Chapter 2: Historical Aspects of Melancholia

“The legend of the melancholic artist is that he is stricken with black bile, which
draws his temperament to what is bleak, such as darkness to preoccupation with
existential matters to the unstoppable passing of time and the inevitability of nightfall;
and, by association, to thoughts of aging and death”.¹

The concept of melancholia was first introduced in the written word by Greek
physician Hippocrates of Cos in the 5th century B.C. He established the humoral theory
which states that there are four bodily fluids, blood, yellow bile, black bile and phlegm,
corresponding to the four temperaments; sanguine, choleric, melancholic and
phlegmatic.² For an individual the bodily fluids must be balanced for a healthy
disposition. Too much black bile can result in mental illness including depression and
mania (hypomania), but can also indicate traits of genius.³ The link of melancholia
relating specifically to the artistic temperament was first recorded in the 4th century B.C.
by Greek philosopher Plato in his writing ‘Dialogues’, where he surmised that in the
state of mania creative inspiration rises.⁴ His student and fellow Greek philosopher
Aristotle posed the question in his writing ‘Problemata’, “Why is it that all those who

have become eminent in poetry or the arts are clearly melancholics?”
This encompassing statement highlights the wide-ranging belief of melancholia affecting artists, referring to ‘all those who have become eminent’ in the arts as being melancholic.

This humoral theory was carried on through the centuries and into the biographical writings of Giorgio Vasari in his 1550, ‘Lives of the Most Excellent Italian Painters, Sculptors, and Architects, from Cimabue to Our Times’, focusing in particular on painters and the prevalence of melancholy during the Italian Renaissance itself. General beliefs at this time concerning the temperamental nature of the artist theorize that isolation and need to reach deep levels of emotion characteristic of the occupation made becoming melancholic unavoidable. Vasari suggests a similar theory, the sedentary nature of being an artist combined with extensive intellectual exertion inevitably leads to melancholy, and if an artist was born with this, they possessed the enhanced faculty of fantasy. The 1585 treatise on painting by Romano Alberti states painters become melancholic because of their unrelenting pursuit to fix sense impressions in their intellects in order to cultivate vivid, mnemonic images when needed. This raises an interesting point as to whether in some cases the actual process of being an artist and forcing the mind into dark places can actually cause melancholia. Such an effort of the mind demands of painters to “keep their minds

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6 Ibid.
7 Ibid (p. 673-4).
8 Ibid (p. 663).
abstracted and separated from worldly concerns, whence comes melancholia, which according to Aristotle indicates intelligence and prudence.” An interesting facet of the mentioned theories is this idea of melancholia providing painters with a certain kind of genius for the fantastical and grotesque, a case in point being the later Romantic vision of artists such as Francisco de Goya.  

The Romantic Age began in the 1790s and with it the belief in an idea of the melancholic and individualistic artist. Artists of this era used their highly emotional states of mind, both in psychological reality and the imaginary, to create visions of a world of sublime light or deep shadow. Perhaps acknowledging madness in relation to fantastical imagination, Spanish painter and printmaker Francisco de Goya wrote underneath the print ‘The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters’, the following commentary, “Imagination, deserted by reason, begets impossible monsters. United with reason, she is the mother of the arts, and the source of their wonders”. This observation came as Goya created the 1799 print series ‘Los Caprichos’, in which he found himself tormented throughout his creative process and realized that while it could lead to artistic inspiration, it also leads to madness. Twenty years later Goya physically and mentally isolated himself in his depression from 1819-1823 and painted a series of frescoes depicting disturbingly violent behavior and lonely bleakness, known as the ‘Black Paintings’. In ‘Two Old Men Eating Soup’, (Fig. 1) as in most of the ‘Black Paintings’,

9 Ibid.
Goya uses a dark palette and paints with a spontaneous quality of brush stroke. The two men appear almost non-human, the presence of the figure on the left exudes derangement with his skeletal like hand gesturing to an unknown space or object beyond the canvas edge. The other figure is completely skeletal, his face depicted with deep, sunken sockets instead of eyes. It is important to consider this and the other ‘Black Painting’ frescoes were painted for Goya’s solitary viewing, this gives insight into his state of mind as he produced these works.

With a Romantic emphasis on individuality and a fragile sensibility that embraced an exploration into emotional authenticity, the arts began to receive a historic amount of recognition for uncovering the meaning, purpose and insight of an unintelligible world. Romantic artists connected strongly with psychological states within artistic expression and fully immersed themselves into a mentally unstable state of mind. Goya and French painter Théodore Géricault portrayed mentally ill people and institutional settings since they had personal insight into the condition and their subjects, as both suffered from depression. “No other artist of the period but Goya could capture the world of derangement with such insight, but while Goya seeks to invoke the mental state, Géricault proceeds always from a clear description of actual appearances”. Goya’s drawing ‘A Lunatic Behind Bars’ (Fig. 2) was rendered after the ‘Black Paintings’ between 1824-28, and can be interpreted as emphasizing the emotional trauma of being labeled a ‘lunatic’. His upper face is lit up, but the shadow below is creeping

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upwards, covering his gaping mouth. The bars of the cell provide a structure that although a geometric grid, also allows for the figure to become an extension of his own imprisonment. Géricault addressed the issue of mental illness through a series of portraits depicting various states of sanity, and the poignancy expressed through paint clearly references his own suffering from depression and suicidal tendencies. In his ‘Portrait of A Kleptomaniac’; (Fig. 3) painted between 1820-24, the man depicted is painted with such a presence of sadness and humanity, the viewer can interpret this empathy as a reflection of the artist.

The Romantic influence continued beyond the Romantic Age and although the artistic styles changed, the concept of the melancholic artist remained firmly within the art world. Expressionists such as the Norwegian artist Edvard Munch, known as the painter of modern anxiety, experienced depression throughout his life and was institutionalized in 1908 for eight months. Upon leaving the hospital, his work emphasized renewed passion and vitality.\(^\text{16}\) Dutch painter Vincent van Gogh stated, “The more I become decomposed, the more sick and fragmented I am, the more I become an artist”.\(^\text{17}\) Both these artists exhibit the use of vibrant, manic colors in their palettes which indicate a distortion of reality. These visual or perceptual distortions tend to coincide with their respective institutionalizations, for example Munch’s 1909 ‘Self Portrait at Clinic’ (institutionalized in 1908) (Fig. 4) and van Gogh’s 1888 ‘Encampment of Gypsies Around Arles’ (institutionalized in 1888) (Fig. 5). Both of these paintings have

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\(^{17}\) ‘Art, Madness and Human Interaction’. Vernon, McCay and Baughman, Marjie L., Art Journal, (1972) (p. 413).
a vibrantly bright palette that suggests an altered interpretation of color perception. The urgency of brush marks may indicate execution during a state of mania, which possibly coincide with their treatment for depression. Another artist suffering from depression, German Expressionist Käthe Kollwitz, also experienced altered illusory changes of proportion believed to be due to Alice in Wonderland Syndrome. The influence is apparent in many of Kollwitz’s drawings, especially regarding the rendering of hands, as in ‘Whetting of the Scythe’ (Fig. 6). In this 1905 lithograph a figure looms in the darkness, the face partially hidden by the sharp edge of the scythe. What is visible evokes a sense of anguished foreboding and tension, especially the ambiguity of whether the cheek is resting on the blade or being pressed into the blade. The hands are beautifully positioned around the face and blade, and the extra emphasis creates a more powerful image, whether or not it was done intentionally or the result of perceptual distortion.

The Abstract Expressionist Movement began in the 1940s and emulated many of the Romantic ideals, significantly the idea of truth encompassing the personal vision of the artist. Painter Jackson Pollock was a central figure of this era and suffered from mental illness exacerbated by alcoholism. While institutionalized for four months in 1938 at the Westchester Division of New York Hospital, doctors agreed that painting provided

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18 ‘The Syndrome of Alice in Wonderland’, Todd, J., Canad Med Assoc J., (1955) (p. 701). This psychological condition is named after Lewis Carroll’s story of a girl who navigates the fine line of sanity and insanity while experiencing perceptual distortions and puzzlement of self and identity in an imaginary reality. Charles Lutwidge Dodgson (pen name Lewis Carroll) is believed to have suffered from this syndrome himself, which effects can include objects or people visually distorted and appear to grow larger or smaller.

a release of thoughts and feelings necessary for his fragile ego.\textsuperscript{20} Jungian therapist Dr. Joseph L. Henderson, who treated Pollock in 1938, noted that, “‘Cure’, in his case, really meant finding his unique identity as an artist”.\textsuperscript{21} Most prolific during hypomanic states of depression, Pollock’s physical style of painting reflected the turmoil within his mind, as shown in the 1950 Hans Namuth photograph ‘Pollock Painting Autumn Rhythm’ (Fig. 7). Pollock’s physical interaction with the paint and canvas show a complete immersion of body and mind with the application of marks and strokes of paint. As he became more deeply mired in alcoholic depression and perhaps suffering from schizophrenia, his paintings show a disintegration of form. The forceful, violent application of the paint personify his mental fragility, and he believed, “…painting is self-discovery. Every good artist paints what he is”.\textsuperscript{22} This coincides with the “cult of action”, which is a concept of Abstract Expressionism, where the painter resolves inner conflict by establishing identity through the act of painting. The painting becomes an expression and unification of self, which for Pollock was an inextricable combination of depression converging with artistic practice.\textsuperscript{23}

Pollock’s 1950 painting ‘Blue Poles’ (Fig. 8) shows the frenzied, repetitive actions and strokes apparent in many of his works. Viewing this work evokes emotional unease and an obvious sense of cathartic release through the very motion of the painting. The blue poles are violent, with sharp edges and a strong association with medieval

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid (p. 44).
\textsuperscript{22} ‘Art, Madness and Human Interaction’, Vernon, McCay and Baughman, Marjie L., Art Journal, (1972) (p. 416).
weapons of torture. The physical manifestations are possibly an interpretation of the mental anguish Pollock endured, endless mental warfare that he could not escape, but perhaps temporary relieve through painting. This painting has been suggested as the last masterpiece Pollock produced, six years before his death in an alcohol related car accident.\textsuperscript{24} Since his death, Pollock has been referred to as the first American victim of Plato’s ‘divine mania’ (artistic temperament), a “flawed genius who requires his madness as a precondition to creativity, but eventually succumbs prematurely to its self-destructive effects.”\textsuperscript{25}

Similarly, Abstract Expressionist painter Mark Rothko suffered from deep depression that ended with his suicide in 1970. In his last series of work, ‘Black on Gray’, produced with the knowledge of impending death whether by his own hand or from chronic heart problems, he “discovered how the touch of the brush itself could provide an immediate grasp of an intractable reality, bringing him closer to an unrecognizable presence in which he could surrender and lose the burden of his innermost self.”\textsuperscript{26} The black section of Rothko’s 1969 painting ‘Black on Gray’ (Fig. 9) exudes a sense of overbearing depression pushing down into the gray space. The lighter space is painted gesturally, with brighter brush marks emerging from the surface. These brush marks indicate the possibility of a hidden quality prevalent in depression, and how Rothko may have expressed this. This goes beyond the obvious choice in palette and use of color to depict a transgression of emotion, it is the gestural activity

under the surface that is easily overlooked unless examined and recognized. Rothko may have meant it as a possible reference to the nature of depression regarding its physical invisibility, yet recognizability within the presence in the mind.

Employing another method of expressing the fragility of the human state, Swiss painter, sculptor and printmaker Alberto Giacometti, 1901-1966, depicted the human figure through states of fragmentation and elongation. These manners of representation have been interpreted by French existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre as revealing the anxiety and alienation of contemporary life.27 Giacometti struggled to interpret the brokenness of humanity and his art is the imaginative construction of how he viewed the world.28 This fragmentation is especially apparent in his 1923 figure drawing, ‘Three Female Nudes’, (Fig. 10) in which the surface of the body is fractured possibly as a way for Giacometti to manifest his understanding of human form from a mental state into a state of physical visuality. The use of fragmentation to bring forth the planes of the body serve to not only reveal the structure, but a brokenness of form that Giacometti also pursued sculpturally with distortions of proportion and an exploration into the flesh as a disintegration of form.

The works of the above mentioned artists indicates a unique sustained vision attributed to various states of mind. Altered representations of objects, spaces or figures whether through color, fragmentation or distortion suggest a distinct correlation between how the artist sees reality and its altered state during depressive cycles. The next

chapter examines traces of depression within the contemporary art work, bearing in mind that the myth of the Romantic artist may have disappeared or been transformed with the Postmodern Era.
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(Fig. 1) Francisco de Goya, ‘Two Old Men Eating Soup’, oil on canvas (49.3 x 83.4 cm) (1819-23).
(Fig. 2) Francisco de Goya, ‘A Lunatic Behind Bars’, chalk on paper (19.1 x 14.5 cm) (1824-28).
(Fig. 3) Théodore Géricault, *Portrait of A Kleptomaniac*, oil on canvas (61.2 x 50.1 cm) (1820-24).
(Fig. 4) Edvard Munch, ‘Self Portrait at Clinic’, oil on canvas (100 x 110 cm) (1909).
(Fig. 5) Vincent van Gogh, ‘Encampment of Gypsies Around Arles’, oil on canvas (45 x 51 cm) (1888).
(Fig. 6) Kathë Kollwitz, *Whetting of the Scythe*, lithograph (29.2 x 27.4 cm) (1905).
(Fig. 7) Hans Namuth, ‘Pollock Painting Autumn Rhythm’, photograph (1950).
(Fig. 8) Jackson Pollock, *Blue Poles*, enamel and aluminum paint on canvas (212.1 x 488.9 cm) (1952).
(Fig. 9) Mark Rothko, ‘Black on Gray’, acrylic on canvas (206.5 x 236 cm) (1969).
(Fig. 10) Alberto Giacometti, ‘Three Female Nudes’, pencil on paper (50.7 x 32.7 cm) (1923-24).