Mo(u)rning and Melancholia: Tasso and the Dawn of Psychoanalysis

The dialogue between literature and psychoanalysis has provided some of the most virulent paradigms for critical practice in the twentieth century. Just as a vast array of approaches to texts has been informed by psychoanalytic theory, so psychoanalytic discourse has revealed its debt not only to the literary texts that name some of its major concepts but also to the more complex insistence of tropes, genres and narrative models which have structured that discourse’s various elaborations. Until recently though, comparatively little has been done to question the historical and cultural limits of Freud’s theoretical constructs (in fact, quite a bit has been done, notably by the Jungian movement, precisely to dehistoricize Freud’s categories into universal truths of the human condition), not in order to dismiss them out of antiquarian reaction nor to insert them into a comfortable narrative of development, but to bring difference to bear upon the Freudian models in order to rethink the scope of their applicabilities and pertinences. Rather, to elaborate a history of the neuroses is to analyze their curious empowerment through literary and cultural representations, the force of whose mythic transmissions does not allow the psychoanalyst to construct them objectively as in a vacuum but may invade or inflect the very formulations psychoanalysis attempts to produce on their account. The following essay mobilizes a psychoanalytic approach for the discussion of one neurosis, melancholia, in one of its prime representatives, Torquato Tasso, in order to re-place Freud’s essay, “Mourning and Melancholia” (4: 243–58), within the context produced by our analysis.

In his Vita di Dante, Boccaccio said that Dante was “malinconico e pensoso” (30), words which recall the opening lines of Petrarch’s celebrated sonnet, “Solo e pensoso i più deserti campi / vo mesurando a passi tardi e lentì.” As Klibansky, Panofsky and Saxl have argued, Petrarch, “perhaps the first of a type of men who are conscious of being men of genius, had himself experienced the contrast between exultation and despair very poignantly indeed” (248). But, as these scholars also and accurately note, Petrarch was still “far from describing” this contradictory ecstasy of sadness as melancholy. In fact, it was the philosopher, Marsilio Ficino, who, in the fifteenth century, explicitly drew the “equation” between the Aristotelian category of melancholy and the Platonic notion of ‘divine frenzy.’ This Renaissance perception of the imbrication between impairment and creative power, fueled by the drive for an intellectual distinction based on individualism, allowed for a pathos of melancholy to emerge. In the fifteenth century, a pathos of melancholy

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The melancholic not only became perceived as an exclusive someone but he also perceived himself as exclusive: his identity bore the supposed traits of difference but the difference became so extreme that the melancholic's world paradoxically belonged to a hyper-exclusivity such that no difference could exist. The very nature of the melancholic was to be that of the self split against the self, in a dialogue with its own imaginary, desirous of fusion and frustrated because of this impossibility. In some cases, as with Michelangelo, melancholia was even to be the artist's joy: "La mia allegrezza è la maninconia" (line 25). In other words, the more the artist suffered, especially through self-denial, the more he became emblematic of superior aesthetic virtues.

Inasmuch as many philosophical treatises of the fifteenth century dealt with the themes of the artist as melancholic, Torquato Tasso emerged as the figure in the late Renaissance who most explicitly embodied the pathological status given those who grieve too long for an impossible union with the Ideal through their fixated desire to negate finitude. He accordingly came to define the new subjectivity of the "homo melancholicus" to an extreme: i.e., one full of doubts and fears, one for whom the existence of any alterity in the world comes at the cost of his exclusivity, which is necessarily impugned by his inevitable participation in the society of women and men. With Tasso, we, therefore, see the rise of a subjectivism which finds its source of identity within melancholy, the by now preferred illness of the gods. Yet as such a divine madness, wherein the melancholic suffers the exclusive fantasy of being the chosen one, precisely because he suffers, what emerges is the image of a figure, Tasso, emblematic of severe states of depression, persecutionary fantasies and babbling madness.3 My intent is not to criticize melancholy from the point of view of some hypothetically pure or normative state of "health," but rather to unravel the stakes in this historicized form of self-identity, a form for which Tasso undoubtedly became a European model, as evidenced by such illustrious imitators as Rousseau, Hölderlin, Nerval or even Senatspräsident Schreber.4 As early as his contemporary Montaigne (2.12.492), Tasso was seen to represent melancholic madness, to represent the split operative in the belle-âme, who having projected its imaginative force onto its desire for an ontological and epistemological certitude which cannot be had, mourns the loss of this ideal by incorporating the ideal back into itself as an ideal self, whose suffering is the incremental sign of an unappreciated, or even persecuted, but divinely accredited genius.

Torquato Tasso's dialogue, Il Messaggiero, explicitly discusses the poet's
melancholic state even as the discourse is structured by the unconscious forces that condition that state. First begun in 1580 and finished in 1583, it was written during the poet’s incarceration in the prison hospital of Santa Anna. The dialogue begins at dawn with an auditory hallucination when a spirit visits the poet, a spirit whose sweet voice, \( \text{voce cosi piana e cosi soave} \) (6), is there not to admonish him for his errors but to assure him that his vision is “real.” On behalf of the poet’s request, the spirit appears to him in a form, not unlike, the messenger says, the poet’s own \textit{anima}. From this moment, which I will return to, the poet then dedicates approximately two pages on the subject of melancholy, especially on his form of melancholic madness. His own particular form of melancholia is here said to resemble a hydra. The dialogue then proceeds onto a lengthy discussion of the phenomenon of spirits and demons, and finally ends with an analysis of the nature and duty of the ambassador, understood as he who goes between the prince or representative of the state and the individual subject or citizen. In this particular case, Tasso is referring to Vincenzo Gonzaga, the person whom the poet hoped would intercede on his behalf in securing his freedom from Duke Alfonso of Ferrara. I would like, then, to discuss briefly the first two sections of this text: Tasso’s vision and his discussion of melancholia.

Let us begin at the beginning, at the dawn or morning of his mourning.

Era già l’ora che la vicinanza del sole comincia a rischiarare l’orizzonte, quando a me, che ne le delicate piume giaceva co’ sensi non fortemente legati dal sonno, ma così leggiermente che il mio stato era mezzo fra la vigilia e la quiete, si fece a l’orecchio quel gentile spirito che suole favellarmi ne le mie immaginazioni, e mi chiamò per quel nome che è comune a tutti quelli i quali son nati ne la mia stirpe. (6)

[It was already the hour when the nearness of the sun begins to re-illuminate the horizon, and while I was lying on delicate feathers with my senses not tightly bound up in sleep but loosened in a state somewhere between wakefulness and repose, when that gentle spirit who speaks to my imagination made itself known to my ear and called me by that name which is common to all those born in my clan.]\(^5\)

The disembodied voice of the matinal spirit announces itself to the poet in a manner reminiscent of the archangel Gabriel who announced to the virgin that she was to give birth to Christ, whose conception in her womb took place through the ear that listened to the messenger angel’s inseminating words. For Tasso’s spirit generates in the poet a desire to give birth to something beautiful in “some gentle and beautiful souls,” (in alcun animo bello e gentile [16]), a set of qualifications by which Tasso characterizes himself in this dialogue and which accordingly signals the exclusivity of this extraordinary group of souls among whom the poet finds himself. The exclusivity of this brotherhood, as well as its fundamental narcissism, is brought forth when the poet asks to see the body of the voice he hears, a body which the spirit says is an image not unlike that of Tasso’s soul which he would have taken with him from
the heavens when the soul became united to his body. The poet desirous to see the body of this spirit, which putatively mirrors the spirit in his body, is granted his wish. In a dramatic moment, with a gust of wind and a profusion of sunrays, the spirit reveals his form to Tasso while the poet is still lying in his bed. What appears to Tasso in this literal in-corporation is a young man (un giovane), beardless (non avea le guance d’alcun pelo ricoperte), of white skin and blond hair (bianco e biondo), and with only a thin veil (sottilissimo velo) which covered nothing of his beautiful person (che nulla ricopriva de la sua bella persona) (13). This erotic figure of a young man, who embodies the spiritual interlocutor whose body reflects Tasso’s own soul inspires in the poet the desire to generate, to partorire, to give birth, to something beautiful (16). This birth, he is quick to qualify, is not corporal but spiritual. And picking up the traditional school of love psychology, he says that such desire is born in him through the virtue he sees descending from the spirit’s eyes into the poet’s heart. The metaphor of birth is continued by the poet who says that he now feels the “itch” (prurito) of “new wings” (novelle piume) sprouting on himself, wings which his soul had unjustly lost in its violent descent into its body (16). But since the poet is sure that now his experience is not a dream, he asks whether he is not in the grips of fantasy, of the imaginative force of the vis imaginativa.

In raising the question of a possible “alienazione di mente,” the text then turns around the epistemological problem of the veracity of sensory perception. Always aware of his condition as a déraciné, Tasso frames the discussion of the epistemological and ontological alienation wreaked by the imagination within the context of his own melancholia and already celebrated madness. The poet says that his mental alienation is related to two types of melancholy. And in an unusual move, the poet analyzes his melancholy. In so doing, Tasso distinguishes between two forms of melancholy, melancholy per infermità or based on an accidental illness in an otherwise healthy self and melancholy per natura as the essential condition of a certain kind of self. The outburst of melancholy as disease, as a sudden but extreme form of mental alienation can be seen in such figures as Pentheus and Orestes. The gifted, innate form of melancholy, also known as divine furor, can be brought to the surface by love or by Bacchus. Tasso says that although he does not recognize his own melancholic madness in the figures of Pentheus or of Orestes, he nevertheless does not deny his being mad. He proposes that his melancholia, this new form of madness, which is peculiarly his own (at least in his mind), has other sources. Perhaps it is, as he says, a “soverchia maninconia,” a surplus of melancholy: “Ma perché di niun fatto simile a quelli d’Oreste o di Penteco sono consapevole a me stesso, come ch’io non nieghi d’esser folle, mi giova almeno di credere che questa nova pazzia abbia altra cagione. Forse è soverchia maninconia.” [But since I am in no way conscious of being similar [in madness] to Orestes’ or Pentheus’, just as I do not deny my being mad, it behooves me at least to believe that this new
madness has other reasons. Perhaps it is a surplus of melancholy.] (18). This self-conscious discourse about his melancholy discloses the nature of what is at stake: one’s self-representation as melancholic, as therefore in a state of mental alienation yet within this state still able to reason, to discourse on the epistemological problems associated with a subjectivism whose only source of affirmation comes from a mirrored dialogue with an Ideal, with the motivating force which drives his eros onto the scene of knowledge.

Saying that he suffers from both melancholy as illness and melancholy as divine inspiration and even more so from a “soverchia maninconia,” the poet is led to describe through a certain analogy the problems associated with this excess: namely, persistent doubt and what we will come to understand as being a defensive splitting of the ego. The analogy is with the mythological creature of the Hydra. Tasso says that melancholy resembles a Hydra more than a chimera because, says the poet, as soon as one of the melancholic’s thoughts is truncated, tronco un pensiero, two are suddenly born in its place (che due ne sono subito nati in quella vece [19]). Certainly, this image of the Hydra cannot help but remind us of Freud’s Medusa’s head, the mythological symbol which Freud associates to the fear of castration and to a general misogyny: not only does truncation obviously recall castration, but as Freud points out, the “multiplication of penis symbols” such as found in the Medusa’a serpentine hairs or, for that matter, in the Hydra’s many heads, also signifies castration “for they replace the penis the absence of which is the cause of the horror.”7 As such, the Hydra, like the Medusa’s head, can be read as a representation, to quote Freud once more, “of woman as a being who frightens and repels because she is castrated” (18: 274). As we know from Hesiod, the Medusa and the Hydra are related. Keto, the mother of the Medusa, also bore the serpent goddess Echidna, the mother of the Hydra, who was, in turn, nurtured by that most threatening of god-mothers, Hera (Theogony 270–313). Both the Medusa and the Hydra are misogynist representations of women which ward off the threat of sexual difference through a (male) logic of identity wherein what is not same is represented as utterly and horrendously different.

Hence, the Messenger who visits Tasso not surprisingly resembles his own projected, idealized self, framed within a context of divine Love and inspiration, a context whereby eros and desire for another are suppressed by a divine madness which excludes alterity while at the same time appropriating a feminization to the extent that the poet posits himself in bed as the recipient of the Logos. It is, thus, not surprising that within such a framework, the Hydra comes to represent the subject’s own fears of castration, namely the recognition of his finitude and inscribed limitations within a pre-existing symbolic order. Thus Tasso’s metaphor of the Hydra for the melancholic’s excess of thought not only signifies a denial or turning away from the recognition of one’s communality with women as, for example, in the experience of disempowerment, but it also mobilizes what Freud calls an “apotropaic act”
(18: 274) such that the fact of sexual difference is denied even as the fear of that difference, castration, is taking in as a symptom so that the ego can subsequently divest itself of the fear. The Hydra thus functions in the same way as the melancholic because each time a thought has been “truncated,” or a loss mourned for, the loss is then doubled or two mournful thoughts are born in the place of one. This ferocious brand of melancholy, soverchia maninconia, turns the work of mourning into a perpetual labor, a more-than-Herculean task, one whose excessive—or rather infinite—production of its own loss comes to define the ego precisely in terms of its loss as the condition of its selfhood: a self forever mourning the loss of its own self.

The gap left by the truncated thought can be seen to be filled in, though, by the production of an imaginary system such as the ensuing, long discourse on demonology, which mobilizes late Renaissance notions of “sympathy” and mutual attraction in an attempt to explain away all sorts of phenomena which remain inexplicable within the framework of current “scientific” thought. Chief among these explanatory devices, the “horror vacuus,” imputed to nature by the Aristotelian tradition and appropriated here by Tasso, is merely the replication on the level of theory of the subject’s more primordial fear of that void which is the unknown, but which is also decipherable within the context of western male philosophy as the fear of castration and of woman.

The relation between castration anxiety and melancholia can be found elsewhere in Tasso. For instance, in the celebrated twelfth and thirteenth cantos of the Gerusalemme Liberata, we find another scene where truncation is at issue within a context of mourning. Tancredi has betrayed the woman he loves by unwittingly killing her in a duel which moves like an erotic and macabre dance and within which Thanatos conquers.

Tre volte il cavalier la donna stringe
con le robuste braccia, cd altrettante
da que’ nodi tenaci ella si scinge,
nodi di fer nemico e non d’amante.
Tornano al ferro, e l’uno e l’altro il tinge
con molte piaghe; e stanco ed anelante
e questi e quegli al fin pur si ritira,
e dopo lungo faticar respira. (12.57)

[Three time his strong arms clasp around her, as she, each time, loosens herself from those tenacious knots, bonds of a ferocious enemy and not of a lover. They take up their swords again and color them with the blood of many wounds, until weak and breathless, they both retire after their long labor to breathe again.]

Too late, the Christian Tancredi realizes that his opponent was his beloved, the pagan warrior-maiden Clorinda:

Ma ecco omai l’ora fatale è giunta
che 'l viver di Clorinda al suo fin deve.
Spinge egli il ferro nel bel sen di punta
to 'l sangue avido beve;
e la veste, che d'or vago trapunta
le mammelle stringe a tenera e leve,
l'empie d'un caldo fiume. Ella già sente
morirsi, e 'l piè le manca egro e languente. (12.64)

[But now, alas!, the fatal hour arrives that Clorinda's life must come to its end. Deep into her lovely bosom he drives the point of his sword which sinks and avidly drinks her blood and her gold embroidered vest that tenderly and lightly clapses her breast, hotly swells with it. She already feels herself dying, and her foot gives way, weak and languid.]

The tragedy of this death scene lies, on one level, on the necessity of her death, _che 'l viver di Clorinda al suo fin deve_. On another level, the tragedy is explained by the fact that Tancredi was unable to recognize Clorinda, since we already know from a previous canto that Clorinda went out to fight without her usual armor. The guilt which Tancredi experiences at her death-murder is fraught with this "error" of misrecognition and also with the inevitability of the event. In the following Canto, we see the eventual demise that this event has upon Tancredi's ability to act, namely to act according to his duty as a soldier and to cut down the cypress tree which would free the enchanted forest of its incantation.

In these two cantos, we read the necessity of immobilizing the threatening powers of Clorinda’s amazonian femininity. She needs to be rendered powerless, for her prowess, here represented as pagan, unfeminine and virulent, must yield to an orthodoxy of Christian beautitude. As we have seen in canto 12, Clorinda’s aggressivity (which we have already understood to be the fruit of her upbringing) is sundered through her death by a beloved from whom she receives baptism. She, thus, becomes accordingly redeemed through the Christian rite which renders her benign and "feminine" by locking her up and away into a beautiful, Christian heaven. In other words, her murder is somehow absolved by virtue of her being now reborn, through baptism, into a state of unworldly happiness and peace (12.68). She has become gentle and gentrified. What is then supposed to happen but doesn’t, as we shall see, is to allow Tancredi the possibility to be the hero of the Christian mission, the conquest of Jerusalem, by cutting down the cypress tree. The sadism implicit in the murder of Clorinda as well as in the desire to conquer Jerusalem, the city of Christ, from the infidels is never really an issue in the _Gerusalemme_. If there are any casualties to this over-riding presumption, it might be read in Tancredi himself. For in Canto 13, Tancredi pays dearly for Clorinda’s death precisely by his incapacity to _cut_ the tree, an act which would free the forest of its evil incantation so that war machines, made out of the forest’s trees, could be manufactured in the name of Christian victory over Jerusalem.
Certainly Tasso, as the epic narrator, is aware of the price extorted by such blatant acts of aggression. For Tasso represents, in the figure of Tancredi, the merciless fixation of a subject caught between word and deed, between representation and experience. Tancredi cannot cut the cypress upon which are inscribed the “evil” words of the magician Ismeno:

\[\text{O tu che dentro a i chiostri de la morte}\\ \text{osasti por, guerriero audace, il piede,}\\ \text{deh! se non sei cruel quanto sei forte,}\\ \text{deh! non turbar questa secreta sede. (13.39)}\]

[O you, audacious warrior, who dared set foot into death’s cloister, Woe! if you are not as cruel as you are strong, Woe! do not disturb this secret place.]

Briefly, the inscription reads: let the dead rest in peace. How strange it seems that these words should be the words of the evil sorcerer. When cut, the tree begins to bleed, and we cannot help but remember the previous canto where the sword drank in the blood that killed Clorinda: “e ‘l sangue avido beve.” At this moment and in a Dantesque vein, her voice ushers forth and pleads with him not to cut down the tree since she is literally embodied within it:

\[\text{Clorinda fui: né sol qui spirto umano}\\ \text{albergo in questa pianta rozza e dura,}\\ \text{ma ciascun altro ancor, franco o pagano,}\\ \text{che lassi i membri a piè de l’alte mura,}\\ \text{astretto è qui da novo incanto e strano,}\\ \text{non so s’io dica in corpo o in sepoltura.}\\ \text{Son di sensi animati i rami e i tronchi,}\\ \text{e micidial sei tu, se legno tronchi. (13.43; my emphasis)}\]

[I was Clorinda: yet not the only one of human spirit who lives within this crude and hard plant, but others still, Christian or Pagan [who] leave their members at the foot of the tall walls, are confined here by new and strange spells [and] I do not know if embodied or entombed. The branches and trunks are alive with sensation, and a murderer are you, if you cut a limb.]

The last lines state: and you are a murderer if you cut, tronchi, the wood. Though Tancredi has been forewarned of the forest’s enchantment, he still cannot help but act as if those sounds really were the sounds of Clorinda’s voice. The mimicking of Clorinda’s voice thus closes this scene of eerie seduction by the so-called forces of evil in a way which leaves Tancredi powerless and transfixed. Once again, a disembodied voice exerts a powerful seduction over a listener, anxious to misrecognize fiction as fact, illusion as reality, or otherwise put, readily willing to believe in ghosts. It is because of this incapacity to act in face of such simulacra, that Tancredi has been heralded as the melancholic character of the Gerusalemme Liberata, per eccellenza. \(^{10}\) In the following canti, Tancredi comes to symbolize the melancholic who is transfixed because of his literal incapacity to cut his losses, to
curtail the incremental momentum of his brooding thoughts, and he thereby reaffirms the motif of the melancholic’s hydra in Il Messaggiere: “tronco un pensiero che due ne sono subito nati in quella vece” (19).

For the false Clorinda, here inextricably bound up within the tree, acts like the Hydra to produce an infinite repetition of loss and mourning as the sign of the suffering beloved. Yet both Clorinda’s auditory image, and its emanation from within the phallic symbol of the cypress tree point also to woman as other within Tasso’s epistemological and moral system.11 Perhaps the difference between the “true” or beatified Clorinda up in heaven and the “false” one induced by the sorcerer’s ventriloquism should be read as a splitting of the representation of woman into good and bad objects. The “good” non-other Clorinda is made into a safe, non-sensual, necrophilic love object, relieved of her womanly experience. The “false” Clorinda is woman as Other, is like the Hydra herself: an enigmatic source of horror which castrates the male by virtue of “her” assault on his consciousness, by virtue of the ever-insisting character of her difference, which ceaselessly re-marks itself even in its denial. The “appagamento” of this act of hubris is that woman continues to haunt the (male) subject as a fearful, phantasmatic gap within that all-inclusive system, the one that sees her as Other and wants to render this strangeness benign.12 In some way, the “horror vacuus” is really a metaphor for a repressed aggressivity towards the feminine, as the male subject—particularly the male poet who attributes to himself the aura of privileged suffering—attempts to make of that repression the expression and appropriation of his eros: the eros of constant lack. The totalizing empowerment of a discourse based on such aggressivity, fueled by the desire to reduce difference and legitimated by an ethos of aesthetic victimization persists throughout the reworkings of Tasso’s major epic under the guise of a Christian ideology which sets out to hegemonize and homogenize Jerusalem, the topographical equivalent of the female other as that which must not only be Liberata (in the epic’s title of 1575) but also and more definitively Conquistata (in the title of the revised epic of 1593).

Within the apotropaic workings of such imaginary systems as demonology or the ideology of the Church militant, that is, in systems reactively defined by the “horror vacuus,” we read the self-doubts to which the melancholic is subject precisely because of his inability to accept castration, to recognize the limits that define him, paradoxically framed by his continuous need to assuage that doubt, which remains as the telltale sign of the castration that would be denied. The paradox of this logic, as in the case of the Hydra, is that the more the poet attempts to assuage his doubts, the more he is driven into doubt and the more, therefore, he needs to build certitude according to the logic of identity foregrounded, for instance, by Il Messaggiere’s epistemological content. Mirroring the analogy of the melancholic’s multiplicity of thoughts as similar to the Hydra, however, and refracting the melancholic’s constitutive loss of self is a certain fragmentation of the body, whose parts then become
available for fetichization. What is therefore at stake in the disembodied voice, ear, or tongue is the double function of condensing the fear of death and castration into a denial of it while privileging it as that which represents the embodiment of the ego’s self-presence. It thereby engenders a psychosis of elite difference and thus of sameness.

Let us consider that, by sovereign maninconia, the poet is unconsciously representing in an economic framework, the excess of narcissistic libido partially damned up through the repression constituted by a model of purity and sacredness, while it (the mechanism of demand from an external absolute model) is also redirecting the overflow of narcissistic libido into a discourse which would exclude alterity. It leaves open an avenue for the vis imaginativa, conditioned by a western metaphysics of immanence, to imagine self in the likeness of a higher being. Therefore, the melancholic proceeds to a double appropriation of incorporation. On the one hand, the melancholic appropriates a feminine position by making of himself the exclusive subject of difference through metaphors of birth and receptivity, which are simultaneously corporeal and non-corporeal. On the other hand, he engenders a fetichized model of the body which both points to the subject’s rejection of the female body which stands for corruptibility and limitation, and to his desire to replace it with a preferred body, the body of the text, of disembodied words which inaugurate the aura of his mo(u)rning fantasy and signify his privileged relation, as poet, with the divine.

For Tasso, the ear, the gap which receives the voice—the disembodied voice of the Messenger—which needs a tongue, the poet’s tongue, is transcribed and transmitted as text, the text of Il Messaggiero. The text represents the tongue of the poet, the phallic material which attests to the reality of his vision. This vision, thus, reveals itself to be a sort of intra-subjective copulation, the only eros available to the subject within such a self-enclosed system. This system, dependent upon its intra-corporality (the ear and the tongue), attempts to presence the impossible, Tasso’s eros, by being at the service of an impossible union, a union of sexuality and anima, and which can, therefore, only be represented by the Logos. But in this case, Logos as Eros belongs only to a privileged few. As the Messenger says: “fra alcuni è una segreta conformità di natura non conosciuta da molti, la quale altro non è che amore” (p. 26). [Amongst a few there exists a secret conformity of nature, not known by many, which is Love]. The ear receives this message of love from the messenger. Furthermore, speaking through the ear recalls the poet’s amatory sonnets wherein he is stricken by love for his lady through the ear.13 Here, as in his sonnets, the power of love’s seduction through the ear, signals its difference from the traditional topos of being love stricken through the eyes, since this aural mark of enamourment has primacy over the eyes. In the Messaggiero, Tasso wants to see the voice which first he hears and which beckons to him. This auditory insemination reveals a further displacement from any poetic relation with the fictional beloved woman as
the narcissistic mirror of poetic inspiration, and appropriates, in her place, the "conformità di natura," like unto like. Furthermore, the aural and oral dialectic marks this poet as the privileged receiver of sound, a medium which in the appropriately poetic form of music has often been considered a cure for the troubled ear, as a cure for melancholy. We need only think of the biblical figure Saul whose own brooding spirit was pacified through melody. Such an écoute points back to the text we are reading as the talking which is to cure what is talked about. The text would seem to stage the cure for melancholia through a dialogue wherein transference can nonetheless never be any more than its own projected fantasy. What is therefore textualized and what is read is nothing more than an idealized discourse, that is, a discourse which takes its strength from an ideal dialogue between the subject, Tasso, and his own version of his own projected self-idealization, that spirit of love, the Messaggiéro. What seems to be Other and radically Other because of its unworlly character betrays its characterization as Non-Other through its epistemological and rhetorical bent: the conformità di natura.

In other words, transference which might produce dialogically at least some aspect of conflict or minimally some affective change evolving from conflictual projection is trammeled up by the inflexibility of the poet’s ideal self mirrored onto the spirit’s imaginary, the fictional dialogic other who represents the exemplum of the poet’s mythological self-production. The function of the Messaggiéro is to mirror the telos of the subject’s desire for absolute certainty and thus of unquestionable self-presence. Consequently, doubt is only a textual strategy which functions as the catalyst to produce a text based on consenting speakers. Nevertheless, doubt functions not only to produce ad infinitum a textual reconstruction of the self, a self engendered by the production of loss, but doubt also functions as the catalyst for the appropriation of a space for the melancholic who then paradoxically remains transfixed in his non-transferential incapacity to cut his losses, in the trans-fiction of his loss as the condition of selfhood. The dialogue, through the weapons of reason, of epistemological veracity, thus works to build its defense by using verbalism as the talking cure, and accordingly attempts to make of this deliria the ideal which necessarily turns back on itself because it requires, in order to survive, the need for lack to motivate its fictionality. Female analogues, Clorinda and Hydra, for example, function to threaten this production of loss by endorsing in their Otherness, the fulfillment of transference proper since their very existence presents an Other experience. One through which models of alterity announce their seductions by virtue of a confrontation between sameness and difference. The Hydra’s many heads represent, on one level, fullness, the phallus multiplied, and paradoxically, on the other hand, they represent Otherness, the monstrosity that points to the horror of lack, otherwise codified as that which remains radically unknown, the terrifying sign of radical difference: Jerusalem, the pagan city, the phantom body of the Other. The melancholic would, thus, seem to mourn the loss of that whose
presence he would fear. Tasso's attempt at self-diagnosis can do no more than reproduce that which it points to, that is, do no more than foreground itself as the case of Tasso the mad poet.

So, in offering himself as the subject of a clinical investigation and cure through the magic of dialogue, could Tasso in his mourning fantasy not be said to situate himself at the dawn of psychoanalysis, at the inception of an eminently modern form of subjectivity? Perhaps it would be more accurate to say the “horizon” of psychoanalysis, for with Tasso as the subject of melancholia, in a gendered myth legitimating that neurosis, we read the symptoms of a specifically male subjectivity that characterizes itself through the production of loss. The melancholic model, therefore, can be understood not simply as the incorporation of a lost object of desire, but rather as the incorporation of loss which needs to be endlessly reproduced as loss to sustain its myth. In other words, an interpretation of melancholia ought not to be reduced to simply discovering lost objects of desire but, ought, rather, to show how the lost object, itself mythologized, mirrors the subject’s desire. By privileging an ideal through absence and deferral, the self not only reverts the loss into its own self-display (which Freud well understood) but also legitimates its display as part of a cultural myth. Freud himself can be said to participate, whether consciously or unconsciously, within this myth. For when discussing the relation between mourning and melancholia, he refers to such nameless but gender-specific categories as the “deserted bride” or the self-deprecating wife (14: 245, 248). But then, elsewhere in the same piece, he refers to Hamlet (14: 246), signaling the fact that a well-known male character such as Hamlet is indeed a nameable subject, and a subject of literary and psychoanalytic interest precisely because the canon legitimizes his “neurosis” as something, or ironizes it as the experience of nothing. The clinical opposition between the banality of mourning and the neurotic but culturally more prestigious (if not romanticized) category of melancholia is hence commanded by a gender opposition, which while certainly not precluding the concrete existences of male mourners or melancholic women, works to maintain the peculiarly privileged artistic and literary status granted the homo melancholicus, since at least the time when Torquato Tasso gleaned his laureate.

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NOTES

1 On the relationship between the two disciplines, an introductory sampling of the issues can be found in de Certeau and in the various collections edited by Bal, Felman, and Meltzer.
2 Klibansky, Panofsky and Saxl 250; Ficino’s discussion of this ‘divine frenzy’ can be found in his Commentarium in Pliedrum, the most pertinent passages being found in chapter 4, “De furore poetico ceterisque furoris et eorum ordine,coniunctione, utilitate” (83–87). Wittkower and Wittkower also provide an invaluable service in tracing the historical influences
of classical texts on Renaissance notions of madness and melancholy and their particular promulgation through Ficino’s re editions of Plato and Aristotle.

3 For the standard biographical information on Tasso’s persecutionary fantasies, Angelo Solerti’s Vita di Torquato Tasso remains unsurpassed.

4 The demonstration of this lineage is an ongoing project of which this article represents a small part.

5 All translations are my own.

6 Maninceia is an old form for the modern Italian malinconia, an alternative spelling for melancholia. Interestingly enough, a still common though archaic expression for a mental hospital is manicomeo. In addition to betraying a primitive association between melancholia and mania (which, as Freud argues in “Mourning and Melancholia” [14: 254–258] is merely the flip side of melancholic mourning), the proximity of these words on the level of the signifier also underscores the institutional connection between the invention of the asylum and the representation of melancholia as an exemplary and privileged form of madness.

7 Freud, “Medusa’s Head,” (18: 273–274); Cf. Hertz, Cixous, Spackman, as well as de Lauretis, who argues that to see the Medusa “straight on” [as Cixous does] “is not a simple matter for women or for men” (135). What is at stake for de Lauretis is that “the relation of female subjectivity to ideology” bear upon the real and the historical in such a way that the political issue of femininity, that is the context of women and the representation of women, is greater than “a politics of the unconscious” (136).

8 In Il Messaggero, while discussing the phenomena of sympathies and attractions, the spirit says that nature “herself” fearing to perish because of nature’s relationship with the void, calls to ‘her’ aid, air, which is a body and thus fills ‘herself’ up so that ‘she’ does not fear to perish: si riempie in modo ch’ella non teme di perire (26).

9 Cf. Inferno 13.22ff; also see Freud, Beyond the Pleasure Principle, where Tancredi at the cypress tree is described as “the most moving poetic picture” governed by the “compulsion to repeat which overrides the pleasure principle” (18: 22).

10 Cf. Petrocchi, Getto, Basile 293–308, and Ferguson, 123–128.

11 Migiel argues that “Tancredì turns as if to stone, upon seeing Clorinda, suggesting that Clorinda is a figure around whom are concentrated many of the horrifying and reassuring feelings about masculinity and femininity excited by the vision of the Medusa herself.” Thus, Clorinda and the Hydra can be said to represent the condensation of castration anxiety (or what Freud calls an apotropaic defensive screen) provoked by the sight of by the imagination that such a sight offers to the hero caught within the fiction of Oedipal narrative.

12 Jane Gallop even defines feminism as “the defense and validation of such monsters” (172). On the transformation of monsters as misogynist depictions of the feminine into positive representations of woman, see Cixous, who states that “you only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she is not deadly. She is beautiful and she’s laughing” (255); Cf. de Lauretis 135–136 and Spackman, who argues, on the other hand, that to side either with the enchantress or the “hag” is to remain within an opposition between essence and appearance that perpetuates the notion that truth is ungendered.

13 Eg. Rime (3: Parte Prima, Sonnets 1 and 2). In Sonnet One, we read: “Quando m’appende donna assai simile / ne la sua voce a candida angeletta” (lines 5–6; my emphasis). In Sonnet Two, the aural motif becomes even more pronounced: “ma del rischio minor tardi m’accorsi / che mi fu per le orecchie il cor ferito / e i detti andaro ove non giunse il volto” (lines 12–14; my emphasis). Tasso, by defining his poetic inspiration as an effect of his beloved’s voice, significantly rephrases the traditional love lyric which had found its pretext in the visual, in the inaugural gaze exchanged between lovers. In this way, it becomes other than Petrarchan even if homage is still paid to his literary father. In Tasso’s lyric, thus, the focus of sensuality has been shifted from the addresses of his love poems, Peperara and Bendidio, and onto the words themselves. The intransigent power of words replaces that of the gaze as Tasso privileges and eroticizes the Logos. As Norman O. Brown notes, speech was “resexualized”
as a means of “overcoming the consequences of the fall. The tongue was the first unruly member. Displacement is first from above downwards; the penis is a symbolic tongue, and disturbances of ejaculation a kind of genital stuttering” (251).

WORKS CITED


