

Abstract for Jews and Melancholia Symposium
Noam Pines, Assistant Professor, SUNY Buffalo

The Portrait of the Jew as a Saturnian Cannibal

In the traditional Christian worldview the Jewish persona was particularly amenable to an identification with Saturn, because like the ancient god the Jews sought to destroy their own offspring, Christ, who was miraculously resurrected, ushering a new world age. However, this association of the Jews with the ancient cannibal god went beyond a mere archetypal identification, and was related to the fundamental melancholic complexion which was ascribed to Jews due to their inability to “digest” or internalize Christian spirituality. The belief in Jewish cannibalism stemmed from the underlying fear that the Jews would eventually consume Christianity in a perverse reversal of religious succession, not unlike Saturn who consumed his own children in order to prevent the advent of the divine Olympian order. In this sense the figure of the Jew served as a repository of religious doubt in the late medieval cultural imagination. By examining certain Christian representations of Jews as Saturnian creatures, I show how the Jews’ alleged cannibalistic tendency (commonly known as the blood libels) encapsulated a threat to Christian eschatological expectations. The Saturnian reversal of genealogical succession exemplified in the image of the Jew drinking the blood of a Christian child implied a melancholic experience of historical time: not as one in which redemptive meaning would ultimately unfold, but as an empty temporal continuum without telos, punctuated by random natural disasters.