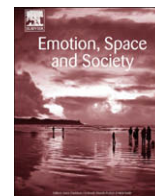




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Book review

A field guide to melancholy, Jacky Bowring. Old Castle Books, Hertfordshire (2008). 240 pp., cloth, £12.00, ISBN: 1842432923.

Ambiguous and ambivalent in shared measures, melancholy is a disarming emotion. Conceptually exposed to multiple interpretations, it nevertheless has a distinguished history, from Dürer's celebrated "Melencolia I" to the films of Andrei Tarkovsky, which attests to its close relation to the genesis of art. Thanks to this relation, melancholy delivers itself from the inertia of depression and establishes a culture in its own right. Alongside this enigmatic history as a muse to artists, however, the medical history of melancholy means that it sits somewhat uncomfortably beside its aesthetic dynamics: is melancholy an aestheticised mode of depression? If so, does this degenerate either melancholy as a mode of affection, or, aesthetics as a branch of melancholy?

It is in the liminal area within this ambivalence that Jacky Bowring, in her *A field guide to melancholy*, ventures. Primarily, the book has two aims. The first is to dissect melancholy as an emotion, exploring its subdivisions, and clarifying its manifold nuances. The second aim is polemical. Against a trend of thought that seeks to appease anxiety and distress through a fixation on the gloss of a preformed happiness, Bowring advocates a revision of melancholy (as the author puts it, "a salvage operation") as a positive and defining emotion, "sought for its sweetness and 'intensity'" (Bowring, 2008: 14). Accordingly, Bowring's book takes a laudable risk in dissenting from the culturally homogenous treatment of melancholy as pathological in nature. Indeed, one of the contributions of her book is to not merely guide the reader through an itinerary of melancholy works, but to demonstrate how these works fundamentally challenge our notions of value and meaning.

Beginning with an analysis of melancholy in relation to beauty, madness, and genius, Bowring explores the paradoxical ground between sadness and beauty through its own history (Ibid.: 24–25). Following Galen's four humoured theory, the reader is led through the occultish incarnation of melancholy in the Salem witch trials, to its synthesis in Robert Burton's seminal *Anatomy of melancholy*, and then to its psychoanalytic culmination in the work of Freud. Bowring's coverage of this history is rich and nuanced. Establishing a role of critical mediator, the author attends to the reductive tendencies of modern psychiatry and science, both of which treat melancholy as a "myth" to be eliminated, while simultaneously reminding us of science's "own mythology and 'truths'" (Ibid.: 31).

Chapter two, "The hunt for melancholy" voyages deeper into the philosophical constitution of melancholy, venturing toward a topography of melancholy's attributes via its physiognomy, materiality, and temporality. Ranging from a discussion of Dürer's "Melencolia I" to the recent embodiment of Batman, Bowring's discussion of melancholy's physiognomic structure is probing and sensitive, drawing together corresponding strands of detail that shares in the spirit of W.G. Sebald, among whom, Bowring identifies as a melancholic *par excellence* (Ibid.: 61–62).

Beyond the face, melancholy materialises in place (Ibid.: 65). Examining the genetic structure of place in terms of its melancholy attributes, Bowring is heedful of the relation between hauntings and materiality, citing Patrick Keiller's film *London* as a vivid example of how "layered histories" can be manifest on surface, yet often symptomatically (Ibid.: 67–68). One such way in which the lugubrious weight of history presses down on place is through ruins, which for Bowring, "signal the mark of time's passage yet the endurance of the trace of things, in the rubble" (Ibid.: 71). Forcing death and ruination to the foreground, the subsequent section on the time of melancholy returns the reader to melancholy's heart: yearning. Incubating itself in the images of autumn, solitude, loss, and shadows, Bowring shows how melancholy's temporality is fundamentally bound with a hypersensitivity toward the poignancy of all things transient. The theme is familiar, but Bowring's approach is fresh, resisting the cumbersome tone of academia without losing an incisive focus.

Chapters three, four and five present respectively an overview of both "melancholy's allies" alongside a "lexicon" of melancholy before arriving at "a blue guide to melancholy," in which the author presents an invaluable compendium of melancholy's cultural outpourings. It is the chapters on melancholy's terminology (Chapter six) and family resemblances (Chapter seven), however, that generate the greatest scope in terms of placing it within human experience. By situating melancholy in a network of affective modes, ranging from *acedia* to *ubi sunt*, a truly topographical view of its scope is obtained. This methodology, which is less linear and more a matter of developing correspondences between ideas, "instead gather[s] up layers and layers of accretions" (Ibid.: 115). The outcome of this constellation of thoughts is that far from splintering into disunited fragments, melancholy, in all its cultural and anthropological differences, retains a unity reinforced by its own elusive diversity.

Illustrated throughout with striking photography by Laurence Aberhart, *A field guide to melancholy* is an important and timely contribution to the study and culture of melancholy. By challenging the bias toward consumptive happiness, Bowring's book is an ethics of melancholy alongside being a field guide to its manifold expressions, as the author concludes on a Bachelardian note: "Melancholy slows things, allows for percolation, facilitates solitude and solace for imagination The *Field guide* proffers destinations for the imagination, an aerial perspective, an overview, a tool for embracing the human condition" (Ibid.: 210).

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