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JACKY BOWRING

A FIELD GUIDE TO  
MELANCHOLY



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# A Field Guide to Melancholy

Jacky Bowring

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For Jasper and Ella



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Rosalind: They say you are a melancholy fellow.  
Jaques: I am so; I do love it better than laughing.

Shakespeare, *As You Like It*





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## Introduction



Laurence Aberhart, *Files, Wanganui*, 1 July 1986

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## Introduction

*Melancholy is a twilight state; suffering melts into it and becomes a sombre joy. Melancholy is the pleasure of being sad.*

Victor Hugo, *Toilers of the Sea*<sup>1</sup>

Melancholy is ambivalent and contradictory. Although it seems at once a very familiar term, it is extraordinarily elusive and enigmatic. It is something found not only in humans – whether pathological, psychological, or a mere passing mood – but in landscapes, seasons, and sounds. They too can be melancholy. Batman, Pierrot, and Hamlet are all melancholic characters, with traits like darkness, unrequited longing, and genius or heroism. Twilight, autumn and minor chords are also melancholy, evoking poignancy and the passing of time.

How is melancholy defined? *A Field Guide to Melancholy* traces out some of the historic traditions of melancholy, most of which remain today, revealing it to be an incredibly complex term. Samuel Johnson's definition, in his eighteenth century *Dictionary of the English Language*, reveals melancholy's multi-faceted nature was already well established by then: 'A *disease*, supposed to proceed from a redundance of black bile; a kind of *madness*, in which the mind is always fixed on one object; a gloomy, pensive, discontented *temper*.'<sup>2</sup> All of these aspects – disease, madness and temperament – continue to coalesce in the

concept of melancholy, and rather than seeking a definitive definition or chronology, or a discipline-specific account, this book embraces contradiction and paradox: the very kernel of melancholy itself.

As an explicit promotion of the ideal of melancholy, the *Field Guide* extols the benefits of the pursuit of sadness, and questions the obsession with happiness in contemporary society. Rather than seeking an ‘architecture of happiness’, or resorting to Prozac-with-everything, it is proposed that melancholy is not a negative emotion, which for much of history it wasn’t – it was a desirable condition, sought for its ‘sweetness’ and intensity. It remains an important point of balance – a counter to the ‘loss of sadness’. Not grief, not mourning, not sorrow, yet all of those things.

Melancholy is profoundly interdisciplinary, and ranges across fields as diverse as medicine, literature, art, design, psychology and philosophy. It is over two millennia old as a concept, and its development pre-dates the emergence of disciplines. While similarly enduring concepts have also been tackled by a breadth of disciplines such as philosophy, art and literature, melancholy alone extends across the spectrum of arts *and* sciences, with significant discourses in fields like psychiatry, as much as in art. Concepts with such an extensive period of development (the idea of ‘beauty’ for example) tend to go through a process of metamorphosis and end up meaning something distinctly different.<sup>3</sup> Melancholy has been surprisingly stable. Despite the depth and breadth of investigation, the questions, ideas and contradictions which form the ‘constellation’<sup>4</sup> of melancholy today are not dramatically different from those at any time in its history. There is a sense that, as psychoanalytical theorist Julia

Kristeva puts it, melancholy is 'essential and trans-historical'.<sup>5</sup>

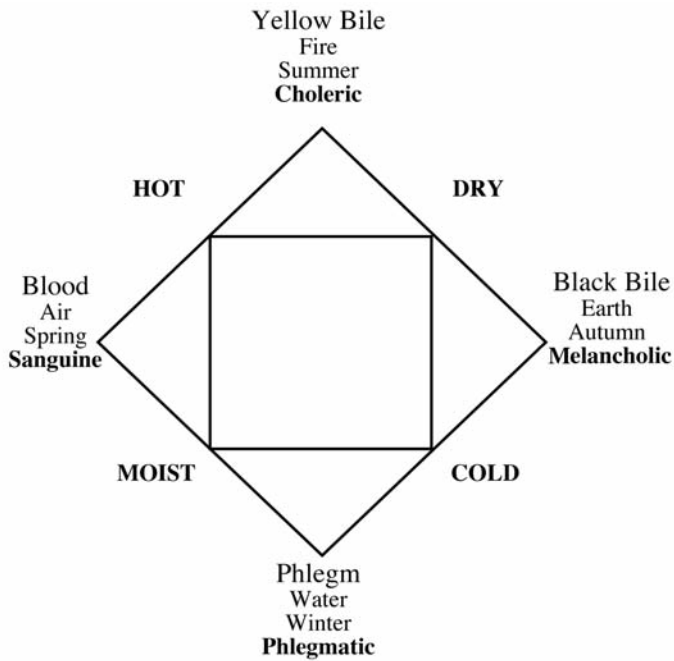
Melancholy is a central characteristic of the human condition, and Hildegard of Bingen, the twelfth century abbess and mystic, believed it to have been formed at the moment that Adam sinned in taking the apple – when melancholy 'curdled in his blood'.<sup>6</sup> Modern day Slovenian philosopher, Slavoj Žižek, also positions melancholy, and its concern with loss and longing, at the very heart of the human condition, stating 'melancholy (disappointment with all positive, empirical objects, none of which can satisfy our desire) is in fact the beginning of philosophy'.<sup>7</sup>

The complexity of the idea of melancholy means that it has oscillated between attempts to define it scientifically, and its embodiment within a more poetic ideal. As a very coarse generalisation, the scientific/psychological underpinnings of melancholy dominated the early period, from the late centuries BC when ideas on medicine were being formulated, while in later, mainly post-medieval times, the literary ideal became more significant. In recent decades, the rise of psychiatry has re-emphasised the scientific dimensions of melancholy. It was never a case of either/or, however, and both ideals, along with a multitude of other colourings, have persisted through history.

The essential nature of melancholy as a bodily as well as a purely mental state is grounded in the foundation of ideas on physiology; that it somehow relates to the body itself. These ideas are rooted in the ancient notion of 'humours'. In Greek and Roman times humoralism was the foundation for an understanding of physiology, with the four humours ruling the body's characteristics.

Phlegm, blood, yellow bile and black bile were believed to be the four governing elements, and each was ascribed to particular seasons, elements and temperaments. This can be expressed via a tetrad, or four-cornered diagram.

The four-part divisions of temperament were echoed in a number of ways, as in the work of Alkindus, the ninth century Arab philosopher, who aligned the times of the day with particular dispositions. The tetrad could therefore be further embellished, with the first quarter of the day sanguine, second choleric, third melancholic and



The Four Humours, adapted from Henry E Sigerist (1961) *A History of Medicine*, 2 vols New York: Oxford University Press, 2:232.<sup>8</sup>



finally phlegmatic. Astrological allegiances reinforce the idea of four quadrants, so that Jupiter is sanguine, Mars choleric, Saturn is melancholy, and the moon or Venus is phlegmatic. The organs, too, are associated with the points of the humoric tetrad, with the liver sanguine, the gall bladder choleric, the spleen melancholic, and the brain/lungs phlegmatic.

Melancholy, then, is associated with twilight, autumn, earth, the spleen, coldness and dryness, and the planet Saturn. All of these elements weave in and out of the history of melancholy, appearing in mythology, astrology, medicine, literature and art. The complementary humours and temperaments were sometimes hypothesised as balances, so that the opposite of one might be introduced as a remedy for an excess of another. For melancholy, the introduction of sanguine elements – blood, air and warmth – could counter the darkness. This could also work at an astrological level, as in the appearance of the magic square of Jupiter on the wall behind Albrecht Dürer's iconic engraving *Melencolia I*, (1514) – the sign of Jupiter to introduce a sanguine balance to the saturnine melancholy angel.

In this early phase of the development of humoral thinking a key tension arose, as on one hand it was devised as a means of establishing degrees of wellness, but on the other it was a system of types of disposition. As Klibansky, Panofsky and Saxl put it, there were two quite different meanings to the terms sanguine, choleric, phlegmatic and melancholy, as either 'pathological states or constitutional aptitudes'.<sup>9</sup> Melancholy became far more connected with the idea of illness than the other temperaments, and was considered a 'special problem'.

The blurry boundary between an illness and a mere temperament was a result of the fact that many of the symptoms of ‘melancholia’ were mental, and thus difficult to objectify, unlike something as apparent as a disfigurement or wound. The theory of the humours morphed into psychology and physiognomy, with particular traits or appearances associated with each temperament.

Melancholy was aligned with ‘the lispings, the bald, the stuttering and the hirsute’, and ‘emotional disturbances’ were considered as indicators of ‘mental melancholy’.<sup>10</sup> Hippocrates in his *Aphorismata*, or ‘Aphorisms,’ in 400 BC noted, ‘Constant anxiety and depression are signs of melancholy.’ Two centuries later the physician Galen, in an uncharacteristically succinct summation, noted that Hippocrates was ‘right in summing up all melancholy symptoms in the two following: Fear and Depression.’<sup>11</sup>

The foundations of the ideas on melancholy are fraught with complexity and contradiction, and this signals the beginning of a legacy of richness and debate. We have a love-hate relationship with melancholy, recognising its potential, yet fearing its connotations. What is needed is some kind of guide book, to know how to recognise it, where to find it – akin to the Observer’s Guides, the Blue Guides, or Gavin Pretor-Pinney’s *The Cloudspotter’s Guide*. Yet, to attempt to write a guide to such an amorphous concept as melancholy is overwhelmingly impossible, such is the breadth and depth of the topic, the disciplinary territories, the disputes, and the extensive creative outpourings. There is a tremendous sense of the infinite, like staring at stars, or at a room full of files, a daunting multitude. The approach is, therefore, to adopt the notion of

the ‘constellation’, and to plot various points and coordinates, a join-the-dots approach to exploration which roams far and wide, and connects ideas and examples in a way which seeks new combinations and sometimes unexpected juxtapositions.

*A Field Guide to Melancholy* is therefore in itself a melancholic enterprise: for the writer, and the reader, the very idea of a ‘field guide’ to something so contradictory, so elusive, embodies the impossibility and futility that is central to melancholy’s yearning. Yet, it is this intangible, potent possibility which creates melancholy’s magnetism, recalling Joseph Campbell’s version of the Buddhist advice to:

*Joyfully participate in the sorrows of the world.*<sup>12</sup>

### Notes

1. Victor Hugo, *Toilers of the Sea*, vol. 3, p.159.
2. Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language*, p.458, emphasis mine.
3. This constant shift in the development of concepts is well-illustrated by Umberto Eco (ed) (2004) *History of Beauty*. New York: Rizzoli, and his recent (2007) *On Ugliness*, New York: Rizzoli.
4. The term ‘constellation’ is Giorgio Agamben’s, and captures the sense of melancholy’s persistence as a collection of ideas, rather than one simple definition. See Giorgio Agamben, *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture*, p.19.
5. Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, p.258.
6. Raymond Klibansky, Erwin Panofsky and Fritz Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy: Studies in the History of Natural Philosophy, Religion and Art*, p.79.
7. Slavoj Žižek, *Did Somebody say Totalitarianism? Five Interventions on the (Mis)use of a Notion*, p.148.
8. In Stanley W Jackson (1986), *Melancholia and Depression: From Hippocratic Times to Modern Times*, p.9.

9. Raymond Klibansky, Erwin Panofsky and Fritz Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy: Studies in the History of Natural Philosophy, Religion and Art*, p.12.

10. *ibid*, p.15.

11. *ibid*, p.15, and n.42.

12. A phrase used by Campbell in his lectures, for example on the DVD Joseph Campbell (1998) *Sukhavati*. Acacia.

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The Conundrums of Melancholy:  
Madness, Genius and Beauty



Laurence Aberhart, *War memorial #2, Balclutha, 1980*

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## The Conundrums of Melancholy: Madness, Genius and Beauty

*Bob: It's a sad and beautiful world.*

*Zach: Yeah, it's a sad and beautiful world, buddy.*

Jim Jarmusch, *Down By Law*<sup>1</sup>

Suffering and joy. Pleasure and sadness. Melancholy is a conundrum, a riddle of contradictions. The latent richness of the concept grows out of these paradoxes, and three particular enigmas haunt melancholy: madness, genius and beauty. Why should being sad mean that you're mad? Why are geniuses and heroes so often melancholy? And, how can things that are sorrowful be beautiful?

### **Melancholy and Madness: 'A disorder of the intellect'**

Madness hangs around melancholy from the beginnings of the idea two and a half millennia ago. The wavering boundary between what might be considered simply a mood, or a disposition, and a more serious disorder has never been resolved. Science's dominion over melancholy as an illness has long sought to clarify the symptoms of insanity. But melancholy has always remained elusive, evading systems of rigid classification, and the situation becomes even more complicated in recent times with 'depression' added to the complex condition.

Early investigations of melancholy were based on humoral theory, and melancholy was simply one amongst four types of humoral imbalance, rather than any exceptional or alarming condition. Historians of medicine point to concerns, even amongst the ancients, about distinguishing mere temperaments from serious disorders. In the diagnosis of a ‘melancholic’, what was required was the identification of a *disproportionate* expression of sadness, for example in the magnitude or sustained nature of grief, or in wretchedness without a normal cause. This foundational judgment, rooted in the words of Hippocrates (‘If fear or sadness last for a long time it is melancholia’), persists to the present day, almost word for word, in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* of the American Psychiatric Association.

These early foundations of the idea hung together as melancholy travelled through time and space. In medieval times in the West it was in the cathedral schools and monasteries that the thinking on melancholia survived, just as many other concepts and aspects of knowledge did. In this religious setting the original ideas became cross-pollinated, and religious misdemeanours and medical explanations were elided in the explanations of melancholy and madness.

The understandings of melancholy that underpinned the Western medical tradition were added to as further information came from the East via translations of the works of, particularly, Middle Eastern scholars like the ninth century Alkindus (Al Kindi) and tenth century Avicenna (Ibn’Sina). The humoral traditions of Galen were continued in this work. The emphasis was on the treatment of humoral imbalances, eliminating the black bile by bathing



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