This essay attempts to discuss the relation of mood to philosophy in the context of Benjamin’s early thought. Reviewing Ilit Ferber’s *Melancholy and Philosophy: Benjamin’s Early Reflections on Theatre and Language*, I try to show that melancholy, far from merely a psychological-solipsistic-pathological condition as it is generally understood today, is rather to be understood as philosophical attunement and which as such is inseparably connected with profound ethico-political questions concerning responsibility and justice, with work and play and with a possible phenomenological disclosure of the world as a whole. Walter Benjamin’s early works are seen, in this context, to be indispensable help to think such questions anew.

**KEYWORDS** Walter Benjamin, melancholy, mood


I

Ilit Ferber’s book traces the idea of melancholy in the early writings of Walter Benjamin. Instead of presenting Benjamin’s idea of melancholy either as a subjective-psychological-pathological mood or as social constructs, Ferber presents this singular idea in Benjamin as a potentially philosophical attunement (*Stimmung*), as *potentiality* itself that occurs at the intersection between the world and man. Ferber thereby withdraws from the dominant interpretation and understanding, not only of Walter Benjamin’s idea of melancholy, but of the idea of melancholy *as such*, melancholy predominantly understood as one pathological mood among others, as a subjective-solipsistic-psychological affectation or as social constructs (a “bourgeois” mood, one can say, which is the privileged
indulgence of the dominant class). Reading the early works of Walter Benjamin in a Talmudic manner, the book introduces a debate or polemos in our contemporary readings of Benjamin and intervenes in debates concerning the relation of melancholy to the philosophical concept of truth, on melancholy as a linguistic disclosure of the world, and on the idea of melancholy as an ethical responsibility to the other. In other words, the book attempts to show “a metaphysics of melancholy” (194) at work in early writings of Benjamin, an idea that touches and affects all other ideas at work in the early Benjamin: his notion of truth and language, of sovereignty and the political, of inheritance and ethical responsibility, of the spectral character of temporality and its relation to mortification, of the relation between play and work, of translation and sadness in language, etc.

Therefore, melancholy for Ferber and for Benjamin himself is not one idea among all other ideas, but one of those few ideas to be presented and which in turn presents—the world, man and the divine and their each time singular opening to each other. As Ferber makes clear through her careful exegesis of these early works that for Benjamin, especially for the early Benjamin, it is this opening of beings themselves (the divine, the mortal and nature) toward each other, each time occurring singularly and differently, that is at stake in the fundamental attunement (Stimmung) of melancholy. It is as if melancholy itself attunes each being toward the other; or, rather, beings themselves are disclosed in this attunement. In the very illuminating last chapter of the book, reading Benjamin in light of Leibniz’s notion of harmony—evoking thereby that which is essential to music—Ferber shows us, contra the dominant understanding, that the Benjamin-word Stimmung is to be translated better as “attunement” rather than as “mood.” As such melancholy is not one pathological mood among others, a solipsistic enclosure of the anthropological subject into its own interiority but metaphysical in the sense that such melancholy, as fundamental attunement (Grundstimmung), lies at the very potentiality of disclosures as such: of the divine, the mortal and of nature to each other in their unique, irreducible and singular modes. According to Benjamin’s early conception of philosophy, it is the task and vocation of philosophy to let such “metaphysics of melancholy” arrive in the linguistic mode of presentation (Darstellung) which is philosophy, in so far as philosophy is the linguistic discourse par excellence and in so far as the fundamental attunement of melancholy adheres in language as such and language at all. For this early Benjamin, melancholy is something like a “secret password” that invisibly and continuously passes through all beings, demanding for an ethical response from us, the mortal, in whom this password reaches an innermost intensity of expression.

It is the merit of Ferber’s Melancholy and Philosophy to let such a call of an infinite responsibility reach us through such a careful, loving, and attentive reading of Benjamin. Bringing Martin Heidegger’s early reflections on attunement (Stimmung) in proximity to Benjamin, and adopting the former’s phenomenological mode of presentation to present the idea of melancholy as philosophical mood in Benjamin’s early works, Ferber invites us to re-think melancholy in relation to philosophical task of disclosure and presentation. Such a re-thinking of a “word” or idea” through a presentation of it does not preserve its sense
absolutely intact in the solidified, petrified mode in which it is displayed in the 
sedimented history of that idea, but rather transforms that very history into 
going something new, something that is yet unheard and unseen. Ferber convincingly 
argues here that such is the case in both Heidegger and Benjamin. In each of these 
two philosophers the presentation of the idea or the word leads to the creative 
transformation of that history. In Heidegger’s case, such creative transformation 
of the history of an idea occurs in the phenomenological disclosure of Dasein’s 
own being opening its world; and in the case of Benjamin, such transformation 
occurs in the mode of presentation entering into a constellation of ideas. 
Therefore Ferber herself in her reading of Benjamin allows the idea of melancholy 
to enter into the constellation of Benjamin’s other ideas, like the idea of truth 
(Chapter Four) and of language (Chapter Three), of death, of the spectral 
character of responsibility and the pain of its expression (Chapter Two). The 
work of Benjamin is thereby opened up once more for the reader, allowing him/her 
to encounter Benjaminian ideas in a renewed mode in a new context, the new 
context being the idea of melancholy as philosophical mood or as metaphysical 
opening of the world to the mortal.

Perhaps here lies the most important contribution of this book, not only to the 
reception history of Benjamin but to the larger debate concerning the relation of 
mood as such to philosophy and metaphysics, a debate in which melancholy 
assumes a very fascinating place. Ferber here justly points out the utmost relevance 
of Heidegger’s discussion of mood (Stimmung) to the contemporary debate on the 
relation of mood and philosophy. However, even though Ferber adopts the 
Heideggerian framework in her reading of Benjamin, her own discussion of 
Heideggerian concept of mood remains limited and inadequate, her discussion 
being confined to his early works, basically Being and Time and his 1929/30 
lectures on The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics, neglecting thereby the 
more profound reflections of the later Heidegger on the relation of melancholy to 
language, especially of poetic language (Heidegger’s discussions of the poems by 
Stephan George and Friedrich Hölderlin) and on the relation of melancholy to 
thinking outside Occidental metaphysics (which is the task of his lectures called 
What is Called Thinking?). Perhaps the most important missing link here is 
Ferber’s exclusion of Heidegger’s 1934–1935 lecture on Hölderlin’s two hymns— 
“Germanien” and “Der Rhein”—wherein Heidegger understands melancholy as the 
Grundstimmung (fundamental attunement) of Hölderlin’s poetry, and thereby 
hinting towards the possibility of thinking melancholy as the fundamental 
attunement of poetizing and thinking outside the dominant metaphysics of the 
West. Even though towards the end of book Ferber returns to Heidegger again in 
order to substantiate her theoretical framework, the framework is still felt not-
substantiated enough and her approach still not sufficiently worked out. Taking 
into account these works by Heidegger, and showing of more profound proximity 
and distance between these two thinkers’ reflections on melancholy would have 
not only enrich her theoretical framework but also would have more decisively 
placed the book in the wider debates concerning metaphysics, art, language and 
melancholy.
II

The decisive question here would be the following: how to think of melancholy as mood and of mood as such outside the framework of the Occidental metaphysics of the Subject? Reading Benjamin in light of the Heideggerian gesture of opening (of the dominant) metaphysics beyond its enclosures (subjectivist-psychological-egotistical and pathological), and taking the mood of melancholy as the guiding question, Ferber attempts to disclose that of melancholy which is unreleased in the history of that idea. According to Ferber, what Hegel is for Heidegger, the same is Freud for Benjamin. Therefore in Ferber’s (and Benjamin’s) reading of Freud’s famous distinction of mourning and melancholia, Freud’s reduction of melancholy into pathology (which, strangely, at the same time opens the possibility of thinking melancholy otherwise), functions somewhat like Hegelian Aufhebung: loss as the condition of possibility of work (which is the dialectical ruse of converting loss into work), interiorization (and preservation) of what is lost, an interiorization that constitutes the condition of possibility of the subject. Freud is rightly here considered by Ferber as the moment of disruption of the received history of the idea of melancholy and as the moment of inauguration of a new history associated with the birth of the discourse called Psychoanalysis. The decisive importance of Freud in the history of the concept must, therefore, be encountered. This is why Freud is important both for Benjamin and Ferber (she devotes her very first chapter to this juxtaposition of Freud and Benjamin).

Wherein lays the Freudian distinction between mourning and melancholia? It is the concept of “work”: mourning makes itself available to work, to be worked upon it, to be converted into meaning, into the symbolic order of language. Its object can be assigned a place, a (de)nomination, a location and a signification. It is not for nothing that Freud calls it “the work of mourning [Trauerarbeit]” which as “work”—or rather as condition of possibility of work at all and of work as such—is not, strictly speaking, “pathological.” On the other hand, the worklessness (or unworking) of melancholy is considered to be “pathological” by Freud: the psychoanalytical transformation of melancholy into “melancholia” (into a pathological condition) lies in this possibility and necessity of work whereby the subject can uplift (Aufheben; sublate) itself from a given loss into the inauguration of a new life.

Reading against this dominant discourse on melancholy, Ferber sees in Benjamin’s early writings another, a “non-pathological” idea of melancholy. This non-pathological worklessness of melancholy in its utter unfathomable non-place between mute suffering and the discursive language of the concept and signification, between a cry and the language of music, remains at “the borderline” (a concept that Ferber borrows from Gershom Scholem), neither “this” nor “that,” partaking both “this” and “that” at the same time. Melancholy is, according to Ferber—and here the work of Jacques Derrida is important for her—spectral: neither dead (that is, complete annihilation) nor simply alive, neither mere absence nor presence, the spectre of melancholy is not even “afterlife” (unlike what the Romantics think of criticism). Not being able to die (nor being simply alive), the spectre of melancholy haunts the very chronos of being with a “dia” (namely, “apart”). Yet this diachrony is at the same time—and this is the paradox—the very
condition of confronting the past at all. Ferber writes: “Benjamin curiously describes the world of spirits as “ahistorical.” The ghost is ahistorical because it is entirely outside time; it is also, however, all about time and temporality. One way to comprehend this inherent paradox is to think about the distinctive temporal structure that Benjamin describes here: past and presence can exist diachronically, in parallel, only through an encounter with the ghost. In this structure the past does not necessarily appear at a moment before the present; it can coexist with the present and be gazed upon” (108–109).

The diachrony of melancholy is spectral: it can’t be uplifted and sublated into (Freudian or Hegelian) “work”; it cannot be elevated into higher (the neo-Platonic concept of truth as non-material, non-sensuous) “truth”; it cannot be incorporated into symbol, into the language of judgment and signification via the conceptual logic of subsumption. The spectral-character of the (always already) lost object renders our melancholy incessant and without consolation. Hence is the melancholic refusal to give up materiality for the sake of a higher spiritual (one that is emptied of all sensuousness) “truth”; instead the melancholic devotes herself with complete fidelity to objects that materially present themselves to her in their disappearance. While all the time moving towards the language of music, melancholy betrays itself, fails itself on the way. Lament arises as this failure of/on the way, as this fragility and betrayal of language. The failure and fragility of the way never arrive at its work. The interiority of the subject is thereby never achieved completely without a remainder. The subject suffers here the most “ignoble” martyrdom for whom neither “this” world has retained its inherent meaningfulness (therefore lost its “place”) nor has the transcendental beyond retained the power of its consolation and the promise of salvation. The utter desolation of this “worldlessness,” this ruin of history which Ferber articulates so evocatively in her reading of Benjamin’s The Origin of German Mourning Play in her second chapter, is the very worldlessness of the melancholic being. In her acute comparative reading of Benjamin with Freud here, Ferber shows us that the desolation and worldlessness of the Benjaminian melancholic is irreducible to the neat theoretical distinction of the psychoanalytical discourse (Freud in this case) between mourning and melancholia. The unfathomable, spectral character of melancholy for Benjamin destabilizes the neatness of the Freudian distinction in advance in the manner of “always already.” Reading Freud in a deconstructive manner and at the same time thinking with his help, Ferber shows via Benjamin the possibility of thinking melancholy before the distinction between the work of mourning and melancholia as pathological mood. Reading another text of Freud from his later period, namely, The Ego and the Id (1923), Ferber shows that Freud himself later reconsiders this distinction he maintained in 1917.

While deconstructing the concept of work, Ferber however does not abandon the concept completely. Ferber locates in Benjamin’s early writings another, if not a concept but an idea of work. The idea of work is now released from the Hegelian (who understands “concept” itself as work) work as concept or Freudian concept of it as constitutive possibility of the subject. As Ferber shows us in a very striking and illuminating way, the passage or the way of philosophical work for Benjamin is not Strasse but Bahn. For Benjamin, the task of philosophical work is not so
much to overwhelm the object of thinking by suffocating it with the power and force of the sovereign subject with its intentionality but to release the object from the violence of the concept and thereby display it by presenting it as idea in a constellation. Far from subsuming the irreducible plurality and singularity of objects of knowledge under the generality of the concept, philosophical work is to display the truth content of these objects in a constellation of ideas which, instead of violating them, redeems them in turn. The passage or the way of the redemption of the object—which is the task of philosophical work—is not Strasse but Bahn. This passage is the way that the Benjaminian melancholic critic himself undergoes, the passage of mortification that the objects themselves go under so as to be redeemed. Bahn is therefore the passage of intersection or border between the melancholic critic and the objects undergoing mortification so as to be redeemed as ideas in a constellation. Therefore Benjamin recognizes a violence that lies in all works of intentionality initiated by the self-founding act of the subject. Far from being the property of the intentional subject that returns to its sovereign self-sameness, the Bahn of truth opens up for the first time to the redemption of the object. Hence is the remarkable remark uttered by Benjamin: “truth is the death of intention.”

A substantial part of the book is devoted to understand this enigmatic utterance of Benjamin: “truth is the death of intention.” Taking up two other philosophers apart from Freud, namely Kant and Husserl with whom Benjamin engages in polemos, Ferber shows how early writings of Benjamin attempt at releasing the idea of melancholy from the metaphysics of the subject. Thus Benjamin finds both in Kantian formal conception of experience as well as in Husserlian phenomenological notion of intentionality the violence and sovereign self-assertion of the subject. On other hand, melancholy for Benjamin is neither reducible to the empty experience of the Kantian subject (which is bereft of language and historicity) nor can it be reducible to the intentional structure of the phenomenological subject. Three philosophers (Freud, Kant, Husserl) or three discourses (psychoanalysis, transcendental philosophy, phenomenology) are taken up by Ferber and she engages them in confrontations with or against Benjamin and shows thereby, by nuanced analyses, how for Benjamin the redemption of the object is the fundamental ethical task and fundamental stake in the attunement of melancholy. To show this, it is necessary to think melancholy outside the metaphysics of the subject. In threefold different manner the discourse of pathology (Freud), the discourse of transcendental philosophy (Kant) and the discourse of phenomenology of intentionality (Husserl) participate in the metaphysics of the subject. Against these discourses of the subject, Benjamin for Ferber opens up a philosophical discourse where not so much knowledge but truth, not so much concept but idea, not so much violence of the object via subsumptive logic of sovereignty but the redemption of objects in contemplation—this is what is at stake. The melancholic fidelity to the loss without minimizing, reducing or subsuming the loss into “work” (of mourning, of the concept, of knowledge and above all, of the subject) opens for us, according to Ferber’s reading of Benjamin, to the ethical responsibility to the other. Loss is thus fundamental to the ethical responsibility. Bringing the works of Jacques Derrida (especially his book on
Marx) into discussion on the questions of spectral character of mourning, of inheritance and being indebted and of responsibility as ethical opening to the others, Ferber reveals here the close proximity of Derrida with Benjamin. This part of the book I consider to be most beautiful.

III

It is an important contribution of Ilit Ferber (and of Benjamin) to introduce the problematic of language as fundamental to the attunement of melancholy. Benjamin understands melancholy not as a property of the subject’s intentional structure (as in Husserl), neither in terms of Kantian empty experience (devoid of language and historicality) nor in terms of a pathological condition of an individual (as in Freud) but essentially the linguistic mode of disclosure of the (dis)continuum of beings—the divine, mortal and nature. Though the question of history is not taken up by Ferber (an important and perhaps necessary exclusion, given the tenor and focus of the book), the question of language is taken up in a big way. “Man’s melancholy should therefore be understood” writes Ferber, “as inner linguistic, not psychological or subjective. Man is not sad or mournful for a specific loss relating to his subjective, contingent existence; his melancholy is linguistic, and it touches directly on his inability to execute his linguistic essence—that of naming nature” (141). Benjamin thereby provides for Ferber an alternative “metaphysics” of melancholy, not the metaphysics of the subject but metaphysics that is concerned with the opening up beings in respect to each other in language as their communicating password. This password that makes possible the contiguity of beings (the divine, mortal and nature)—which Benjamin calls “the gift of language”—opens us to the messianic restitution of immortality. Benjamin calls it “pure language” or “the language of truth.” It is the merit of Ferber’s book to show that this linguistic structure of not only melancholy but of the contiguity of beings is reducible neither to the language-less mythic context nor to the intentional structure of the subject. It is therefore, according to Ferber, “Benjamin enthrones Adam rather than Plato as the father of philosophy. In Adam he finds a theological figure whose core is markedly linguistic than mythical” (119).

From this astonishing statement three questions/problematic can be immediately elicited: 1. It appears here that Benjaminian discourse subjects to deconstruction the dominant Occidental (Greco-Roman) self-understanding of philosophy that sees Plato as the father; 2. What Benjamin (or Ferber) means by “the theological” is to be understood as the otherwise than “mythic,” and 3. The question of language has a deeper relation to the theological than mythical. What at stake in these three claims is of immense importance for our contemporary thinking. Ferber, however, passes on without even raising these stakes as stakes and thereby neglects to formulate important consequences that she could have drawn from her insightful reading of Benjamin.

Language is Ferber’s singular and the distinctive approach to Benjamin; it is here to be found the energy of her thinking. Therefore her reading of Benjamin—which is also Benjamin’s style of reading—I call “Talmudic.” In such reading language is constantly opened itself to its own expressability and communication opens to its
communicability itself. Talmudic reading is oriented by a tendency of language to its own event, that is, toward its potentiality. The event of language is its potentiality which Benjamin calls “pure language.” What passes, linguistically, through the contiguity of beings is this pure language as potentiality. Bringing Giorgio Agamben here into her discussion, Ferber understands Benjaminian notion of language as potentiality that by its innermost tendency opens itself to the expressability, the expressability that moves all expressions—from the mute, nameless creatures to the blissful melancholy that arises when Adam names them and from that blissful melancholy to its fall into the melancholy of overnaming when the naming language is transformed into the language of judgment. Thus transformation of melancholy is for Benjamin the linguistic transformation par excellence which affects, in a fundamental manner, the very contiguity of beings.

What Ferber understands as potentiality, I understand as the promise of language which is a messianic conception. It seems that the question of messianism—very fundamental to Benjamin—is not truly a fundamental problem for Ferber. It is this messianic promise that passes from the Adamic language of naming and of knowledge without concept (a blissful melancholy it is) to its possible messianic restitution to come. It is, however, not homogenous continuity: the Fall of Adam and the building of the tower of Babel interrupt the immediacy of the former. Language then falls into prattle; the immediacy of knowledge is replaced by the language of judgment; the immanent magic of contiguity of beings is replaced by external magic of evil and the blissful melancholy of naming is replaced by the excessive melancholy of overnaming. Melancholy is thus a linguistic phenomenon; it is the passage between the divine, the mortal and nature. The messianic restitution of the naming language of man is opened in the abyss between blissful melancholy and the other melancholy, arising out of the violence of judgment and overnaming. Because of the possibility of the messianic restitution of justice to come (therefore Benjamin is also a thinker of future in an essential sense), the idea of melancholy is to be connected with Benjamin’s idea of messianic happiness which, in the profane world, suddenly and in an incalculable manner, manifests itself—like the shooting star against the dark background of history that is in ruin. What I find missing in the book is a discussion on this relation that Benjamin makes between melancholy and happiness which for him are not incommensurable ideas but that which may belong together in their very diachrony. A discussion of this relation cannot evade the question of messianism in Benjamin’s early writings, a serious question that I find missing in Ferber’s book.

The question of promise brings Benjamin very close to Franz Rosenzweig’s messianic understanding of language as promise which, passing through revelation, opens the world to redemption yet to come. Rosenzweig conceives such an immemorial promise as language before all (particular) languages, which is the potentiality of language as such and language at all, an idea very close to Benjaminian idea of the gift of language. In that sense language is not only a disclosure of the world but an awaiting—for the eternity to come. It is again, as with Benjamin of “Language as such and Language of Man,” the restitution-model of messianism that is at work. Bringing Rosenzweig in relation to Benjamin would have surely enriched the book and opened up new dimension to her work.
However, these limitations and missing links—the weak points of her work—may be, perhaps, its very strength. I know very few books in our contemporary time which have so powerfully intervened in debates concerning mood as linguistic and philosophical phenomenon. Despite these limitations, the book as it stands is still beautiful and an important contribution to some of the deepest concerns of our time.

Notes on contributor

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