitely rapid and able to steal in anywhere, including between the mind and the body: "...having a light body...so that he can travel/Easily over the waves and not fall to earth."⁸⁰ However, such a body is without substance; something more substantial must be added to it, something heavier, so that it can appear and remain: "The air must be in some way thickened, approximating the quality of earth while keeping the property of air. Now, demons...are able to achieve this condensation, by means of the heavy vapors rising from the earth."⁸¹

This rapport between air and earth is found again in the plague. If it is true that, according to most authors, the cause of the plague is "infected air," it is not this element that is to be blamed for the origin of the corruption; here air is only the medium that transmits the infection, it being understood that living beings having "the need to breathe draw into their mouths the infected air like a venom."⁸² Putrefaction definitely comes from the vapors exhaled by the earth, where unburied corpses are decaying, humors are fermenting and blood is rotting. If the pestilential infection

⁷⁹ P. de Lancre, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

⁸⁰ Ronsard, *op. cit.*, verses 77-79.

⁸¹ Institoris and Sprenger, *op. cit.*, p. 338.

⁸² Valleriola, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

comes from above, it is from God; if not, it has its origin below, in the miasmas of the earth.

This is why the epidemic usually settles in poorly ventilated places where the air is stagnant like swamp water⁸³ and develops when the days are “cloudy and dark.”⁸⁴ To fight it, therefore, the air must be regenerated, made to circulate again so that it will carry the germs away.⁸⁵

If air is the vehicle of the infection and explains its prodigious diffusion, it is because the air is *oppressed* in some places by vapors from the earth. For its propagation the pestilential epidemic requires that the percentage be higher in the air than it is on the earth, if we may say that, but for its implantation the proportion must be reversed, and heaviness must predominate over lightness.

Now, it is here that we again meet melancholy, because in this malady, differently from the preceding, air plays a minor role;⁸⁶ everything is dominated by the image of earthly heaviness: the melancholic takes pleasure in solemn meditations, he is particularly fond of autumn and lowering skies, he loves “heavy, dark, tenebrous, foul-smelling air.”⁸⁷ In short, does not melancholy create a predilection for conditions that are very close to those required by the plague? By definition terrestrial, does it not dissipate, like the plague, with a “change of air”? If distractions, voyages and music were for a long time the traditional remedies for spleen, it was because of an imagination that attributed to *air* the ability to dispel a malady originating from the *earth*. Melancholy and the plague, very different in many ways, are similar for their common imagery of heaviness, stale air and a closed horizon, that imply a predominance of earth over air.

Now it remains to appraise the meaning and value of fire in

⁸³ Ficino, *Antidote des maladies pestilentes*, p. 13.

⁸⁴ Aubert, *op. cit.*, p. 42.

⁸⁵ We must point out, however, that this therapy for the circulation of air is necessary but insufficient.

⁸⁶ However, its presence is justified in Problem XXX, I, with the argument of the variety of forms this malady assumes. Wine, which has no less variable effect according to the subject, has an “aerial” nature, thus there must be air in melancholy. We note that if there is something aerial in melancholy, it is to explain the circulation of forms.

⁸⁷ A. du Laurens, *Discours de la conservation de la veue...*, Paris, 1597, quoted by Starobinski, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

this speculation on the elements.

First of all, we must remember that it is the presence or absence of fire, its good or bad quality, on which depend *cooking*, *decay* or *burning*. Let the heat be “strange” or “intense,” or even insufficient, and the humor is corrupted and burnt, the blood becomes vitiated and brings about the pestilential infection. Fire has a central role because it assures the passage from the crude to the cooked, which means that escape is possible from the double peril of the savage world and the formless world, to reach that of culture.

Likewise, there are various modalities of the presence or absence of fire that account for the color *black*. There is a blackness that is the result of excessive heat, another the result of its lack, another finally of that “strange heat,” whose malignity seems to depend on its quality rather than on its degree.

On the other hand, fire is the superlatively pure element;⁸⁸ it represents the negation of all corruption and all infection.⁸⁹ This is why it is readily used to fight the plague. “Fire corrects air in two ways, through contrary qualities, as in drying out humidity, reducing filth and rectifying infection and stench. The other way is when the germs of the plague are consumed by fire.”⁹⁰ “Large fires of fragrant wood” have some chance of overcoming the infection.⁹¹ Is it necessary to recall that fire is also the means by which the epidemic of witchcraft is fought? To the role of mediator of culture is added here a role of purifier of corruption.

However, such power is only the adverse of its destructive power. If fire regenerates, it is because it destroys.⁹² If it attacks

⁸⁸ Fire is so pure that La Ménerdière hesitates to call melancholy a “liquid fire” (because of its excessive heat): “...if the most noble operation of an element that is so pure could accommodate itself to such a dangerous humor,” *Traité de la Melancolie*, p. 22.

⁸⁹ Aubert, *op. cit.*, p. 7: “Fire alone, which for its great subtlety, violent heat and aridity naturally is incorruptible.”

⁹⁰ Labadie, *op. cit.*, p. 50. °

⁹¹ Aubert, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

⁹² There is nothing here that is not traditional. That fire is at the same time a purifier and a destroyer is attested to in the Bible and in the writings of the Church Fathers. St. Basil even thought that the two properties of fire—to give light and to destroy—will be separated at the Last Judgment: light for the just, burning for the impious. (*Homelies sur l'Hexameron*, 6, 3, Patr. Grec., 29, 121d). A similar doctrine is found in the Middle Ages. cf. T. de Cantimpré, *Liber de natura rerum* (1240), ed. H. Bose, Berlin-New York, 1973, p. 412.

and conquers the venoms that are the plague and witchcraft, it is because it itself proceeds exactly like the evil it triumphs over: the same as venom “overwhelms our substance and converts it to its own venomous nature,” says Ambroise Paré, so fire “through its great heat immediately converts straw and consumes it.”⁹³ This comparison is no accident. Elsewhere we find an affirmation of the identity of propagation between the plague, witchcraft and fire: the one and the other advance, assimilating all that they find to their own nature, as “fire, which having found some squalid matter to burn, makes it similar to itself.”⁹⁴

The Stoics made a distinction between two kinds of fire: “one lacking art and consuming what nourishes it, the other an artisan favoring growth.”⁹⁵ Whether it is a matter of two fires or of two aspects of the same reality, we have recognized here the “artisan” fire that “cooked” in moderation the humors and produced the lovely colors of red or white of a triumphant and living nature, and the “art-less” fire that either spoils the “cooking” and creates the sinister black color of sickness or death, or “consumes that which nourishes it,” as venom does. However, while it purifies as it devastates, it does not because of that become an “artisan” fire but in repudiating negation it plays a regenerative role.

After it has passed, when the conflagration of the epidemic is countered by the conflagration of purification, the moderate fire—the “good fire”—may again find its role and assure the production of the “well-cooked” world of life and culture.

⁹³ Paré, *Des venins*, p. 285.

⁹⁴ Vair, *op. cit.*, p. 77. For a comparison between the plague and fire, see N. de Nancel, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

⁹⁵ Stobée, *Eclogarum physicarum et ethicarum libri duo*, I, 25, 3, translated by J. Brun in *Les Stoïciens, texte choisis*, Paris, 1968, p. 51.