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Karl Jaspers on Melancholy

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Abstract: In this essay I propose to analyze Karl Jaspers' view of melancholia and schizophrenia developed in *General Psychopathology*¹ (1912; 1920; 1925; 1946), further explored in the comparative psychiatric study *Strindberg and van Gogh – Swedenborg-Hölderlin*² (1922) and expanded in the Groningen Lectures on Kierkegaard and Nietzsche collected in *Reason and Existence*³ (1935). The analysis, undergone in order to define the role and significance of the condition of human existence within Jaspers' philosophical thought expounded in his magnum opus *Philosophy*⁴ (1932), involves a discussion of Jaspers' pluralistic clinical approach to the psychopathology of melancholy and schizophrenia as well as his own existential interpretation of the morbid psyche.⁵

¹ *General Psychopathology*, transl. by J. Hoenig and Marian W. Hamilton (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1997). [Henceforth cited as *GP*]

² *Strindberg et van Gogh – Swedenborg-Hölderlin*, translated by Helene Naef (Paris: Les editions de minuit, 1953). [Henceforth cited as *SG*]

³ *Reason and Existenz*, transl. by William Earle (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1997). [Henceforth cited as *RE*]

⁴ *Philosophy*, 3 volumes, transl. by E. B. Ashton (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1970).

⁵ In his phenomenological description, Binswanger presents the melancholic being as a disturbance in the harmony of the triad of selves provoked by and related to a disturbance in the three Husserlian temporal intentionalities. He develops a transcendental phenomenology of intentional consciousness that complements the descriptive naturalist studies that limited themselves to the content of lived experience, such as those of Jaspers', Victor-Emil von Gebattel's, or Minkowski's. For him phenomenology does not mean the description of subjective manifestations of psychic life as in the case of Jaspers' but rather a pure transcendental Husserlian phenomenology. According to him, psychoses are nature's experiments, phenomenologically significant since they make visible the otherwise inaccessible transcendental operations.

Jaspers' Phenomenology of Melancholy

I begin the task at hand with Jaspers' phenomenological description of melancholy, his critique of the theories of Victor-Emil von Gebattel and Erwin Strauss, and his own philosophical understanding of the condition.

What is the nature of melancholy according to Jaspers?⁶

⁶ Please refer to the vast theology of the deadly sins for melancholy, acedia, accidie, grief, despair, and sloth, from Evagrius Ponticus, the originator of the list of eight passionate thoughts that would develop into the theology of the seven mortal sins, to the present. Siegfried Wenzel's *The Sin of Sloth: Acedia in Medieval Thought and Literature* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1967) is a classic study of the subject.

There is no simple answer to this question. Minimally, the answer would require defining melancholy and situating it within the context of the three major psychoses, i.e., epilepsy, manic-depression and schizophrenia. But Jaspers' theoretical presuppositions do not allow for a rigorous classification or definition of melancholy—or any of the other psychopathological conditions—as a *sui generis* morbid entity. From the beginning of the impressive *General Psychopathology*, Jaspers clarifies his theoretical and methodological positions: his existentialist respect for the mysterious and incomprehensible whole of the object of research, i.e., the psyche, as well as for the uniqueness of the individual case—which cannot be in itself the object of scientific approach but only in its manifestations—makes any definition inadequate. Indeed, throughout *General Psychopathology*, Jaspers refrains on principle from presenting the main psychoses—epilepsy, manic-depression and schizophrenia—as complete entities (or, as he writes, "classified plants in the botanical album"); on the contrary, aspects and hypostases of these pathologies will appear individually, since the whole will always be a unique case. The outcome of following this principle is the absence of a definitive discussion or definition of any of these psychoses whose principal features will appear scattered throughout the work, and discussed under different entries. Jaspers engages into "the quiet absorption into psychic life without attitude" that allows for the human being to be "approached in unbiased fashion" (GP 17), thus limiting himself to a phenomenological presentation, exhaustive and unbiased, of the nature and state of the field of psychopathology. His comprehensive and detailed classification and description could be seen as a psychiatric phenomenological complement to Hegel's *Philosophy of Mind*. In this vast organism, melancholy and schizophrenia appear fragmented into their principal components—complexes or hypostases—that can form different morbid entities according to the contingent nature of the case. Essential features of melancholy, depression and schizophrenia are succinctly referred to and described in Chapter 1—*Abnormal Psychic Phenomena*, in the sections on the experience of space and time, body awareness, delusions and awareness of reality, feelings and affective states, urge, drive and will, awareness of the self, and phenomena of self-reflection (GP 55-138).

The essential disturbance induced by melancholy is the distorted experience of time and self, i.e., the experience of temporal stagnation and emptiness, inner

vacuity and non-existence. The corresponding delusions are delusions of insignificance and guilt, of metaphysical sin, destitution, and nothingness that ultimately result in abysmal despair. The abnormal feeling-states differ from the normal ones by arising endogenously as a psychological irreducible, and lacking an understandable causal development. Explanations point to sources beyond consciousness, i.e., physical events, phases, periods. The feeling-states have an all-embracing character, and enjoy a varied, psychologically nuanced distinctiveness, i.e., cheerfulness, merriment, grief, melancholy, *accidie*. This is an example of the way Jaspers takes apart particular entities or types and refers only to their classifiable core: in this case, the all-embracing character of the feeling-states.⁷ He further notes that the bodily feelings are part of the feeling-states and that the core of cyclothymic depression is a change in vital feeling: the misery of vital depressions has different bodily locations. Depressive patients experience most commonly a feeling of insufficiency, uselessness, incompetence and incapacity for action, inability to make decisions, wavering, clumsiness, inability to think or understand any more; this range of feeling is only partly objective, thus understandable; essentially, though, it is an unfounded and primary feeling. Apathy or lack of feeling, indifference and abulia, the feeling of not having feeling are suffered by depressive patients. Jaspers notes that existential anxiety, depression, and monastic *acedia* also contain an element of restlessness and reluctance to work (GP 65-114).

Jaspers' Critique of Psychological Theories on Melancholy

In Part III, Chapter 11, "Explanatory Theories—Their Meaning and Value," Jaspers discusses theory formation in psychopathology (GP 534-546). He succinctly presents and critiques the theories of Wernicke and Freud, as well as the constructive-genetic theories of von Gebattel and Straus.⁸ The latter two

⁷ In *Fallible Man* Ricoeur will term the feeling-states "ontological" and "meontological," i.e., states pertaining to Being and to Nonbeing, respectively.

⁸ In *Figures de la subjectivité*, Arthur Tatossian emphasizes the seminal contribution of the philosophical study of melancholy to the understanding of subjectivity; he, as a psychiatrist, uses subjectivity as a means to understand and treat his melancholic patients. The meeting ground for the

refer to the pathology of melancholy-depression specifically. Jaspers explains that Gebattel's "constructive-genetic method," Straus' "theoretical psychology," Kunz' "philosophical anthropology," Storch's "existential analysis," Binswanger's "existential anthropology" are all terms that refer to endogenous depression; they attempt to explain this condition as a "disturbance in vital events," or "vital inhibition," a "disturbance in becoming a person, an elementary obstruction in becoming, an inhibition of one's own inner timing, an inhibition of the personally molded urge to become, of the urge for self-realization, a standstill in the flow of personal becoming." The vital inhibition will manifest differently according to the

particular illness (GP 540). The experience of time is that of time standing still, thus of the absence of the future, one in which the past predominates; the delusions related to this stagnation are delusions of insignificance, poverty, and sin; hence the creation of a temporal vacuum; in the absence of the future nothing can be brought to a conclusion, and the patient is incapable of completing a decision, or making an end. Gebattel explains these symptoms by a disruption of the trend of basal happenings that instead of moving toward development, growth, increase, and self-realization, is turned toward reduction, downfall and dissolution of the particular life form. This modification in the trend of basal happenings fills the psyche with negative significance, i.e., death, corpses, rot, contamination, images of poison, faeces, ugliness. The morbid basic events color the patient's interpretation of the world.⁹ Gebattel establishes the connection between disturbance in becoming and contamination: who rests, rusts. Guilt and contamination are variants of the same condition: the patient experiences the guilt of not fulfilling his life by a purifying movement into the future; according to him, forward moving life, form-developing is opposed by a hostile formlessness of a self-distorted past. Hence, negative meanings dominate as forces of dissolution of form.¹⁰ A different interpretation of the genesis of melancholia-depression is proposed by Erwin Straus. He explains the tedium of depression and melancholy by the absence of the patient's awareness of power simultaneous with the presence of the urge to development: the result is the impossibility of filling the passing time with content towards the future. The absence of the future empties out the past of meaning as well.

two is the phenomenological approach to subjectivity. Significantly, phenomenology appeared in psychopathology precisely in connection to melancholy. At the time the interest gravitated around temporality rather than subjectivity. Psychiatrists – such as Straus, von Gebattel, and Minkowski – discovered the modifications of temporality that occur in cases of melancholy, i.e., temporal stagnation, immobilization of the future, predominance of the past within lived time. Since it is a matter of vital time and not of perceived time, this modification means the collapse and degradation of the subject himself and of his world. The domination of the past and the absence of movement toward the future trigger the melancholic radical impotence and helplessness, which, in turn, lead to the classical anesthesia of affect, manifested as incapacity to act, think, decide, or, paradoxically, to feel or suffer. The sterility of melancholic being was discussed by Ludwig Binswanger as an effect of retrospection and propection, the two canonical forms of melancholic temporality, which affirm tragic future with the certitude of the past. Binswanger observed a "reweaving" of the temporal woof in which the past is woven into the future and the future into the past. This disturbance in the perception of the self in time leaves the melancholic only one power, one act: the lamentation. It appears that the self who lives out the melancholic temporality is a self for whom the phenomenon of change is the most critical problem. Hubertus Tellenbach even conditions the emergence of any melancholic condition on the difficulty to change. Correspondingly, the two traits specific to Tellenbach's *typus melancholicus* are the quasi-fantastic need of permanence and order in space and time, on the one hand, and the sense of duty toward self and other, on the other hand. In terms of the layout of melancholic subjectivity, the melancholic's sense of identity is preserved in and through the other. The *typus melancholicus* can be himself only by perfectly fitting the expectations of the other and of society. This self-accommodation to the other is his answer to the problem of identity. When the dissolution of the role identity occurs through a modification in the familiar field (the loss of the other), the melancholic self disintegrates and this process of degradation constitutes clinical melancholy. In his complaints, he laments his having become nothing, since for him the only being is social.

⁹ The morbid propensity of melancholy is known to Edgar Allan Poe as the demon of perversity.

¹⁰ In *Metaphysical Guilt*, Alan M. Olson pertinently discusses the relation between Ricoeur's theory of symbols of evil as defilement, sin, and guilt, and Jaspers' complex concept of guilt. According to Ricoeur, he explains, defilement is the primordial symbolization of evil as contamination; as such, it remains the symbolic foundation for further elaborations of consciousness in the symbols of sin and guilt. Contamination through stagnation thus forms the symbolic core in the melancholic delirium of guilt, and, I conclude, explains at the symbolic level the therapeutics of work recommended in the theology of the sin of melancholy and sloth proposed by for the first time in the fifth century by John Cassian.

After this schematic presentation of Gebattel's and Straus' theories that refer to the pathology of depression-melancholy, Jaspers develops his critique. It is interesting to note the fact that the same symptoms of the condition had already been presented by Jaspers in Chapter 1—*Abnormal Psychic Phenomena*. According to his interpretation of psychic life as an "infinite whole, a totality that resists systematization," which cannot be reduced to a few principles and psychological laws, but rather allows for only tentative hypotheses (GP 17), his overall intention in *General Psychopathology* is to engage in the pure appreciation of facts (GP 17) and to "make every possible approach to psychic reality using all methods," i.e., without prejudice, but with detachment and sympathy (GP 20-22). It is on this presupposition that Jaspers elaborates his critique of Gebattel and Straus. He argues that the disturbance in vital basic events and the events themselves are a given and have to be accepted as such; that the disorder appears in a number of different manifestations (obsessional patients, manic depressives, schizophrenics); the patients are unable to observe the disturbance in vital basic events. He concludes that Gebattel's theory is theory pure and simple since it refers to a vital basic event, which cannot be explained but only deduced (GP 542). The origin of the theory, he observes, is the psychiatrist's encounter with the "inexplicable other." Both Gebattel and Straus display perceptive intuition and accurate observation of psychological fact; but their theories apply to phenomena that, Jaspers believes, are ultimately rooted in "the very Existence of Man in its historical absolute and irreversible aspect." The vital substrate replaces Existence itself, and, while both are impenetrable and incomprehensible, only Existence is, Jaspers maintains, capable of an infinite illumination (GP 545). Jaspers laments the fatal leap of thought from a meaningful psychology lit by the illumination of Existence itself down into the world of biology that requires a method appropriate to somatic fact. He does not deny validity to the latter; what he regrets is the confusion of the two that leads to a non-philosophical philosophizing and pseudo-knowledge respectively. From a scientific perspective, the theology of the concealment or loss of God is as void as the theory of a disturbance in vitality; knowledge of life should not simulate scientific knowledge.

Unlike Freud and Wernicke, Gebattel and Straus do not harbor a fanatical theoretical attitude; they exhibit the desire to give meaning to pathology, thus helping patients towards self-understanding, and offer

the skeptical-humanistic permissiveness of interpretation as both more and less than scientific theory (GP 545-546). But Gebattel develops a metaphysics of human Existence rather than a psychopathology of depression. Jaspers explains that, although nothing can be said against his basic plan and aim,

The totality of human life and its ultimate origin cannot be the object of any scientific research. But [Gebattel's] theory refers to human life as a whole. This however is the proper theme of philosophy, whereas science is only concerned with particular aspects of the whole. (GP 543)

Gebattel is not justified, Jaspers continues, in relating the vital depression to a theory: the disturbance is theoretically deduced, ill defined and of shifting significance. It covers extra-conscious vital processes and time-experiences, objective states and events of which the patient is not aware; on the other hand, though considered biological, it is not open to biological research; and it is so abstract that ultimately it becomes the "mysterious whole of life," inaccessible to science, since, as such, it is not a definite nor definable object; the disturbance in becoming is not verifiable and cannot be either proved or disproved; moreover, the effects of the vital disturbance are multiple and allow for diverse interpretations according to the method used (GP 544). Significant for Jaspers' critique of psychiatric theories of depression-melancholy is his insistence on the fact that depressive-melancholy cannot be contained in a scientific theory and that a philosophical existential interpretation is required. It is with this philosophical reflection, an *Ersatz* of Jaspers' mature thought on boundary situations and the possibility concealed in them for the illumination of *Existenz*, that he concludes his critique of theories on depressive-melancholy.

Jaspers' Philosophy of Existence: Melancholy as Limit Situation and Cipher

Throughout *General Psychopathology*, melancholy, in all its stages and forms, i.e., deep melancholy, agitated melancholy, and depression, as well as schizophrenia and epilepsy are described phenomenologically as particular constellations of symptoms, rather than as whole morbid entities. This attitude results, as we have seen, from Jaspers'

theoretical presupposition of the idiocy¹¹ of the uniquely individual case, which precludes any meaningful attempt at definition, generalization, in a grasp of the whole.¹² Thus, any theory that would attempt to comprehend the whole would betray both its scientific ambition and the singular nature of the case. Jaspers proposes two alternatives: first, the pathographies of great personalities which allow for a study of individual biographies of disease in parallel with biographies of artistic creation; second, taking up the phenomenology of clinical cases into a philosophical reflection. These alternatives complement each other and allow for a glimpse into the depths of the ever-receding totality of Existenz. Before the pathographies of Strindberg, Swedenborg, Hölderlin, and van Gogh, as well as Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, already in *General Psychopathology*, Jaspers poses the ancient and Renaissance question, made respectable again by Kant for the Romantics, of the relationship between diseased psyche and creativity, between genius and madman, between saint and fool. Thus, in "Psychopathology of Mind,"¹³ Jaspers considers the relation between creativity and psychopathy, especially melancholy and schizophrenia. He explains the value of self-understanding and interpretation of psychic

distortions in the formation of *Weltanschauungen*.¹⁴ The paradox of a positive significance of the negation or evil of disease is proposed. Consider:

The problem regarding the significance of illness for creativity. We need to investigate empirically which types of disease have not merely a destructive but a positive significance. Pathographies regarding outstanding personalities always pose the question whether the creativeness was in spite of the illness or came about among other things because of the illness (e.g. creativeness during hypomanic phases, aesthetic content arising from depressive states or metaphysical experiences in schizophrenic episodes). So too in events of historic moment, the problem arises, was the morbid event only destructive or was it an ally in positive creation? (fn. This is an essential point in my *Strindberg und van Gogh*). (GP 729-730)

The question whether creativity occurs in spite of illness or because of it; whether creativity emerges by overcoming morbidity, or whether the latter creates the conditions for the possibility of creativity is in fact a false question, since the sickness, as the Other of health or the negation of it, is—in Schelling's theogony of *The Ages of the World*—simultaneously the negation *and* the ground of creativity. Interestingly, on this occasion, Jaspers, the clinical psychiatrist, clearly distinguishes

¹¹ Please refer to William Desmond's discussion of "the idiocy of being" in *Perplexity and Ultimacy* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995) where "idiot" is used in its original etymological meaning.

¹² If any of the three major psychic disorders, i.e., epilepsy, schizophrenia, and manic-depression, is privileged by Jaspers, that would be schizophrenia due to its more complex nature. It is present in numerous case illustrations, while his study of Strindberg, Swedenborg, Hölderlin and van Gogh, is a study of schizophrenic creative personalities, and further indicates his special interest in the condition. Jaspers acknowledges the poly-semantic ambiguity of the term schizophrenia that makes it into a cipher for psychopathology as such; thus he will make use of the term in its broader signification, in the way Robert Burton used "melancholia" as a cover term for all human madness and folly. As it has been already noted, Jaspers rejects in principle the scientific-dogmatic reification of the concepts of the three main psychoses allowing for their enhanced fluidity. According to his interpretation, schizophrenia evolves in time, has a particular history, and creates a new world that it necessarily inhabits, whereas melancholy, bound to the negative, is essentially uncreative.

¹³ GP, Part V: "The Abnormal Psyche in Society and History."

¹⁴ GP 728. "Mind itself cannot fall ill and to this extent the title of this section is contradictory. But Mind is borne along by human existence. The illnesses of this existence have consequences for the realization of Mind which can thus become inhibited, distorted and disturbed but may also be furthered and enabled in a number of unique ways. Furthermore, Mind interprets the abnormal psychic phenomena and in so doing transforms them. I may know that my natural passions animae are subjecting me to distress, or I may blame myself and interpret my actions and feelings as wicked or I may believe I am exposed to the influences of gods and devils and am possessed by them or that others have a magic influence over me and that I am bewitched. These are all extremely different points of view. [The corresponding conduct] may be variously interpreted as doing penance, attempting a philosophical self-education, engaging in rituals, taking to prayer or seeking initiation into mysteries. The world of Mind in its connectedness and its unity lies outside the confines of psychology. Psychopathology can only investigate certain isolated aspects of Mind as realized in phenomena from a number of points of view. We group these as follows: a. we note the empirical investigations concerning particular concrete material (pathographies and enquiries into the effects of meditative practices); b. we discuss some of the general questions to which these give rise; c. we take a look at the relation of psychopathology and religion."

between mania, depression, schizophrenia, on the one hand, and their corresponding creations, on the other: he relates mania to creativeness, depression to art, and schizophrenia to elaborate metaphysical visions, i.e., full-fledged religious dramas. This distinction is original: traditionally, from Aristotle to Kant, melancholia has been the cipher for both artistic genius and religious *virtuoso*. It is Jaspers, with his clinical psychiatric expertise, who constellates anew the different manifestations of psychic morbidity. He notes an uncanny closeness between specific illnesses and particular cosmologies, i.e., between Gnosticism and compulsive disorder, journeys of the soul and schizophrenic experience, mythologies, superstition, witchcraft and dementia praecox, as well as, between the sick and religious figures, shaman, saint, founder of religion (GP 730). But Jaspers, the existential philosopher, does not make distinctions among the morbid manifestations: he considers the generic category of madness or melancholy in both religion and art as a cipher of tragic destiny and profound human mystery. Thus:

It has been a different situation with poetry and art. Here *the sick person is often presented as sick and at the same time as a symbol of a profound human mystery*. Philocretes, Ajax and Herakles all ended their tragic existence in madness; Lear and Ophelia go mad, Hamlet plays at madness. Don Quixote is almost a typical schizophrenic. In particular there is a repeated presentation of the Doppelgänger experience (E.T.A. Hoffman, E.A. Poe, Dostoyevsky). In contrast, with Goethe, madness plays scarcely any part and when it appears it is treated unrealistically (Gretchen in prison) if we compare it with the realistic presentations of Shakespeare and Cervantes. Velazquez painted idiots. Fools were maintained at the Royal Courts and enjoyed the freedom of fools in their talk. Dürer's engravings are melancholia itself; Hans Baldung Grien drew the saturnine individual as typical of melancholic distress. Many more examples could be quoted and they cannot be subject to a single, common and exhaustive interpretation. *But it is certain that some hidden correlation often stood in the background between the fact of illness and the profoundest of human possibilities, between human folly and wisdom.* (GP 730-731, italics mine)

Folly and wisdom, illness and health, these dialectical opposites coincide in a true *coincidentia oppositorum*. Jaspers recalls the illustrious figures of our cultural history that have opened for consciousness horizons previously unknown of abysmal depths and soaring heights. The list is a twentieth century

continuation of the Aristotelian list of remarkable melancholic men. The history of the hermeneutics of madness and melancholy is evoked by the mention of its landmarks. What perplexes Jaspers is the coincidence of religion and madness. He wonders:

could we interpret it that where the individual himself is in extremity, *the extremity of his existing vital state provides a basis for meaningful experience?* We may point to the empirical social fact that all effective movements of faith and all creeds have for the most part unconsciously, and rarely consciously, been characterized precisely by the absurdity of the content of their faith (*credo quia absurdum*, as Tertullian and Kierkegaard emphasized).¹⁵ (italics mine)

While Jaspers seems to embrace Freud's anti-religious interpretation of religion qua neurosis, in fact, he develops an existentialist defense of religion through the defense of madness; this is a complete reversal of the Freudian position, i.e., the religious are mad, the

¹⁵ GP 731: "We can go through the types of illness and notice what kinds of religious experiences have been observed in them. In this way contemporary phenomena can be demonstrated. Or we may see from history what outstanding religious individuals have shown abnormal traits and how mental illness and hysteria have played a part, particularly how individual religious phenomena can be grasped in psychological terms. Or we may ask how the priest or minister behaves towards people in practice when their religious behavior is rooted in and colored by illness and how religion may help the sick. Finally, we may go beyond the empirical field and ask how there could be any meaning in the *coincidence of religion and madness*; could we interpret it that *where the individual himself is in extremity, the extremity of his existing vital state provides a basis for meaningful experience*. We may point to the empirical social fact that all effective movements of faith and all creeds have for the most part unconsciously and rarely consciously, been characterized precisely by the *absurdity of the content of their faith* (*credo quia absurdum*, as Tertullian and Kierkegaard emphasized). In Luther's time reason was rejected and the tendency grew to promote the absurd, whereas Catholicism, since Thomas Aquinas, has discarded absurdity and denied that the content of its faith was absurd; it was rather that a distinction must be made between that which was beyond understanding (the content of revelation) and that which was contrary to reason (namely the absurd)." (italics mine)

mad par excellence, but that does not cancel the value of religion; on the contrary, it is religion that gains its value thanks to the value contained in madness. A sui generis typology of religions is thus generated to correspond to a typology of psychoses. If such classifications may appear risqué, their deeper meaning is grounded in Jaspers' philosophy of the human being and his conception of illness and health summarized in Part VI of *General Psychopathology*. The paradox of the identity of illness and health, as well as that of the outstanding morbid personalities are here elaborated upon (GP 784). According to Jaspers, being ill belongs to living as such, and Man is the locus of this identity. He muses:

Man is exceptional among all living things. He has the largest potential scope and the biggest chances but with this goes the greatest risk. Thinkers have often conceived man's life as a whole in the form of a sickness, a disorder of living or a primeval disarray, a wounding of human nature through original sin. (GP 785)

If man's life is a form of sickness, this sickness is also of exceptional and superior ontology to health: Plato and Nietzsche are in agreement on this point and refer to illness not in the sense of being less than health and simply destructive, but rather being more than health, as "an enlarged state, an enhanced state, a state of creativity." Jaspers understands madness as an existential limit, a boundary or marginal situation that must be accepted as such; it is only in that acceptance and exposure that the message from the "margins of experience" can be received.

In any case where there is *an awakened sense of the human abyss* and no possible pretext for ordering the world, no possible human ideals of genuine outlook on the world, *madness and psychopathy acquire a human significance*. They are an *actuality in which such possibilities are revealed, which the healthy person conceals from himself*, avoids and guards himself against. But the healthy person who keeps his psyche marginally exposed and who investigates the psychopathological *will find there what he potentially is* or what is essentially there for him, distant and strange though it may be, a message from beyond the actual margins of his experience. (GP 786-787, italics mine)

In Part VI, the philosophical coda of *General Psychopathology*, and a latter addition, Jaspers extracts the existential meaning of all the clinical and psychiatric material and articulates a genuine *Dasein* analysis. Jaspers, the clinical psychiatrist and the man of vast

culture, had patiently collected the existential evidence that will be put to use in this concluding philosophical reflection on the nature of the human being and the meaning and the *sine qua non* value of limit situations for authentic Existenz: the shattering in madness is certainly a limit—a two faced Janus, one looking into the abyss, the other, like Dante, at the stars. Jaspers considers the reality of human incompleteness: he understands "the essence of Man as the incompleteness of his Being" (GP 787). For a being defined by incompleteness, sickness must be an ontological condition. For such, to provoke the event or psychological state, i.e., anxiety that initiates the descent into the abyss is a task of pedagogical love. Jaspers acknowledges his psycho-philosophical position grounded in but going beyond clinical psychiatry and quotes Gebattel:

We cannot rid ourselves entirely of some basic philosophical viewpoint when formulating our psychotherapeutic goals...we cannot develop any psychotherapy that is purely medical, self-contained and appears to be its own justification. For instance, to dispel anxiety is generally thought to be a self-evident therapeutic aim. Gebattel's dictum [] is true: "We are doubtful whether we really want a life without anxiety as we are certain that we want a life without fear." Large numbers, particularly of modern people, seem to live fearlessly because they lack imagination. There is as it were an impoverishment of the heart. *This freedom from anxiety is but the other side of a deeper loss of freedom. Arousal of anxiety and with it of a more vital humanity might be just the task for someone possessed by Eros paidagogos* (informing passion). (GP 803, italics mine)

The existentialist philosopher sacrifices the clinical psychiatrist: existential anxiety, as apocalyptic—revelatory in its original etymology—and a condition for freedom, must be cultivated by the human individual whose horizon of Being must be the actualization of *Existenz*. As for Boehme, Pascal, Schelling, Kierkegaard or Nietzsche, so for the existentialist thinker: the beginning of authentic life originates in *Angst*. It is only confronted with the limit situation of the melancholic or schizophrenic *pathos* that the gifted personality reaches the deep hidden sources of *Existenz* and, as a consequence, his creativity increases—a pearl born in the anguished labor of the wound.

Jaspers continues this investigation of creativity and pathology in his pathographies on Strindberg and van Gogh. Here, he tirelessly though vainly searches for an irrefutable proof of a necessary causal connection

between the two: what he is capable of establishing with the available biographical, aesthetic and pathological data is only a meaningful existential connection between the two histories of schizophrenia and of artistic achievement. The meaningful connection reveals malady as a cipher of profound mystery, i.e., a limit situation whose essential nature is the shattering of the human personality; thus, a *coincidentia oppositorum*, creative and destructive, revelatory and concealing, awakening, disturbing, potentially self-illuminating. Most interesting in its own right is the concluding chapter, "Schizophrenia and Contemporary Civilization" (SG). He suggests that every epoch is defined by a specific form of madness: for example, hysteria was the medieval madness par excellence, a fact that explains, he believes, the mysticism of medieval monasticism. If hysteria had an affinity with the spirit before the eighteenth century, he notes an affinity between schizophrenia and his own time, the beginning of the twentieth century. Jaspers observes that great artists, turned mad, exert today a considerable influence precisely through the works conceived during their malady. The spirit, he qualifies, remains independent of the malady as demonstrated by a Meister Eckhart or Thomas Aquinas who were not touched by hysteria. Jaspers believes that contemporary schizophrenia, unlike the hysteria of medieval monasticism, is neither a mode of expansion nor a mediating medium, but the soil in which certain exceptional possibilities will take root and develop. These exceptional personalities—such as Strindberg and van Gogh—open for us an intimate source of existence just for the space of an instant, as if the hidden depths were momentarily unveiled: some of van Gogh's paintings vibrate with an intensity that is not endurable for long; they do not belong to our world, but bring with them a radical interrogation, a call addressed to our own existence that provokes our own transformation (SG 234). Prophetically, continuing in the footsteps of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, Jaspers calls the present epigone time to account and brings it under judgment: in this age, the authenticity of *Existenz* when the self is shattered and the awareness of the divine presence are the privilege of the mad, insanity becomes the condition par excellence of sincerity and authenticity.

It is in this same vein that in "Origin of Contemporary Philosophical Situation: The Historical Meaning of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche," the opening lecture in *Reason and Existence*, Jaspers questions the

meaning and value of the entire Western philosophical tradition prior to the *kairotic* event of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche:

The great history of Western philosophy from Parmenides and Heraclitus through Hegel can be seen as a thorough-going and completed unity. But the consciousness of a change into mere knowing about doctrines and history, of separation from life itself and actually believed truth has made us question the ultimate sense of this tradition: *we question whether the truth of philosophizing has been grasped or even if it can be grasped in this tradition.* (RE 22-23, italics mine)

The history of Western philosophy has been the history of a veiling, i.e., the veiling of the Other than Reason, the non-rational, in any of its forms, i.e., for knowledge, the opacity of the here and now; in matter, what is never consumed by rational form; in actual existence, that which is just as it is; in religious thought, the content of faith (RE 19). In all these forms the non-rational remains unconquerable: it is Being itself which while it cannot be completely dissolved into rationality, is reduced, in the arrogance of Reason, to matter, primordial fact, impulse or accident (RE 20). The dialectics between reason and non-reason is present at the foundation of all thinking and forms the history of Western philosophy. Jaspers engages in a brief tour through it calling out a few paradoxical landmarks in this agonistic combat between reason and its Other. The incomprehensible Fate was the ultimate background of the Greek gods; Socrates listened to his daimon; Plato recognized madness as more than reason if divinely inspired, or less than reason if not so inspired; Aristotle considered the *alogoi's* superior principle to deliberative reason; Christianity introduced the non-rational as faith, a complement or contender of reason, whose idiom was antinomical and paradoxical. With Descartes begins the grounding of reason upon itself alone, while, for the Enlightenment, rational thinking is considered the sufficient basis for human life. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries counter-movements have emerged in support of the Other than reason, which made reason possible while restraining it. Pascal, Vico and Bayle are mentioned as the contenders of rationalists and empiricists. German Idealism followed as the attempt at reconciliation between reason and its Other. Jaspers remarks that, through rational understanding, Being, the Other to reason, has been converted into reason, was recognized as a limit, or was seen as the source of a new reason—thus ultimately, Being was grounded either in reason or

God. On this background where counter-movements against rationality were "like a distant thunder announcing storms which could be released but which were not yet" (RE 22), Kierkegaard and Nietzsche emerged as a shock that has provoked a radical and irremediable transformation in Western consciousness: they initiated a new philosophical attitude and atmosphere, a new type of thought, and therefore a new type of humanity, thus determining the philosophical situation of the twentieth century. The fundamental metamorphosis has been produced by their relentless and honest questioning of reason from the depths of Existence in search for genuine truth. The new intellectual attitude was "the medium of infinite reflection which is conscious of being unable to attain any real ground by itself" (RE 24-25). Both have made visible the limit of scientific knowledge and rationality that must humble itself and admit that there is something which one cannot understand. Their most ridiculed enemy is the system, its closure and deadly perfection that is contrary to Existence.

The ambiguity of Existence and genuine truth can be adequately articulated by indirect communication and masks, as well as by engaging in the hermeneutic task of infinite interpretation. Faith and will replace thought: they are both grounded in the depth of personal existence: the faith of the martyrs and the will to power in a world in which God is dead. Both saw before them nothingness (RE 30) and had an apocalyptic vision of the end of history and of a radical change in man. The distress of the epoch was experienced suicidally through "endless reflection, drive towards the basic, and, as they sank into the bottomless, [they grasped] hold upon the Transcendent" (RE 31). Jaspers explains the unlimited reflection as "a reasoning without restraint, the dissolving of all authority and the surrender of content which gives purpose, measure and meaning to thinking, i.e., a play of the intellect." But, infinite reflection, Jaspers warns, is twofold: it may lead either to "complete ruin or authentic Existence." Infinite reflection cannot exhaust or stop itself, is faithless, hinders decision, is never finished, can become dialectical twaddle, the poison of reflection, is grounded in the endless ambiguity of existence and action. Thus, Jaspers observes, while infinite reflection and endlessly active dialectic is the condition of Freedom, breaking out of the forms of the finite, the risk of awakening it is the melancholic condition of Kierkegaard's aesthete and ultimately insanity (RE 32).

To avoid the latter, a decision of faith—Kierkegaard's ethical—must restrain infinite reflection. In their drive toward the basic, their self-reflection stopped only by the leap towards Transcendence: Kierkegaard leaped toward Christianity understood as an absurd paradox and a decision for world negation and martyrdom; while Nietzsche leaped towards the eternal return (RE 36). Jaspers insists on their destinies as exceptions, their loneliness, their lack of world fulfillment, their failure; he observes in both a developmental physical retardation and a lack in vitality (RE 37). Kierkegaard's melancholy carried him to the edge: it was the consequence of a lack in the animal life (RE 41). As a consequence, Jaspers remarks, they have been called simply insane, and, in fact, could be objects for a psychiatric analysis, if that would not detract from their height and nobility; any typical diagnosis or classification would fail due to their exceptional natures that defy classification since "with them a new form of human reality appears in history" (RE 38). Most significant is the martyr truth manifested in the sacrifice of their shattering and shipwreck. Jaspers reflects:

As if their very being shattered and in the shattering itself manifested a truth which otherwise would never have come to expression. (RE 37)

Both are irreplaceable as having dared to be shipwrecked... Through them we have intimations of something we could never have perceived without such sacrifices, of something that seems essential which even today we cannot adequately grasp. It is as if the truth itself spoke bringing an unrest into the depths of our consciousness of being. (RE 38)

The "shattering" manifests a hidden unexpressed and inexpressible truth; the sacrifice makes visible something essential, difficult or impossible to articulate, that stirs the depths of our consciousness of being. The profound truth has been uncovered by Kierkegaard and Nietzsche through their shattered destinies as exceptions, and their having assumed the task of searching for truth in infinite reflection and questioning of Reason. The consciousness of our age has been indelibly marked by the *pathos* of the morbid psyche of apocalyptic creators, such as Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, Strindberg, Swedenborg, Hölderlin and van Gogh; in the foundering of these destinies, the depths of *Existenz*, its hidden possibilities could be glimpsed: philosophizing after Kierkegaard and Nietzsche must actualize the possibility of *Existenz* made visible through them without following them in their

shipwreck. Perhaps it is his early encounter as a case psychiatrist with melancholy and schizophrenia that has been most critical in the transition to his later existential philosophy, and has suggested the thought, defining for Jaspers, of the boundary situations in relation to *Existenz* and Transcendence. In order to elucidate the relation between the mystery of the psychopathological, i.e., melancholy and schizophrenia, and Jaspers' philosophical ciphers, we will refer to his threefold philosophy of *Existenz*, with its philosophical world orientation, existential elucidation, in particular, the discussion of boundary situations, and metaphysics. In this concluding endeavor, we will be guided by Alan M. Olson's in-depth and subtle study on Jaspers and the rehabilitation of transcendence.¹⁶ As Olson explains, "a conceptual elucidation of the boundaries and limits of thinking can contribute to a heightened understanding of reality, for [in Jaspers' words] philosophical meaning comes from the boundary alone" (*TH* 6 ff). Jaspers' interpretation of the meaning and value of boundary situations, such as death, fear, suffering, struggle, and guilt, Olson notes, takes him beyond Kantian epistemology into "a reality or ground beyond the limits of cognition which is both foundation and goal of transcending-thinking," i.e., thinking that transcends *qua* thinking, not to be misunderstood as thinking that is transcended. The boundary situation, or rather, boundary awareness, is threefold and occurs at the limits of cognition of world, self, and Transcendence-Itself, i.e., existential, epistemological, and metaphysical; thus objectifying cognition—be it of science, psychology, and metaphysics—ultimately fails, and in its foundering and ruins the ineffable experience of the more occurs in silence, or in a language of *ciphers* that implies necessarily the participation of the human subject. Boundary situation or awareness, Olson emphasizes, begins at the existential level, with "a disjunction of being" between the seeker after world and the world; it continues and deepens epistemologically by "qualified negativity" which forms the basis for transcending-thinking (*TH* 20 ff). At the first level, there is the disjunction between the self and the world, an experience that can either lead to indifference, to the *apathea* of resignation, or open up toward a more comprehensive horizon. An act of transcending toward

Transcendence is required in this first mode in order to avoid a sterile stagnation, i.e., as we suggest, the depression leading to the melancholy of entrapment in time or space. Olson evokes the moment of boundary provoked by the awareness of the impossibility of empirical cognition of world unity and totality:

I discover that no matter how far reaching the parameters of my world orientation I am still bounded for "the world encompasses me no matter how much I attempt to encompass it." Thus I am faced with the first limit of attempting to unify my world on the basis of empirical world-orientation alone. (*TH* 11 ff)

The limit perceived provokes either a "recoil," the "jerk backward" or the leap forward towards a more comprehensive horizon. Olson explains the Jaspersian elan of transcending-thinking towards Transcendence as a Kantian imperative of the idea of unity: This awareness of world drives me beyond the particularity of my givenness-in-a-world to a more comprehensive standpoint whereby I may develop a unified world orientation (*TH* 11 ff). This first invitation to transcendence is made possible, Olson continues quoting Jaspers, by the new awareness that we must "have our being from another source, for in the world, we comprehend ourselves from beyond the world" (*TH* 15). The first mode of transcending-thinking evokes the Kantian dialectic of the mathematically sublime: the natural spectacle suggesting infinity through magnitude overwhelms the faculty of Imagination, circumscribed as it is to perceptible form; while reason in its transcending comes to the realization of its supernatural destiny. Indeed, as Olson convincingly proves, while Jaspers follows the Kantian epistemological turn, he does not stop at the limits of cognition, but goes beyond them, following transcending-thinking itself. Nevertheless, the experience of disjunction caused by "the limitedness of limitlessness," i.e., "the endlessness and unresolvability of objectifying thinking," "quantitative endlessness," can become oppressive; instead of the Kantian feeling of the sublimity of the human calling, I suggest, the "seeker after world" can withdraw and fall into depression and deep melancholy. The existential and epistemological boundary situation is made visible precisely by the psychic pathos of a transcending subject who fails in the attempt to transcend; paradoxically, the foundering itself points towards Transcendence. Hence, melancholy, or deep depression, characterized throughout the history of the hermeneutics of the malady by the experience of temporal and spatial

¹⁶ Alan M. Olson, *Transcendence and Hermeneutics* (La Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1979). [Henceforth cited as *TH*].

entrapment, functions as a cipher of Transcendence, indirectly suggesting its Being, by manifesting the existential despair of the failure of transcending-thinking and of the subjective loss of Transcendence. One can think of melancholic failure as the failure of the Kantian subject to rise beyond the Imagination trapped in its intrinsic incapacity to transcend form. By contrast, schizophrenia, as Jaspers observed in his earlier works of psychopathology and psychopathography, is creative, and, moreover, he insists, its creations are genuinely metaphysical. The third mode of transcending is transcending in speculative metaphysics. This is the last moment of the trajectory of transcending-thinking through world, and self-being, that fulfills itself in the final leap towards Transcendence-Itself; the initial failing or foundering of transcending-thinking over against its object as limit is not the end of thinking but rather the beginning.¹⁷ Jaspers' entire project aimed at the rehabilitation not only of Transcendence but also of metaphysics since he viewed the latter as true philosophizing and as such having to do with questions about Transcendence. Since for Jaspers both metaphysics and Transcendence are disclosed only in lived experience and can be communicated only indirectly through metaphysical ciphers, i.e., symbols in which the individual subject participates and experiences, the schizophrenic metaphysical delirium constitutes a valid experiment in exploring experientially the beyond of cognition and the Other of reason. In this dialectical reversal, melancholy and schizophrenia as the Other of reason, become the cipher of illuminated *Existenz* pointing to Transcendence-Itself.

Thus, throughout his work, as his study of *Strindberg and van Gogh*, his *Reason and Existence*, as well as his *Philosophy* indicate, Jaspers has been preoccupied with the questions first approached in *General Psychopathology*: what is the nature, significance, and role of the non-rational and the un-understandable? What is the relation between sickness and health, between sickness and creativity? Ultimately, the

question grounding all questions, the fourth twofold question grounding the Kantian three, "what is a human being?" and "what is God, the cipher of Transcendence-Itself?" The maladies of the psyche make visible the antinomical structure of existence and the metaphysical Other: the Other than Reason as well as the Other than Being. Jaspers' clinical observations provide an existential proof for Schelling's metaphysics of primordial non-being, as negation and ground of Revelation. Since his critique of Schelling was mainly directed to the unverifiable theogonical vision,¹⁸ one could argue that he demythologizes Schelling's mythological construction and translates it existentially into "a thought that one can inhabit." Thus, from the perspective and expertise of the clinical psychiatrist, he gives witness to Schelling's metaphysics of *The Ages of the World*.¹⁹ For both Schelling and Jaspers, Being and Reason are founded in their respective Other, as their ultimate ground, which is the condition for the possibility of freedom and creativity. Both invoke melancholy and madness as a fundamental experience of the metaphysical Other. At the conclusion of *The Ages*, Schelling refers to human melancholy as a vestige of primordial unreason or madness, the ungrounded abysmal naught that provokes the revelation of being by negating it, thus, also, ironically being its ground. Madness as the *sine qua non* of freedom and creativity must continually be conquered but never eliminated—as Gebattel, too, suggested in relation to anxiety; Jaspers agrees with both Schelling and Gebattel: the loss of anxiety, by extension, of psychic pathos, would mean the loss of imagination and of freedom, of *Existenz* and Transcendence-Itself, of being human.

¹⁸ Karl Jaspers, "Gnostic Dreamers: Boehme and Schelling," in *The Great Philosophers*, vol. 3. Translated by Edith Ehrlich and Leonard Ehrlich (New York: Harcourt & Brace, 1993)

¹⁹ F. W. J. Schelling, *The Ages of the World*, transl. Jason M. Wirth (New York: SUNY Press, 2000)

¹⁷ TH 30-31: "The question of world has become the question of possible self-Being and the Idea of Absolute Consciousness has engendered the question and goal of the comprehensive standpoint of Transcendence-Itself. Thus the initial failing or "foundering" of transcending-thinking over against its object appearing as a limit provides not the end of thinking but is rather the occasion for a conversion to a more encompassing horizon of transcending."