

Demonic Melancholy. Reading Gershom Scholem and Walter Benjamin Today

Vivian Liska

Melancholy has been configured as both a sickness and a source of genius. In both cases, it has often been associated with the demonic – itself a similarly ambivalent term referring to the vision of being possessed by an alien, uncanny force. Both Gershom Scholem and Walter Benjamin have dealt with melancholy in their writings; they have also themselves been variously regarded as melancholics. Their melancholy has been linked to their respective ideas of the messianic regarded as a desolate longing for the redemption of a fallen world in a metaphysical as well as a political sense. Two particularly significant examples of contemporary reactions to these aspects of Scholem's and Benjamin's writings, the one articulated by the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, the other by the Israeli Kabbalah scholar Moshe Idel, illustrate the varied and even contradictory correlations of melancholy with the demonic in these controversies.