



Alina N. Feld's *Melancholy and the Otherness of God*

Thomas J. J. Altizer

State University of New York, Stony Brook

tjja@ptd.net

Abstract: If melancholy is a taste of God's Other, as Alina Feld argues in the philosophical tradition of Kierkegaard, then it is also a taste of apocalypse as well as the ground of transfiguration and redemption. What is the meaning of postmodern depression? Does it manifest God's Other? Or a new universal Body of God, no longer namable as God's? Feld's book is an invitation to think these questions further.

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Is there anything more alien to our world than melancholy? A melancholy that we can only know as depression, yet thereby we unknow or disown what was once a vast world, and a world inseparable from a uniquely Western interiority. Melancholy was then a universal human world, seemingly possessing everyone, just as a non-melancholic state was apparently impossible, or possible only for the holy or the demented. Now melancholy has been virtually resurrected from the dead, as occurring in Alina Feld's *Melancholy and the Otherness of God*,¹ whose greatest strength is its theological analysis, and its greatest originality as well. Setting Søren Kierkegaard aside, whose investigations are absolutely his alone, this is perhaps our only in depth theological investigation of melancholy, although it employs a strong philosophical foundation, for this is a genuine work of philosophical theology.

Yet this is a philosophical theology incorporating psychological and imaginative realms as well, indeed,

it virtually creates a truly new philosophical theology, and one that is a profound exposition of the depths of melancholy, depths otherwise wholly obscured. The book concludes with an investigation of postmodern depression as apocalypse itself, an apocalypse only made possible by interior voyages into the depths of darkness, and if that darkness is Hell itself, it is only a descent into Hell that can actually realize apocalypse. Thus the depths of melancholy are here unveiled as being essential for a genuine liberation or redemption; thereby our deeper fantasies about redemption are not only ended but transfigured, and transfigured by initiating us into the deeper actualities of melancholy. Now it should be recognized that there is nothing more veiled in modern theology than is redemption itself, a redemption given extensive exposition in classical theology, and perhaps at no other point is there a greater gulf between modern and classical theology. So, too, redemption or an ultimate liberation is deeply explored by classical philosophy and increasingly absent in modern philosophy, and when it is renewed by Martin Heidegger this has an ultimate effect upon modern philosophy, and one inseparable from the profound investigation of *Angst* in *Being and Time*. Of

¹ Alina N. Feld, *Melancholy and the Otherness of God: A Study of the Hermeneutics of Depression*, Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2011.

course, this is only made possible by Kierkegaard; and Feld also is very much under the impact of Kierkegaard, a Kierkegaard who created an in-depth philosophy of melancholy.

Certainly this had an enormous impact upon modern theology, so that Feld is very much in the tradition of modern theology, a theology whose strength is in its exposition of darkness rather than light. That is the context in which Feld must be understood, and theologically her work must be accepted as an exposition of the darkness of God, and of the absolute darkness of God. While alien to the great body of theology, it is not alien to the deepest theology, as perhaps most manifest in Augustine himself, who created Western theology, and did so most precisely in his creation of the doctrine of predestination, which to this day is alien to all Eastern theology. While predestination is unmentioned in Feld's book, its counterpart is there in her understanding of the absolute necessity of melancholy for redemption, for just as in the doctrine of predestination, redemption is impossible apart from damnation, and the redemption of the elect impossible apart from the damnation of the great majority, so that the doctrine of predestination is a true *horror religiosus*. Feld's understanding of melancholy can be understood as such a *horror*, for it is a deeper melancholy that initiates us into the absolute darkness of God, a darkness unknown apart from such melancholy, and a darkness inescapable once one knows this melancholy.

Here, the darkness of God cannot be understood as a human veiling of absolute light, but far rather as pure darkness itself, a darkness that is a true *horror*, and the ultimate source of *horror* itself. One who knows deep melancholy inevitably knows this horror, for in knowing that melancholy one knows the absolute No of God, and knows it as No and only No, or as what Feld speaks of as "God's Other." This is an Other apart from which we cannot understand deep melancholy, hence it is alien to those whom William James knew as the once-born or the healthy-minded, and yet it is inescapable for those whom James knew as the twice-born or the sick souls. Yes, this is in Kierkegaard's language a sickness unto death, but this is a death that is absolutely necessary for redemption, just as deep melancholy is necessary for redemption, a redemption wholly unreal

apart from that melancholy. Consequently, God's Other is absolutely necessary for redemption, and necessary as the absolute otherness of Godhead for itself, and if it is only in deep melancholy that we can actually know God's Other, an Other that is the absolute No of God, that is the No that finally makes possible an absolute Yes.

All too ironically, *Melancholy and the Otherness of God* is finally an enactment of an absolute Yes, a Yes that is only possible through God's Other, an Other only actually manifest through the death or self-emptying or self-negation of God, but then a body of absolute death or otherness is released, and actualized for us through the depths of melancholy itself. Through that melancholy we can actually taste God's Other, and taste it at the very center of our own being, and if melancholy has become depression in our world, that is a depression in which God's Other is wholly hidden, and we can only taste the darkness of ourselves. Hence there is no greater mystery for us than depression or deep depression, a depression that is truly other than deep melancholy, for in that melancholy we can know and taste God's Other, whereas in deep depression we can only know or taste ourselves.

So how can Feld dare to attempt to understand postmodern depression as apocalypse itself? Is that an attempt to understand such depression as a deep even if disguised melancholy, or is it an opening to a new and even absolutely new melancholy, and one made possible only by the advent of an absolutely new world? If such an advent has occurred, we could certainly expect an absolute transformation of depression, and perhaps one truly renewing melancholy, and renewing it as an absolutely new melancholy. How would God's Other be manifest in such melancholy? Would it any longer be manifest as God, or as a dimension or expression of God? Or would it give birth to an absolutely new Body of God, and for the first time a universal Body of God, one so universal that it is no longer manifest or namable as God? These are questions that this book calls forth, and inevitably calls forth by its in depth exploration of melancholy, thereby revealing the depths of melancholy for us, and depths calling us to an absolute transfiguration.