Essay review

The languages of melancholy in early modern England


One could be forgiven for thinking that a review article on Renaissance melancholy must needs revisit some pretty familiar territory. Nearly forty-five years since the publication of Klibansky, Panofsky and Saxl’s *Saturn and Melancholy* it has become a topos for scholars to throw their hands up in despair at the mountain of literature devoted to this subject and to content themselves with citing a few milestones (e.g. the studies of Lawrence Babb, Stanley Jackson, Jackie Pigeaud, Jean Starobinski, Margot and Rudolph Wittkower, Thomas Ruetten, Michael MacDonald, Winfried Schleiner, Noel Brann). Yet melancholy remains irresistible, implicating as it does so many areas of early modern cultural and intellectual life: the body and the body politic; the powers and passions of the soul; witchcraft and possession; astrology, healing and prophecy. And, of course, melancholy (along with her older and younger sisters, *acedia*, hypochondria, ‘nerves’, and so on) was glossed and/or professed by some of the most prominent scholars, poets, dramatists and artists of the fourteenth to eighteenth centuries. Perhaps more than any other single topic in the history of medicine, melancholy – already the site of a rich cross-fertilization of humanist, religious and ‘scientific’ discourses in the early modern period – has attracted attention from across the scholarly spectrum, from historians of literature, art and culture as well as science and medicine (as seen in the cluster of essays devoted to it in *Intellectual History Review* (2008), 18 (1), special issue on ‘Humanism and medicine in the early modern era’). The books reviewed here share a focus on the languages of melancholy – from philosophical to literary, Latin to English, sermon to self-analysis – in what is usually considered its heyday and home turf: early modern England.
Angus Gowland’s *The Worlds of Renaissance Melancholy: Robert Burton in Context* is true to its title, exhaustively anatomizing the learned medical, humanist, theological and political worlds of an early modern text with proverbially universalizing pretensions. This is a dense and dazzling first book that is sure to achieve classic status as a companion to Burton’s *Anatomy of Melancholy* as it evolved through no fewer than five authorial editions. What Gowland says of Burton’s work could just as well be applied to his own, that it displays ‘erudition … both genuinely up to date and genuinely European’, and draws on ‘scholarly resources … largely the products of the Latinate intellectual culture that continued to remain prominent in the universities of the era both across the continent and in England’ (p. 29). Gowland ranges over both English and European sources, from Ficino to Ferrand, engaging confidently with original editions and languages. (Burton himself fretted over ‘prostituting’ his Muse by writing in English, switching to Latin, for example, when dealing with venereal subjects, or when composing a learned tirade against university men whose intellectual and moral integrity were compromised by corrupt patronage.) One of Gowland’s achievements in this book is to reveal the extent of the debt of Burton’s English-language classic not only to humanist literary models and techniques (for example his use of the cento form, as in Lipsius’ *Politica*) but also its dialogue with Continental humanist moral and political ideals, notably Erasmus’s ‘spiritualised model of philosophical erudition’ (p. 19) and neo-Stoicism.

This is not a book for the uninitiated (the chapter on the struggle for the soul of the English Church, for example, assumes familiarity with theological positions such as Erastianism, Socinianism and Arminianism). Gowland’s text would also have benefited from some paratextual enhancements, perhaps especially from reproduction of the tabular synopses of Burton’s ‘partitions’. For all its ambitious scope, though, *The Worlds of Renaissance Melancholy* is a model of clarity and concision in writing. In his first chapter Gowland cuts through the fat of centuries of classical, scholastic, humanist and occultist literature on the humours, animal spirits, imagination, astral influences and indeed the very logic of learned medicine, to expose the muscle of Burton’s medical theory of melancholy. Then, in a fascinating sequel, ‘Dissecting medical learning’, Gowland reveals that Burton’s scientifically savvy textbook, respectably neo-Galenic on the surface, betrays an alignment with a tradition of humanist satire of learned medicine, from Petrarch through Gianfrancesco Pico to Agrippa and Montaigne (associating it with atheism, greed, fraud and even demonic delusion). Burton’s much-remarked inundation of the reader with ‘torrents of authoritative quotations’, and his sceptical aporia in the face of a multitude of conflicting opinions, are shown to belie his claim to be expounding elite medicine for the ‘common good’ inasmuch as he tacitly eschews the pedagogical premises of that discipline.

In his chapter on ‘Melancholy and divinity’, Gowland finds that Burton, far from taking refuge in the ‘relative ideological neutrality of medical-scientific discourse’ (p. 140) as did contemporary physicians who wrote on religious melancholy, plunged himself into religio-political controversy. Paying lip service to Calvinist concerns to keep cases of melancholy separate from those of divinely afflicted conscience, Burton, by including discussion of predestinarian despair under the heading of ‘religious melancholy’, effectively collapsed that distinction and assumed a provocative stance. He
took hellfire ministers to task for terrifying ‘silly’ souls with meditation on divine judgment, and, more pointedly, with the ‘experimental piety’ of radical Calvinists (who advocated torturous soul-searching via the ‘practical syllogism’ for signs of election). Towards the end of this chapter, however, Gowland makes the interesting suggestion that Burton’s argument on predestination was perhaps motivated less by theological scruples than by a traditional humanist animus against scholastic reasoning in divinity. The final two chapters, ‘The melancholy body politic’ and ‘Utopia, consolation, and withdrawal’, reveal the influence of humanist political and moral theory on Burton’s framing of the ills of the early Stuart polity and of the condition of the contemporary intellectual alienated from the sources of power and preferment.

Burton emerges from Gowland’s pages as a moderate humanist sceptic who reads the epidemic melancholy bemoaned in so many Renaissance medical treatises less as public health crisis (or, for that matter, as a peculiarly English malady) than as the sign of a world gone mad, a universal moral and spiritual disease with its seeds in the political and religious conflicts engendered by the Reformation. As it proceeds, in fact, Gowland’s book spirals away from the medical problem of melancholy (which he treats, incidentally, in a rich and learned article, ‘The problem of early modern melancholy’, Past and Present (2006), 191, 77–120) to conclude that Burton’s real achievement in the Anatomy was the ‘flexible and expansive manner in which he applied [the endogenous scholarly theory of melancholy] to his surroundings’, rather than a commentary upon or development of that theory per se (p. 295). And yet, of course, melancholy was much more than a metaphor for Burton, whose own rumoured suicide appears to be foreshadowed in certain passages of his book, and Gowland speculates on the process by which, in attempting to salve his own melancholy with scholarship on the melancholy of the world, Burton may have fed both his writing and his disease (p. 300).

Jeremy Schmidt’s Melancholy and the Care of the Soul: Religion, Moral Philosophy and Madness in Early Modern England explores some of the worlds magisterially mapped by Gowland at ground level, via pastoral and consolatory literature, medical and philosophical treatises, and case histories of (and by) English melancholics from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries. In the core of the book (Chapters 3 to 6) the author tease out the various theological and therapeutic responses to melancholy in early modern England, from evangelical ‘spiritual physicians’ treating cases of afflicted conscience as a battleground between God and the Devil over the sensitive sinner’s soul (although, as Schmidt shows, this did not necessarily mean sweeping aside considerations of ‘organic’ disease); through a Restoration critique of ‘enthusiasm’ (possession of the human psyche by a spirit) by both Anglican and Dissenting divines, culminating in a social distaste for heightened religious rhetoric as ‘impolite’ towards the end of the seventeenth century; to the conversion of the languages of melancholy in the eighteenth century into those of ‘hypochondria’ and ‘hysteria’. There is no space here to review the many authors and cases, male and female, carefully analysed by Schmidt in his probing study. Suffice it to cite the example of Presbyterian minister (and, as it were, melancholi-holic) Richard Baxter, who in Michael MacDonald’s influential view may be taken as ‘evidence for the continued “Puritan” tradition of spiritual physick among the Restoration Dissenting communities’ (p. 104). But while Baxter recognized that
melancholy could be engendered by genuine spiritual affliction, Schmidt points out that he was in fact highly suspicious of complaints of God’s desertion as bids for sympathy or even admiration by ‘mere’ melancholics.

If in the seventeenth century ‘melancholics’ were sometimes suspected of giving themselves spiritual airs, in the eighteenth, conversely, ‘hypochondriacs’ could be charged with using a medical illness label to excuse their socially unacceptable or even vicious behaviour. Schmidt, like Gowland, gives welcome attention in his book to the contribution of moral philosophy to the conceptualization and treatment of early modern melancholy. He brings clarity to the notion that the Renaissance was a period characterized by confusion of vice and sickness (Jean Delumeau):

It is true that early modern writers concerned themselves with the moral analysis of melancholy. This way of approaching melancholy, however, was not rooted in conceptual confusion, but in the fact that the role of the mind in causing and sustaining the melancholic condition remained an open question in the early modern period. (p. 28)

Schmidt’s first chapter, ‘Therapeutic languages: ancient moral philosophy and Patristic Christianity’, provides the ancient backstory for the religious dramas played out in the central chapters. While much of the book is concerned with the theorization and consolation of melancholy by churchmen, Schmidt also shows us some high-profile physicians invoking both moral and spiritual remedies for melancholy. The Restoration experimentalist Thomas Willis wrote evenhandedly of melancholy from the perspective of both moral philosopher and physician: melancholy was a disease, to be sure, but it was as much a disease of the soul as of the body, and it could be ameliorated by the application of reason and prayer. The eighteenth-century physician George Cheyne, obese hypochondriac and author of the popular and much-reprinted *English Malady*, adds his voice to those of his contemporaries who censured luxury and over-refinement as causes of nervous disorder – but ascribed it chiefly to a failure of piety.

Schmidt provides a highly nuanced reading of the early modern English languages of melancholy, especially for the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. His account of the transition from melancholy to hypochondria – fascinating as it encompasses the transitional figure of Baxter, who theorized about the former and suffered from the latter – seems, to this reviewer at least, not quite the full story. While social conditions that obtained specifically in eighteenth-century Britain may well have fanned the vapours there and contributed to a sense of (even pride in) a national susceptibility, the wider Continental context of epidemic ‘hypochondriacal melancholy’ needs to be taken into account. The phenomenon is remarked by Gowland and is found already in sixteenth-century Italian authors. Interestingly, an author Schmidt cites as ‘one of the most incisive critics to explore the moral psychology of hypochondria’ (p. 164) is Sir William Temple, whose works, though published throughout the eighteenth century, date back to the 1680s (a time of hypochondriacal panic also, for example, in Catholic Italy; see the reviewer’s article on a Neapolitan ‘plague’ in 1689 in *Early Science and Medicine* (2007), 12 (2), 187–213).
The religious and also medical writers discussed by Schmidt engaged the melancholic as an individual constituted not only by humours but by passions, beliefs and behaviours, and by social and familial relationships. They recognized, ‘as we are now in danger of ignoring, that melancholy/depression is a problem of the person, not simply of the body or of the mind’ (p. 16). Schmidt demolishes, almost *en passant*, Foucault’s idol of early modern melancholic madness as ‘delirious discourse’ inaccessible to reasoned persuasion and moral therapy (indeed Foucault’s casting of moral therapy as more painful and constraining than physical confinement). It is also difficult not to agree with Schmidt that

the disappearance of the terms of popular demonological psychology which represented mental suffering as demonic affliction was not as [Michael] MacDonald would have it, in one of the closing lines of *Mystical Bedlam*, ‘a disaster for the insane’, but was in fact an improvement, and was encouraged precisely for the benefit of the insane. (p. 139)

While he confesses to feeling uncomfortable in the role of amateur psychiatrist, Schmidt’s analysis of early modern philosophical and spiritual therapies not infrequently resonates with current debates in psychiatric theory and practice; his remarks, in his closing pages, on the extent to which reductive medical language now predominates over the moral and spiritual in the treatment of depression, should give us pause (on the potential of ancient philosophical exercises for modern psychotherapy see Richard Sorabji, *Emotion and Peace of Mind: From Stoic Agitation to Christian Temptation* (New York, 2002), surprisingly absent from Schmidt’s bibliography). Indeed, it is because of the enduring relevance of the languages of therapy – or, to invoke the title of a classic study by psychiatrist Pedro Lain Entralgo, the ‘therapy of the word’ – that melancholy is one of the few topics in the history of medicine where useful clinical insights may still be gleaned from early modern sources.

In Douglas Trevor’s *The Poetics of Melancholy in Early Modern England* reflections on modern psychiatry are rare (with the exception of some theoretical genuflections to Lacan). The book takes as its point of departure an evidently lively debate in English literary studies over the nature and representation of the ‘self’ in the early modern period. At first blush Trevor’s work appears of limited interest to readers of this journal, its primary focus being canonical ‘literary’ authors (Spenser, Shakespeare, Donne and Milton), with an obligatory chapter on Burton. However, as he rightly points out, ‘Histories of “science” that ignore the domain of what we might today designate as “literary” forms of writing mistakenly demarcate as firm and stable generic and epistemic boundaries that were, in the early modern period, fluid and elastic’ (p. 12). Trevor argues for the inextricability of literary melancholy and learning in early modern England, for an awareness of and attention to their Galenic complexions by these scholar–writers, and, perhaps most provocatively, for a significant connection between their marginal status and the manipulation of the margins of the texts they produce. The parallel between self- and textual analysis proves fruitful – even if the consideration given to issues of print and paratext is not quite the rarity among intellectual historians Trevor contends it to be. An important omission from the bibliography is Noel Brann’s
The Debate over the Origin of Genius during the Italian Renaissance: The Theories of Supernatural Frenzy and Natural Melancholy in Accord and in Conflict on the Threshold of the Scientific Revolution (Leiden, 2002). While Trevor may be correct in asserting that Galenism did not influence European poets prior to the English Renaissance as much as it did Shakespeare, Donne, and Milton, one suspects that the complexity of the Continental background (and indeed contemporary context) for seventeenth-century English melancholy is underestimated. The next great challenge for students of early modern melancholy, perhaps, is to begin to reconstruct a more multicultural story, to trace all its languages, their evolution and inflections from the fourteenth to eighteenth centuries, across continental Europe and the New World.

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