

Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies

Volume 18, Issue 1

2018

Article 8

TRANSITION/TRANSGRESS

All the Black Hole Suns

Erik Noonan*

*

Copyright ©2018 by the authors. *Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies* is produced by The Berkeley Electronic Press (bepress). <https://ir.uiowa.edu/ijcs>

All the Black Hole Suns

Erik Noonan

***Melancholy.* Földényi, László F. Translated by Tim Wilkinson, Yale UP, 2016. 360 pp. \$ 35.00. Hardcover.**

In the centuries since it ceased to be understood as a property of the body—the etymological meaning of its name is *black bile*—and began to be considered an aspect of a person’s character instead, melancholy has cloaked itself in various guises and stripped itself of others, even as its essence within the individual consciousness remains the same. A paradox dwells within melancholy: exposing the melancholic person to depression, existence poses a triple threat—harm may come from within and/or without—and yet that same existence depends upon the ability to turn this position into something more than a way to get by. The cosmology that such pragmatism produces is the burden of *Melancholy*, a 1988 study by Hungarian academic László F. Földényi, now available in an English translation by Tim Wilkinson, published by the Yale University Press. “The idea,” the author explains in an interview in *Three Percent*, “was to explore the dark current of European cultural history that has always been present, even if submerged, pushed into the shadows so as not to disturb the ‘sunlit’ aspect of the prevailing culture.” For the American reader of this fourth edition, Földényi intends “to present an alternative history of European culture,” showing that “The ‘vertical’ thinking which was dominant in the past two and a half millennia has been replaced by a ‘horizontal’ way of seeing the world we live in.” *Melancholy* does not make good on those intentions—one closes the book with the sense that contemporary European positivism remains as hierarchical as European reality, and that European melancholy languishes under hostile conditions today no less than in ages past—yet what emerges from these pages instead is a historical theory

that the Anglophone reading public will value for its wealth of example and precedent, and for its contextual analysis of melancholy as seen throughout the recorded past, in the first such comprehensive account since Robert Burton's 1621 *Anatomy of Melancholy*.

Földényi's vision of history is linear, progressive and cumulative—not melancholic, in other words—and he analyzes the extant record of melancholy people as a random sequence of chance perspectives on a static personality type. In antiquity, the spirit of melancholy animated a mystery cult devoted to Demeter and Persephone, centered on the Greek city of Eleusis, whose rites invoked the interpenetration of life and death. By contrast with the Freudian “oceanic feeling” surging beneath monotheistic religion, Medieval melancholy flowed through schism and heresy and melancholics' estrangement from their God left them invisible, anonymous, diseased and damned. During the Renaissance—as the drive to construct a world of one's own coincided with the imperative of the age, and melancholics were afforded opportunities they had heretofore been denied—it became possible to rise to prominence by creating artworks: accordingly the melancholy interpretation of existence found public expression for the first time in history, and melancholy occupied a privileged position in the collective awareness. Artists of the Romantic period built upon the advance of the Renaissance and militated for melancholy, attaining a leap forward that has not been matched since, much less surpassed: the incorporation of death within the confines of life, and the thrust of life across the threshold of death, both feats accomplished by the early death of individuals whom we might justly call pioneers—not of the frontier, the hinterland or the oceans, but of existence. The modern and postmodern melancholic is a cultist of art, an archaist of the imagination whose way of life harks back to the Eleusinian ritual procession, attaining the vision of freedom as cosmic ambiguity, in the contemplation—not to say veneration—of artworks, art history, and artists. *Melancholy* is essentially a poststructuralist view of the history of melancholy, interspersed with empirical descriptions of the object of study.

The book has two strengths. The first is Földényi's evocation of a number of characteristically melancholic turns of thought. Although melancholy people are “refined, sensitive and ironic, but also downcast, despondent and inconsolable,” they “do not in the least think of themselves as being either ill or subversive,” but instead believe that they are the recipients of “a negative imprint of everyday life,” and that while “drawing aside the veil concealing the truth inherent in poetry, they glimpse the nothingness that threatens them,” and their eyes “are met by chasms, covering all existence, from which, as from so many yawning gullets, an endless and unappeasable deficiency whistles” (276). The book's second strength is the author's conception of melancholy as a cosmology with applications in all fields of intellectual and spiritual endeavor. The world of art, for example, makes a memorable appearance in *Melancholy* by way of an analysis of Jan Van Eyck's *Arnolfini Wedding*: “The mirror [depicted in the painting] creates what one would nowadays call with some justice a ‘distancing’ or ‘alienation’ effect, since the painter is deliberately bringing to our attention the fact that this viewpoint is

accidental, one-off, and therefore forces the viewer into keeping an intellectual distance, while also identifying with it" (131). Further, the author notes how the melancholic condition is related to ethics: "Melancholia was one of the preconditions of bourgeois morality," Földényi writes, but "the bourgeois mentality strove to tame and ransack melancholy following the Renaissance." The outcome of this violation was ennui, an affliction "born in the bourgeois world, [which] that same world condemns and disowns [...] like a stepchild." The relationship between melancholy and religion is examined in some detail: "The evolution of the concept of melancholia in the modern age went hand in hand with the disintegration of the divine order." Finally, the failure of the sciences to engage with melancholy is ideological, according to Földényi: science "hears only the questions it is able to answer," because it "believes in matter in the same way that medieval medicine believed that illness was the devil's work. Faith in matter [...] is a sort of tacit religiosity, a diabolic theology, and it is related to the modern undertaking of pushing God off His throne." The goal of choosing melancholy as a subject of study is not to replace somatocentrism with a dyad whose other constituent is the psyche, but rather to open the window of consciousness to different horizons.

Melancholy projects itself into the negative dialectic, and Földényi's evocation of this turn of thought shows his imaginative vision: "The physical existence of man is no more real than his intellectual existence; indeed, only with major qualifications can one make a distinction between the two." Moreover, the author is at pains to distinguish melancholy from depression: it is not "a burden, an illness, in which the biological being is extensively affected," because "the melancholic experience of fate does not necessarily rule out serenity." Unresponsive to the sciences, and to theories within the humanities that employ conventional definitions of melancholy as a symptom of depression, Földényi's philosophical conception of melancholy instead belongs to a tradition that will be best known to readers of poetry, notably "Il Penseroso" by John Milton:

But hail thou goddess, sage and holy,
Hail divinest Melancholy,
Whose saintly visage is too bright
To hit the sense of human sight;
And therefore to our weaker view,
O'er-laid with black, staid Wisdom's hue [...]
Come pensive nun, devout and pure,
Sober, stedfast, and demure,
All in a robe of darkest grain,
Flowing with majestic train,
And sable stole of cypress lawn,
Over thy decent shoulders drawn [...]
Thy rapt soul sitting in thine eyes:
There held in holy passion still [...]

Later, this exalted state develops into a kind of negative sensuality in the “Ode to Melancholy” by John Keats: “Ay, in the very temple of Delight / Veil’d Melancholy has her sovran shrine, / Though seen of none save him whose strenuous tongue / Can burst Joy’s grape against his palate fine.” Földényi’s argument comports with these personifications of melancholy as a goddess, rather than with the designations of contemporary analytical and experimental science. Given the evident “divine and destructive might” of “a negative imprint of everyday life,” then, what is at stake in rethinking the European inheritance from the alluring and despised standpoint known as “the melancholy interpretation of existence”? In the United States, amid the present climate of paranoia and aggression, the very existence of such an interpretation goes unacknowledged and is treated as symptomatic of an illness if it emerges into the open. By contrast, Földényi’s sympathetic identification with his subject can be seen when he records, in the book’s only moment of self-revelation, that “having fought one’s way through the melancholic interpretation of life, one is nonetheless left richer in experience, if not in knowledge”—a typical melancholic rhetorical figure of defeat, calling into question the value of his enterprise, triumph though it is, by expressing self-doubt in a way that anyone except an initiate would dismiss as either falsely modest or feebly defensive.

In its treatment of human existence as a melancholy proposition, influencing every field of endeavor and shading every event with gloom, this book will be a wonder to students and readers from other disciplines. One suspects, however, that those whose *lives* are melancholy, especially those who have lived to a certain age because or in spite of melancholy, will not discover much in these pages beyond the erudition with which their author cites precept and precedent—along with the frisson that such readers are bound to feel upon encountering the author’s sketches of the melancholic outlook. The timeworn periods of history go unquestioned, for example, as does the specialization of disciplines—which is to say that *Melancholy* is a mainstream study of the fringe. Yet, if it’s true that the melancholic condition is widely experienced but shallowly understood, a foreseeable next step for researchers is not only to show that melancholy permeates the universe, and that melancholics are not depressives, but also that melancholy occupies every part of contemporary society, and that melancholics take part in the practice of everyday life alongside their neighbors. Such a project would require a vision of the simultaneous presence of elements that are conventionally understood as being distributed through space and time. It would also require the corrosion of conventional boundaries among concepts. But it would be worth the effort.

Works Cited

Keats, John edited by Jack Stillinger. *The Poems of John Keats*. Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1978.

Milton, John. *L'allegro, Il Penseroso, Comus, and Lycidas*. Longmans, 1918.