

# A Linguistic and Cultural History of the Spleen in the Romanophone Europe

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## Abstract

The history of the words inherited from Latin and Greek shows how various semantic fields and classes of lexemes have ensured the unity of the Romance languages. Among them are the anatomical terms referring to body parts, organs, and functions. However, a “mysterious” organ (Haque, A. 2006) has had separate and sinuous evolutions and a surprising transformation: the spleen. From the theory of humours to Baudelaire’s poetic spleen, the term has known multiple transfigurations both in the linguistic and the cultural fields and has developed additional meanings over time. The present study is a diachronic review of the evolution of the term designating the anatomical spleen in the Romance languages and an incursion into the ancillary traditions and beliefs that have shaped its semantic fluctuations in different regions of Europe. Several concepts from medical anthropology will also be investigated, such as various interpretations of the spleen function and processes over time or medical approaches shaped by the cultural and historical settings.

**Keywords:** *Spleen, melancholy, black bile, humours, Romance languages, linguistic anthropology*

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## Introduction

“What art thou, Spleen, which ev’ry thing dost ape? / Thou Proteus to abused mankind, / Who never yet thy real cause could find, / Or fix thee to remain in one continued shape.” The baffling question raised in her Pindaric ode, *The Spleen*, by Countess of Winchelsea Anne Finch (1713, p. 88), referred to this splanchnic viscus as a symbol of depression and low mood. Finch’s question epitomises over 2000 years of explorations, suppositions, and interpretations regarding the organ of laughter and melancholy – the spleen. Over millennia, the spleen intrigued doctors, philosophers, and artists who regarded it as a vital organ with intricate functions, even antagonistic at times. From antiquity to the late modern period, the spleen was perceived as an inherent part of the humoral tetrad. There were believed to be four main humours (fluids) in the body – blood, phlegm, choler (yellow bile), and black bile (Greek: *melaina chole*; Latin: *atra bilis*), corresponding to four sites of formation or filtration – liver, brain, gallbladder, respectively spleen. If any prevailed, it would lead to health conditions or to alterations resulting in a dominant temperament: Sanguine – jovial; phlegmatic – apathetic; choleric – bad-tempered; melancholic – depressed.

## A Linguistic Overview

The pan-Romance words, inherited from Latin, form a corpus that includes, among other categories, terms denoting anatomical parts, functions, and organs, one of which the spleen is not. The etymologies of the words designating the spleen in the Romance languages are widely debated. These terms differ from one language to another, being also used in expressions or figuratively (e.g., in all Romance languages, the lack of spleen implies resilience to physical effort or work).

The French word for spleen is *rate*. Etymological dictionaries indicate the source of this word as a Dutch borrowing, *rate*, meaning honeycomb, due to the resemblance of the spleen to a honeycomb, its membrane extending into the organ in the form of separating walls, as in a honeycomb (Dauzat 1938, p. 612). However, it is difficult to sustain this theory. Rather, we could consider that *rate* evolved through apheresis from the Latin *jecur*, *jecorata* (liver). *Jecur* is a term that has been lost in all Romance languages, being replaced by words derived from *ficus*, *fici* (fig) (Pavel 2017, p. 22). This argument is supported by the ancient and medieval medical concepts, which viewed the spleen as functioning in tandem with the liver (or as a bastard liver, in Aristotle's interpretation). In addition, in Vulgar Latin of the 10<sup>th</sup> century, the anatomical term *lien* (spleen) corresponded to the colloquial word *rata*: “lien, quam rustici ratam vocant” (“the spleen, popularly called *rata*”) (TLFi). In the 11<sup>th</sup> century, the same connection between the informal Latin term *rata* and the formal *lien* (spleen) appears in *Early medieval medical texts in manuscripts of Vendôme*: “lien, id est rata” (“spleen, that is *rata*”). By the 13<sup>th</sup> century, *rate* is already attested in the French language. The expressions about the spleen are linked to the idea of humours (*décharger sa rate*: to vent one's spleen; *épanouir la rate*, *désopiler la rate*, *dilater la rate*: to make one laugh) or to physical resistance: (*Ne pas*) *se fouler la rate*; (Not) to strain one's spleen, i.e. (not) to tire oneself.

In Spanish and Portuguese, the generally accepted theory is that the terms designating the spleen are derived from the Latin word *badius*, meaning light brown or reddish-brown, similar to the fur of some animals, hence the name given to bay horses: Sp. *baço*, attested from the 14<sup>th</sup> century, and Pt. *baço*, attested in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. The adjective *baço* in Portuguese is a formal synonym for *opaque*, hence the words *embaçado* or *embaciado* (hazy, blurred, foggy, misty). However, some linguists propose this etymology only for the colour *baço* (reddish-brown or yellowish-brown), but a different one for *baço*, spleen. According to Calandrelli (1881, p. 733), the term *baço* comes from the Provençal *bésele*, blesqué, blesquin, bedouso, beusso, etc. Another suggested etymology for *baço* is of Greek origin, from the name *batbos*, *prolixitas*, because of the long and narrow shape of the viscus. A further explanation lies in the Latin word *bassus*, given its location below the left lobe of the liver. A Spanish proverb about the spleen is related to what was considered its paired organ (Aldrete 1674, p. 110): *Lo que es bueno para el higado, es malo para el baso*. (What is good for the liver, is bad for the spleen). *Diccionario de Autoridades* (1726, p. 582) defines the spleen in relation to the black bile, as *la parte ... que en el animal recoge la cólera* (the part in the animal that collects the anger). It also mentions the very popular slang expression of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, *cagar el baço* (to defecate one's spleen): to annoy with impertinence.

Attested in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, the Italian term to denote the spleen is *milza*, related to the Provençal *melso*, and the Venetian *spienza*, the latter resulting from the merging of *milza* and *splen*. The generally accepted theory is the Lombard origin *milzi*, from the Proto-Germanic *miltija*, through the equivalent Middle High German *milze*, and Old High German *milzi*; the Romance cognates, Italian *milza*, Spanish *melsa* are derived from the High German form: “The cognates are probably connected with the Teutonic root *melt*, ‘to soften, melt,’ with respect to the properties ascribed to the spleen of manufacturing, decomposing, and liquefying the various humours of the body” (Kluge 1891).

In Romanian, the etymology of the term *splină* is Latin – the term *splen*, *splenem*, an etymology supported by three arguments: Firstly, because both in Istro-Romanian and in a small linguistic group in western Romania, *splina* appears with the form *spliră*, a form existing only in words inherited from Latin, through rhotacism; secondly, because *splina* also exists, with minor alterations, in some Italian dialects, Sardinian, and in Old French; lastly, because the term is also present in the three southern Danubian dialects (Aromanian, Megleno-Romanian: *splină*, Istro-Romanian: *splire*). Additionally, *splină* also refers to a wild plant, whose name comes from its reddish-purple flowers.

## An Anatomic History

In the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC, Hippocrates described the spleen as a soft, hollow, “spongy and rare” part, which enlarges and hardens by absorbing the adjacent “juices” which it can “neither digest nor discharge” (*On Ancient Medicine*, 22). The absorption of water by the spleen was regarded as indispensable for

maintaining fluid balance and, therefore, for preventing the occurrence of diseases. In *Epidemics*, the author described several cases presenting symptomatology subsequently identified as “compelling evidence of malaria” despite lack of jaundice (Lane Fox 2020, p. 247). Among the diseases of autumn, Hippocrates enumerated enlarged spleen and melancholic disorders (*Aphorisms* III.22). The aetiology of some pathologies (e.g. “crude dejections,” apoplexy – *Aphorisms* VII.40) was indicated as the black bile, but its drainage was not presented in connection with a particular organ. In fact, no direct report of any organ responsible for secreting or purging the body of black bile was delivered in his writings. However, in the Hippocratic corpus, water (ὕδρωψ – a more accurate translation would be ‘a watery humour’) appears among the humours of the body, together with blood, phlegm, and bile, and in connection with the spleen: “For blood the heart is the source, for phlegm the head, for water the spleen, for bile the region on the liver” (*De Morbis* IV.33, p. 544). This enumeration enables us to infer a connection between black bile (the fourth humour, here called “water”) and the spleen. Moreover, in the later Hippocratic works, ‘water’ was replaced by ‘black bile’ implying “that the spleen should attract black bile rather than water” (Wear: 1977, p. 44).

The doctrine of humours was not coherent or symmetrical in antiquity, not even in Hippocratic writings: *Affections* I attributed most illnesses to bile and phlegm; *On Airs, Waters, and Places* as well as *Epidemics* I and III mentioned predominantly the bilious and phlegmatic temperaments. *On Ancient Medicine* described various other humours but their physiology was rather more implied than detailed. However, the traditional view on anatomy and health was shaped by philosophers of Empedoclean filiation who correlated the four natural elements (air, water, fire, and earth) with symmetrical substances of the human body (blood, phlegm, yellow bile, respectively black bile). This approach would later be developed by Galen in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD and established as the theory of the four temperaments (sanguine, phlegmatic, choleric, respectively melancholic).

In *Timaeus* (Vol. 9 Section 72c), Plato (4<sup>th</sup> century BC) erroneously described the spleen as an organ composed of avascularised tissue. About its function, Plato stated that it served to keep the liver “bright and clean,” by cleansing and absorbing “any impurities due to ailments,” but all excess of debris would cause spleen enlargement and purulence. Aristotle (*On the Parts of Animals*, III.7) also mentioned the role and position of the spleen as complementary to the liver, with the exception that the spleen was not deemed to be “of very stringent necessity.” When absolutely necessary, the spleen “might be taken for a kind of bastard liver.” Given their hot and bloodlike nature, both organs had a role “in the concoction of the food.” According to Celsus (1<sup>st</sup> century AD), any excess of residual humours or decrease in the spleen’s temperature caused illnesses due to “over-repletion with nutriment,” since the spleen and the liver worked complementarily (*De Re Medica*, Book III, p. 267).

The view that the spleen was a dispensable organ, with no purpose or function, was shared and promoted later by other thinkers, such as Erasistratus (Galen, 1916, p. II.4). Traditionally, the spleen was regarded in connection with athletic abilities and endurance, which is why Pliny de Elder, among others, stated that the spleen could be safely removed, since it sometimes caused “a peculiar impediment in running, for which reason the region of the spleen is cauterized in runners” (Pliny, Book XI, 80.11). Many viewed the spleen as a useless organ, particularly after the increasing number of splenectomies performed with no repercussions. This belief prevailed for centuries, concurrently with the opposite view that the spleen was indispensable in the dynamics of humours.

Gradually, accounts of the spleen were homogenised and rectified, especially with regard to its morphology. But in terms of its physiology, some aspects remained divergent. The prevailing theory was that the spleen acted as a filter, but what exactly it filtered remained a matter of debate. Aretaeus considered it a strainer for the impurities carried by “the black blood” (Adams 1972). And Galen identified its role in cleansing the body of the “black bile (atrabiliary),” and in purifying the blood (Galen 1916, p. II.9), as well as in drawing “all material from the liver that tends to be thick” to convert it into more useful matter (Galen 1916, p. II.13). Galen’s perspectives on the physiology of the spleen were greatly embraced by doctors (e.g., Oribasius) over the following centuries but, with minor exceptions,

their influence was negligible in the Western world, unaware of the Greek language. With the translations made by the Arab and Persian scholars in the 9<sup>th</sup> century, his writings extended their domination in the new medical universities of the High and Late Middle Ages. One of the most significant representatives of the Islamic Golden Age, Avicenna, described the correlative fluids of the spleen: “the part of atrabillious humour which goes to the spleen is ... no longer needed by the blood and that part that emerges from the spleen is no longer needed by the spleen” (Gruner 1929, pp. 84-89). The physiological theories of the spleen articulated by Hippocrates and Aristotle, and completed by Galen, were consequently transmitted by the Arab and Persian thinkers to physicians throughout Europe by the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The first Latin edition of Galen’s *Opera Omnia* was printed in 1490 in Venice, with nineteen editions succeeding it over the next 125 years (Fortuna 2012).

In the first half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Vesalius refuted Galen’s theory of the gastrosplenic system with the spleen functioning as a secondary liver. However, Vesalius adhered to the humoral regulation of health, with the spleen acting as a filter of black bile from blood,” although he admitted not knowing “how the spleen purges black bile to the intestines.” He also contested any “direct connection between the melancholic character of people and the size of their spleen,” using a case study to demonstrate that splenomegaly was not triggering melancholy in patients. In 1549, Adriano Zaccarello performed the first reported splenectomy in Western Europe, upon the request and with the help of his fellow doctor, Leonardo Fioravanti. The operation was successful, and the patient recovered in twenty-four days (McClusky 1999). With the studies of Glisson and Malpighi in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and, later, with Hewson’s research work, misconceptions about the spleen were corrected, and the organ was irrevocably assimilated to the lymphatic system by the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

## **Renaissance: The Spleen in Medicine and Arts**

During the Middle Ages, European civilisation had been highly subordinated to religious dogma. However, attempts to overcome the limits of medieval thought were manifested in the Renaissance despite dogmatic absolutism. Not only doctors but also artists diffused the arts into the profane world and the profane into the art world, which led to the depiction of the human biostructure in the art of the Renaissance. The growing alienation from religious imagery ushered in a new era of artistic thought, and major forms of plastic expression started to depict important aspects of human biology. It was the point in history when visual arts acquired an intrinsic anatomical component insufficiently explored since antiquity. The 15<sup>th</sup> century saw the development of medical schools in Western Europe, and Italy became the leading centre for anatomical studies, with the dissection of corpses becoming a widespread procedure and studio practice in cities like Bologna, Padua, Venice, Pisa, or Genoa. No medical school existed in Florence, but prestigious doctors and anatomists were present there, such as the forerunner of Giovanni Battista Morgagni, Antonio Benivieni. Domenico Florentino also made anatomical drawings of human dissections, later used in Charles Estienne's treatise *De dissectione partium corporis humani* (1545).

Through his analytical spirit, Leonardo da Vinci surpassed the Florentine model of descriptive anatomy. Between 1490 and 1511, he dissected about thirty corpses for his anatomical works of the early 16<sup>th</sup> century. He organized descriptive, typographic, and functional anatomy, according to objective principles, at a time when even physicians were oblivious to the structure of the human body. In his drawings, the organs, including the spleen, are presented three-dimensionally and with great scientific accuracy. Greatly influenced by Galen’s writings, da Vinci correlated the human biosystem and the macrocosm, just as the humours corresponded to the natural elements. The progress is impressive, regardless of some omissions and misunderstandings (e.g., despite the successful graphic representations, he considered the spleen to be a stomach-feeding organ). Such errors can be ascribed to his respect for the predecessors, whose texts he assimilated as such, without confronting the data with the evidence from the dissections. Moreover, along with the Renaissance artists’ direct contact with

the instruments and framework of medical research, previous authoritative sources prevailed: Galen (*De usu partium*), the works of Avicenna, Aegidius Romanus, de Luzi, etc.

Modern techniques of anatomical illustration replaced the symbolism of medieval iconography, such as in the Canano's mythological atlas, *Musculorum humani corporis picturata dissectio* (1541), a fine example of the evolution of engravings. Another noteworthy example is the series of seventeen etched and engraved anatomical plates preceded by a title page with a dedication to Francesco Ghisleri, senator of Bologna. The series, entitled *Notomie di Titiano*, printed between 1670 and 1680 by Domenico Bonaveri, reproduces anatomical figures from Vesalius' *De humani corporis fabrica libri septem* and Eustachi's *Tabulae anatomicae VI*. Previously attributed to Tiziano Vecelli, most plates were created by Tiziano's apprentice, Jan Stephen van Calcar, while the paternity of some is attributed to Vesalius himself. What would definitively mark the decline of the humoral doctrine was William Harvey's, *Exercitatio anatomica de motu cordis et sanguinis in animalibus* (1628) about the double circulatory system, which challenged the significance and veracity of humours in the human body.

## Spleen and Melancholy

If the ancient understanding of human existence was mediated by medicine and philosophy, the scientific progress triggered by the Renaissance intertwined with artistic advancement. Despite its puzzling function and mysterious morphology, the spleen did not come across as an organ generating reverie and fundamental questions; but one aspect, intrinsically regarded in connection with it, did: melancholy (from the Greek word *melankholia*, literally: black bile. An excess of black bile was believed to cause melancholy or depression). As Jean Starobinski (1960, p. 38) famously stated, "Renaissance was the golden age of melancholy," and people in the following centuries continued this trend in medicine, literature, philosophy, and the arts, as important treatises were published.<sup>88</sup> The revival of the interest in the ancient anatomic thinking laid the foundations for pluridisciplinary studies. Medicine and arts were confluent, and at this confluence lay melancholy, a distemper originating from the black bile, auspicious for medical, literary, and artistic observation. Medical and philosophical dissections coexisted, and writers diligently scrutinised the human body, mind, temperaments, and even physiognomies.

Relying mainly on the writings of Hippocrates, Aristotle, Galen, Robert Burton integrated in the study of medicine the exploration of the soul to create behavioural and physiognomic typologies. Since "there is almost no part of the body, which being distempered, doth not cause this malady" (Burton, 1628, p. 309), everyone is prone to melancholy. But there are melancholies and melancholies. Natural melancholy, *atra bilis*, religious melancholy, love melancholy, and general or hypochondriac melancholy. Detectable by pathological or physiognomic manifestations, melancholy also has behavioural or moral attributes. Melancholic patients have "a weak spleen;" the evacuation ducts are obstructed, e.g. in haemorrhoidal condition (Burton 1628, p. 339). The melancholic person is arrogant, lazy, resentful, sceptical, "uncheerful in countenance, and not so pleasant to behold," withered, "much troubled with costiveness," but compensating with higher creativity and intellectual genius (Burton 1828, p. 316). Other traits specific to melancholy "are taken from physiognomy, metoposcopy, chiromancy." From a physiognomic perspective, their complexion is dark, eyebrows – thick, and head – small; they have broad veins and thick brows. The melancholic suffer from hirsutism, have emaciated bodies despite polyphagia, although "those who stutter and are bald will sooner be melancholic (...) because of the dryness of their brains" (Burton 1628, p. 172). Some display "too familiar" mimical gestures, "laughing, grinning, fleering, murmuring, talking to themselves, with strange mouths and faces, articulate voices, exclamations;" their personalities are mostly unpleasant due to their continual "fears, griefs, and

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<sup>88</sup> Such were *De triplici vita* by Marsilio Ficino (Florence, 1489), *Diálogos de Filosofía Natural y Moral* by Pedro de Mercado (Granada, 1558), *Examen de Ingenios* by Juan Huarte de San Juan (Baeza, 1575), *Libro de la melancolía* by Andrés Velásquez (Seville, 1585), *De la melancolía* by Antonio Álvarez, (Sevilla, 1588), *Discours de la conservation de la veve: des maladies melancholiques: des catarrhes: and de la vieillesse* by André Du Laurens (Paris, 1597), *Trois discours philosophiques: ... Le III. de l'humeur mélancolique, mis de nouveau en lumière* by Guibelet, Jourdain (Évreux, 1603), etc.

vexations,” yet “they have happy wits, and excellent apprehensions.” Their manners are awry, marked by “intempestive laughing, weeping, sighing, sobbing, bashfulness, blushing, trembling, sweating, swooning” (Burton 1628, p. 180). A description filled to the brim with references to ancient texts and to science popularisation texts, with broad-brush, redundant, and contradictory traits. With some variables, this typology persisted over time. Murillo (1672, p. 38) described the melancholic type as having a darker skin, bright and big eyes, black hair (or bald), with lean and beautiful bodies; some are good conversationalists, and affable, conceited, and rebellious, sly, evil, and vengeful, and those who have the sharpest wit, are unhappy. But the specificity becomes non-specific, as melancholy encompasses an increasingly wide and comprehensive, even infinite range of symptoms (Klibansky et al 2019, p. 149), leading to hallucinations, manic states, or seizures (Starobinski 1960, p. 15). As for women, melancholy had different connotations, not so much related to intellectual abilities, but to their genitalia. From the issue of vicious fumes emanated by the menstrual period to sexual frustrations and states of hysteria caused by a wandering womb, female melancholia was more than a dyscrasic state produced by excess black bile; it was an inevitable condition of female sexuality, a biological effect of their sexuality (Mátyus Oosterdyk, p. 1756).

It is also the time when traditional typologies of nations arise, e.g., melancholy appeared as a distinctive feature of the Spaniards, and its echoes continue to this day. In the preface to *Mémoires du capitaine Alonso de Contreras* (1582-1645), E. Jünger attributes to the Spaniards a black and melancholic ancestry, governed by black bile, with mythical attributes (Orobitg-Laval 1995). Huarte (1575) develops a humoral cartography, establishing connections between the collective or individual temperaments and the region in which they live, laying the foundations for the theory of national typological specificity. But the theory also has Christian applications: Adam’s figure emerges as the archetype of the man created with a perfect humoral balance. The disappearance of moral equilibrium also triggered a humoral dyscrasia that defines our temperament. Nevertheless, melancholy as a collective behavioural and temperamental trait emerged and spread in Renaissance Italy in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, when it became a trend. But the traditional association between melancholy and a nation is with England. Due to its climate and environment, England with its rainy, gloomy weather was thought to have the right atmosphere conducive to the preservation of melancholy. So, in 1672, when Gideon Harvey published his treatise *Morbus anglicus*, melancholia was referred to as “the English disease” (Babb 1951, p. 66). The valorisation and approach to the climatic and geographical determinism started to gain momentum in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, as in Montesquieu’s depiction of the geographical factor in shaping nations’ specificities (*De l’esprit des lois*).

## Melancholy and Literature

### *Otium, Taedium Vitae, Accidia, Saudade*

As mentioned earlier, the first Latin edition of Galen’s works was printed in 1490 in Venice, thus popularising the doctrine of humours. However, in the religious line of patristic writings, the humoral doctrine had survived insularly even before this date, as evidenced by Passavanti’s *Trattato de’ sogni* (*The treatise on dreams* 1354): “When that humour called melancholy, which is cold and dry as the earth, overtakes others, then one’s dreams are fearful and sad, dark and gloomy.”<sup>89</sup> I also find references to humours (in the Hippocratic acceptance) in Dante Alighieri’s *La Divina commedia* mentioning of the “ill-digested humour” that swells the paunch. However, no direct association between the humoral theory and melancholy (black bile) arises from Dante’s *Divina commedia*. The terms *malinconico*, *malinconia* have no occurrence in the work; instead, the author employed partial equivalents (*masto*, *tristo*) or referred to states of despair, solitude, anguish, hopelessness, depression. In *De vita solitaria*, Petrarch praised solitude understood as *otium*, an essential condition for the act of creation. Petrarch’s melancholy is not so much

<sup>89</sup> “Quando quello omore che si chiama malinconia soprastà agli altri, il qual è freddo e secco come la terra, allora si sognano cose paurose e triste, oscure e tenebrose” (my translation).

a state of morbid sadness as an expression of *taedium vitae*, a state of deep dissatisfaction, indifference, failure to (re)act, and of *accidia* (in *De secreto conflictu curarum mearum*) which would later be coined by Leopardi as *noia* and by Baudelaire as *spleen*. In Dante's *Inferno*, however, *accidia* is used with its religious meaning (*accidioso fumo*), derived through the writings of St. Thomas Aquinas (1963, p. 76) – that of apostasy, of neglect, apathy towards one's religious duties. In Portugal, Dom Duarte's book, *Leal Conselheiro*, (1438, p. 13) describes *accidia* as a form of idleness characterised by procrastination, lack of devotion, repulsion (*nojo*), and unnecessary rest. The most significant change in the text is the replacement of *accidia* with melancholy, which is associated with the sin of sorrow, which proceeds from the “disconcerted disposition” called “the disease of melancholic humour.” This marks the first occurrence of a medical reason for a sin in the medieval Portuguese world. The author also discusses the differences between several concepts, such as *nojo* (the equivalent of the Italian *noia*), *accidia*, *saudade*, and melancholy, taking into consideration the guilt factor, stemming from the acknowledgment on one's own sin of idleness, sorrow, or lack of piety. Melancholy in all its forms is thus perceived as a transgression for which the sinner should repent and seek forgiveness (pp. 16-19). In the first half of 16<sup>th</sup>-century Portugal, Francisco de Sá de Miranda introduced Renaissance genres from Italy, and Bernardim Ribeiro originated the pastoral style in his eclogues and romances (e.g., *Livro das Saudades*), by expressing desires and emotions of unreciprocated love, and thus inspired the Portuguese literary tradition of *saudade*. Portuguese literature developed the model of *saudade*, which, although partially similar to melancholy (sense of longing, nostalgia, and sadness for something that has been lost or that is unattainable), was not subsumed or assimilated into it, having an autonomous existence.

### ***Melanchole, Atrabilis and their Remedies***

The spleen and its function in regulating the flow of black bile was explored in the literature of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, together with the common treatments employed, such as bloodletting, purging, and herbal remedies. François Rabelais created his works by interweaving medicine and literature just as his profession as a doctor intertwined with his occupation as a writer. And similar to the physicians of his time, he understood and evaluated health and disease in close relation to the theory of humours. In *Gargantua et Pantagruel*, his approach to spleen and melancholy was strictly in their physical acceptations. In Book 3 he described the physiological mechanisms of “the little sourish black humour, called melancholy, which is transmitted thereto from the milt.” He used the word “spleen” and the old term “milt” interchangeably to refer to the viscus whose role is to draw “from the blood its terrestrial part (...) or thick substance settled in the bottom thereof, which you term melancholy” (chapter IV). Chapter II describes remedies such as concoctions to help the brain recover, to refresh the liver, and “disobstruct the spleen.” Additionally, a more eccentric and seemingly effective remedy is presented in chapter XX: “swearing doth your spleen a great deal of good.” However, in matters of humoral balance, things can sometimes take a dramatic turn; excessive pleasure and laughter can damage one's spleen – a steep fit of laughter leads to spleen failure, and the character dies laughing because of his ruptured spleen.

But if originally melancholy designated solely a humour, over time it came to mean a cold and dry temperament and also a health condition – the alteration of this humour. Hence, the difference was created between natural melancholy and *atra bilis* – that sour and harsh humour, so corrosive and bad-natured that it harms the soil, flies, and animals (Velásquez 1585, p. 35). Its effects are widespread in the body, as Lope de Vega writes in *El Príncipe Melancólico*: “This is the great melancholy, / that chills the heart / and fills the chest entirely” (verse 1105); “This is the great melancholy, / that clutches your entrails / and grasps the heart” (verse 1185).<sup>90</sup> Tirso de Molina, too, reveals many aspects of melancholy

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<sup>90</sup> “Ella es gran melancolía, / que el corazón le resfría / y el pecho todo lo llena (1105). Ella es gran melancolía, / que las entrañas te aprieta / y el corazón le sujeta” (1185) (my translation)

in his works. We can encounter the basic meaning, the imbalance of the black bile, and the miasmas that lead to physical illness, but also the transition to melancholy understood as a depressive state:

This morbid quality, / which has a bad influence / and infects airs and people / produces melancholy / and, even if it does not make you ill, it makes you feel sad / ...because it increases the atrabilis, / earthy, cold and leading / to untreatable alienations.”<sup>91</sup> But there is the melancholy produced by the “evil time,”

the melancholy produced by idleness, or the melancholy as a state of sadness caused by loneliness. Cervantes, too, was addressing his readers who were aware of the relation between a dry humour and melancholy or madness: “From too little sleep and too much reading his brain dried up, so that he came to lose his mind.”<sup>92</sup>

## ***Melancholy and Hypochondria***

Melancholy was viewed as emerging at the confluence of physical and psychic suffering, of the materiality of a viscus (spleen) and the immateriality of the spirit. The study of the melancholic temperament became a cornerstone of a new field, later referred to as “mental philosophy” and psychology. Quoting the verses of Lope de Vega: “la mayor enfermedad / llaman la melancolía” (the greatest illness / they call melancholy), Sánchez Granjel (1978, p. 166) alluded to the fact that melancholy was the most cited psychiatric process in the literature of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Also referred to as hypochondria, melancholy turns from a humoral excess into a behavioural pattern, being then perceived as disruptive conduct to eventually be reduced to a pathology. From the Greek words *hypo* (below) and *chondros* (cartilage), the term *hypochondria* referred to the area below the cartilage of the ribs, which was thought to be the seat of melancholy and anxiety, since the spleen was located there as well.

In 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century medical works, the terms melancholia, hypochondriasis, vapours appeared recurrently, and the symptoms described included palpitations, fainting, nervous breakdowns, behavioural disorders, constant mood fluctuations. One particular

species of melancholy is called hypochondriac or windy (...) The liver, the spleen and the mesentery are three other considerable foci, from which the vapours rise to the brain (...) Fear and sadness are two signs common to all species of melancholy (...) the patients lose weight visibly, they never have a free belly and this is why they always have lassitude and continuous spitting.

(Tardy 1654)

This is when melancholia became both a physical ailment and a nervous disposition, so by the 18<sup>th</sup> century its definitions would oscillate between a disease of the imagination and an imaginary disease. Conu’ Leonida, the character of the Romanian playwright I.L. Caragiale (1880), would later summarise this evolution in a colourful and concise remark: “A man, *par exemple*, out of I don’t know what or something, as he’s neurotic, out of curiosity, gets ideas. Got ideas? The whimsy is there; well! And then, from this whimsy, he falls into hypochondria. Then, of course, he freezes.”

Derived from the figure of the gloomy and pensive melancholic is the portrait of the imaginary sick man, fearful of everything and everyone. So are Molière’s Argan and Goldoni’s Celio, who suffer from bouts of hypochondria: constantly obsessing over their health, they whine, they permanently check their vital signs, and have fits of paranoia. Goldoni himself suffered from such hypochondriac manifestations (Ferrara 2020). Many of Molière’s plays (*Le médecin volant*, *Le médecin malgré lui*, *Le malade imaginaire*, etc.) revolved around this theme. Hypochondria thus became a popular and desirable disease, because it epitomised a privileged status (Riva 1987, p. 347); aristocrats, intellectuals, men of genius, fragile

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<sup>91</sup> “Esta calidad morbosa, / que de malas influencias/ aires y gente inficiona, / produce melancolías/ y, aunque no enferme, congoja / ... porque aumenta el atrabilis,/ térrea, fría y que provoca/ a retiros intratables.” (my translation)

<sup>92</sup> “Y así, del poco dormir y del mucho leer, se le secó el cerebro, de manera que vino a perder el juicio”. (my translation)

individuals and unencumbered by the difficulties of the lower stratum. Neurasthenia therefore became “the prerequisite for high social status” (Pagani 2013, p. 40).

In Romania, this literary theme emerged with some delay, following the process of acculturation of the French model. Changes in Romanian society that stemmed from the influence of the French culture also resulted in an intense process of translation of French literary works into Romanian. Thus, Romanian literature adopted major themes already explored in Western Europe, yet with some delay. Therefore, even in 19<sup>th</sup> century Romania, bouts of hypochondria and lassitude were in style. Such are Vasile Alecsandri’s parvenu characters like Coana Chirița, who feels consumed and asthenic, suffocated with ennui and hypochondria in the countryside, so she takes a trip to Paris.

### *Melancholy and Creative Spirit*

Nevertheless, the melancholic temperament is deemed to be the closest to the artistic spirit with manifestations of eccentricity, prodigy, solitude, silence, and depression, as portrayed by the Italian aesthetician Cesare Ripa (1603) in his emblem book known as *Iconologia*. Here, he presents an allegoric personification of melancholy, for the figure “Malenconico per terra:” A man of dark complexion, who holds in his left hand an open book showing that he is studying. His mouth is covered with a bandage, he holds a purse in his right hand and on his head sits a lonely sparrow. The bandage signifies silence, stemming from the cold and dry nature of melancholy. The open book symbolises that the melancholic is devoted to studying, while avoiding the conversations of others. The solitary sparrow shows the lonely nature of the melancholic. “The clenched purse signifies the miserly nature, which mostly reigns in melancholics.”<sup>93</sup>

The rejection of the humoral theory implies a reassessment of the concept of melancholy, which will gain new cultural connotations in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, coexisting with its previous meanings. Separated from its etymological, humoral significance, melancholy also becomes a state of mind, a mood. There are also two opposing acceptations of melancholy: a positive, idealised one and a dark one (Diderot 1751-1765, p. 307). The idealised image of melancholy refers to the sublime state of artistic genius, also rooted in the Renaissance. Melancholia becomes a European trend in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, a mark of creative genius, without which one cannot create. With a slight delay, the Romanian writer Ion Heliade-Rădulescu authors a pamphlet ironizing the portrait of the many pretentious, self-fancied melancholic poets.

Giacomo Leopardi proposes and popularizes the multivocal term *noia* around which his entire work will revolve. *Noia* describes the period of contemplation preceding a creative process which refers simultaneously to a state of tedium, melancholy, and anticipation. Its connotation is twofold; from a positive perspective, it reflects the opportunity to acknowledge and to apprehend one’s own melancholy; from a negative point of view, it may also refer to a state of apathy and futility rather than idleness. Victor Hugo, who dedicates a poem to the author of the famous Renaissance engraving *Melancholia (To Albrecht Dürer)*, actually describes the joy of being melancholic as an indispensable state for the act of creation. Romanticism is, at its core, melancholic, permeated with nostalgia and the sense of a lost paradise. A topos of nostalgia, explicitly romantic, emerges, which mourns over the ruins of lost worlds and, at the same time, over the damages caused by modernisation. The poetry of ruins, the sensation that the present is a profane time marked by degradation, portrays a post-historical paralysis leading to even more decay.

Parallel to the development of melancholy as a literary motif, *saudade* had an evolution of its own, and António Nobre and Teixeira de Pascoais became the leaders of the *saudosismo* movement in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, with Nobre's collection of poems in *Só* (1892) exemplifying the themes, mood, and

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<sup>93</sup> “La borsa serrata significa l’avara natura, che suole per lo più regnare nei malenconici” (my translation)

rhythms of this literary movement. Other writers such as Mário Beirão, Augusto Casimiro, and João de Barros, also embraced *saudosismo* as a means of expressing the Portuguese soul.

With Charles Baudelaire, the spleen becomes the existential malaise derived from sensitivity and inability to adapt to the real world. The term *spleen* appears in the 18<sup>th</sup> century in France with the meaning of melancholy as existential anxiety and feeling of alienation, as described in *Les Fleurs du mal* (1857): “Then long processions without fifes or drums / Wind slowly through my soul. Hope, weeping, bows / To conquest. And atrocious Anguish comes / To plant his black flag on my drooping brows.” A loanword from English, the term *spleen* enriches a cultural motif, which is melancholy, as well as its semantic field by describing the idea of existential crisis: “the acknowledgement, (...) the discovery of emptiness and insecurity within one's being” (Mauzi 1960, p. 459). It is an era of malaise and evil, where the spleen is understood not only in its aesthetic and psychological meanings, but also from an ethical perspective; *le mal du siècle* transpires from the symbolist movement in literature and exerts its influences in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Fernando Pessoa's works bear the mark of melancholy, in all its forms and connotations: in the theatre of being, Alberto Caeiro, Ricardo Reis, Álvaro de Campos, and every other heteronym talk to each other and their polyphonous dialogues echo the faraway sound of fado and saudade. The melancholic's neurosis stems at times from the solitude necessary for distancing oneself from one's own emotions; this process of self-detaching may lead to ennui: “To live a dispassionate and cultured life in the open air of ideas, reading, dreaming and thinking of writing – a life so slow it constantly verges on tedium, but pondered enough never to find itself there.” Tedium is deepened and aggravated by the feeling that everything is finite; it is a source both of suffering and of inspiration that triggers and heals at the same time the artist's ailments. It is the existential feeling of hypochondria: “It's like being intoxicated with inertia, drunk but with no enjoyment in the drinking or in the drunkenness. It's a sickness with no hope of recovery. It's a lively death” (Pessoa 2002, pp. 106, 105).

Tedium vitae, accidia, otium, depression, solitude, saudade, spleen, and noia; melancholy went through various metamorphoses and took on different forms of expression in literature over time.

## Conclusion

This article was intended as a chronological exploratory journey through the evolution of the term *spleen* and its anatomical, medical, and cultural significance in Romance-speaking Europe. From Greek heritage (the ancient doctrine of humours) until the medicine of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the spleen was one witness of the progress made in the fields of anatomy, physiology, arts, and literature. In close connection with the spleen and black bile was melancholy and its diverse manifestations, spanning from Hippocrates to contemporary psychiatry, from Da Vinci to Cervantes through Baudelaire. Melancholy was represented in various forms, including poetry, art, medicine, and philosophy, and eluded any attempt at confinement. It covered a range of realities that went from a vague feeling of creative sadness to an agony worse than death, conveyed through written words and artistic strokes. In addition, the definition of the melancholic personality went back to the doctrine of the four psychophysical types into which human beings were divided in antiquity. The scientific revolution triggered by the Renaissance meant the decline of Galenic medicine and the theory of humours, especially the mysterious black bile, reduced to the status of an erroneous fable. What remained and became popularised, however, is the concept of melancholy, which acquired increasingly complex meanings and important cultural mutations; accidia, saudade, noia and, to end the loop, the artistic expression spleen.

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