

Introduction: Melancholy Through the Ages

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*When the matter is diverse and confused, how should it otherwise be but that the species should be diverse and confused?*¹

Robert Burton's reflection on the myriad species of melancholy provides a fitting introduction to this volume of the *MHRA Working Papers in the Humanities*. The following collection of articles comprises critical insights into the persistent theme of melancholy in its range of manifestations, a range which is reflected by the variety of terms invoked in describing this mental state through the ages, and across the disciplines of literature and science. For instance, Owen Holland's thought-provoking analysis of the 'mulleygrubs', which stubbornly persist in William Morris's utopian landscapes, reveals that even specific individual terms for melancholy are open to more than one interpretation, and may be appropriated, and distorted, for ideological purposes. Esra Almas, meanwhile, demonstrates a culturally specific construction of melancholy in a discussion of the Turkish term *hüzün* in Orhan Pamuk's *Istanbul: Şehir ve Hatıralar (Istanbul: Memories and the City)* (2003). With melancholy thus emerging as a nebulous concept which resists easy classification, the six articles featured engage with it under a variety of different guises, taking in issues of mourning, loss, love-melancholy, elegiac poetry and melancholy landscapes and moods.

¹ Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, ed. by Holbrook Jackson (New York: New York Review Books, 2001), The First Partition, p. 174.

Although the reception of melancholy has been shaped by a variety of discourses, it emerged first and foremost among the ancients as the subject of scientific and medical investigation, and has remained a popular subject for consideration by scientists, artists, philosophers and scholars ever since. Most recently, the pathological manifestation of melancholy has once more come under the spotlight in Lars von Trier's 2011 film *Melancholia*, with its portrayal of two sisters suffering from the related conditions of depression and anxiety. This modern interpretation does not, however, ignore the long-standing history of the discourse. The second half of the film features the sudden appearance of a mysterious planet, 'Melancholia', which threatens destruction as it approaches Earth. This recalls the perceived causal link between melancholy and astrology, particularly the planet Saturn, in the later Middle Ages and the Renaissance.²

Galenic humoral medicine, which ties astrology to medicine through the influence of the planets over the four bodily humours (black bile, yellow bile, phlegm, blood), explains melancholy as the result of an excess of black bile in the subject's body. The Greek word 'μελαγχολία' (*melagkholia*) is in fact formed from the two words 'μέλας' (*melas*, black) and 'χολή' (*kholē*, bile). Lovesickness is viewed by ancient and medieval medical writers as being a subcategory of melancholy and the renaissance in Galenic and Hippocratic medicine, fuelled by the Latin translations of Graeco-Arabic texts from the late eleventh century onwards, coupled with the ubiquitous presence of lovesickness in (particularly vernacular) literature from the twelfth century forwards, results in melancholy's cohabitation of scientific and literary texts in the later Middle Ages.

² See Jennifer Radden, 'Introduction: From Melancholic States to Clinical Depression', in *The Nature of Melancholy from Aristotle to Kristeva*, ed. by Jennifer Radden (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 3-51 (p. 9).

The process of exchange which takes place between science and aesthetics is mirrored in ‘melancholy’s alleged link with some kind of compensatory quality of brilliance’, and the reception of this idea evolved into the perception of melancholy, not just as an ‘enabling agent’ for creative genius, but also as its ‘noxious side effect’.³ The scientific endeavours which connected melancholy to extremes of mood and temperament led to the recognition of this affliction in the ecstasy of poets and philosophers, an idea which has endured from Plato to the Romantics and beyond. By the nineteenth century, as Jennifer Radden notes, the allegedly normal disposition of melancholy began, in scientific treatment of the subject, to separate from melancholia, or melancholy pathologised.⁴ As melancholy’s reception continues in a cyclical process, a response to this distinction can be found in literature of the emerging modern period, for example in Georg Büchner’s novella *Lenz* (1835), which, rather than romanticising the figure of the tortured genius, provides a sympathetic early portrayal of an author suffering from schizophrenia. This sets the stage for more modern terminology, opening the field to the question of whether science has simply rebranded melancholia as, for example, depression. The significance of the concept of melancholia for Freudian psychoanalysis, which itself draws on a combination of medico-scientific tradition and areas conventionally the subject of literary analysis and composition (dream, myth etc.), is an important indicator of melancholy’s liminal position as property of both the arts and the sciences. It is thus highly appropriate that several of the articles in this volume should take Freud as a significant point of reference for their discussions.

Freud’s 1917 essay, *Mourning and Melancholia*, claims that while the former allows for the identification of the lost object and the possibility of eventual divestment, the latter

³ Radden, p. 12.

⁴ *Ibid.*

coincides with a sense of loss which is not so easily defined.⁵ An interesting aspect of this notion is taken up in Almas's article, which transfers this non-specific sense of sadness from the inhabitants of a place to the place itself, bringing to the discussion the significance of melancholy landscapes and their reception. In Orhan Pamuk's memoir, Almas argues, Istanbul becomes the 'locus of melancholy' and 'transmits its mood to its inhabitants'. The discussion is complicated by the orientalist descriptions of nineteenth-century French writers who travelled to Istanbul and viewed it as a city in decay, and Almas notes the problematic nature of these descriptions following Edward Said. The article, however, moves beyond the terms of postcolonial theory by framing the alleged loss of grandeur within a discussion of *Mourning and Melancholia*. If the loss of ego results from an 'idealised identification' with the lost subject, then we might ask if a city may not mourn for its past; and, in making that suggestion, an interesting connection arises between melancholy, imperialism and cultural identity.

All of the articles in this journal address the work of writers from the modern period, and indeed we find that the long-standing notion of artistic melancholy continues to be celebrated today. We find, for example, in London's 'The Last Tuesday Society', a scene in which attendees at 'Loss' events are invited to chop onions in order to induce tears, a literary nod to Günter Grass's famous onion cellar episode in *Die Blechtrommel (The Tin Drum)* (1959). Such public expressions of loss remind us that melancholy is not only a personal state of mind, but also a performative and aesthetic process, as Adam Crothers's article in this issue demonstrates. Through a close reading of a variety of contemporary elegies written to remember the poet Michael Donaghy, Crothers explores the ways in which the form of a

⁵ Sigmund Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. and ed. by James Strachey et al., 24 vols (London: Vintage, 2001), XIV, pp. 237-60.

poem is tied to the activity which the poem performs and the process of negotiation which takes place between the poem and poet as the writing of the latter unfolds.

Despite our contributors' focus on modern works, however, their discussions of melancholy remain informed by earlier debates. In this area of scholarship, as Jennifer Radden writes in *The Nature of Melancholy*, 'we discover a kind of conversation, or dialogue, conducted across centuries'.⁶ Here, Holland connects the etymological roots of the term melancholy ('black bile') to a utopian experiment which seeks to '[drain] it from the social body'. This application of the ancient humoral theory to the collective raises moral questions for a post-Marxist society which would rid itself of those malcontents who suffer their condition as a result of bourgeois idleness. The body as a site of melancholy is a theme also taken up in Maureen Watkins's reading of Thomas Mann's *Der Zauberberg* (*The Magic Mountain*) (1924). The institutional setting of this novel, whose plot unfolds in a sanatorium in the Swiss Alps, draws attention to the association of melancholy with 'a loss of identity that is compounded by illness'. Like Holland, Watkins engages with the moralising aspect of the discourse by linking melancholy to disease and noting its association with 'laziness and a loss of moral fibre'. This phenomenon is perhaps best illustrated in the example of the protagonist Hans Castorp, who, despite no clear evidence of serious physical illness, remains in a state of inertia rather than taking up his planned career outside the sanatorium.

Moving on from the causes of melancholy, commentators over the centuries have also been motivated to seek or expound upon possible cures. In particular, the conceptualisation of melancholy as an excess of fear and sadness without discernible cause has given rise to somewhat moralising pronouncements. Even Philippe Pinel, an instrumental figure in the reformation of Parisian institutions for the insane, was provoked by his studies on the subject

⁶ Jennifer Radden, 'Preface' in Radden, *The Nature of Melancholy*, p. ix.

to proclaim, ‘Nothing [...] can be more hideous than the figure of a melancholic, brooding over his imaginary misfortunes.’⁷ Robert Burton suggests the close relation of cause and cure,

Nothing begets [melancholy] sooner, increaseth and continueth it oftener, than idleness; a disease familiar to all idle persons [...] they will not compose themselves to do aught; they cannot abide work, though it be necessary [...] [they] will not use the facile and ready means to do themselves good; and so are still tormented with melancholy.⁸

We have encountered this problem in Holland’s dissection of the ‘mulleygrubs’, and Watkins’s analysis of life in the tuberculosis clinic. Similarly, Simon Calder’s article, which assesses a selection of George Eliot’s fictional writings (with special emphasis upon *Middlemarch*) in the light of Spinoza’s *Ethics* also deals with the notion of *melancholia* as an evil which, unlike anguish, is unproductive and does not lead to greater self-knowledge. Though Eliot herself translated Spinoza’s *Ethics* into English, Calder’s article argues convincingly that Eliot’s fiction, rather than simply dramatising Spinoza’s descriptions of mental states, refines and critiques them. Ultimately, Calder suggests, Eliot rejects Spinoza’s totalising statements about knowledge, happiness and existence in order to present her readers with a more nuanced account of the ways in which human beings can avoid the pit of melancholy by learning to appreciate the importance of varying one’s mental perspectives.

As is clearly demonstrated by this brief discussion, melancholy not only resists easy definition as a concept, but it is frequently associated with individuals and concepts which resist (actively or passively) integration into the social and/ or psychic order – the immoral, the lazy, the Oriental, the sick, the dead, the ingenious. It is, for this reason, highly appropriate that Mark Ryan’s article chooses to explore melancholy as the site of William Blake’s

⁷ Philippe Pinel, *A Treatise on Insanity, in Which are Contained the Principles of a New and More Practical Nosology of Maniacal Disorders Than Has Yet Been Offered to the Public*, trans. by D.D. Davis (Sheffield: Cadell & Davies, 1806), pp.136-7. Cited in Radden, p. 205.

⁸ Burton, *The First Partition*, pp. 242-3.

resistance against the prevailing social and intellectual climate in which he found himself. Ryan emphasises the way in which Blake's presentation of the causes and effects of melancholy – though using the common symbolism of eighteenth-century anatomical studies – reacted against the emergent mechanistic understanding of the human body expounded by his contemporaries. In light of this resistant aspect, which sits at the core of the melancholic, the present volume can hardly hope to state definitively what melancholy *is*. Instead, it aims to depict the various veils under which the melancholic performs his or her acts of resistance, and to reveal the processes through which, in eluding definition, the melancholic enters into negotiation with the everyday systems in and through which we exist and experience.