Allegories of One's Own Mind

Riede, David G.

Published by The Ohio State University Press

Riede, David G.
Allegories of One's Own Mind: Melancholy in Victorian Poetry.
The Ohio State University Press, 2005.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/28259.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/28259

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=1150059
CHAPTER ONE

Melancholy and Victorian Poetry

I. Victorian Melancholy

In many respects the transition from the Romantic to the Victorian poetic tradition is nearly seamless: the early poetry of Tennyson, Robert Browning, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning so closely apprentices them to the second generation of Romantic poets that this first generation of Victorian poets, who began to publish well before Victoria’s ascension, can reasonably be regarded as a third generation of Romantics. Similarly, the clear apprenticeship of Arnold to Wordsworth suggests a smooth continuation of early Romanticism into the mid-Victorian period. In one highly significant respect, however, the Romantic and Victorian periods are sharply divided, at least to the extent that Victorians continued to identify Romanticism with Wordsworthian formulations of the poetic character and with Coleridge’s theological/philosophical poetics of “joy,” the healthy mind’s imaginative echo of the “eternal I AM,” both God’s creative Word and “Nature’s holy plan.”¹ The Victorians, yet more eager for poetry to supply the need for an authoritative cultural discourse, were much less confident about the sources of poetic authority and tended to see their age as suffering from a disabling post-Wordsworthian melancholy akin to the mood Coleridge had already described in “Dejection: An Ode” at a time when the creative power of “joy” was denied to him:

A grief without a pang, void, dark, and drear,
A stifled, drowsy, unimpassioned grief,
Which finds no natural outlet, no relief,
In word, or sigh, or tear—(ll.21–25)

Coleridge’s dejection anticipated the more poetically productive melancholy of the first generation of post-Wordsworthian poets: the titanic
suffering of Byron’s gloomy heroes, the bleak skepticism of Shelley, and the luxuriant melancholy of Keats, but it more accurately anticipated the later dejection of the Victorians, who often saw melancholy as we now see depression, as a mute or incoherent mood that imprisons the sufferer within himself and the precise antithesis of poetic creativity. Ironically, however, as we will see, the rejection or policing of melancholy actually intensifies melancholy as it divides the mind more emphatically against itself and, more, the Victorian melancholy of melancholy turns out to be poetically productive rather than disabling.

In denying melancholy, such influential Victorian writers as Thomas Carlyle and Matthew Arnold evidently “protest too much” and indirectly, but emphatically, reveal the continuation of the discourse of melancholy in their work. Carlyle, in particular, counseled his generation to “close thy Byron” (Works, 1: 153), described Shelley “filling the earth with inarticulate wail, like the infinite, inarticulate grief and weeping of forsaken infants” (28: 31), and lamented the “diseased self-conscious state of literature” (28: 24) as a symptom of the age’s degradation. At about the same time, John Stuart Mill was urging the young Robert Browning away from diseased self-conscious Romanticism by describing his Shelleyan Pauline as morbidly introspective to the point of insanity. By mid-century Matthew Arnold, returning to the healthier early Romantic emphasis on “joy” that he found in Schiller, was to reject the titanic, Byronic lamentation of his own Empedocles on Etna as morbid and unfitted for poetic representation, a “continuous state of mental distress [that] is prolonged, unrelieved by incident, hope, or resistance, in which there is everything to be endured, nothing to be done” (Works, 1: 1).

The urgency of Arnold’s protest against melancholy, however, is symptomatic of the inevitability of melancholy in modern literature. He cited Schiller as his exponent of joy, no doubt because his usual exponents of healthy, strong-minded poetry, Goethe and Wordsworth, could not be drawn on in this context. Wordsworth, as Arnold acknowledged in “Stanzas in Memory of the Author of Obermann,” attained serenity and joy only because his “eyes avert their ken / From half of human fate” (ll.53–54), and Goethe, as the author of Faust, was guilty of creating a prototype of just the kind of poetry Arnold was rejecting. For that matter, even Schiller could only be used here if Arnold averted his eyes from the argument of On the Naïve and Sentimental in Literature that “senses and reason” are now “separated in their function” and the poet no longer “gives the impression of an undivided sensuous unit and of a harmonious whole.” The cultivated poet “can only express himself as a moral unit, i.e., as someone striving for unity” (39) and is necessarily melancholy because the “ideal is an infinite one to which he never attains” (40). The civilized
The poet must ever strive for the unattainable—a notion that we will see recapitulated in the melancholy of Carlyle, Ruskin, and Browning. For Schiller, “Our feeling for nature is like that of the sick man for health” (38). Nevertheless, with the supposed authority of Schiller, Arnold suppressed *Empedocles on Etna* in his “Preface” to *Poems* of 1853 and wrote the best known of all Victorian complaints about the difficulties of the modern poet:

> Into the feelings of a man so situated there entered much that we are accustomed to consider as exclusively modern. . . . What those who are familiar only with the great monuments of early Greek genius suppose to be its exclusive characteristics, have disappeared; the calm, the cheerfulness, the disinterested objectivity have disappeared; the dialogue of the mind with itself has commenced; modern problems have presented themselves; we hear already the doubts, we witness the discouragement, of Hamlet and Faust. (*Works*, 1: 1)

Rather oddly, Arnold seems to have dated the beginning of the melancholy, modern age from the time of Empedocles in the fifth century B.C., but the references to Hamlet and Faust indicate that he is really thinking back to the origins of the modern subject in the Renaissance and, implicitly, no doubt, to the more recent extravagance of that subject’s representation in the overreaching of Goethe’s Faust and Byron’s Harold, Manfred, and other protagonists. Arnold’s reaction against the melancholy of such late Romanticism was most forceful in the age’s most famous self-representation, “Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse,” in which he explicitly rejected the melancholy of Byron’s “bleeding heart” (1.136) and Shelley’s “Lovely wail” (1.140). For good or ill, the melancholy of post-Romantic literature was so pervasive as to be an “outworn theme” (1.100), as also seemed self-evident to Arthur Henry Hallam, whose early review of Tennyson’s poetry referred to the “melancholy, which so evidently characterizes the spirit of modern poetry” (190). As Carlyle, Arnold, and Hallam clearly demonstrate, even the warnings against melancholy continue to keep the literary and philosophic discourse of melancholy at the center of literary history in the Victorian age.

It is probably because the Victorians often and emphatically described melancholy as we now describe depression rather than within the ancient discourse associating melancholy with “great men”² that Victorian melancholia has been generally neglected in literary history, as in Juliana Schiesari’s excellent study of melancholy and gender. As Schiesari shows, such prominent postmodern theorists as Jacques Lacan, Jean-François Lyotard, and Julia Kristeva positioned “themselves as various kinds of
melancholics” in the wake of “contemporary poststructuralist, postmodern, postMarxist, postFreudian, even postfeminist discourses” (2). In a discussion that only accidentally illuminates post-Romantic Victorian melancholy, Schiesari compares “Renaissance and postmodern melancholias” and suggests that

we are dealing not with two different periods of dramatized loss but rather with the historical boundaries of a great age of melancholia (in Foucault’s terms: an epistemic formation), whose edges are coterminous with the historic rise and demise of “the subject” as the organizing principle of knowledge and power. The prominence of the discourse of melancholia at the edges of that historical block does not point so much to a disjunction or repetition as it does to the continuity of a tradition, inaugurated by the Renaissance, refined by the Enlightenment, flaunted by Romanticism, fetishized by the Decadents and theorized by Freud. (2–3)

The omission of the high Victorian age from this catalogue of melancholic periods is not entirely surprising, if only because, due to insufficient recognition of James Thomson’s The City of Dreadful Night (1867), the Victorians seem to have produced no literary monument to melancholia comparable to Burton’s Anatomy, Shakespeare’s Hamlet, Milton’s “Penseroso,” or Keats’s “Ode.”

In addition, from the scientific outlook of the Victorians, the association of melancholy with genius would look merely superstitious. Like Ebenezer Scrooge’s visions, the conceptions of a disordered mind would characteristically be attributed to a malfunction of the body, a “slight disorder of the stomach . . . an undigested bit of beef, a blot of mustard, a crumb of cheese, a fragment of an underdone potato,” perhaps. As William James disparagingly summed up the “medical materialism” (13) of the Victorian age, “there is not a single one of our states of mind, high or low, healthy or unhealthy, that has not some organic process as its condition” (14).

Even when psychologists were inclined to speculate on the relationship of mental states to genius, they remained so attracted to the promised pleasures of the healthy imagination that they tended to associate not melancholy but exaltation with genius. One of the “medical materialists” referred to by James, the eminent psychologist Henry Maudsley, for example, attempted to associate a psychological state with “genius,” but like other Victorians he looked to “genius” as a source of quasi-religious consolation in a world increasingly barren of such solace. His speculations consequently endorsed “exaltation” and he anticipated Freud’s later analy-
sis of the “true source of religious sentiments” in a “sensation of eternity,’ a feeling as of something limitless, unbounded, as it were, ‘oceanic’” (21: 64). But though he anticipated Freud in this respect, his own account of the (illusory) sources of religion and poetic feeling in a “transport of being” or “extravagant elation” (12) is in the tradition of a Wordsworthian “feeling” that can be claimed to represent its fundamental root in and union with the nature it issues from and always remains part of; so that where elemental instincts come into play the domain of intellect can be prescribed to end and the domain of religion to begin. Necessarily a somewhat vague and vacuous region—a spacious feeling of an infinite within as of an infinite without—but for that reason all the more delectable. (10)

Maudsley’s account helps to explain why Victorians bereft of the doctrine and creeds of the Christian past found “healing power” (Arnold, “Memorial Verses,” 1.63) in Wordsworth’s transports of feeling in harmony with nature; in the feeling of religion, if not the creed.5 In an age looking for spiritual solace from poetry, the Wordsworthian and Coleridgean intuition of a divine order of things glimpsed in experience of the oceanic depths of self made it difficult to formulate an idea of poetic genius associated with melancholy rather than joy. Maudsley, for example, was willing to associate genius with a very possibly pathological sense of beatitude (13–15), but he saw melancholy as mute or incoherent depression: a “feeling of deepest dejection and desolate misery with appalling loss of a sense of realities—a vast, vague, ineffable woe—notably overwhelms the victim of profound melancholia” (13). Though not published until 1908, Maudsley’s Heredity, Variation and Genius, with an Essay on Shakespeare demonstrates a widespread Victorian hope that a consoling poetic discourse might take on the cultural work for which traditional religion was disabled by the intellectual enterprises of the day, especially the “higher criticism” of the Bible and the encroaching studies of philology, geology, astronomy, and evolution.

A reminder that early-twentieth-century works often reflect the earlier Victorian culture that engendered them, Maudsley’s work encourages us to look at the work of his far greater contemporary, Freud, whose celebrated “Mourning and Melancholia” was written in 1917 but “can be shown to derive seamlessly from earlier work on melancholia and loss in the letters to his friend Wilhelm Fliess, written in 1902” (Radden, “Love and Loss,” 223). Freud’s immensely influential theorization of melancholia, then, may reasonably be taken as a product of the nineteenth-
century culture that underlay the foundations of his thought. “Mourning and Melancholia” is recognizably akin to the work of Carlyle and Arnold in the age’s literary discourse, but it also reflects the larger cultural history behind the Victorian age’s characteristic nostalgia and especially its cult of mourning. Freud distinguishes mourning, the response to the loss of a specific object of love, from melancholy, which he sees as a pathology involving an impoverished sense of self, a lost sense of wholeness of being. Unlike mourning, melancholy does not necessarily result from the loss of a loved person, but rather from the loss of an internalized ego-ideal (14: 246). Freud’s analysis, rooted in his prior study of narcissism, posits the internalization of loved ideals into a separate part of the ego, the conscience (later evolving in his thought as the superego) and argues that this division of the self leads to a situation in which “one part of the ego sets itself over against the other, judges it critically, and, as it were, takes it as its object” (14: 247). For Freud, melancholy consists of the loss of a loved person or ideal and the “identification of the ego with the abandoned object”: “the shadow of the object fell upon the ego and the latter could henceforth be judged by a special agency, as though it were an object, the forsaken object. In this way an object-loss was transformed into an ego-loss and the conflict between the ego and the loved person into a cleavage between the critical activity of the ego and the ego as altered by identification” (14: 249). The conflict strongly resembles Victorian constructions of melancholy made inevitable by the recognition even in Wordsworth of the “two consciousnesses” in the mind: the “dialogue of the mind with itself” described by Arnold, the “return of the mind upon itself” described by Hallam as characteristic of melancholy, and Tennyson’s idea of a “Second-rate Mind not in Unity with Itself.”

Freud’s association of melancholy with conscience is almost certainly indebted to Hegel’s dialectical analysis of unhappy consciousness in the Phenomenology, but for my purpose it is more significantly akin to Carlyle’s diagnosis of his age’s disease as the division of wholeness of mind into self-contemplation in which conscience first emerges as one part of the mind to chastise another (Works, 28: 7–8). Nothing could be more fundamentally Victorian than this formulation, in which “character,” if not necessarily personality, is defined as the mastery of conscience over other elements of mind. This model of mind, fundamental to Victorian understanding of the self as identical with the will and self-control, is the same model that leads to Victorian earnestness.

Less systematically, Carlyle and other post-Kantian writers in England were engaged in a project much like Hegel’s as they attempted to analyze the “unhappy consciousness” at the base of the modern subject. The divi-
sion of mind described in Carlyle's analysis, the dialogue of the mind with itself, and the return of the mind upon itself are all versions of the modern formation of melancholy as recently described by Judith Butler, for whom Melancholia "returns us" to the figure of the "turn" as a founding trope in the discourse of the psyche:

In Hegel, turning back upon oneself comes to signify the ascetic and skeptical modes of reflexivity that mark the unhappy consciousness; in Nietzsche, turning back on oneself suggests a retracing of what one has said or done, or a recoiling in shame in the face of what one has done. In Althusser, the turn that the pedestrian makes toward the voice of the law is at once reflexive (the moment of becoming a subject whose self-consciousness is mediated by the law) and self-subjugating. (168)

As my citations of Maudsley and Freud suggest, melancholy in the Victorian age involved not only the continuation of a literary discourse but also a social pathology in need of diagnosis. The diagnosis ultimately came in the form of Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents*, but the discontents manifested in Victorian melancholy are historically specific to Victorian culture, since the introjection of the conscience, whether it is called the "superego," "the law of the father," "the symbolic order," or simply "character," is the introjection of the hegemonic cultural values of the age: as Samuel Smiles put it, "Character is human nature in its best form. It is moral order embodied in the individual" (quoted in Rylance, 132). Our postmodern anti-essentialism may lead us to question Smiles's invocation of "human nature," but we will all the more clearly see "moral order" as a socially constructed product of the historical moment. In fact, one reason why Victorians did not generally see melancholia as akin to genius is that they saw it not as an access to transcendent eternal truths but as historically conditioned: Maudsley argued that delusion is precipitated "in a mind saturated with the feeling of inexpressible woe; and it takes different forms according to the degree of the patient's culture, and the social, political, and religious ideas prevailing at the particular epoch" (Radden, *Nature*, 253). As Butler points out,

the account of melancholy is an account of how psychic and social domains are produced in relation to one another. As such, melancholy offers potential insight into how the boundaries of the social are instituted and maintained, not only at the expense of psychic life, but through binding psychic life into forms of melancholic ambivalence. (167–68)
The specifically Victorian causes of melancholy are numerous, complex, and intertwined, but among the most pervasive are the emergence of an economic system alienating the products of consciousness from the working consciousness, the emergence of a rigid moral code enforcing the dictates of conscience as self-control, subordination of individual desires to the gospel of work, and, in general, the cultivation of such ideals as earnestness, character, and duty. Other major historical sources of the severity of conscience contributing to melancholy include the intellectual and scientific advances leading to the disappearance of God, the emptying of the heavens, and displacement of a providential teleology by a sense of immeasurable stretches of time in which human history is just a passing moment. For poets, the single greatest source of melancholy poetics may have been a version of Schiller’s sense of the conflict between infinite inwardness and finite actuality: the incompatibility of a Romantic sense of the infinite, mysterious depths of the self with a Victorian sense of the finite socially constructed “character.”

Perhaps more than any other age, the Victorians experienced the melancholy of time confronting eternity. Adding to the sensed emptiness of the cosmos was a sense of lost vitality in an emergent economic system that, as Marx showed, led to the reification and petrifaction of the human world. Further, the legacy of Romantic introspection combined with the loss of divinity and vitality in the world led to a perceived conflict between the demands of the individual and of society, especially the sense that the social order diminishes the claims of the individual. The “dialogue of the mind with itself” is, in effect, the dialogue of the ego with the cultural demands of the age, and Arnold represented it in *Empedocles on Etna* with the figure of a great poetic nature overwhelmed by the little natures that constitute the social order:

> The brave, impetuous heart yields everywhere
> To the subtle, contriving head;
> Great qualities are trodden down,
> And littleness united
> Is become invincible. (xi: 90–94)

Arnold blamed the melancholy, or anomie, of his age on the “absence of great natures” (*Letters*, 1: 156), and Carlyle, similarly, saw the spiritlessness and lack of direction in the age as due to the absence of “heroes.” Tennyson also lamented the loss of great natures amidst the multitudinousness of modern life: “the individual withers, and the world is more and more” (“Locksley Hall,” 142). Further, his Ulysses feels diminished when called from the wide world of heroic adventure to the social
demands of domesticity and duty, and much of Tennyson’s other early poetry represents the difficulty of reconciling a creative individual mind with the demands of conscience or duty. The anomic of the age was paradoxically the product of a rage for moral order, just as, according to Freud, the melancholy of individuals is caused by the rage of the superego against the ego. Arnold’s contrast of the “impetuous heart” with the “subtle, contriving head” is one of many Victorian references to the displacement of oceanic, infinite emotional depths by the finite moral order bounded by rationalist ideology. The suppression of “oceanic” depths of the self prevents the interpretation of such depths as either exaltation or infinite sorrow, but in itself it constitutes melancholia as a striving against inchoate and possibly mutinous depths of feeling.

As Foucault has extensively argued, the social structure of modern Western nations is based emphatically on the internalization of legal and moral policing within the self as conscience. The connection of melancholy with the development of conscience clarifies Hallam’s enigmatic comment that for the belated melancholy poet “repentance is unlike innocence.” The suggestion that belated poetry is somehow guilty, or transgressive, may be further glossed by reference to Nietzsche’s analysis of the origins of bad conscience in The Genealogy of Morals. Nietzsche’s analysis is strikingly akin to Freud’s discussion of conscience in melancholy, but it is more emphatic about the connection of guilt to the division of mind against itself. For Nietzsche, the internalization of social control within the self produced “bad conscience [as] nothing other than the instinct of freedom forced to become latent, driven underground, and forced to vent its energy upon itself” (220). Examining the same “modern” condition as Freud and Foucault, Nietzsche more immediately links his discussion with both transgression and the artistic production of beauty:

This secret violation of the self, this artist’s cruelty, this urge to impose on recalcitrant matter a form, a will, a distinction, a feeling of contradiction and contempt, this sinister task of a soul divided against itself, which makes itself suffer for the pleasure of suffering, this most energetic “bad conscience”—has it not given birth to a wealth of strange beauty and affirmation? Has it not given birth to beauty itself? (221)

The association of bad conscience with artistic production has been well discussed by Butler as a “moral laboring on oneself”:

This fundamentally artistic production of bad conscience, this production of a “form” from and of the will, is described by Nietzsche as “the womb of all ideal and imaginative phenomena.” Bad conscience
is fabricated, but it in turn is credited with the fabrication of all ideal and imaginative phenomena. Is there, then, any way to answer the question of whether artistry precedes bad conscience or is its result? Is there any way to postulate something before this “turning back upon itself” which is the tropic foundation of the subject and all artistry, including all imagination and conceptual life? (76)

Butler's questions imply that the “dialogue of the mind with itself” is not, as Arnold thought, an obstacle to poetry but rather, as Hallam intimates in his essay on Tennyson, is the condition of the creative modern subject. Her comments, moreover, almost seem a description of the most important Victorian innovation in genre, the artistic production of subjects in dramatic monologues, which most characteristically involve speaking subjects imposing form on their own subjectivity as self-contemplation produces a self to be contemplated, and as the poet produces a poem for the reader's contemplation, but of course the association of unhappy consciousness with English poetry had already been definitively established by Byron's production of “Byronic heroes” as objects of aesthetic contemplation. Further, of course, for both Browning and Byron, the production of the poem involves the melancholy production of the self as a commodity. Late in the century R. L. Stevenson’s *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* is a parable of the division of the conscience against the self to produce imaginative phenomena. Ronald Thomas convincingly argues that Hyde “is the text of Jekyll's own self-censorship” (251).

The disconcerting Victorian sense that the artist produces the self as a commodity, moreover, suggests that in this particular historical moment the division of mind into ego and conscience entails a further division of mind into producer and product, a division that suggests how melancholy must be further historicized within the capitalist marketplace and emergent commodity culture of the age. The cultural consequences of subject formation in modern capitalism have been well studied by the Frankfurt school critics, particularly Adorno, Benjamin, and Lukacs, whose views are deftly and concisely brought together by Beatrice Hanssen:

[O]ffering a comparative reading of Lukacs’ *Theory of the Novel* (1914–15) and [Benjamin's] *Trauerspiel* book, Adorno established that both works shared a common purpose, namely the transvaluation of nature and the natural. As he noted, Lukacs diagnosed the effects of modern capitalism in his theory of “second nature,” a term that signaled the world of convention, reification, and petrifaction, as well as the ensuing alienation of the subject and his life-world, an alienation giving rise to a “charnel-house of long dead interiorities.” (15)
The economic conditions contributing generally to the melancholy of the Victorian age (and our own) also contributed in very specific ways to the particular melancholy of authors in the newly developing capitalist marketplace of ideas described by Carlyle as an “angry, noisy forum” ([Works], 1: 10), a “stunning hubbub, a true Babel-like confusion of tongues” (28: 33). Beginning in the mid-1820s changes in the economics of the publishing industry and in the political climate imposed new working conditions and expectations on authors. Even in the Romantic period Coleridge had already felt that the expanding but debased reading public was an obstacle to serious art, and later in the century Walter Bagehot and others regretted the effects of extended literacy in creating a debased reading public that included women and the undereducated lower classes. As Lee Erickson has shown, the industrialization of printing, papermaking, and even the textile industry altered the relations of authors to the means of production. For economic reasons that Erickson describes in detail, publishers almost entirely abandoned the publication of volumes of poetry by new poets, so the aspiring poet could hardly hope to come before an audience as the seemingly autonomous Romantic poets had done a generation before. As Benjamin observed, moreover,

> Around the middle of the century, the conditions of artistic production underwent a change. This change consisted in the fact that for the first time the form of the commodity imposed itself decisively on the work of art, and the form of the masses on its public. Particularly vulnerable to these developments . . . was the lyric. It is the unique distinction of *Les Fleurs du Mal* that Baudelaire responded to precisely these altered conditions with a book of poems. It is the best example of heroic conduct to be found in his life. ([Arcades], 337)

Pace Benjamin, however, Baudelaire was scarcely unique in his response, and his “heroism,” as Benjamin himself notes, corresponded with a widely shared sense of “the unavoidable necessity of prostitution for the poet” ([Arcades], 337).

As Elizabeth Barrett continually remarks in her letters, the only significant publisher of poets at this time was Moxon, who was himself wary of publishing any but the most proven of poets, specifically Barrett herself and Tennyson. The major venue of literary publication of all kinds had become the periodical press, so authors, as Carlyle complained, were forced to merge their identities with the corporate identities of the periodical to which they sold their work. In this way the social identity of the author, the “character,” became explicitly reduced to and identifiable with the machinery of ideology. Worse, the very condition of selling their work
in the literary marketplace involved an alienation of authors from the means of production and a commodification of their genius that Carlyle and others viewed as nothing less than the prostitution of genius: “I have said a thousand times,” he said once again, “that the trade of Literature was worse as a trade than that of honest Street Sweeping: that I knew not how a man without some degree of prostitution could live by it” (Letters, 5: 237). This sense of prostitution within a commodity culture was widespread. Tennyson lamented “these dark ages of the Press” and hated submitting his genius to the “public thumb” (Ricks, 148–50). Browning spoke with chagrin of the need to retail his poetry where “verse-merchants most do congregate” and compared the sale of his own genius with the selling of cabbages. By marketing much of his early work in cheap pamphlets (the series called Bells and Pomegranates), he even attempted to create an audience beyond the reach of the “verse-merchants” by underselling the market, though with the result that he seemed to value his genius at something like the price of a cabbage. Similarly, R. H. Horne made a market for his epic Orion in the early 1840s by selling it for a farthing, and later in the century, John Ruskin attempted to circumvent the bourgeois marketing of literature by selling directly to working men in the letters of Fors Clavigera. Influenced by Ruskin, William Morris attempted to merge socialism with aestheticism, but his intervention in the cultural marketplace led to the contradictory position of his aesthetic “firm,” selling beautiful objects for everyday life at prices that made them accessible not as art for the people but only as luxury items for the wealthy. Also, as Jerome McGann (1988) has argued, D. G. Rossetti’s struggles to avoid the prostitution of selling his genius reveal the difficulties of achieving artistic autonomy in a capitalist economy. Perhaps the strongest example of the Victorian artist’s sense of alienation in the modern marketplace is R. L. Stevenson’s remark that even his subconscious mind, the source of his art, produced ideas that would sell because it was so thoroughly saturated with the values of the market. Even at their most apparently creative, he said, artists “are whores, some of us pretty whores, some of us not: whores of the mind, selling to the public the amusements of our fireside as the whore sells the pleasures of her bed” (quoted in Arata, 49). Stevenson’s comment is only a more emphatic account of the division of authorial self-experienced by other Victorian authors: the depths of the self are constrained by the controlling demands of public culture, and the production of the self, the author’s unique “genius,” as a commodity simultaneously produces the unhappy consciousness of “selling out,” even though it is ultimately only selling out to itself, to the author’s own conscience as the internalized moral order of the culture. Placing the author in his contemporary marketplace, then, underscores and historically contextualizes rather than
answers Butler’s question: “Is there . . . any way to answer the question of whether artistry precedes bad conscience or is its result?”

The economically induced shift from publications of books to a market flooded with journalism not only diminished the poet’s sense of autonomous wholeness of being but also created a marketplace that inhibited the inward infiniteness of poetic feeling with public discourse. Early in the century Wordsworth had described the effects of newspapers as among the main causes of the reduction of modern consciousness to “a state of almost savage torpor,” and at mid-century Arnold complained that newspapers were one of the leading causes of the fundamentally unpoetic nature of the Victorian age: “these are damned times—everything is against one—the height to which knowledge is come, the spread of luxury, our physical enervation, the absence of great natures, the unavoidable contact with millions of small ones, newspapers, cities . . . our own selves, and the sickening consciousness of our difficulties” (Letters, 1: 156).

It seems odd that the excitement of news should be associated with a “savage torpor” or even a “physical enervation,” but Walter Benjamin has suggested how melancholy, newspapers, and modern commodity culture are interrelated. Describing the conditions that led to the melancholic art of Baudelaire and Proust, Benjamin discussed the effects of commodity culture:

Man’s inner concerns do not have their issueless private character by nature. They do so only when he is increasingly unable to assimilate the data of the world around him by experience. Newspapers constitute one of many evidences of such an inability. If it were the intention of the press to have the reader assimilate the information it supplies as part of his own experience, it would not achieve its purpose. But its intention is just the opposite, and it is achieved: to isolate what happens from the realm in which it could affect the experience of the reader. (Illuminations, 158)

Benjamin’s claim that newspapers contribute to the “issueless private character” of “Man’s inner concerns” suggests yet again that the effect of modern culture is to fence in the deep self with the social order, to bury melancholy consciousness within itself, a notion put still more forcefully by Theodor Adorno. Speaking of Kierkegaard, that second most melancholy Dane, Adorno argues that “in the reified world itself,”

by its very history, mythical nature is driven back into the inwardness of the individual. Inwardness is the historical prison of primordial human nature. The emotion of the trapped is melancholy. In
melancholy truth represents itself, and the movement of melancholy is one toward the deliverance of lost “meaning.” A truly dialectical notion. (60–61)

Adorno’s reference to the “emotion of the trapped” is suggestive of such Victorian representations of the claustrophobically imprisoned mind as Tennyson’s “Mariana,” “Lady of Shalott,” and “The Palace of Art” as well as Walter Pater’s famous description of solipsistically enclosed consciousness in the “Conclusion” to *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*. Further, though intimating a solution, Adorno’s comments also suggest the difficulty of bringing the “truth” of melancholy to consciousness as cognitive thought or recovered “meaning.” The difficulty of speaking the truth of melancholy was universally recognized: Maudsley spoke of “inexpressible woe” and “unutterable real suffering” (Radden, *Nature*, 253) and Freud’s essay, notoriously vague about the cognitive content of melancholy, emphasizes that the sufferer himself “cannot consciously perceive what it is he has lost” (127), with the inevitable result that his inability to express himself, his “inhibition,” “seems puzzling to us because we cannot see what it is that absorbs him so entirely” (127). The ineffable source of melancholy appears to be an infinite inwardness, a sublime of interiority or, in Maudsley’s phrase, a “feeling of infinite within as of infinite without.” This sense of infinite inwardness as sublime, ubiquitous in English poetry from the time of Wordsworth, is perhaps given its most emphatic form by Gerard Manley Hopkins in “No Worst There Is None”: “O the mind, mind has mountains; cliffs of fall / Frightful, sheer, no-man-fathomed. Hold them cheap / May who ne’er hung there” (ll.9–11). As Hopkins’s lines suggest, the “oceanic” that could be interpreted as a source of religious feeling could also be interpreted as a source of what Maudsley called vague, ineffable woe. Forceful as these lines are, however, they do not enunciate a cognitive content for melancholia but only an analogy for inward depth in the outward sublime. In effect, they domesticate the sublime in a Kantian sense, subordinating the potentially devastating power of the buried self to the critique of judgment, to the merely rational ego that projects the undiscovered country of the unconscious back into the natural world rather than delivering “lost ‘meaning.’”

The difficulty of representing melancholy is still more evident in Arnold’s “The Buried Life,” a work dedicated to the problem of depicting the depths of the inner self, specifically a “nameless sadness,” a vague “something in this breast” (ll.3, 6), unavailable to consciousness and intuited as vast, infinite, but entrapped interiority:
Still, from time to time, vague and forlorn,
From the soul’s subterranean depth upborne
As from an infinitely distant land,
Come airs, and floating echoes, and convey
A melancholy into all our day. (ll.72–76)

Arnold’s poem ends on a note of calm, as though he had succeeded in
giving his “nameless sadness” a local habitation and a name, but like
Hopkins, Arnold only substitutes an analogical outward landscape for
inner depth:

And what we mean, we say, and what we would, we know.
A man becomes aware of his life’s flow,
And hears its winding murmur: and he sees
The meadows where it glides, the sun, the breeze. (ll.87–90)

The difficulty of representing the depths of melancholy was as great for
Freud as for Arnold and Hopkins, and his essay would only have been
able to characterize melancholy as the mute and inglorious depression
known to the psychiatric discourse, if he had not turned suddenly to the
older literary discourse about melancholia. Turning to the older tradi-
tion, and particularly to Hamlet, he gives the genius of melancholy a
voice, or at least a spokesperson, in an eminently Victorian icon, and he
locates melancholy in the peculiarly “modern problems” that Arnold
located in “the dialogue of the mind with itself” inherited from Hamlet
and Faust.

The special significance of Hamlet (and incidentally of Faust) for the
Victorians was well stated by A. C. Bradley at the close of the century:

wherever we are forced to feel the wonder and awe of man’s godlike
“apprehension” and his “thoughts that wander through eternity,”
and at the same time are forced to see him powerless (it would
appear) from the very divinity of his thought, we remember Hamlet.
And this is the reason why, in the great ideal movement which began
towards the close of the eighteenth century, this tragedy acquired a
position unique among Shakespeare’s dramas, and shared only by
Goethe’s Faust. It was not that Hamlet is Shakespeare’s greatest
tragedy or most perfect work of art; it was that Hamlet most brings
home to us at once the sense of the soul’s infinity, and the sense of
the doom which not only circumscribes that infinity but appears to
be its offspring. (108)
Like other Victorians, Bradley saw Hamlet as overwhelmed by the unlimited possibilities of his own thought, paralyzed by the multitudinousness of possibilities brought on by “thinking too precisely on the event” (IV.iv.41). For Bradley, and for the Victorians more generally, Hamlet embodied the tendency of the melancholic described by Klibansky, Panofsky, and Saxl to “feed on the metaphysical contradiction between finite and infinite, time and eternity . . .” (234). Evidently for Bradley, as for Arnold, Hamlet and Faust were the prototypes of a modern subjectivity that came more widely into being with Romanticism. What Edward Alexander has described as a widespread Victorian “malady of Hamletism” (132) was caused by the sensed incompatibility of the infinite and inexpressible depths of a self “which passeth show” (I.ii.85) with the character represented by the “outward trappings” including not only clothing (Hamlet’s “suits of woe”) but other social signifiers including language itself. That is, the melancholy of Hamletism was caused by the incompatibility of the infinite Romantic self with the bounded Victorian “character.”

Bradley’s comments most vividly call to mind the work of Browning, who described his own poetry as an attempt to fit the infinite into the finite forms of his poems, but the Victorian poets most evidently suffering the “malady of Hamletism,” as Alexander has argued, were Arnold and Arthur Hugh Clough, who, as Masao Miyoshi puts it, “has often been dismissed as a sort of agonized Hamlet mourning for a lost identity” (165). Both Arnold’s and Clough’s poetry consistently displayed the doubts, vacillations, and general incapacity for socially directed action of protagonists unable or unwilling to limit themselves within the bounds of conventional beliefs (unwilling, in a sense, to accept limited identities, to become characters). The most prominent melancholic among all Victorian poets was Tennyson, who described *Maud* as a “little Hamlet.”

The Victorian and Freudian preoccupation with *Hamlet* indicates a desire to preserve the traditional association of melancholy with genius and even hints that the “modern problems” once depicted so brilliantly by Shakespeare were not altogether beyond the scope of poetry, but it still does not indicate just how to free melancholy from its “inhibition,” how it could find issue from its apparent entrapment, buried within the self. As I will argue in the next section, however, the example of *Hamlet* did provide a starting point for the Victorians to develop a poetics of melancholy, as they struggled to develop a poetic mode adequate to make sense of the “metaphysical contradiction between finite and infinite, time and eternity.”
II. A Poetics of Melancholy

The tension in Victorian poetry between the poet’s use of available public language for the expression of character as ideology and his or her effort to express the ineffable, idiosyncratic feeling of inwardness results in what Isobel Armstrong has called a “crisis of representation” (Victorian Poetry, 6). Armstrong’s account posits the “double poem” (13) as the characteristic product of an ideology in which a historicized and “deeply politicized consciousness” is set against a more intimate and vital “aesthetic realm” (6). Armstrong’s account of the divided consciousness of Victorian poets corresponds closely with my own account of melancholy as a split between a politicized Victorian “character “ and an infinite Romantic self, but her account of the “double poem” leads to an assertion that “the task of a history of Victorian poetry is to restore the questions of politics” (7), whereas I am more concerned with exploring the ways that the “buried life” of the infinite self, perceived as anterior to language, could find expression.

The Victorians never seem to have doubted the “truth” of the innermost feelings, though they occasionally thought that modern life both made it difficult to feel intensely or on a grand scale and that modern subjectivity was to a degree anesthetized by the constant barrage of stimuli. After the death of Wordsworth, Arnold wondered “who, ah! Who, will make us feel?” in “this iron age / Of doubts, disputes, distractions, fears” (Memorial Verses,11.67, 43–44), and Arthur Hallam sensed a “decrease of subjective power, arising from a prevalence of social activity, and a continual absorption of the higher feelings into the palpable interests of ordinary life” (190, his emphasis). For just this reason, however, it seemed especially urgent to promote a poetic mode that would cultivate the feelings. In The City of Dreadful Night, in fact, Thomson asserted that only by stripping away the trappings of ideology, of “ordinary life” in an age of “doubts, disputes, distractions, fears,” could one “break the seals of mute despair” (1.6), drawing on melancholy for poetic authority. The poet “wail[s] life’s discords” (1.7)

Because a cold rage seizes one at whiles
    To show the bitter old and wrinkled truth
Stripped naked of all vesture that beguiles
    False dreams, false hopes, false masks and modes of youth;
Because it gives some sense of power and passion
In helpless impotence to try to fashion
    Our woe in living words howe’er uncouth. (ll.8–14)

Here and throughout the opening sections of the poem, however, Thomson suggests that the uncouth, esoteric language of “power and
passion” remains entrapped in melancholy consciousness, incommuni-
cable beyond the “sad Fraternity” (1.36) of fellow melancholics:

No secret can be told
To any who divined it not before:
None uninitiate by many a presage
Will comprehend the language of the message,
Although proclaimed aloud for evermore. (ll.38–42)

The difficulty of finding apt language to express the deepest feelings was
equally apparent to Hallam, even as he advocated a shift away from the
Wordsworthian “poetry of reflection” to the “poetry of sensation” of
Shelley, Keats, and Tennyson. He both recognized that such poetry was
characteristically melancholy and implied that it was also difficult to dis-
engage from the depths of the poet’s psyche: “Hence the melancholy,
which so evidently characterizes the spirit of modern poetry; hence that
return of the mind upon itself, and the habit of seeking relief in idiosyn-
crasies rather than community of interest” (190). As Thomson suggests,
even if the poet finds “community of interest,” it is only within the limit-
ed community of the “sad Fraternity,” and Hallam similarly recognized
that the modern poet could hardly hope for a wide audience because his
melancholy was dissonant with ideology. In a sense, Hallam and Thomson
conceded a diminished cultural role for poetry even as they drew on the
authority of melancholy as the key to something like “primordial human
nature,” drawing its imagery from a “charnel-house of long dead interior-
ities.”

Audrey Jaffe has recently discussed both the Victorian belief in the
truth of feeling and the difficult necessity of finding communal represen-
tation of idiosyncratic inwar dness. Commenting on Richard Sennett’s
description of the “constant attempt [of the nineteenth-century ‘personality’] to formulate what it is one feels,” Jaffe notes that the authority and
value of feeling are due precisely to its idiosyncrasy, its separateness from
“community of interests”: “In a modern dispensation . . . ideologies of
feeling draw their power from feeling’s presumed self-evidence: feeling,
ostensibly emerging from the deepest interiority, seems by definition
beyond the reach of social regulation, and its cultural value depends on
that inaccessibility.” Yet, Jaffe continues, for that feeling to have any social
or cultural meaning, it must issue from interiority as representation:
“though the ideological power of feeling relies on the idea of an essence or
truth to which language and representation are said to remain inadequate,
the specific nature of that power becomes visible in the terms of its repre-
sentation” (14). In the terms of my argument, to reach a general audience
the inchoate interiority of the inner self must be shaped for public discourse, and is limited and thus shaped by public discourse in the form of conscience and its rage for order. The dialogue of the mind with itself, as melancholy, is the site of artistic production, but what shape can this production take within that discourse?

Hallam’s solution to these difficulties was to advocate poetic representation of feeling at the level of the senses—a “poetry of sensation” that speaks to and of the senses with an immediacy not to be found in the philosophical poetry of Wordsworth. Hallam’s essay, insisting on the root meaning of the “aesthetic” in feeling and on the pursuit of beauty as the sole purpose of art, announces the tradition that would lead through Shelley, Keats, and the young Tennyson to D. G. Rossetti, William Morris, and Swinburne and on to Yeats, and he preemptively designated the “aesthetic” tradition of Victorian poetry as “so evidently” melancholy that the point did not need to be argued.

Hallam’s view of sensation as the source and end of poetry was consistent with a general tendency of the post-Romantic period to value feeling above thought in poetry. John Stuart Mill, for example, was arguing at this time that the truest poets are those who have the deepest capacities for feeling, and his primary example of a “born poet” was the wailing Shelley. Moreover, in describing the particularly “poetic” element in other arts, he not only stressed the expression of deep feeling but also emphasized specifically melancholy feeling: “the very soul of melancholy exhaling itself in solitude” in “Winter’s beautiful “Paga fui’” and the “grandeur and melancholy” of Beethoven’s overture to *Egmont* (557). Once poetic authority is attributed especially to “persons who have most feeling of their own” (556), as by Mill, it is only a small step to attributing such authority to persons suffering the intense feeling of melancholy. For Shelley and Byron melancholia was the source and theme of poetry, and for Keats, “the wakeful anguish of the soul” described in the “Ode on Melancholy” was inseparable from “Beauty—Beauty that must die” (1.21).

Like Hallam and Keats, Edgar Allan Poe took it for granted that “Beauty is the sole legitimate province of the poem” (106), but more explicitly and emphatically than they, he also insisted that “Beauty of whatever kind invariably excites the sensitive soul to tears. Melancholy is thus the most legitimate of the poetical tones” (107). Unlike Arnold, moreover, Poe also knew how melancholy could find issue in representation: it could issue in the form of his poem, “The Raven.” More usefully, however, for those who had not written “The Raven,” he affirmed that “the death, then, of a beautiful woman is, emphatically, the most poetical topic in the world” (109). The surprising prevalence of this opinion is evident in the many Victorian paintings of the dead or dying Ophelia and Lady of
Shalott as well as in poems like Tennyson’s “The Lady of Shalott” and “Oriana.” Perceiving a link between lyric poetry and melancholia, Hallam selected “Oriana” as representative of Tennyson’s ability to capture the “effect by sound” (194, his emphasis) of “shades of fine emotion in the human heart . . . which are too subtle and too rapid to admit of corresponding phrases.”14 The ballad of Oriana’s death, in Hallam’s view, perfectly represents the kind of melancholy beauty prescribed by Poe: “The strong musical delight prevails over every painful feeling and mingles them all in its deep swell until they attain a composure of exalted sorrow, a mood in which the latest repose of agitation becomes visible, and the influence of beauty spreads like light over the surface of the mind” (195).

Obviously not every poem can be “The Raven” or “Oriana” or yet another variation on the theme of the dead or dying woman. A more comprehensive mode of apprehending and expressing the depths of melancholy is suggested by the ways in which the late Romantics and early Victorians brooded on death to allegorize the depths inaccessible to the outward senses. Wordsworth’s “deep power of joy” enabled him to see into “the life of things,” but for later generations “the life of things” had been displaced by a “world of convention, reification, and petrifaction,” and it became the burden of melancholy imagination to see into the death of things. Arnold’s sense of the innermost life as “buried” is to be taken literally and grouped with the speaker of Maud imagining himself as literally buried, with Heathcliff’s notion that his soul was in the grave, with Lucy Snowe’s identification with the figure of a nun buried alive in Villette, with Dickens’s Dr. Manette, buried alive in the Bastille, with George Eliot’s description of Dinah Morris’s spiritual beauty in terms of a “lovely corpse” (158).

Eliot’s reference to the “lovely corpse” calls to mind the late-twentieth-century revisions to Freud’s theory of mourning and melancholy by Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok, who argue that for the melancholic the lost ego-ideal is not only cast over the ego as a shadow but is cast into the ego as an “exquisite corpse,” entombed in what they describe as a psychic “crypt” that simultaneously protects it and renders it an issueless interiority, a buried self hidden from consciousness. As in Arnold’s “The Buried Life,” the interior ego-ideal is hidden from consciousness so that the ego cannot betray it, and like Arnold and Freud, Abraham and Torok insist that however much the conscious self might long to represent this encrypted “Reality,” however much the ego might want to “spill the beans and come clean,” the buried ideal remains “unnameable.”15 Still, for Abraham and Torok the unspeakable encrypted truth is not mute and issueless, but finds representation in literally cryptic language. As Derrida points out in his foreword to The Wolf Man’s Magic Word, “the appearance
of an exquisite corpse,” though “apparently illegible and devoid of meaning,” is ultimately readable: the corpse can be “exhumed” by analysis (xxxv). For postmodern psychoanalysis, as for Arnold and Hopkins and Victorian studies generally, the unnameable buried self is spoken in other words. For Abraham and Torok the language of the hidden interiority is “cryptonomy,” but for the Victorians the crucial point is that the buried life speaks itself as the other, speaks itself as allegory. The corpse, of course, is itself an allegorical representation and even, as we shall see, the ultimate allegorical referent in the eyes of Walter Benjamin.

For the Victorians, as for Benjamin, the awareness of the inner life as corpse and the fragmentation of the reified world into emptied out, meaningless ruins is the precondition for the brooding of the melancholy gaze that can assign (or seem to find) subjective meanings and attempt to articulate a redeeming coherence in the structure of allegory. William James, describing the alienated perception of “melancholy subjects” in a world that has become “remote, strange, sinister, unnerving” (151), accounts for the brooding tendency of melancholia:

Now there are some subjects whom all this leaves a prey to the profoundest astonishment. The strangeness is wrong. The unreality cannot be. A mystery is concealed, and a metaphysical solution must exist. If the natural world is so double-faced and unhomelike, what world, what thing is real? An urgent wondering and questioning is set up, a poring theoretic activity. (152)

The allegorical structure of The City of Dreadful Night reveals a possible poetic form to represent the uncanny world of melancholia by representing the “charnel house of long dead interiorities.” Thomson’s poem represents a journey through the “Great ruins of an unremembered past” (1.79), a “drear pilgrimage to ruined shrines” (1.153), culminating in a monumental shrine to Melancholia herself, as imagined in Albrecht Dürer’s famous allegorical engraving (ll.1040–1053).

Whether associated specifically with ruins and melancholy or more generally with the Utilitarian, scientific, rationalist spirit of the age, allegory seemed the almost inevitable mode of the Victorian age. From the 1820s, the nineteenth century was notoriously a “Mechanical Age . . . the Age of Machinery” in which man had become reified: “Men are grown mechanical in head and in heart, as well as in hand” (Carlyle, “Signs of the Times,” Works, 27: 63). Lamenting this condition, Coleridge notoriously identified allegory as the literary mode of a “mechanical understanding, which in the blindness of self-complacency confounds SYMBOLS with ALLEGORIES. Now an Allegory is but a translation of abstract notions into a
picture language which is itself nothing but an abstraction from objects of
the senses; the principle being more worthless even than its phantom
proxy, both alike unsubstantial, and the former shapeless to boot” (*The

For Coleridge the “symbol” participated in the “life of things,” while
allegory, like the “dead letters” of “literal language,” could only systematize
or articulate dead things. Perhaps the clearest example of the tendency to
articulate dead things in Victorian poetry is to be found in William
Morris’s “Concerning Geffray Teste-Noire,” in which the narrator
describes finding the bones of a slain woman, reassembling the skeleton,
falling in love with it (her), adorning it with hair of spun gold, and build-
ing a shrine for this aesthetically “resurrected” exquisite corpse. But the
post-Romantic allegorist is best represented by another “articulator of
human bones,” Mr. Venus of Dickens’s *Our Mutual Friend*, who embod-
ies the tendency of the age to build systems in which dead matter can be
instilled with the semblance of life, as in Saussure’s work showing how
words and dead letters find meaning only within articulated linguistic sys-
tems, and in Marx’s account of the “life” of commodities. As the nine-
teenth century came to understand itself in structuralist terms, as an order
of things, or as a “Social System” (Carlyle, “Signs of the Times,” 27: 600)
“that knows its own structure” (28: 13), the system building of allegory
was perhaps its inevitable literary expression. The skeletal articulation of
Mr. Venus epitomizes Walter Benjamin’s account of modern allegory as
summed up by Teresa Kelley: “allegory offers emblematic images that are,
as it were, skeletal reminders of a system of meaning” (254). Franco
Moretti has pointed out that, for Goethe, as for Coleridge, allegory, “being
conventional,” “acquires a whole series of pejorative connotations. It is an
artificial figure, mechanical, dead” (78). Yet, Matthew Arnold notwith-
standing, Goethe’s use of allegory in *Faust* “is a sign of his historical intel-
ligence: of his having understood that allegory is the poetic figure of moder-
nity” (78, Moretti’s emphasis). As Moretti notes, since Benjamin allegory
has been seen as structurally parallel with Marx’s analysis of the commod-
ity: “like the commodity, allegory humanizes things, making them move
(and speak), and it reifies human beings” (78).16

It should not be wholly surprising that attempts to represent the buried
life of the self should concern themselves with articulating dead matter or
making dead matter articulate, like Yorick’s skull. Both Thomas Carlyle
and John Ruskin devised theories of the imagination akin to Hamlet’s
melancholy insight, and Ruskin, in particular, offered a distinctively
Victorian sense of melancholy imagination as opposed to the
Wordsworthian and Coleridgean model of joy wedding self, language, and
nature in the divine logos. In the second volume of *Modern Painters*
Ruskin defined what he called the “imagination penetrative,” with an eye toward Coleridge’s influential distinction between the fancy and the imagination. Although imagination remained the important authoritative faculty, Ruskin did not see it as an echo of divine creation and evidence of a holy plan, but rather as an access to “the melancholy deeps of things” (4: 257). Ruskin argues that the truth of things is to be found in the mysterious depths below “outward images of any kind.”17 Like Ruskin, James argues that “No prophet can claim to bring a final message” (162) unless he accounts for the “taint of nausea,” a “whiff of melancholy, things that sound a knell, for fugitive as they may be, they bring a feeling of coming from a deeper region, and often have an appalling convincingness” (136). Similarly, Thomson characterizes melancholics as those who

fill their living mouths with dust of death
And make their habitation in the tombs,
And breathe eternal sighs with mortal breath,
And pierce life’s pleasant veil of various error
To reach that void of darkness and old terror
Wherein expire the lamps of hope and faith. ("The City of Dreadful Night," ll. 559–64)

Again, as Ruskin puts it, imagination

ploughs [surface images] aside, and plunges into the very central fiery heart; nothing else will content its spirituality; whatever semblances and various outward shows and phases its subject may possess go for nothing; it gets within all fence, cuts down the root, and drinks the very vital sap of that it deals with . . . ; its function and gift are getting at the root, its nature and divinity depend on its holding things always at the heart. (4: 250–51)

Not surprisingly, Ruskin’s ultimate example of the “imagination penetrative” is Hamlet’s meditation upon Yorick’s skull.

Walter Benjamin’s twentieth-century thoughts on melancholy and allegory bring the terms of the nineteenth-century discourse into sharp focus. Replacing the Romantic imagination with melancholy, the allegorical mode in Benjamin takes as its starting point the ruin, or corpse, or skull and, like Mr. Venus, articulates the dead bones of the past into a system of meaning:

If the object becomes allegorical under the gaze of melancholy, if melancholy causes life to flow out of it and it remains dead, but
eternally secure, then it is exposed to the allegorist, it is uncondi-
tionally in his power. That is to say it is now quite incapable of
emanating any meaning or significance of its own; such signifi-
cance as it has, it acquires from the allegorist. He places it within
it, and stands behind it; not in a psychological but in an ontologi-
cal sense. In his hands the object becomes something different;
through it he speaks of something different and for him it becomes
a key to the realm of hidden knowledge; and he reveres it as the
emblem of this. This is what determines the character of allegory
as a form of writing. It is a schema; and as a schema it is an object
of knowledge, but it is not securely possessed until it becomes a
fixed schema: at one and the same time a fixed image and a fixat-
ing sign. (Origin, 183–84)

Ruskin's discussion especially clearly distinguished the melancholy
Victorian imagination from the Coleridgean Romantic: for Coleridge, the
imagination, as opposed to the “fancy,” is the cheerful expression of the
entirely healthy mind, sharing in “the one Life within us and abroad”
(“The Eolian Harp,”1.26) to echo the eternally creative faculty of logos
itself, but Ruskin, maintaining the Coleridgean distinction, continues to
see “fancy” as a juggling of externals but sees imagination as essentially
melancholy:

She sees too far, too darkly, too solemnly, too earnestly ever to smile.
There is something in the heart of everything, if we can reach it, that
we shall not be inclined to laugh at. And thus there is reciprocal
action between the intensity of moral feeling and the power of imag-
ination; for, on the one hand, those who have keenest sympathy are
those who look closest and pierce deepest, and hold securest; and on
the other, those who have so pierced and seen the melancholy deeps
of things are filled with the most intense passion and gentleness of
sympathy. (4: 257)

Such reverie, the “emotion of the trapped,” to take Adorno's phrase, is
apparent early in the post-Romantic period in the intensity of longing in
“Mariana” and throughout the works of Elizabeth Barrett, and it eventu-
ally became the “malady of reverie” that Pater saw characterizing “aesthet-
ic poetry.”

The shift from a poetics of pleasure to a poetics of melancholy was not
as clear-cut or abrupt as the juxtaposition of Ruskin’s “imagination pene-
trative” with Coleridge’s theocentric imagination implies, but it was para-
doxically an inevitable result of the very success of the Wordsworthian,
Coleridgean model. Once Wordsworth made “the Mind of Man” his “haunt” and the “main region of his song” (“Prospectus” to The Recluse, II.40–41), the poetic tradition was turned inward and the mind was divided against itself into at least two states of consciousness: the mind observing and the mind observed. Though Wordsworth did not put the matter in these terms, it is clear that the mind observing corresponds with conscience and that it has authorial control over the mind observed, the subject. By the time of Byron, Shelley, and Keats, and more explicitly by the 1830s, such self-consciousness came to seem morbid, even diseased: Wordsworth’s ideal wholeness of mind came to seem impossible as the irreconcilable conflict of the mind observing and the mind observed became increasingly painfully felt. Carlyle’s great essays analyzing the spirit of the age, “Signs of the Times” (1829) and “Characteristics” (1831), emphatically registered the association of modern (late Romantic) literature with morbidity and disease, and promoted the authority of a “piercing” imagination to penetrate the surfaces of things and locate the “deep truth” that Shelley had declared “imageless.”

The emergence of melancholy poetics was obviously problematic for Carlyle, who famously instructed his age to move beyond the morbidity of late Romanticism, to “close thy Byron” and to eschew the “wailing” Shelley, so it is not surprising that he carefully distinguished himself from the “melancholic speculators” (Works, 27: 80) that he evidently resembled. He nevertheless saw his age through the lens of the period’s icon of melancholy, Hamlet, whose “‘large discourse of reason’ will look before and after” (27: 36, and see Hamlet, IV.iv.36–37) and he felt that “the time is sick and out of joint” (27: 80; Hamlet, I.v.188), sunk in languidly restless discontent. More pertinently still, he argued that because of the loss of other sources of spiritual authority, “At no former era has Literature . . . been of such importance as it is now” (27: 77), but he specifically denied modern literature the Coleridgean authority to disclose “to our senses the deep, infinite harmonies of Nature and Man’s soul” (27: 78). Carlyle apparently believed that in other times literature might have divine authority, but like many of his contemporaries, he feared that his unpoesic age could not claim any such authority, and he lamented “the diseased self-conscious state of literature” (28: 24) as a symptom of the age’s degradation. Yet he also saw that to have any authority in a melancholy age, literature must itself be melancholy: the age is diseased, but “The self-consciousness is the symptom merely; nay, it is also the attempt towards cure” (28: 20). Carlyle himself, moreover, wrote as a melancholic, appropriating the cultural authority of Hamlet’s penetrating imagination to pierce the infinite depths of the soul and look beneath the “film” that supports life over the “boundless Deep, whereon all human things fearfully and
wonderfully swim” in the “neighbourhood of an inevitable Death” (27: 3). Even though, like Ruskin, he wanted to penetrate beyond the mere surfaces of things, he wrote in a mode of melancholy allegory, diagnosing the “signs” and “characteristics” of the age as emblems or symptoms of “horror and disease and dead men’s bones” (28: 20) beneath the fragile film. He even demonstrated the close connections among melancholy, piercing imagination, and allegory, the inward sublime and its outward manifestation:

So cunningly does Nature, the mother of all highest Art, which only apes her from afar, “body forth the Finite from the Infinite”; and guide man safe on his wondrous path, not more by endowing him with vision, than, at the right place, with blindness! Under all her work, chiefly under her noblest work, Life, lies a basis of darkness, which she benignly conceals; in Life too, the roots and inward circulations which stretch down fearfully to the regions of death and Night, shall not hint of their existence, and only the fair stem with its leaves and flowers, shone on by the fair sun, shall disclose itself, and joyfully grow. (Works, 28: 4)

For Carlyle, as for Ruskin and Thomson, the outward show of things is semblance, “a vesture that beguiles,” but as Benjamin would argue, the veil that hides the deep truth may also emblematically body it forth.20 Carlyle seems to welcome an ignorance that is bliss, but he recognizes that the deep truth is ascertainable only as melancholy allegory in which the flowers are emblems writ on a delicate film that “any scratch of a bare bodkin will render asunder” (Works, 28: 3). Such signs on the painted veil of Life signify allegorically “in a deeper than metaphorical sense” (27: 78).21 Carlyle’s allegorical mode, most obviously represented in the clothes philosophy of Sartor Resartus, thus originates, like Hamlet’s, in the classical tendency to “feed on the metaphysical contradiction between finite and infinite, time and eternity” (Works, 28: 28–29). Time itself is the clothing of infinity, so that the semiology of clothes represents the embodiment of eternity in time: “Time itself reposes on Eternity: the truly Great and Transcendental has its basis and substance in Eternity; stands revealed to us as Eternity in a Vesture of Time” (Works, 28: 38–39). Carlyle’s allegory, which anticipates and may have influenced a recurring motif of clothing as allegory in Browning’s poetry, is best understood in modern terms in relation to Benjamin’s arguments in The Origin of German Tragic Drama that allegory retains the traces of lost divinity—Benjamin even allegorizes these traces à la Carlyle as clothing: “The attire of the Olympians is left behind, and in the course of time the emblems collect
“around it” (225). Further, like Carlyle, Benjamin sees the confrontation of
time and eternity as the underlying basis of allegory: “Allegory established
itself most permanently where transitoriness and eternity confronted each
other most directly” (224), and he also argues that the deep truth, if image-
less, is accessible as allegory: “The Sense of the abyssal is to be defined as
‘meaning.’ Such a sense is always allegorical” (Arcades, 271).

Carlyle’s allegory resembles Adorno’s comments on the emotion of the
trapped, since he reads the cast-off clothing of time to restore meaning to
the world, to free the human soul from its historical prison, “that ‘Time
element,’ wherein man’s soul here below lies imprisoned,—the Poet’s task
is, as it were, done to his hand: Time itself, which is the outer veil of
Eternity, invests, of its own accord, with authentic, felt ‘infinitude’ whatev-
er it has once embraced in its mysterious folds” (Works, 28: 79). Carlyle’s
example helps make sense of Adorno’s enigmatic argument that the “dele-
verance of lost meaning is necessarily allegorical”:

For if truth presents itself in melancholy, it indeed presents itself to
pure inwardness exclusively as semblance. . . .

Thus truth subordinates itself to melancholic semblance through
semblance’s own dialectic. In its semblance melancholy is, dialectical-
ly, the image of an other. Precisely this is the origin of the allegorical
of Kierkegaard’s melancholy. In the face of melancholy, nature
becomes allegorical. . . . Melancholy itself, however, is the historical
spirit in its natural depth and therefore, in the images of its corpore-
ity, it is the central allegory. (60–61)

As is often the case, Adorno’s comments are rather oracular than lucid, but
at the very least he is suggesting that man’s “private character” is the realm of
an authoritative melancholy and that such melancholy, though imprisoned
as “inner concerns,” is not necessarily “issueless” but might find expression
in allegory, “the image of the other.” Adorno’s “semblance” (“schein”) refers
to the “images of [the historical spirit’s] corporeity,” and both terms refer to
the outward dress, the “clothing” of Time. For Adorno the fragile film or
painted veil of allegory as schein is subjectively constituted, and as semblance
is ultimately delusive, but for Carlyle and other post-Christian theists the
clothing of time represents the lineaments of Truth, hidden from human
perception but still existent behind the appearances of things.

An influential poststructuralist account of melancholy and allegory may
elucidate the issues more clearly. Like the Frankfurt critics, Paul de Man dis-
placed the aesthetic primacy of the Romantic symbol with his insistence on
allegory as a poetic mode more adequately suited to represent the temporal
reality of human experience. In his account of how Rilke’s depth of feeling
seems to be represented seamlessly in his symbols (Allegories, 48), de Man almost seems to be answering Arnold’s question in “Memorial Verses” about who, after Wordsworth, will “make us feel” and more specifically, “Where will Europe’s latter hour / Again find Wordsworth’s healing power?” (ll.63–64). De Man asserts that “Rilke seems to be endowed with the healing power of those who open up access to the hidden layers of our consciousness” (20).

But this is semblance. De Man analyzes the illusion that melancholy speaks itself by demonstrating the poet’s virtuoso displacement of his own unhappy consciousness with an “allegory of figuration” (Allegories, 45). He quotes Hermann Mörchen to demonstrate the extent to which Rilke’s melancholy poetry, like Tennyson’s (according to Hallam), seems to eliminate the gap or barrier between ineffable, private feeling and public representation: “The fundamental poetic practice, namely the elaboration of a metaphorical language, also derives from the experience of suffering. The metaphor is an act of identification: the actual suffering of the poet is made ‘equal’ with that of his symbolic figures” (25–26).

Mörchen’s utopian argument is akin to Hallam’s assertion that the very sounds of the poet’s language may convey shades of inwardness too deep and too subtle for the denotative meanings of words to communicate, though Mörchen goes further to argue that poetic “truth” is communicated in language “that is not confined to acoustic affinities but . . . includes linguistic structures in general” (Allegories, 26). De Man’s reading of Rilke’s poems demonstrates that Rilke both creates and deconstructs the illusion of the equivalency of feeling and language in a way that sheds some light on Adorno’s remark that in melancholy truth presents itself as “semblance.” Apparently thinking of Baudelaire’s theory of correspondences, de Man argues that Rilke’s metaphors characteristically seem to confirm a “correspondence” between the inwardness of the subject and the outside world,” but that they do so by displacing rather than embodying inwardness, substituting the seeming inwardness of things for the actual inwardness of the self by means of “analogical representation” (35). The means of at least seeming to communicate pure inwardness are allegorical, then, in something like the way Adorno cryptically describes as “semblance.” Or, as de Man puts it, the poem that appears to be a confrontation of man and nature is in fact the “simulacrum of a description in which the structure of the described object is that of the figural potential in language” (38).

In de Man’s view feeling does not achieve its own “deliverance” from the “historical prison of inwardness,” and the semblance of feeling achieved by allegorical figuration is in fact only semblance: the “general pattern of substitution that all tropes have in common” allows one mean-
ing to “substitute for the other without revealing the difference necessarily introduced by the substitution” (Allegories, 62).

The nature of melancholy allegory is clearer in Walter Benjamin’s analysis, which both Adorno and de Man have in mind. In his The Origin of German Tragic Drama Benjamin had rehabilitated allegory at the expense of the Romantic idealization of the symbol, primarily by debunking the Romantic belief that the symbol could seamlessly unite experience and language and arguing that allegory has the salutary but melancholy function of signifying the inability of language to capture and communicate moments of pure being. The symbol claimed to arrest and immortalize moments, but allegory, a sequential and temporal mode like language itself, acknowledges in its ongoing course that each moment is temporary and incomplete, so that the images of allegory are only transiently meaningful and soon give way to “disappointed abandonment of the exhausted emblem” (185). Benjamin asserts that nature appears to the allegorist “not in bud and bloom but in the overripeness and decay of her creations... as eternal transience” (179). Allegory describes the truth of mortal existence, but it is a disillusioned, thoroughly melancholy truth. “Within the decisive category of time,” Benjamin argues,

Everything about history that, from the very beginning, has been untimely, sorrowful, unsuccessful, is expressed in a face—or rather in a death’s head. And although such a thing lacks all “symbolic” freedom of expression, all classical proportion, all humanity—nevertheless, this is the form in which man’s subjection to nature is most obvious and it significantly gives rise not only to the enigmatic question of the nature of human existence as such, but also of the biographical historicity of the individual. This is the heart of the allegorical way of seeing, of the baroque, secular explanation of history as the Passion of the world; its importance resides solely in the stations of its decline. The greater the significance, the greater the subjection to death, because death digs most deeply the jagged line of demarcation between physical nature and significance. But if nature has always been subject to the power of death, it is also true that it has always been allegorical. (166)

Benjamin’s comments are historically specific to seventeenth-century Lutheran Germany, but as he came to see, his comments apply also, with only slight modification, to nineteenth-century Europe since in important respects the culture of the baroque coincides with Victorian culture. In the first place, almost as if describing the conflict between the overstrained Victorian conscience and the “joy” of the Romantic life of things,
Benjamin described “the allegorical outlook” as having its “origin in the conflict between the guilt-laden physis, held up as an example by Christianity and a purer [pagan, but also Romantic] natura deorum” (226).24 Second, Benjamin’s argument that the sense of time confronting eternity underlies the melancholy that produces allegory is entirely consonant with the new Victorian awareness that time spans millions of years of astronomical and geological change rather than the mere thousands of years of biblical history, and that this perspective of time confronting eternity discredited any notion of a teleologically purposeful divine plan with human life at the center. The changed perspective rendered human life and human history insignificant within a vast span now perceived as “an endless succession of discrete moments—in other words as inauthentic, empty infinitude” (Hanssen, 58). The new Victorian sense of emptiness in infinite time was cogently expressed by Edward Fitzgerald, who noted that the new sense of geological time “must wither the poet’s sense of immortality” (Letters, 1: 566) and commented that “we all live in a ridiculous parenthesis of Time on a shelf made by insects and planted by stray seamews.”25 Benjamin argued that within a cosmic scheme that reduced life to insignificant transience, the only meaning to be redeemed from time is found in the monuments of transience, the ruins of history. As Carlyle said, whatever time “once embraced in its mysterious folds” is redeemed in melancholy brooding as an emblem, a key to the “felt infinitude” (Works, 28: 79) of the imprisoned inner self. When the ultimate truth of human existence is death and the true self of the individual is “buried,” the ultimate representation of human life is the corpse or the death’s head. Benjamin had just enough religious hope to fancy that the *caput mortuum* retained the residue of former life and even former divinity (“the residue of the creative word of God” [quoted in Duttman, 59]), and similarly, many Victorians, still Christian under empty skies, could hope, as Carlyle did, that the ruins of time, the cast-off clothes of history, might still represent something “truly Great and Transcendental.”26

As we have seen, for Benjamin the emotion of the trapped could find issue in the articulation of “dead objects” (“in its tenacious self-absorption [melancholy] embraces dead objects in order to redeem them” [Origin, 157]). Looking at the seventeenth-century world of the *trauerspiel*, when Lutheranism had rendered “good works” irrelevant to salvation, Benjamin saw a world in some respects strikingly like Victorian England, where the conduct of earthly life (“creaturely existence”) had no cosmic consequences, no ultimate meaning. In both eras the “rigorous morality” of official discourse “did, it is true, instill into the people a strict sense of obedience to duty, but in its great men it produced melancholy” (138). For both eras the futility of human endeavor produced the dilemma of the dispirited
Hamlet: “What is a man / If his chief good and market of his time / Be but
to sleep and feed? A beast, no more” (138, and see Hamlet IV.iv.33–35).
Again seeming to describe Victorian England as much as Lutheran
Germany, Benjamin suggests that “There was no answer to this except per-
haps in the morality of ordinary people—‘honesty in small things,’ ‘upright
living’—which developed at this time, forming a contrast to the taedium
vitae of richer natures. For those who looked deeper saw the scene of their
existence as a rubbish heap of partial, inauthentic actions” (139). And the
looking deeper of the melancholy gaze (the brooding described by James)
resulted in seeing the vesture of allegory, reviving “the empty world in the
form of a mask,” because “[e]very feeling is bound to an a priori object, and
in the representation of this object is its phenomenology.” Nameless “feel-
ings, however vague they may seem when perceived by the self, respond
with a motorial action to a concretely structured world” (139). To the
melancholic gaze, “the most simple object appears to be a symbol of some
enigmatic wisdom” precisely because “it lacks any natural creative relation-
ship to us” (140). Consequently, the representation of feeling, of interiori-
ty, shifts from the abstract language of subjectivity to phenomenology of
subjective experience in the articulation of a structure of objects, rather like
Mr. Venus articulating bones into a human form. Crucially, the introduc-
tion of a severe conscience, of rigorous public morality, produces the melan-
cholic gaze that then finds expression as allegory.

Though Benjamin developed his thoughts on allegory in relation to the
baroque German drama, his analysis depended on a post-Romantic dis-
crediting of the Romantic symbol and a return to the baroque conception
of the symbol as emblem—the kind of emblem well described by Giorgio
Agamben:

Metaphor, as the paradigm of signifying by improper terms (and
according to baroque theorists, both the emblem and the impresa fall
under this framework), becomes thus the principle of universal disso-
ciation of each thing from its own form, of every signifier from its
own signified. . . . Each thing is true only to the extent to which it
signifies another, and each thing is itself only as it stands for another.
For the allegorical project of the baroque, this mortification of the
proper form is a token of redemption that will be rescued on the last
day, but whose cipher is already implicit in the act of creation.
(142–43)

Since Benjamin’s understanding of the baroque depended on his post-
Romantic discrediting of the symbol, it is not surprising that his later writings
focus on the melancholy of nineteenth-century European post-Romanticism
for which the industrialized and reified world presented itself as a congeries of things, emptied of intrinsic meaning but able to signify other things. From this perspective, melancholy and its expression in allegory simultaneously see the object world as an anomic phantasmagoria and suggest the possibility of its redemption. Describing what he calls the “antinomies of the allegorical,” Benjamin writes that

any person, any object, any relationship can mean absolutely anything else. . . . [A]ll of the things which are used to signify derive, from the very fact of their pointing to something else, a power which makes them appear no longer commensurable with profane things, which raises them to a higher plane, and which can, indeed, sanctify them. Considered in allegorical terms, then, the profane world is both elevated and devalued. (175)

Despite his collapsing of the baroque age of reformation with the nineteenth-century age of commodity culture, for Benjamin melancholy allegory is profoundly historical, though unlike what he calls “universal history,” it presents not the triumph of the victors but sites of loss where the “historical materialist” “recognizes the signs of a Messianic cessation of happening, or, put differently, a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past” (Illuminations, 263). Elsewhere, arguing for the dialectical character of allegory, he remarks that

The word “history” stands written on the countenance of nature in the character of transience. The allegorical physiognomy of nature-history . . . is present in reality in the form of the ruin. . . . And in this guise history does not assume the form of the process of eternal life so much as that of irresistible decay. Allegory therefore declares itself to be beyond beauty. Allegories are, in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things. (177–78)

Not surprisingly, Benjamin’s argument for the dialectical nature of allegory has been superseded by the implications of his preemptively poststructuralist sundering of the signifier from the signified. Benjamin’s account of the function of signs obviously anticipates the postmodern version of allegory that, in de Man’s version, functions as a system of différance:

it remains necessary, if there is to be allegory, that the allegorical sign refer to another sign that precedes it. The meaning constituted by the allegorical sign can then consist only in the repetition (in the Kierkegaardian sense of the term) of a previous sign with which it
can never coincide, since it is the essence of this previous sign to be pure anteriority. (Blindness 1983, 207)

The work of art is a sign of the pure anteriority of the artist’s consciousness, an emblem of forever lost origins.

Melancholy allegory was an effective poetic mode in the works of Tennyson (especially Maud), Browning, and other Victorian poets, but, as Arnold and many others saw it, not only was melancholy ineffectual earlier in the century, but by his hopelessly belated age, even his own melancholy was an “outworn theme.” On the other hand, Arnold’s own best poetry, malgré lui, was relentlessly melancholic; however “outworn” he thought it, melancholy is the persistent tone and even theme of “Stanzas,” “The Scholar Gypsy,” “Thyrsis,” “The Buried Life,” “Dover Beach,” and of course the rejected Empedocles. Further, though Arnold manifestly described melancholy as unpoetic in the preface to Poems, he praised the melancholy poetry of Keats, and he even described a penetrating imagination akin to that of Ruskin as he traced the element of natural magic in British poetry to its Celtic strain. In “On the Study of Celtic Literature,” he argued that the Celts are responsible for English culture’s streak of “Titanism,” a “penetrating passion and melancholy” (Works, 3: 361). For that matter he only found it necessary to write the preface in order to combat the view that “a true allegory of the state of one’s own mind . . . is perhaps the highest thing that one can attempt in poetry.” Arnold’s rejection of “allegories of one’s own mind” is much better remembered than the advocacy of such allegories by a critic he declined to name (J. M. Ludlow), but Arnold was well aware that he was actually questioning the authority of Goethe, whose criticism was being elucidated by Ludlow.

Goethe’s version of allegory was a mode designed to represent subjective truth, not the “real” world, and as Stanley Corngold has shown, the authority of Goethe also stood behind both de Man’s and Benjamin’s formulations of allegory, allegories of the poet’s own mind. As we have seen, Benjamin’s account of the allegorist notes that “for him” the appropriated emblem “becomes a key to the realm of hidden knowledge.” As the crucial phrase “for him” suggests, the melancholic’s allegory creates a symbolic order unique to the allegorist, hence an “allegory of his own mind,” not of universal knowledge or truth. Allegory then generates both semblance, the appearance of truth, and a genuinely true index of the poet’s subjectivity. In Hamlet’s terminology, the semblance, or seeming, is communally apparent in his “suits of woe,” but the deep truth of his inner self is also spoken by the outward show of emblems.

Twentieth-century theorists from Freud to Benjamin and Adorno to de
Man seem to be describing Victorianism as well as later modes of thought not so much because they all share in an “epistemic” celebration of the self, but because they all share in a post-Romantic sense of loss described by de Man:

Romanticism can appear as a high point, a period of splendor, and the subsequent century as a slow receding of the tide, a decay that can take on apocalyptic proportions. A reversed image of the same model sees Romanticism as a moment of extreme delusion from which the nineteenth century slowly recovers itself until it can free itself in the assertion of a new modernity. (Allegories, 81)

Even within the high Romantic era what appears as splendor at one moment appears as delusion the next, as is made emphatically clear in Wordsworth’s “Elegiac Stanzas,” which explicitly characterized the delusional splendor as semblance: “the gleam, / the light that never was, on sea or land, / The consecration and the poet’s dream” (ll.14–16). For all post-Romantics who are no longer able to believe in the logocentrism of Coleridgean metaphysics, Romanticism is bound to look like a splendid delusion, as it did for Tennyson, the Brownings, Carlyle, and Arnold as well as Benjamin, Adorno, and many postmoderns. The sense of lost splendor, moreover, is characteristic of chastened melancholy: the Romantic symbol unifying god, man, and nature is displaced by a more limited sense of the possibilities of poetic language, and particularly by an allegorical mode that acknowledges the gap between language as the dress of thought and the imageless deep truth, the melancholy deeps of things. Like Hamlet, it is aware of a distinction between the inward truth that passes show and the outward “trappings and the suits of woe,” the allegorical semblances that cover the truth, but simultaneously “body it forth.”

The characteristic content of melancholy allegory, moreover, represents a melancholy consonant with Freudian and post-Freudian theory, and it was already available to the early Victorians in works of disillusionsed Romanticism beginning at least as early as Coleridge’s “Kubla Khan” and conspicuously including such works as Byron’s Manfred, Shelley’s Alastor, and Keats’s Endymion. In the face of excessively sanguine beliefs about the Romantic symbol, even the poets of the Romantic era began to replace logocentric symbolism with allegorical representations of failed quests for transcendental vision or expression. Byron, Shelley, and Keats all rewrite vision as brooding, objectifying the deep self as an other under the scrutiny of the observing self, displacing miraculous epiphanies of the spirit with allegorical narratives of brooding on the self, and they all displaced imagination as achieved transcendence with imagination as melancholy
love, a desire to possess and incorporate the unattainable imaginary. The extent to which these works anticipated a postmodern definition of melancholy is evident in Schiesari’s account of the Lacanian scheme in which the melancholic is recognized as a self split against itself, fleeing the social into a perpetual dialogue with its own Imaginary. . . . Such a morbid turning-in on itself, however, frustrates the implicit desire for a fusion of selfhood because a distinction is thereby established between the self and its objectification of itself. The “sufferer” thus bemoans this inability to suture the self or to overcome the necessity of lack. As elaborated since the Renaissance, the discourse of melancholia glorifies this frustration as heroic suffering and consecrates the situation of lack as blessed. (8)

Lacan’s analysis of melancholy, like Freud’s, draws on a reading of Hamlet: for Lacan, the melancholy of Hamlet is for the loss of the phallus as ego ideal (imaginary fullness of being, complete identity), and the play represents his hopeless desire for the imaginary and his actual pursuit of death. Further, for Lacan as for Benjamin, mourning is an ideal condition for the deployment of substitute objects for the lost ideal—in fact, therefore, for the production of allegory. Postmodern psychoanalysis, Marxist theory, and even poststructuralist literary theory provide a framework from which to view Victorian melancholy, but I would not wish to argue that the Victorian poets thought through the possible meanings of melancholy in a precociously postmodern way. Rather, they inherited a fully elaborated poetics of melancholy directly from the Romanticism of Coleridge, Byron, Shelley, and Keats, who had all developed their poetry in response to a Wordsworthian model that they could neither escape nor imitate. In allegorical narratives by all of these poets the creative imagination is presented as originating, at least at times, in melancholy narcissism and a dialogue with its own “imaginary” conceived as a female love-object. Byron’s and Shelley’s narratives, in particular, can be glossed more convincingly than Hamlet itself with Lacan’s account of the pursuit of the imaginary ego-ideal and of actual death.

Perhaps the best model of such a construction of poetic imagination is Coleridge’s “Kubla Khan.” Coleridge, of course, presented the poem as a “psychological curiosity” rather than as a parable of the visionary imagination, but the poem nevertheless presents a vision of absolute authority in the representation of an Oriental despot whose simple “decree” brings into being not merely a vision but the realization of that vision in material terms, as well as a despotic control over the created world. The “psychological curiosity” Coleridge had in mind was concerned with the effects of an “anodyne”
(opium) on the imagination, but Coleridge also saw opium as a “will-destroying” drug and the poetic imagination and the poet’s very self as the faculty of will (the most important element in Victorian “character”). The psychological curiosity is at least in part an experiment to see whether the poetic will could control the most voracious appetites that attack willpower, including not only the opium but also the “Abyssinian maid” who is, perhaps, an allegorical figure for the pleasures of opium itself. The poem’s melancholy nature may also be seen in the dialogic structure of the preface and the two distinctly different sections of the poem as representative of the dialogue of the mind with itself, of a multitudinous and possibly melancholy consciousness. The possibility of the poet’s realizing in himself the Khan’s extreme version of poetic authority as power is entirely dependent on satisfaction of melancholy desire, on the appropriation of female sensibility in the person of the Oriental “damsel with a dulcimer”:

Could I revive within me
Her symphony and song,
To such a deep delight ’twould win me,
That with music loud and long,
I would build that dome in air,
That sunny dome! those caves of ice!

The poem explicitly displays the loss of a transcendental power to create the thing itself in the Romantic symbol, the desire to revive it, and the sense that the revived objectification (the damsel) would suture the wholeness of self. The melancholic is doomed to ultimate failure: the fantasized woman cannot lead the poet out of his own interiority into authoritative communication with the world because she is herself finally a narcissistic ego-ideal, only existing as the shadow of the loved object that has fallen on the ego. She exists only in the interior dialogue of the mind with itself.

In addition the poem follows a prefatory account of a “vision” in which signifier and signified are magically fused as “images rose up before [the poet] as things, with a parallel production of the correspondent expressions.” The poem itself records not the attainment of this vision, but the loss of it, and the parallel sundering of signifier from signified: that is, the poem presents itself not as the material and allegoric over the spiritual and symbolic, since fantasy and allegory are characteristically perceived in Romantic aesthetics as Oriental despots, like the khan himself. Kelley points out that in Hegel’s Aesthetics “Phantasie is an oriental despot whose proliferation of sensuous shapes to represent divinities works against the spiritual in art” (137). And finally, the publication of “Kubla Khan” as a fragment suggests that the loss of wholeness described in the poem finds
its fullest representation as a ruin, representing only the loss of divinity and the decay of vision.

A similar melancholy quest is more fully represented in the construction of the poetic character in Shelley’s *Alastor* and Keats’s *Endymion*. In both of these poems the protagonist is explicitly represented as a solitary, melancholy character troubled by a dream of transcendence to be achieved through an Orientalist erotic quest. In *Alastor* the skeptical Shelley presents a parable that, like Coleridge’s, finally reveals the impossibility of transcendence through narcissistic brooding. The narrative structure of *Alastor* evidently enacts a complex “dialogue of the mind with itself” akin to the Freudian dialogue of the ego divided against itself. The Poet protagonist is represented within the frame narrative of a poet-narrator, and both poet figures are represented within the critical discursive frame provided by the preface. In addition, the Poet is clearly characterized by his narcissism as he is metaphorically compared to the narcissus flowers that, like him, “For ever gaze on their own drooping eyes, / Reflected in the crystal calm.” As in “Kubla Khan” the Poet is enamored of an ideal that is patently a projection of his own ego, or soul, a “fair fiend” (1.297) whose “voice was like the voice of his own soul / Heard in the calm of thought” (ll.153–54) and is driven on a narcissistic quest to locate in the material world a being who can only exist as a part of his own mind. Like “Kubla Khan,” *Alastor* presents the visionary quest within an Orientalist discourse that suggests at least a latent cultural imperialism even as it examines a manifestly Romantic imperialism in the attempt to appropriate a feminine sensibility that is “other” at least to the extent that it is gendered as feminine, and yet at the same time is already appropriated as the ego’s idealization of itself. An interesting variant on the theme is also present in *Alastor* since Shelley represents the Poet “fleeing the social into a perpetual dialogue with its own Imaginary,” his rejection of an actual woman, the “Arab maiden,” as a cause of the Poet’s punishment, his alienated solitude—it is as if the melancholy quest could be fulfilled by turning from poetic idealism to actual cultural imperialism, the actual appropriation of a living “Arab maiden.”

Significantly also, the Poet of *Alastor*, like the protagonist of Byron’s *Childe Harold*, seeks for truth among “The awful ruins of days of Old” (1. 107), “poring on memorials/ Of the World’s youth” (ll. 121–22) and attempting to articulate the truths of the dead world. Describing the ruins of ancient shrines, the Poet almost seems to anticipate Benjamin’s theory of the redemptive power of allegory by attempting, as Shelley would put it in “A Defence of Poetry,” to redeem “from decay the visitations of the divinity in man” (505).

Keats’s *Endymion* was evidently modeled in part on *Alastor*, though its
archaic Elizabethanism and its mythic sources introduce a supernatural element that enables Endymion’s eventual transcendence to godhood. Keats’s uses of the Narcissus myth (1.890–989) make it clear that he was as aware as Shelley of the ultimately narcissistic character of pursuing the transcendent vision of a dream, but his deliberately anachronistic Elizabethanism nevertheless provides a happy ending as it is used in the service of a neo-Platonic version of melancholy desire. Endymion is characterized from the start as a melancholy character for whom the world is impoverished:

all the pleasant hues
Of heaven and earth had faded: deepest shades
Were deepest dungeons; heaths and sunny glades
Were full of pestilent light; our taintless rills
Seemed sooty. . . . (ll.691–95)

His transcendence from earthly melancholy to heavenly fulfillment precisely follows the neo-Platonic trajectory described by Ficino and others. Endymion is made to speculate on this possibility as early as book i, and he concludes that, originating in “ardent listlessness” (i. 825), “this earthly love has power to make / Men’s being mortal, immortal” (i. 843–44). Keats enables his protagonist to climb the neo-Platonic ladder of love to eventual immortality partly because he does not follow the example of Alastor and have Endymion scorn human love in the form of an Oriental woman. Instead, Endymion is made to fall in love with an Indian maiden who is the virtual embodiment of “sorrow,” and only through this love, this wedding to sorrow, or embrace of melancholy, is he finally “spiritualized” from “this mortal state” (iv. 991–93). Endymion is made a god only by allegorically embracing the melancholy that Keats later invoked in his great odes: transcendence is reached when the mind miraculously achieves unity with itself by satisfying its own melancholy desire. The Orientalism of “Kubla Khan,” Endymion, Alastor, and, for that matter, Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage and Manfred anticipates the cultural imperialism of the Victorian age in a startling way, but these poems only represent a particularly exaggerated version of the Romantic imagination as an imperial faculty. In the examination of inwardness, the melancholic, like the lover and like the Romantic imagination, creates the ego-ideal in his own image, falls in love with his own “Imaginary,” and seeks to appropriate this infinite inwardness (the soul within the soul, as Shelley puts it).

My focus in the following chapters will be on the allegorical figurations of melancholy in the poetry of Tennyson, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and Robert Browning, the poets most immediately inheriting the legacy of what Masao Miyoshi has called “the romantic failure in self-discovery”
and struggling with the problems of the divided self. Before proceeding, however, it will perhaps help to draw together some of the diverse strands in my argument with a brief glance at the most programmatically allegorical of the melancholy Victorians, Dante Gabriel Rossetti.

Not coincidentally, in such ostentatiously allegorical works as *The House of Life* Rossetti was the Victorian most emphatically credited with finding means to express the buried life of the inmost self with precision. As Walter Pater put it, Rossetti’s poetry was able to find “exact equivalence of those data within,” to produce “the just transcript of that peculiar phase of soul which he alone knew, precisely as he knew it” (200). In part, as Pater recognized, Rossetti’s allegorical mode was a legacy from Dante:

This delight in concrete definition is allied with . . . Dante, the really imaginative vividness, namely, of his personifications—his hold upon them, or rather their hold upon him, with the force of a Frankenstein, when once they have taken life from him. Not Death only and Sleep, for instance, and the winged spirit of Love, but certain particular aspects of them, a whole “populace” of special hours and places, the “hour” even “which might have been, yet might not be,” are living creatures, with hands and eyes and articulate voices. (201)

The extent to which Rossetti believed in the Christian symbolism that he inherited from Dante and deployed in “The Blessed Damozel” and the early poems and paintings of the virgin Mary has been debated, but I have argued that the use of such images was entirely agnostic, and I would add now that the efficacy of these images as allegorical representations of the poet’s own mind was due, precisely, to their status in post-Christian thought as ruins, emptied-out emblems of dead faith (*Rossetti and Limits*, 53–76). Even the natural world, for Rossetti, provided emblems emptied of divine truth but allegorical of the speaker’s own mind. “The Woodspurge” is an account of melancholic brooding:

My eyes, wide open, had the run
Of some ten weeds to fix upon;
Among those few, out of the sun,
The woodspurge flowered, three cups in one.

From perfect grief there need not be
Wisdom or even memory:
One thing then learnt remains to me,—
The woodspurge has a cup of three. (*Poems*, ll.9–16)
The woodspurge can no longer represent the divine Trinity but rather, in Benjamin’s terms, presents itself to the melancholy gaze in which the most simple object “lacks any natural creative relationship to us” but “appears to be a symbol of some enigmatic wisdom.”

Rossetti’s most elaborate allegory, however, is The House of Life, which, as I have argued at length elsewhere, is emphatically a poem of divided consciousness, perhaps the most powerful “account of personality dismemberment in the language” (Rossetti Revisited, 133). As I have also argued elsewhere, The House of Life, especially in the “Willowwood” sonnets (49–52), is squarely in the tradition of the poems that I have here described as allegories of melancholy:

The lover of “Willowwood” is first cousin to the questing poet of Alastor, and is almost as closely related to Keats’s Endymion and Byron’s Manfred. Except for Endymion, however, these narcissistic questers seeking their vision beyond the confines of mortal life are all ultimately seeking not fuller life, but death. Not just Rossetti, but the romantic tradition generally . . . reduces the female to the unattainable vision that keeps [the poet] questing. (Rossetti Revisited, 132)

As this account indicates, The House of Life, like its Romantic predecessors, lends itself readily to the analysis of melancholy drawn from Hamlet by Lacan: it is an allegory of desire for the lost ego-ideal in which the melancholy divided self broods on death to explore its own innermost depths and seek its lost unity of being.

Rossetti is the clearest practitioner of melancholy allegory in the late Romantic tradition, but allegories of melancholy take many forms in the Victorian period. As we shall see, the Romantic allegorization of imagination as desire for the veiled otherness of the inner self is at the heart of Tennyson’s poetic project, and is the model for Browning’s Pauline and Paracelsus, Fitzgerald’s “Salámán and Absál,” and, in a transgendered form, Elizabeth Barrett’s Sonnets from the Portuguese. More generally, the Victorian dialogue of the mind with itself characteristically leads poets into allegories of their own minds that shadow forth the dialectical struggle of conscience and a “buried life,” a subterranean deep self, or, in more characteristically Victorian terms, “character” and the “abysmal deeps of personality” (Tennyson, “The Palace of Art”).