Essay Review

WOLF LEPENIES, *Melancholy and society*, transl. Jeremy Gaines and Doris Jones, Cambridge, Mass., and London, Harvard University Press, 1992, pp. xviii, 253, £31.95 (0–674–56468–5).

Melancholy has always been a catchall phrase as universal as the human condition: widespread, if disparate, in every epoch; an affliction of the young and old that has been virtually incapable of adequate definition; levelling almost everyone at one time or another to apathy, sorrow, dejection, inaction, even utter boredom and uselessness—a pervasive syndrome that continues to be encoded, even in our time, in abstract art forms of music and painting, as well as versified by poets and rationalized by philosophers. The depressive incapable of action is not so distant from the suicide in the melancholic worldview. Indeed, melancholy remains so proximate to the incarnate human tragedy that moralists have never known how to distinguish its borders from their profoundest tragic vision: a reason, Shakespeare quipped in *King Lear*, we come into this world crying, as if we already knew what lay in store for us.

The *natural* history of melancholy has been narrated many times, each era, each generation it seems, redefining for itself the essential features of its diverse forms, especially religious, medical, and psychological versions. The Greeks inscribed melancholy (black bile) in a number of texts, though most do not survive, and Robert Burton, the polymathic Elizabethan scholar, embroidered its natural history into an anatomy of the cosmos ("What it is, with all the kinds, causes, symptomes, prognosticks & severall cures of it") articulated at the length of many hundreds of thousands of words. Since the 1600s, "naturalists" have been inscribing their own tomes about melancholy, in every language, discursive mode and key, recently in such diverse scientific books (to mention just a few) as Ludwig Binswanger, *Melancholie und Manie* (1960); Jean Starobinski, *Histoire du traitement de la mélancolie des origines à 1900* (1960); Hubert Tellenbach, *Melancholie: Zur Problemgeschichte—Typologie—Pathogenese und Klinik* (1961); R. Klibansky, *Saturn and melancholy* (1964); B. G. Lyons, *Voices of melancholy: studies of literary treatments of melancholy in Renaissance England* (1971); Richard Kuhn, *The demon of noontide: ennui in western literature* (1976); Henning Mehnert, *Melancholie und Inspiration* (1978); Julia Kristeva, *Black sun: depression and melancholia* (1989), as well as Freud's by now classic essay 'Mourning and Melancholia' ('Trauer und Melancholie'), where Freud articulated a theory of psychic regression for both these conditions through the trope of "the loss of the world".

Wolf Lepenies is a distinguished and prolific German sociologist who departs from this tradition of "natural history" through exploration of the melancholy of social classes. His "melancholic science" is a philosophical construct grounded in the recent (i.e., the last hundred years) discourses of theoretical sociology. That is, if doctors are concerned with the *angst* and *ennui* of their patients, and writers with their imaginary Hamlets and Ophelias, Lepenies wants to explore how melancholy manifests itself in *social classes* throughout history (i.e., utopian societies of the Renaissance, French aristocracies of the seventeenth century, the middle classes of eighteenth-century Germany, and so forth).

While Lepenies knows the *natural* history of melancholy, he grasps that its sociology—its relation to specific social milieux—has been less well understood. Lepenies grants melancholy's anatomical, physiological, psychological, psychiatric, even geochemical existence, but also believes (and he is probably right) that each generation shapes its own melancholy, its own versions of pessimism. This bending or shaping of the modern human condition is an essential feature of melancholy from which no one entirely escapes, one's own genetic predisposition notwithstanding. The approach does not amount to denial of the anatomical reality or psychiatric essence of melancholy down through the ages: Lepenies' treatment of melancholy is rather more complex than the analyses found in modern medical models because of the way it relates the shapes of melancholy's transformations. In the end this is a book about "bourgeois boredom" (a phrase apparently inspired by Saint-Simon) in modern philosophical thought from approximately 1600 to the present, rather than a treatment of its concrete historical manifestations. The product is systematic speculation about melancholy rather than historical appearances, and it is the labryinth of theoretical speculation that fascinates Lepenies.

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Nine chapters, arranged thematically rather than chronologically, deal with social order, boredom, behaviour, arbitrariness, bindingness, and action, all in relation to melancholy, capped by a concluding chapter on the philosophy of Arnold Gehlen, the post-World War Two theoretical anthropologist who developed a philosophy of "the melancholic climate" based on a speculative anthropology of humankind and a doctrine of social institutions. Lepenies' approach sets up relationships for scrutiny, which compel the inquisitive student of "melancholic science" to ponder how to break new ground on this well-worn subject by looking at social classes. The most original and persuasive material is found in the fourth chapter entitled 'On the origins of bourgeois melancholy', echoing Walter Benjamin in his famous essay on the origins of tragedy, and charts the birth of modern *ennui* along the lines of the social classes, particularly the need of the eighteenth-century bourgeois to escape into imaginary mental spaces. So much has been made of the rich and poor in that century of political crisis and social transformation that it is salubrious to gaze at "the middle zone" of society. Not even the fecund Robert Burton could have imagined, in 1620, that the growth of modern pessimism would burgeon when the expanding bourgeoise felt compelled to retreat (in its newly found leisure time) into interior, Rousseauistic spaces permitting reverie of an intensely sentimental and nostalgic type. The rise of modern melancholy also brought with it the maturation of suffering and sentimentality, a new form of human sin requiring its own cure and exorcism through action and work.

The strength of the sociological approach, as found here, is that it sheds new light on modern philosophy and critical thinking from Heidegger and Freud to Horkheimer and Adorno. It opens up questions and suggests approaches that have bewildered traditional literary and historical criticism. Chronological history is never violated—centuries and personages appear roughly in chronological order—but the primary agenda is not to trace the rise of melancholy in Western civilization. It is rather to contextualize and annotate what groups of persons, arranged in social classes, mean when they profess to be steeped in lassitude and depression; hence the sociology of modern boredom (post 1500) gathered against the backdrop of an ever-expanding bourgeois mentality. The pillars of the method rest on developing bourgeois norms and broad categories calibrated to explore the sweeping melancholy of entire social classes rather than to discover what melancholy essentially is, or could be, in any philosophical or heuristic sense. The post-1600 development of melancholy, it seems, is thoroughly bourgeois: bourgeois places and spaces; bourgeois ethics and philosophies; bourgeois texts and counter-texts; bourgeois psychologies and rationales; all culminating in a pervasive modern "bourgeois boredom" that few of us living on the precipice of the third millennium would deny as palpably credible.

The *dramatis personae* of Lepenies' exercise in contextualization are largely Continental, especially French (Maine de Biran, Saint-Simon, Marcel Proust, Paul Valéry) and German (Kant, Goethe, Hegel, the German romanticists and any number of neo-Kantians). Abundant discussion is found of twentieth-century theories of melancholy in the work of Georges Dumas, Karl Mannheim, Hubert Tellenbach, Theodor Adorno, R. K. Merton, Jürgen Habermas and many others. But Arnold Gehlen's theory—that melancholy is constitutive of the human condition and that action, work, dedication to social institutions and systems of leadership keep it at bay—is singled out for its fundamental melancholia *within* a theory of melancholy generated in an era (ours) that grows increasingly melancholic, if also increasingly bourgeois. All this appears paradoxical.

Throughout this treatment, Lepenies harbours a sense of *historical* melancholy (1600 to the present) that is assumed rather than derived, one appearing linguistically in these chapters as "Renaissance melancholy, seventeenth-century melancholy, eighteenth-century melancholy, modern melancholy" and so forth. In chapter eight there is discussion of a counter-tradition, or dark underside, of melancholy in which such diverse early modern figures as Ficino, La Rochefoucauld, Sabbatai Zevi, and Natham of Ghaza are shown to have coped with melancholy as part of their "search for legitimation", but this chapter appears to be the result of an afterthought rather than essential to the argument in any logical or comparative sense.

The thinkers Lepenies chooses may be less significant than the points they adumbrate about the "legitimation of melancholy". They could have been interchanged with other thinkers, and readers looking for their favourite authors and examples here may be frustrated, but they probably do well to

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recognize that Lepenies wants to expand modern melancholy, to enlarge its intellectual spaces rather than close them by definitive prescriptive theories. This is, after all, a social and hypothetical, not a scientific and empirical, study of modern lassitude. It is a book about society.

The endnotes are abundant and always useful, demonstrating the degree to which Lepenies has engaged the vast contemporary metadiscourse of melancholy. A pithy essay on melancholy composed by the late Judith N. Shklar prefaces the book. It must have been one of the last pieces she composed before her death and develops points made in her 1965 essay on 'The political theory of utopia: from melancholy to nostalgia'. Framed as a 'Foreword' it is characteristically "Shklarian" as it reminds us that nostalgia lies at the heart of modern melancholy, and that "the last word about melancholy will probably never be written". Lepenies expands on melancholy's indeterminacy in this perceptive two-hundred page essay by laying the groundwork for "a potentially wider applicability for the concept of melancholy" than was even provided by Gehlen.

The English translation is generally clear, if not always intelligible, as in this pronouncement found in the penultimate paragraph: "Rather than viewing melancholy as an anthropological quality, we should ask whether it is not in fact the condition for *an* action-oriented anthropology, and *a* philosophy of history that cannot harmonize except by assuming the existence of 'underlying' gloom and the opportunity that arises from this stylizing such gloom as a stance one supposedly wants for oneself" (p. 196). Can the original German have read like this?

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