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Title: Nietzsche under Saturn. Self-knowledge and Vanitas in the Mirror of Melancholia

Abstract

Various biographical factors show Nietzsche's familiarity with *melancholia*. For example, his letters testify to the cyclothymic course of his mood, as well as his hypochondria, a passion that Robert Burton already recognised as a figure of melancholy. We also know that Nietzsche developed a visceral attachment to Dürer's engraving "Knight, Death and the Devil", where the heroic valour of the main character is spurred by the warning of human transience. In this engraving, some melancholic symbols emerge: an hourglass supported by Death, and a human skull lying on the ground.

After those preliminary remarks, I will develop two interconnected themes: 1) the heightened self-consciousness and 2) the perception of worldly *vanitas*, both of which are saturnine elements of Nietzsche's thought.

1. Since antiquity, a cognitive privilege has been attributed to the melancholic: not only the contemplative talent due to the inactivity of the body, but also a relentless desire for introspection. The melancholic succeeds better than others in detaching himself from himself, thus becoming an object for himself. The issue of self-objectification is central in Nietzsche's thought: only the individual who makes the effort to become an object for himself in order to study his own emotions, like on an anatomical table, can be truly free and conduct a life suited to his goals.
2. Following an insight by Starobinski, it is possible to recall that the melancholic mirror of self-knowledge is also a symbol of worldly *vanitas*, i.e., fleeting beauty and vacuity of all things. I interpret Nietzsche's doctrine of eternal return as an attempt to answer to the melancholic perception of the emptiness of world and time. To make every instant worthy of eternity, and indeed to enjoy the fleetingness of every instant, is to fill an emptied world with meaning, just as Dürer's valiant knight, who marches towards the ideal city while pressed by the anguished looming of time and death.

Keywords: Friedrich Nietzsche, Self-knowledge, Mirror, Vanitas, Eternal Return, Lutheranism, Albrecht Dürer, Jean Starobinski

Bio

Ludovica Boi is currently Research Fellow in Moral Philosophy at the University of Verona (Italy), for the project "HEALING - HEALth and Illness in Nietzsche and the Greeks". She obtained: her master's degree at Sapienza Università di Roma; a DAAD (German Academic Exchange Service) scholarship;

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