



Seasickness

Boredom, Nausia, and the Self

The image in figure 3, from a Greek pot (termed a white-ground lekythos) of the mid- to late fifth century B.C.E., depicts a person mourning, either over the remains of a friend or, more likely, over the person's own remains.¹ These are contained in the identical pot by the right knee (another lekythos—a mirror of the one we are looking at).² I have often showed this picture to people who are unfamiliar with this type of Greek funerary vase. Their almost unvarying response has been to suggest that the face and crossed arms of the person on the lekythos suggest boredom. Most people assume that we are viewing a male in this picture. They have told me that the origin of the boredom is overindulgence: the bulky arms and chest, the heavy neck, and the apparent garland about the neck suggest an enthusiastic devotee of the banquet scene rather than one of the gym. There are other indications to support their guess. That the person's hair is drooping in ringlets and is apparently oiled, that the person is overweight but quite young, that the head drops toward the left shoulder with a look of tired resignation, and that there is an appearance of intelligence indicate to them quite reasonably “a Greek Oscar Wilde suffering from too many parties” and “fed up” accordingly.

Some respondents have pursued this conjecture concerning the young person's emotional state one step further. They have conjectured that the adjective *depressed* might fit the young person's depiction better than does *bored*. They have suggested to me that there is in this facial set (the eyes, the mouth, the manner) more sorrow and dejection than mere boredom. The weight of the shoulders and neck, rather than pointing to a life of youthful dissipation, might as well point to a disconsolate life that is somehow out of kilter with itself.

The reality is in some ways more surprising. The young person is usually identified by scholars to be a young woman.³ She is mourning. It is not completely clear whether this mourning is for herself or for another person, but the temptation is strong for us to guess that in fact the picture is intended as a post-mortem representation. The young woman is mourning her own untimely



FIG. 3. “Greek Mourning” (fifth century B.C.E.).
(© Copyright The British Museum.)

passing from the banquet of life. The pot on which she is depicted contains her ashes. The pot from which she gazes away with resignation is a replication of this very pot in which her remains are capped. The likeness of the actual lekythos and the figurative lekythos lead most economically to this conclusion.

It is this inevitably implied polyvalence of the young person’s emotions that so intrigues. The lekythos provides a remarkable congruence—as far as the intuitive viewer is concerned—between the emotions of boredom, melancholia, and mourning. It illustrates, no doubt, the vase painter’s intuitive understanding of the link between these three conditions.

This chapter will attempt to illustrate how the psychological insight concerning the nature of boredom that is evident in this picture eventually became a part of the literary or discursive tradition of antiquity. The gradual “interiorization” of boredom (its generic assumption, we could say, of the status of mourning—even its becoming likened to a sorrow without cause) is part of the theme of the chapter to follow. The link between this and the previous two chapters is through melancholia.⁴ Boredom, at least as it was championed throughout the twentieth century, was seen as a cognate form of melancholia. Just as is the case with melancholia, it is sometimes said to have been an invention of the Enlightenment, something that the ancients did not have either the wits or the opportunity to experience. That this is not the case (i.e., that such emotions are not cultural constructs) will be part of the point of this chapter.

The growing link between boredom and melancholia is important in another way.⁵ Boredom has been a vital concept for over two thousand years of Western culture—even if sometimes we have had no idea of what we are actually talking about.⁶ Ranging from dark age and medieval monastic *acedia*, through the “English disease” of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and the French Enlightenment and the *mal de siècle* of nineteenth-century Europe, to the “nausea” and alienation of twentieth-century existentialists, the concept has had a long and powerful history (for surveys see Bouchez 1973; Kuhn 1976; Spacks 1995; Jonard 1998). It is a history of literary and sociological significance (as much felt as written about). Clarification of the prehistory of the emotion is therefore of considerable importance.



In Greek of the archaic, classical, and Hellenistic periods and in Classical Latin, references to boredom are very hard to find. The terms that are used to designate boredom in Greek and Latin are not at all common, they are very vague, and if possessed of an unambiguous sense of “boredom,” they tend to come late. In Greek, for example, *alus* is perhaps the best of available terms. It originally meant something like “being other to oneself,” thus “distracted” or “grief-stricken.” Only in Plutarch’s time (the second century C.E.) did it take on an unequivocal sense of “boredom.”⁷ *Taedium* (literally “tedium”) is the best of the Latin terms, but it lacks concision. Its lexical ambit is far wider than that of the English “boredom” (or, for that matter, of such modern-language terms as *l’ennui*, *la noia*, or *Langeweile*).⁸ It can mean anything from that weariness brought on by satiety right through to an uncomplicated boredom that too dull a book or concert may engender. When it came to designating boredom, the ancients experienced a shortage of terms (if not necessarily of the emotion

itself; all languages have their descriptive blind spots).⁹ It follows therefore that descriptions of the condition must be limited in number and in scope.

A typical, random example involves Aristophanes' (ca. 450–385 B.C.E.) old farmer Dicaeopolis, the protagonist in the *Archarnians* (which play dates to 425 B.C.E.), who is depicted at the beginning of this work sitting in the Pnyx, waiting for the Athenian assembly to begin. He has arrived early. The officials and participants are late in arriving. We would expect him to be bored and fed up, and he is. He announces in verses 30–32 of this play:

I groan, I yawn [*kechêna*], I stretch, I fart,
I don't know what to do. I write, I pull at my hair, I figure things out
As I look to the country, longing for peace . . .

What else can Dicaeopolis be referring to by this yawning, stretching, and farting than boredom? But what is so interesting is that he does not tell us he was bored. Instead he describes what are for us the telltale symptoms of boredom.

Satiety, or “being fed up,” is often synonymous with boredom. There are a number of instances where this may be witnessed. Take Euripides' *Medea* (her play dates approximately to 431 B.C.E.). She seems to think that husbands become “fed up” with their families and then act unfairly. She tells us this in the midst of her great monologue on the role of women in Greek mythical society (*Medea* 244–46).

A man, whenever he is grieved/fed up/bored [*achthêtai*] with the
household,
Goes out and puts an end to the satiety/boredom [*asê*] of his heart,
Turning either to a friend or to someone of the same age.

The difficulty that this passage presents to us resides in the imprecision of the language (imprecision, at least, for people asking questions like the ones that I am here). The verb *achthomai* (v. 244) means “weighed down” or “vexed” or “disgusted.” The notion of “disgust” links it with satiety and, for some commentators, with boredom. The lexical net for this word is therefore very wide. It seems to imply a whole spectrum of emotions that range from disgust through to boredom. Much the same point can be made of the reference to satiety (*asê*) in the next line. The word indicates “surfeit,” hence “disgust.” I suppose boredom is not indicated because Euripides does not have a word for it. But, to be clear, he may have thought that he did.

Let us tease out the two words *achthomai* and *asê* a little further. One other intriguing use of *achthomai* is found in *Symposium* 173c of Plato (429–347 B.C.E.). It occurs soon after the beginning of that amatory tract. Apollodorus, one of the dialogue's chief interlocutors, is speaking. After asserting that he

knows of nothing that gives him greater pleasure than discussing philosophy, he goes on to say: “as for those of you who are rich and monied, I’m bored [*achthomai*] with you, and I pity your companions, because you think you are doing something when you are not.” As eminent a Hellenist as Sir Kenneth Dover (1980, 79) interprets *achthomai* as “bored.” One can see why. “Weighed down” or “disgusted” seems too strong for the context. “Bored” or “fed up” seems to catch the tone nicely. Yet that is not quite what Plato says. How could he have when he had no such word? To translate the verb *achthomai* as “bored” requires, therefore, something of a cultural act of faith. Although it would be incredible (and would fly in the face of the picture with which this chapter began) to suggest that Greeks did not feel such an emotion as boredom, it remains to be stated that at this stage in their language, they had no apparent word for the condition.

The ambiguities of *asê* are neatly demonstrated in the poetry of Pindar (518–438 B.C.E.). In Pindar’s victory odes (and in oratorical literature) the fear is often expressed that a too lengthy exposition of the achievements of the victor may induce in the audience the emotion of *asê* or, more usually, *koros*. The audience’s satiety, Pindar fears, may turn them away from his poetry and from the achievements of his patron, the victor. I think that we in the twentieth century would be more comfortable with a translation of *koros* as “boredom.” Pindar’s *Pythian Odes* (1.81–83) provides a typical reference to this fear: “if you were to speak to the point, drawing together into a brief space the strands of many things, less blame follows. For irksome satiety [*koros*] blunts swift hopes” (cf. also *Pythian Odes* 8.32; *Nemean Odes* 7.52, 10.20). What is the *koros* referred to here? Is this “satiety” the same thing as “boredom”? Or could it even entail, as Burton maintains (1962, 107; cf. Bundy 1962, 13, 40, 74 ff.), “some sort of offensive action.” What Pindar may also be suggesting is the danger that such fulsome praise may rouse the envy of the audience and thus bring hostility against the addressee. In other contexts the result of *koros*, comparably, may be the weakening of the force of the speaker’s argument (defense, accusation, request, etc.).¹⁰ Pindar’s version of *koros* and *asê*, therefore, leaves us properly as undecided on the link between “satiety” and boredom as does the *Medea*.

One may draw some provisional and simple conclusions from my brief consideration of these terms. Boredom is not easily named. It is most readily alluded to by metaphors. As we have just seen, these relate to digestive disorder (*asê*, *koros*, farting) or to the mildest forms of physical enfeeblement (*achthomai*, at root, probably has this sense).¹¹ Such metaphors are corporeal; that is, they are easily and publicly visible. They mark the condition. They seem (despite corporeal interiority) to exist on the surface of things.

That is enough of satiety and disgust. I would like now to look at one other

topos to illustrate my point. This concerns military service. Unoccupied soldiers, now and in antiquity, are well known for their proneness to boredom. Plutarch (ca. 46–after 120 C.E.) is very useful on this matter. His life of Eumenes (11.3) provides a very neat example. In this passage the effect of the close confinement of the besieged forces is described and Eumenes’ attempts to alleviate the feeling of boredom (here designated as *alus*) that was taking hold of his soldiers. The passage warrants quoting in full (Loeb translation modified).

But most of all detrimental to his besieged forces was their narrow quarters, since their movements were confined to small houses and a place only two furlongs in circumference. Because of this neither men nor horses could get exercise before eating or being fed. Therefore, wishing to remove the boredom [*alus*] of those men who were weakened by inactivity [*apraxia*] and, more than that, to have them somehow or other in training for flight, if opportunity should offer, he assigned the men a house, the largest in the place, fourteen cubits long, as a place to walk, ordering them little by little to increase their pace.

The crucial words are “wishing to remove the boredom [*alus*] of those men who were being weakened by inactivity [*apraxia*].” Activity has been for a very long time a standard, if ineffectual, remedy for boredom—and not just for soldiers. But this is not the real issue. It is that Plutarch, writing late in the first or in the early second centuries of our era, unambiguously designates boredom and, calmly, notes its deleterious, but for us predictable, effect on inactive soldiers. This is an acknowledgment that in the passages previously surveyed, boredom seems not to have been possible because, I have no doubt, of the absence of adequate terms for the word. The change is remarkable, if imperceptible. The emotion of boredom, registered but unnamed in earlier periods, has now assumed a banal lexical life. The strength of the change could be underlined in another way. The earlier terms for boredom, as I have stated, were visible public marks for a condition that, for its designation, required metaphors. The term *alus* (implying literally alienation or otherness—it is linked to the Greek word for other, *allos*) is abstract. It is, if it ever had metaphorical status, a dead metaphor. This is evident from its regularity of usage. It designates an emotion that is hidden, private, and abstract.

Two other passages may reinforce the simple lexical conclusions that I have been emphasizing: *Iliad* 24.403 and Euripides’ *Iphigeneia in Aulis* 804–8. These passages were written five hundred or more years before Plutarch. Both passages are instructive in a negative way. They cry out for a clear-cut term like *alus*. Both describe military situations that, on first reading, seem to allude to

boredom. (If *Eumenes* is anything to go by, boredom ought to be expected in such situations.) Yet neither context mentions the emotion. In the Homeric passage, Hermes, pretending to be one of Achilles' Myrmidons, is speaking to Priam. He states that the Achaeans will begin fighting the Trojans at dawn. They have become vexed at sitting around waiting (*aschaloōsi gar hoide kathēmenoi*). Their leaders can no longer restrain them. One might have expected Hermes to express some notion of boredom here. It is implicit, I suppose, in *kathēmenoi* (sitting around). Yet *aschaloōsi* is a precise word. It suggests that the soldiers were not merely bored but vexed—even disgusted—at having to wait. In a comparable passage from Euripides' *Iphigeneia in Aulis*, Achilles has just come on stage and has addressed the chorus. He asks for Agamemnon and seems to complain about the delays he and the soldiers are enduring, bottled up at Aulis.

For not on equal footing do we remain near the Eurippus.
Some of us, being unmarried
And so having left empty homes, here
Sit by the shore [*thassous' ep'aktais*]; others have wives
And children.

The key words are *thassous' ep'aktais*, which are occasionally interpreted as referring to the boredom of being bottled up. I am quite sure that the unmarried Greeks were bored. They were probably also frustrated. The passage, with its wide connotative spread, is inconclusive. If, however, we do encounter boredom in this passage, it is of the simple, first type outlined at the beginning of this chapter. The absence of boredom, thus, serves to emphasize the novelty of Plutarch's *Eumenes*.

A little over two hundred years after Euripides composed his *Iphigeneia*, the early Roman poet Ennius (239–169 B.C.E.) put together for the stage his version of the same legend. The play survives only in fragments, but one of those seems to reproduce the sense of frustration—which we would easily interpret as boredom—evident in Homer and Euripides. It is remarkable how the lexical silence and metaphor persist. There is no clear-cut reference to boredom, yet it is certainly implied. The fragment (XCIX, vv. 195–202 in Jocelyn 1967), spoken by a group of soldiers, follows:

Whoever doesn't know how to use *otium*
Has more work [*negotium*] than when there is work [*negotium*]
with/in work/business.
For a person who has begun a job [*negotium*],
Does it, takes pains over it, and takes mental and emotional pleasure
in it.

When there is a lazy beginning the mind doesn't know what it wants.
 This is the same with us. We are not at home and we are not on
 military service.
 We go here, we go there. When we've gone there we want to go
 away.
 The mind wanders indecisively; we only live a sort of a life.¹²

Should we understand *otium* as boredom? The chorus of soldiers may be telling us that *otium* ("ease" or "a lack of things to do") can quickly become "wearying" (*otiosum*) or, as we might say, boring. Thus it is with them. They go here and there (like Lucretius's rich man in the passages to follow) but cannot settle or derive satisfaction from life (*praeterpropter vitam vivitur*). The fragment is a protest against the indecisiveness produced by a lack of things to do (*otium*) in military life. It is also claiming that when you make a lazy start, you do not know where you are; that if you begin indecisively, things continue that way and a task becomes laborious.¹³ But whatever else these soldiers tell us, there is nothing to the boring point, as there is with Plutarch. Ennius, like most of our early witnesses, is silent on this matter.

Taken on their own, the passages and contexts discussed so far can prove nothing. The knowledge, however, that the contemporary term for boredom was either absent or rarely used and that the mental state was rarely described or unambiguously alluded to allows us to note a marked tendency to ignore the emotion. One could conclude that the early Greeks and Romans of these periods, perhaps judging the emotion trivial, did not dignify it with frequent reference.¹⁴ I suppose that is part of it. But as I have indicated in the two preceding chapters, the mode of registering boredom and related conditions (melancholy and love) was historically circumstantiated. The major construction of emotional experience favored emotions that could be registered and seen in a public, "political" sphere. Such an emotion was, for example, anger, a state of mind that manifestly exists on the surface of things and requires a social setting for its causation and manifestation.

If we were to formulate a definition of the boredom that I have just been discussing, it would go something like this:¹⁵ to say that something (a person, an experience, a way of life) is boring can mean, simply, that it is dull and predictable. In such an instance, one's normal expectations, that an experience provide a reasonable amount of varied stimulation, are disappointed. Being shut up indoors for too long can be boring, for example. It is also the case that people can be as "boring" as situations. In people, an excess of long-windedness, for example, or an unwillingness to vary a long practiced routine is often described as "boring." (A "bore" may also be a person who is judged socially

inept or socially inferior.) Such situations are not usually long-lived. They are usually related to trivial matters. Animals, as it stands to reason, may experience such situations (Wemelsfelder 1985, 1989). This type of boredom is remedied easily by variety. Boredom becomes more of a problem when it persists and when it is generated by more essential matters. It is one thing to find a concert or a book boring. They can be abandoned. It is another thing altogether to find one's work, one's life partner, or one's whole way of life "boring." Boredom in this case can become pervasive, if not necessarily enervating. It can be remedied: remove the source of entrapment, if this is possible. This type of boredom borders on frustration. The great classical scholar Count Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff is said to have angrily thrown boring scholarly books out his study window. His frustration, born of boredom, spilled over into anger. This story may well be apochryphal, but it reflects a real enough emotion.



The sources of boredom are not always easily pinned down. Boredom can appear regularly, as we all know, and it can be as unexpected and as difficult to eradicate as the common cold. Hitherto enjoyable situations or relationships or experiences can suddenly become boring. One can with equal suddenness become bored without a situation or relationship or an apparent experience to generate it.¹⁶ Satiety may be a cause (one is literally "fed up"). The ancient (and modern) disease of *horror loci* (meaning, I suppose, a revulsion toward where one is) provides a famous example of this type. Typically this persistent state of mind is seen in the rich Roman who hurries to his country house only to become bored with this. He then hurries quickly back to his city house, where the same thing happens all over again. It is as if boredom is stalking him. This state of restless dissatisfaction is certainly more serious than that form described previously. This form of boredom, if it is to be associated with humans, is sometimes termed *ennui*. I suspect that it is suffered more by some sorts of personality than by others (Fenichel 1953; Bernstein 1975). I suspect furthermore that it also has economic or sociological determinants (Lepenes 1992; Deleuze and Guattari 1977). If it can be suffered by an animal, it could exhibit itself as repetitive, neurotic behavior (Wemelsfelder 1985, 1989).

Here is how I would attempt to define this emotion. This form of boredom or *ennui* is the product of the interaction of three situations: it occurs when a persistent lack of experiential variety combines with a marked restriction in the possibility of exercising conscious choice; these two factors are then embodied within one individual who, paradoxically, enjoys (or experiences) material and

physical well-being. This form of boredom, therefore, requires a reasonably advanced economy or at least a stable and adequate one. A wealthy urban-dwelling Roman in the first centuries before or after our era might be in a situation to experience it. A monk in his calm, protected, and secure cell might be expected to be prone to it. So, too, might be a financially secure Canadian or Australian university teacher. In humans the element of conscious choice is crucial for this emotional register. I imagine that, except in the case of extreme confinement, animals do not suffer this.¹⁷ I wonder if Homeric heroes, who often exhibit the volitional control of animals (they so often make their decisions instinctually), were also immune to the condition?

For the first unequivocal description of this form of boredom (of a boredom possessing any psychic complexity), we have to wait for Lucretius (d. ca. 55 B.C.E.).¹⁸ This is contained in his *On the Universe* 3.1053–75, a very famous passage. Its depiction of the anxious, bored lives of the Roman rich¹⁹ was imitated later by Horace and by Seneca. Lucretius's bored individual tires of being at home. He goes out only to return again dissatisfied. He hurries from his city house to his country home to escape the sense of anxiety and ennui. But the same experience awaits him in the country. The key lines are as follows (3.1060–67):

He often leaves his great home,
The man whom being at home bores. And he suddenly returns
Perceiving that being away is indeed no better.
He rushes with his nags to his country house
As if he were taking water to a burning house.
He yawns as soon as he gets home,
Or he goes heavily to sleep and seeks oblivion,
Or he even hurries back to the city.

Lucretius seems to blame the unsettled emotions of his wealthy Roman on a fear of death.²⁰ Presumably Lucretius means that the desire for a change of place of habitation reflects a hope that novelty will assuage or distract his wealthy man from this fear of death. But Lucretius's value system seems underlaid by a dimly sensed realization that not just fear of death but also boredom is at issue. (Were this not the case, there would be no yawning and heavy, oblivion-seeking sleep.) Lucretius strangely seems to place little store in boredom as an emotion capable of motivating conduct such as that of the rich man in this passage: I think that he would prefer his grandee to be driven by something more serious. This passage points to Lucretius's unwillingness to accept that such a banal emotion as boredom could cause such havoc in a life. It may reillustrate my contention that boredom was not an affective condition to be

taken very seriously at this time in the ancient world. Notwithstanding that, Lucretius's *On the Universe* 3.1053–75, being such a vivid portrait and one so obviously at odds with authorial ideology, suggests that the emotional state of his wealthy man was not uncommon. Bailey²¹ remarks that “boredom and restlessness were a characteristic of Roman life at the end of the Republic and the beginning of the Empire.” His observation may well be correct, despite the paucity of contemporary evidence. (I imagine that he was thinking of Horace.) The passage must hint at its prevalence. However, despite the probable frequency of this type of emotion, Roman literature of this and later periods makes few references to it.²² That in itself is surely significant. The Roman valuation echoes that of the Greeks.

Two further aspects of this passage require emphasis. First, if we are justified in detecting boredom behind these lines, then the boredom matches well the description I have just now suggested, of boredom as the product of the interaction of three situations: it occurs when a persistent lack of experiential variety combines with a marked restriction in the possibility of exercising conscious choice; these two factors are then embodied within one individual who, paradoxically, enjoys (or experiences) material and physical well-being. That our wealthy Roman believed that he suffered from a lack of experiential variety is quite apparent. Perhaps, furthermore, we may speculate that the societal chaos of this period created in the minds of many contemporaries a perception that their ability to choose and to influence current politics had become markedly limited. But that these wealthy individuals experienced material and physical well-being is obvious. My second point is this: the type of boredom that seems, partly, to be implicit in this passage represents a new direction for the representation of the emotion.

The same points may be made of Horace (65–8 B.C.E.), at whom I will look next. What we would describe as a bored restlessness is one of the key characteristics of his *Epistles*. This state of mind becomes extremely helpful when we come to try to sort out Horace's persona and voice and how they provide linking themes for a number of the poems within his first book of *Epistles*. Horace often accuses himself of a type of fickleness—a proneness to boredom, to becoming “fed up”—which we easily recognize and with which we easily empathize. This is not serious enough to be termed melancholia in the medical sense or depression. The symptoms are not quite sufficiently pathological. Save for the fact that Horace's condition seems to represent a permanent personality disorder and not something remediable by variety, we might wish to link it with the simple boredom. The best place to begin to explore this striking state of mind is in *Epistles* 1.11. Bullatius, the addressee of this poem, was traveling abroad and, the poem seems to suggest, was prone to the disorder described in

On the Universe 3.1053–75 (a form of *horror loci*).²³ This poem presents Bullatius's problems as symptomatic of a larger malaise. Verses 25–30 summarize:

For if logic and prudence, not a locale,
 Commanding the widespread sea, remove cares,
 Climate but not mentality do they change, those who rush across the
 sea.

A vigorous lassitude [*strenua inertia*] harries us. In ships and
 Chariots we seek to live well. What you seek is here.
 It is at Ulubrae, if you have a calm mind [*aequus animus*].

The *strenua inertia*—a synonym for *taedium* (cf. Negri 1988; La Penna 1956)—is certainly a form of boredom (a lassitude, an *inertia*), but one whose consequences are most apparent in the *horror loci* (which produces a vigorous, *strenua* reaction) suffered by Bullatius (but, as the first-person plural verb indicates, the condition is not Bullatius's alone).²⁴ The solution to the problem is the exercise of *ratio* (logic) and *prudencia* (prudence) and the resultant possession of an *aequus animus* (calm mind). The cure is philosophical. It needs to be stressed that Horace's opinion of *horror loci* seems to differ from that of Lucretius. The incessant desire for change, which this emotion reflects, is symptomatic for Lucretius of a deeper malaise, the fear of death. Novelty distracts one from the fear, while sameness is inclined to encourage it. Horace sees his specialized boredom, *strenua inertia*, as the result of a philosophical pusillanimity. Horace amplifies the symptoms of his condition in *Epistles* 1.8. Here he accuses himself, famously, of being *ventosus*. The word means “windy,” but its significance is “fickle” or “easily bored.” (It is no admirable condition, as we learn from the use of *ventosus* of the plebs at *Epistles* 1.19.37.) At *Epistles* 1.8.11–12 Horace provides the vigorous self-condemnation that uses the adjective *ventosus*.

What harms me I follow; I run from what I believe helps.
 At Rome I, “windy”/fickle [*ventosus*], love Tibur and at Tibur Rome.

In this short poem, however, we come to suspect that Horace's ability to be content with his lot is the result not just of a lack of philosophical conviction but also of his own psychology. More is intended in that than mere autobiography. Horace uses his own poetic persona as an example of the sort of person who is unable to sustain an *aequus animus*. Horace himself (his persona) becomes a lesson to us all: we should avoid the philosophical and psychological conditions that so produce his easily bored nature. Boredom, in this sense, becomes emblematic of why humans so unsuccessfully pursue philosophical solace.

Horace displays his fickleness (his “windy” or easily bored nature) in other ways. He is, ironically, swift to spot the failing in others. So in *Epistles* 1.14 Horace accuses his farm manager (his *vilicus*) of this vice. The *vilicus* longs for the excitements of the city life that he has abandoned for the farm. The dissatisfactions felt by the *vilicus* come in for the same sort of criticisms in *Epistles* 1.12, where Agrippa’s procurator, Iccius, feels dissatisfactions with his rustic lot. We might, at this point, look back in time to the slave Davus in Horace’s *Satires* 2.7, for he, too, highlights such fickleness. *Satires* 2.7 reports a dialogue between Horace and this slave. Taking advantage of the freedom of speech allowed to slaves during the Saturnalia, Davus upbraids his master for philosophical pusillanimity and accuses him of in fact being the real slave. He argues that Horace is slave to his own lusts, his intrigues, his ambitions, his sensuality, and his fickle nature. The basic notion of the poem is that only the wise man is free: Davus, a slave, is in fact the true free man because he understands this, while Horace, though free, is in reality a slave to his own various and inconstant desires. One of Davus’s demonstrations of Horace’s lack of freedom hinges upon *horror loci*, as is expressed in verses 28–29.

At Rome you want the country; in the country the city, you country
man,
You praise Rome to the stars.

Like Lucretius’s wealthy man, Horace is unable to find contentment in either the city or the country.

The most strenuous depiction of Horace’s emblematic malaise is found in *Epistles* 1.8. This occurs shortly after the characterization, just noted, of Horace as “windy” (*ventosus*). Here Horace describes his boredom as a kind of illness, a lethargy (something associated with old age), a *veternus* that requires the treatment of doctors. In verses 9–10 of the poem, he describes himself as locked into a perverse frame of mind.

I offend faithful doctors and become angry at friends,
Because they are anxious to get me away from this *veternus*.

This *veternus*, as we have come to know it, is not quite a state of melancholia²⁵ but a playfully exaggerated form of boredom.²⁶

Horace’s boredom, born perhaps of a fickle nature, is something that is applied fruitfully to poems of a more philosophical cast. Horace’s own philosophical beliefs swing wildly between and even within poems. Horace does not make a virtue out of this habit. Instead he allows this to infuse his persona with life and immediacy, because of its understandably human failings. So it is that of himself Horace states (*Epistles* 1.15.42–46):

To be sure, this is me: safe and lowly things I praise
 When my means are lacking. I'm strong when it doesn't count.
 But when something better or more salubrious happens, it's me who
 Claims you're only wise and living well if
 Your money is displayed invested in posh villas.

This attitude makes no reference to boredom. But we can see now that just as Horace's easily bored nature causes him to move restlessly between town and country (and to upbraid this behavior in others), just as it can cause him to turn against his loyal friends (*Epistles* 1.8), so does it cause him to swing fickle between the extremes of philosophical belief. At times Horace is the Cyrenaic hedonist, at times the indifferent Stoic sage or the apathetic Epicurean; at times he is the proud and unbending Cynic, at times the accommodating Peripatetic. The unity in all this change is in the fickleness of Horace's character, his easily bored inability to stay with one set of beliefs. What we see here is a philosophical fickleness, a type of philosophical opportunism, it could be said, that is typical of Horace's self-presentation in the *Epistles*. This persona readily matches the psychological fickleness we have seen in *Epistles* 1.8.

Horace has used this strange form of boredom, therefore, not just as an autobiographical self-portrait but as a persuasive tool, designed both to characterize what he sees as a dominant psychology of his age and as a persuasive means to suggest a remedy for this. Such a brilliant use of the persona has little parallel in ancient literature.

The same picture is depicted vividly in *Epistles* 1.1.94–105, where this philosophical fickleness—which we can now see as an intellectualized version of Horace as *ventosus*, as the easily bored Roman—is presented as a type of insanity. Horace is addressing Maecenas.

If a haphazard barber has trimmed my hair and
 I meet you, you laugh. If there's a worn shirt 95
 Beneath my neat tunic or if my toga hangs badly,
 You laugh. What then, when my views contradict themselves
 And scorn what they seek and seek again what they just abandoned,
 What if it boils up like a tide and ill fits my whole system of
 thinking,
 When it pulls down, then rebuilds, when it changes square for
 round? 100
 You think I'm mad */insanire/* in the usual way and don't laugh at me,
 And you don't think I need a doctor or a guardian
 Court appointed, Maecenas, guardian of my means,
 Although you'd be angry at the hangnail
 Of one of your dependants, a friend who looks to you in all. 105

Horace accuses himself here of a remarkable philosophical inconsistency. This is the type of fickleness that I have just noted. Curiously Horace terms it a type of insanity (cf. 101: *insanire*). This is the “windy” Horace of *Epistles* 1.8 again, and I doubt that we would be wrong to connect it, in bipolar fashion, to the *veternus* of that same poem. (It may also pick up the idea of the link between melancholy and boredom to which I have already alluded. *Insanire* makes Horace sound like Orestes.) At any rate, Horace’s philosophical opportunism, his doctrinal fickleness, has its psychological parallel in his self-confessed proneness to boredom and in his restless desire for change. Horace is as fickle and as easily bored in philosophical matters as he is in day-to-day life. Philosophy, like his place of habitation or his relations with his friends, is subject to a type of intellectual *horror loci*.

One last observation may be made on this theme of philosophical “boredom.” Within Horace’s philosophizing is a tension between his attraction to the cynic notions of proud independent *autarkeia* (self-sufficiency) and the philosophical opportunism of the *metriotês* (the mean), the *aequus animus* (a balanced and calm mind) of the Peripatetic, the Epicurean, or the Cyrenaic (La Penna 1995, 243 ff.; Toohey 1997b). Horace is ficklely drawn, as I have already suggested, between the realism of the latter and the distasteful idealism of the former. We can see this markedly in *Epistles* 1.1.70–105, a portion of which passage I have just cited. One sees this, too, in the compromised advice *nil admirari* of *Epistles* 1.6. Here the advice to “marvel at nothing” is coupled with the comforting, if hollow, advice—for the dependent such as Horace—that wealth and power count as nothing in comparison to the pursuit of virtue. These are tediously predictable sentiments from one whose station in life denies him such pursuits. Is this philosophical posture, then, that of one who, *ventosus*, is too prone to the habits of which the poet disabuses us? This tension between unrealistic self-sufficiency (to which the poet aspires) and an opportunistic mean (by which compromise the poet must live) becomes a key theme of the *Epistles*, as Antonio La Penna has so brilliantly illustrated (1995, 243 ff.). It exists in an at times uneasy relationship between the dependent Horace and the independent “great” to whom he writes and upon whom he depends. It can, furthermore, mark the relation between poems as well as between sections within single poems. It notably marks the sequence of *Epistles* 1.16, 1.17, and 1.18. Remarkably we hear the advice of 1.17 and 1.18 (both poems on how to cut one’s cloth according to the wishes of one’s *patronus*) immediately after the sermon on *autarkeia* of 1.16 and its advice to live to oneself and to resist the subtle blandishments of others (can we not read Maecenas, Horace’s patron, among these?). It is as if Horace’s status as a *cliens*, a client and a dependent, militates against his aspirations to Cynic *autarkeia* (self-sufficiency) and leaves him with a com-

promised philosophy of the mean, the *aurea mediocritas* (the “golden mean”) and the *metriôtês* (the Greek for “mean”). The tension between Horace’s status as Maecenas’s client, the consequent need for a balanced, calm, and accepting disposition (an *aequus animus*), and Horace’s obvious admiration for the *autarkeia* of the Cynic can boil over to produce the tempered impatience of Horace’s protestations to Maecenas in *Epistles* 1.7.

All of these poems allow us to draw several useful conclusions concerning Horace, boredom, and the depiction of the self. First, the very absence of a clear-cut term for an emotion that is central to Horace’s concerns is significant. It indicates how novel was the emotion, at least how little it had been made the subject of serious literary discourse for ancients of this and preceding periods. This matches the conclusion drawn in the preceding pages of this chapter, that boredom was an ill-defined emotion to this point in the ancient world. Second, boredom, the very key to the distinctive authorial and philosophical psychology displayed in the *Epistles*, is the motif that provides coherence to the displays of the distinctive Horatian persona of many of the poems in the first book of the *Epistles*. It is remarkable, is it not, how Horace has used this emotion to dramatize his compromised philosophical concerns and, at the same time, to produce a persona for himself that, in its thoroughgoing realism, is both strikingly recognizable and strikingly compelling. Just as importantly, Horace allows this persona to catch what must have been the mood of so many of his generation who, because of the dynamics of the politics of the period, had been forced to become what we would call intellectual trimmers (again see La Penna 1995). Third, the type of boredom that we witness here (and in Lucretius) is not quite the all-pervasive and viruslike existential emotion that I will designate as *nausea*. Rather, this affective and intellectual condition occurs because Horace, though subject to a persistent lack of experiential variety and though subject to a marked restriction in the possibility of exercising conscious choice, nonetheless, thanks to Maecenas, enjoys material and psychological well-being in a world that pays at least lip service to intellectual freedom. The resulting disposition, it seems to me, becomes particularly prone to a bored fickleness. Fourth, the *Epistles* aim to produce a type of literature whose force resides in its depiction of a particular, distinctive and isolated individual psychology—this, as I have indicated, is related to boredom. We see this best in the irritable posturing of *Epistles* 1.8. The prominence given to the depiction of the self in this poetry is the product of the experiential conflict that I have already indicated. Horace’s focus on this conflict provides a remarkably subtle ancient portrait of the self (bordering on the autobiographical). Fifth, Horace makes it quite clear, like Lucretius, that this experiential (if not philosophical) fickleness is quite widespread.



Horace puns with *nausea* at verse 93 in the first poem of the first book of his *Epistles*. He is attempting to explain the changeability of most people's views and habits. For this reason, he will not go along with all of the opinions that he hears on philosophical matters, and more importantly, he will not reverse his decision to take to writing lyric poetry again. Here is the context in which Horace's *nausea* occurs (*Epistles* 1.1.90–93).

With what now will I hold Proteus of the changing form?
 What of the poor man? Laugh then: he changes squats, beds,
 Bathhouses, barbers. When he's rented a boat he gets
 As seasick [*nauseat*] as the rich man whom a trireme conveys.

Excessive change, Horace is telling us, is as pointless for the poor man as for the rich man. Both suffer the same outcome. That is demonstrated here by “seasickness” (thus the verb *nauseat* in v. 93): on the sea, rich man and poor man alike suffer seasickness. The poor man's haste for novelty is thus as ineffectual as the rich man's. Know yourself and your limitations, Horace is suggesting, and, poor man or rich man, you may gain a modicum of happiness. Horace knows his limitations. Hence he is unwilling to return to the writing of lyric poetry. *Nauseat*, the verbal form that is used here, literally means “become seasick.” That is certainly meaning enough for it here. Yet, as we know from twentieth-century literature, the noun *nausia* (a variant spelling for *nausea*) is associated with boredom. That secondary meaning works quite well in verse 93. So we could translate the lines as “when he's rented a boat he gets / as bored as the rich man whom a trireme conveys.” Such a reading for the line works perfectly well (and I am sure Horace intended the double entendre)—unless one jibes at the notion of this poor man boating for recreational purposes.

But let us not dwell on Horace's *nausea*. Let us look instead at another description of the condition, this one penned some eighty years after Horace. It is from Seneca. Its content decries the plight of those who find life repetitive to the point of being meaningless (*Epistulae morales* 24.26).

[T]he same satiety for doing and seeing and a disdain [*fastidium*]
 —not boredom [*odium*]
 —for life assails certain individuals. We are driven into this, philosophy itself forcing us, when we say: “How long the same things? Surely I will yawn,²⁷ I will sleep, I will eat, I will be thirsty, I will be cold, I will be hot. Is there no end? But do all things go in a circle? Night overcomes day, day night, summer gives way to autumn, winter presses on autumn, which is checked by spring. All things pass that they may return. I do nothing new, I

see nothing new. Sometimes this makes me seasick [*fit aliquando et huius rei nausia*]. There are many who judge living not painful but empty.”

Seneca’s *nausia* (his “seasickness” or “biliousness”) is certainly a type of boredom. The telltale, if brief, reference to yawning indicates this. The symptoms are a first cousin to those suffered by Aristophanes’ Dicaeopolis. This is made quite clear by the stress on tedium and on repetition (“Night overcomes day, day night . . . I see nothing new”) and by the emphasis on a kind of sensory entrapment. But the boredom is far more pervasive—even existential—than that of Horace. This *nausia* embodies a satiety with life itself, not just with a specific act. It registers an estimation of the worth of life, one that judges it futile.

Some other points need to be made concerning Seneca’s *nausia*. It represents a spiritual condition that has been both corporealized and at the same time represented unequivocally as an illness. This represents a continuation of the Horatian tradition of *Epistles* 1.11. There is, however, no equivocating in Seneca. I suggest that this medicalization of affective states (medicalization requires corporealization) has its precise parallels in that which we saw of melancholia and depression in the instances of Persius’s *Satires* 3 (my chapter 1) and Charicleia’s lovesickness (chapter 2) and, as we will see (chapter 6), in the corporeal registering of time by Trimalchio as an affective disorder. A final parallel will be provided by Hostius Quadra (a Senecan character) in my last chapter.



The noteworthy frequency with which this heightened emotion of boredom, in all its forms, appears in Seneca’s work is remarkable. It points to something of deeper, if of more obvious, significance. This is the persistent inwardness, the introspection, the psychological self-consciousness of Seneca’s prose work. Seneca, in his letters, in his philosophical writing, and sometimes in his work on natural history, is relentlessly concerned with his own or other’s inner states and the origins and ambit of their emotions. (It is as if, in Seneca, the outside world is there only to reflect, mirror, and comment on his and his associates’ mental states.) To a very large extent it is this aspect of his oeuvre, the inner focus, in which he is surely the best successor of Horace, whose focus is on the inner state, the *strenua inertia*, in *Epistles* 1. It is here that Seneca’s indisputable greatness (and modernity) resides. There is, in Roman prose, nothing quite as self-absorbed, quite as obsessed with the interior life—and consequently as wearying—as that author whom we encounter in Seneca’s writing. His persistent interest in boredom, in all its phases, represents one important aspect of

his inward turn. It marks a new point in the registering of this emotion in the ancient world.²⁸

The form of boredom that we encounter here is sometimes described as “inner” or “spiritual” or “existential.” This is exclusive to humans, in a way that the two previous forms were not. Seneca believed that this form of boredom, this *nausia*, could become a life-threatening condition. This type of emotion is perhaps more familiar from the literature of the nineteenth century, where it was termed the *mal de siècle*. In this period it was also considered life-threatening. (It has had a sort of an afterlife in the conditions suffered by Roquentin in Sartre’s *La Nausée* or by Mersault in Camus’s *La Peste*, or by Dino, the protagonist of Moravia’s *La Noia*.) What makes this form of boredom so different to those described previously is its complex constitution.²⁹

In Seneca’s writings, as I say, the notion of boredom appears frequently. Its range of connotations is broad and seems to stretch from simple boredom to a type of boredom reflecting that described by Horace in *Epistles* 1.8. Boredom can become so all-pervasive as to sour one’s whole approach to life. Similarly broad is Seneca’s use of the key term *taedium*: the word can mean anything from “disgust” or “weariness,” through simple boredom, to full-blown ennui.³⁰ Seneca’s perception of the emotion represents something new. Simple boredom is often mentioned.³¹ Describing a style of speech that is too slow, for example, Seneca suggests that the “boredom” (or “weariness”) induced by halting speech causes an audience to lose interest: “for also this paucity and thinness produces a listener who concentrates less because of the boredom [*taedium*] of the stop-start slowness” (*Epistles* 40.3). In a comparable passage (*Epistles* 70), Seneca uses a nautical metaphor. He contrasts the reactions of sailors toward slow versus speedy voyages. Sailors trapped into the first type of passage are wearied by the boredom that is induced in them by windlessness: “for, as you know, the lazy winds sport with and detain and tire one man with their boredom [*taedium*] produced by the slowest calm; another the energetic wind carries along swiftly.”

Seneca also describes that *horror loci* that we encountered in Lucretius and Horace. *Epistle* 28.1 devotes itself wholly to this topic (it quotes specifically Horace’s *Epistles* 1.11.27 but expands, in Stoic fashion, on its central idea). The opening couple of sentences of the letter are indicative of the theme of the whole: “are you surprised . . . that after such long travel and so many changes of scene you have not been able to shake off the gloom and heaviness [*tristitiam gravitatemque*] of your mind? You need a change of soul rather than a change of climate.” The theme is repeated with variations in the *Consolation to Helvia* (12.3.4), where Seneca refers to the extremes to which the rich will go to avoid *taedium*. In this case they vary their bored lives by imitating the poor:

“it isn’t the times or a shortage of space that makes them act like the poor; they choose certain days, when boredom [*taedium*] with wealth has got hold of them, on which they eat on the ground and, with the silver and gold plate removed, use pottery.”³² Somewhat the same theme is repeated in *Epistles* 18.7, where the rich are referred to as attempting to escape *taedium* through luxury. So we hear, “you need not think that I mean meals like Timon’s, or “paupers’ huts,” or anything else at which wealth plays because of boredom [*taedium*] with riches.”

Boredom (or *taedium* as Seneca usually terms it) can spoil a whole life. The predicament described in *Epistle* 28 was very close to this. The invasive *taedium* outlined in *Epistle* 24 seems stronger again. It can be so powerful as to lead to suicide.³³ We have already noted this in *Epistle* 24.26: observe that in this passage the word *taedium* does not appear.³⁴ It is replaced by *satietas*, *fastidium*, and, most remarkably, *nausia*.³⁵ In that already quoted passage, Seneca’s portrait of boredom has taken the pervasive, souring emotion of Lucretius and Horace to its logical extreme. This boredom has become so severe that it influences all portions of life. The victim is left with but one alternative: “there are many who judge life to be not bitter but superfluous,” states Seneca (*Epistle* 24.26). The remedy here can only be suicide, that death wish (*libido moriendi*, *Epistle* 24:25 or *velle mori*) to which, in *Epistle* 77.6, Seneca says the bored person (*fastidiosus*) is subject.

Before leaving Seneca I ought to mention the dialogue *De tranquillitate animi*.³⁶ It is often and rightly cited in discussions of Seneca’s ennui (most recently in Jonard 1998). Written for a young Marcus Annaeus Serenus,³⁷ Seneca’s dialogue begins innocuously with Serenus outlining a condition of irresolution that he terms *fluctuatio animi* (or *bonae mentis infirmitas* or even *nausea*).³⁸ Its symptoms are a wavering between satisfaction and dissatisfaction with his own possessions (1.4–9), between a desire for public and private life (1.10–12), and, in literary matters, between the high style and the low style (1.13–14). Serenus, who feels himself neither ill nor well, requests Seneca’s help. Seneca (2.1–2) replies that Serenus’s “illness” is not bad. Rather, it is like the slight fits of fever following a serious illness or the ripples on a tranquil sea. Seneca continues, *quod desideras autem magnum et summum est deoque vicinum, non concuti* [what you desire is a great, noble, and godlike thing: not to be shaken]. The Greek philosopher Democritus, notes Seneca (2.3–5), had a name for this condition of *non concuti*, “not being shaken.” This was *euthymia* (see McGann 1969). Seneca calls it *tranquillitas*, “calm.” Cicero or Horace (*Epistles* 1.14) might have said that it means possessing an *aequus animus* (a “balanced mind”).³⁹

The next, key section of *De tranquillitate* (2.6–15) provides a symptomatology, albeit one that goes well beyond the problems suffered by Serenus. A

variety of colorful terms describe the illness (most of which do not match the condition of Serenus): nouns or noun phrases such as *adsidua mutatio propositi* [a vigorous changing of one's mind], *cunctatio vitae* [putting one's life on hold], *displicentia sui* or *sibi displicere* [dissatisfaction with oneself], *fastidium [vitae]* [disdain [for life]], *fluctus animi* [spiritual flux], *inertia*, *levitas* [inconstancy], *marcor* [wasting], *maeror* [grief], *odium vitae* [disdain for life], *oscitatio* [yawning], *residentis animi volutatio et otii sui tristis atque aegra paenitentia* [the vacillation of a mind that never finds rest and the sad and languid endurance of one's leisure], *taedium*, and *tristitia*; of individuals, the adjectives *instabilis* and *mobilis*; and the marvelous adjectival clause *inter destituta vota torpentis animi situs* [the decay of a soul that lies torpid amid abandoned hopes].

Seneca maintains that Serenus's circumstances are representative of a much more widespread malaise. It is, he insists (2.6–9), all the same whether a person is plagued by fickleness, boredom, or shifting purpose (like Serenus) or whether they loll about and yawn. To these four types should be added those who flee *odium vitae* through change or, because of personal *inertia* (Seneca is using Horace's term for ennui), live their lives in the same inadequate circumstances in which they began. The result of all of these conditions is a type of dissatisfaction with oneself (*sibi displicere*). This ensues from the lack of mental poise, which ensues from not daring to attain what one desires or by desiring more than can be attained. Thence comes a type of existential melancholy and dissatisfaction, a mental state that nowhere finds repose. There is also a sad and languid endurance of one's own leisure (2.10–12). In 2.13–15 Seneca outlines the various antidotes that sufferers have unsuccessfully set to work against this condition: travel to remote places, to seaside resorts, to the city; such dissatisfaction has even led to suicide.

The remaining sections of the *De tranquillitate* (3 ff.) are of less importance. They present a variety of cures for the condition. Seneca recommends, among other things, an involvement in practical affairs, self-understanding, care in the choice of friends, circumspection in the use of wealth, equanimity in the face of fortune, adaptability, an avoidance of misanthropy, and four final pieces of advice: to vary one's company; to use games for relaxation; to get adequate rest; to indulge in mild exercise and wine drinking.⁴⁰



After Seneca, Plutarch provides the most useful set of references for the notion of boredom.⁴¹ To judge from the occurrences of the word *alus* in his work, he preserves part of the range of the meanings evident in Seneca. There are in Plutarch several references to the simple form of boredom.⁴² I have already

noted, at the beginning of this chapter, the passage from the life of Eumenes: close confinement of besieged forces engendered a boredom (*alus*) that Eumenes felt compelled to remedy. *Alus*, like *taedium*, may also have the sense of “distress” (see *Brutus* 5) or even “depression” (see *Marius* 78). But perhaps the most startling reference to boredom occurs in *Pyrrhus* 13. Pyrrhus, after becoming regent of Epirus and later of Macedonia, withdrew from the latter possession in disappointment at the disloyalty of his subjects. It is in the description of this point of Pyrrhus’s life that Plutarch makes his reference to “boredom.” The passage deserves quoting in full (Loeb translation adapted).

[T]hen chance offered Pyrrhus (who had left Macedon for Epirus in exile) the opportunity of being at ease and living in peace, while ruling his own people. But he thought not offering ill to others and not receiving it from others was a sort of nauseous boredom [*alus nautiôdês*, “seasicklike boredom”], just like Achilles could not tolerate ease . . .

Boredom—to the point of nausea or seasickness—did not allow Pyrrhus to enjoy his retirement. He was only content, according to Plutarch, when doing or receiving mischief. To alleviate the boredom, Pyrrhus launched himself on a new round of military activities, at the end of which he lost his life. Boredom and its avoidance are therefore seen as the motivating forces in Pyrrhus’s life.⁴³ Whether or not Plutarch is telling us historical truth is irrelevant—and we have no means of ascertaining the state of Pyrrhus’s psychology. What is vital is Plutarch’s perception of the emotion. Boredom, like a *mal de siècle*, has become a psychic malady and is seen as capable of devouring a whole life.

For what it is worth, this theme remains a persistent one in Western literature. I here cite a few random examples. Gustave Flaubert, in his letters to Louise Colet, speaks of the “nausea of ennui” (Kuhn 1976). Flaubert’s phrase is remarkably close to Plutarch’s *alus nautiôdês*, which means literally a “seasicklike [nauseous] boredom” (Toohey 1988). This in turn links with the Senecan estimation of life. The onetime classical scholar Friedrich Nietzsche would have known of the tradition of Senecan nausea. The emotion figures regularly in his work, in the *Genealogy of Morals* (2.24, 3.14), for example, and above all in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, where the “dangers of the great nausea and the great pity are among the central motifs” (Kaufmann and Hollingdale 1989, 125). Nausea (estrangement from the human world) is one of the challenges that Zarathustra must overcome. The idea of this nausealike estrangement from the world about (not just from other humans, as it is for Nietzsche) is picked up famously by the French existential philosopher and novelist Sartre. This is central for his novel *Nausea* (1938) and his philosophical tract *Being and Nothingness* (1943). Roquentin, the protagonist of *Nausea*,

experiences a revulsion (i.e., a nausea) when confronted by the world of matter and people. The corporeal revulsion, however, is closely linked to an ennui-ridden estrangement that Roquentin had been experiencing since well before his return to France from Southeast Asia. Nausea, in much the same sense, also plays a key role in *Being and Nothingness*, where Sartre (1966, 550) explains it as “the ‘taste’ of the facticity and contingency of existence.” He maintains, “A dull and inescapable nausea perpetually reveals my body to my consciousness.”

The century following Plutarch provides further references to boredom, just as we might now expect. There is, for example, Diogenes of Oenoanda (fr. 25 Chilton) referring to the fickle and bored manner in which passersby read his work. Or Aelian (*Varia historia* 14.12) singling out the king of Persia who, to avoid boredom when traveling, kept a knife and a piece of linden wood for whittling (cf. Seneca *Epistles* 16.3). These references describe a form of boredom best understood as belonging to the first or second types. A more alarming form is highlighted by Marcus Aurelius. Farquharson, the editor of Marcus Aurelius, argues for the presence of a reference to ennui, precisely *horror loci*, in *Meditations* 2.7.⁴⁴ The passage is as follows:

Do things from outside break in to distract you? Give yourself a time of quiet to learn some new good thing and cease to wander out of your course. But, when you have done that, be on your guard against a second kind of wandering. For those who are sick to death in life [*kekêmêkotes tōi biōi*], with no mark on which they direct every impulse or in general every imagination, are triflers, not in words only but also in their deeds.

The expression “sick to death in life” may be a very condensed way for describing the aimless life of the overprivileged Roman aristocrat of the type depicted by Lucretius.⁴⁵ The vigor of the expression and its doleful context may indicate that we are learning of an emotion more similar to those described by Seneca than to that described by Lucretius.



These increasingly complex forms of boredom come very close to resembling the sorrow without cause, the melancholia, discussed in chapter 1. Can they in fact be distinguished from melancholia (they are not in Lepenies 1992)?⁴⁶ Some empirical research has argued that under situations of prolonged and excessive confinement, the emotions of boredom, frustration, and depression form an experiential continuum (Wemelsfelder 1985, 1989). A caged battery hen, for example, will initially exhibit signs of listlessness (boredom?), then anger and

even self-directed violence (frustration), then finally a profound psychic dislocation that may exhibit itself in such psychotic (or depressive) behaviors as repetitive, even self-destructive, motor acts and eventually death. To produce the three affective phases of this condition, all that is required is prolonged and harsh confinement. An animal in such a situation will graduate through the three levels. The movement, therefore, from the simple boredom to the more complex “inner” phases is to be expected. Boredom, in its most extreme forms, therefore comes closely to resemble, or even becomes, melancholia.

We should return to the beginning of this chapter and to the white-ground lekythos representing the young person mourning her own death. What it is that I have attempted to demonstrate is that the “themes” of this fifth-century B.C.E. pot—boredom, melancholia, and death—gain their literary representation much later in antiquity. The increasingly complex form of boredom that came to be registered in the literature of Seneca’s period reproduces an experience to match that depicted on the lekythos. So it is that Senecan boredom can be characterized in such a manner that it can resemble melancholia, but in such a way also that it is associated with death.

The lag between this artistic representation and the literary representation of this emotion is remarkable. Felt experience, we may deduce, always understood the complex emotions associated with boredom, but early literary experience was not ready or equipped for its representation. The resultant lag has a clear parallel in the manner by which melancholia itself was represented. The insights of the Eumenides Painter’s Orestes were just as slow to percolate into popular literary representation.



Several conclusions may be drawn from this brief survey. The first and most obvious is that the ancients were subject to boredom. But qualifications need to be made to this assertion. Greek literature down to the Hellenistic period lacks reference to anything more than the simplest form of boredom. The word *boredom* only seems to appear in the fourth century. Serious or unequivocal consideration of boredom begins in the first century B.C.E. in Rome, but here it is limited to the less complex forms. It is in the first and second centuries C.E. that a pervasive, destructive form of boredom is first referred to. This is apparent initially in Horace’s *Epistles*, then in the works of Seneca and Plutarch. Boredom in Seneca can be an emotion that not only effects sporadically but also spreads to influence one’s every waking action. It can become a psychic disease. Plutarch, to judge from his life of Pyrrhus, was quite familiar with the concept. In Seneca and Plutarch, therefore, there seems to be the beginnings of

the modern concepts of the emotion. Seneca's instance is especially instructive. He represents boredom as a spiritual condition but, at least in the case of his treatment of *nausia*, illustrates for us a condition both corporealized and represented as an illness. This medicalization of boredom, I have suggested, has its parallels in the cases of depression and lovesickness.

I would like to reemphasize this last point, that we can build this periodization of boredom onto the periodizations that have been established in chapters 1 and 2 for melancholia and lovesickness, through the three aspects of spiritualization/interiorization, corporealization, and medicalization. It is striking that these emotions—admittedly linked, but nonetheless distinguishable—gain currency in literature during the same period. As I noted in chapter 2, these peculiar congruences may tell us something about the prehistory of affective states at least as they are given literary representation.

It appears that there took place in the first and second centuries of our era a decisive expansion in the willingness or capacity to depict in literature the interiorized symptoms of such affective states as love, lovesickness, melancholia, and boredom. (In subsequent chapters, I will show that these changes are to be linked with other emotional mutations.) These changes are connected to the written presentation of self and of self-consciousness. It is quite evident that the changes in the presentation of boredom highlight a thickening or deepening, in the nonjudgmental sense, of the manner by which the self and self-consciousness are presented. The presentation of "self" that we witness as achieved through boredom is far more detailed and evident in Horace, for example, than it is in earlier literature. This is a sense of self (or self-consciousness or self-definition—*notitia sui* as Seneca terms it)⁴⁷ as constituted by inwardness. It is built upon an opposition of "inside-outside," a partitioning off of the self from the world about us. "Thoughts, ideas, or feelings . . . [are] 'within' us, while the objects in the world which these mental states bear on are 'without,'" states Charles Taylor in a different context (1992, 111–12). He continues: "[human] capacities or potentialities [are] 'inner,' awaiting the development which will manifest them or realize them in a public world. The unconscious is for us within, and we think of the depths of the unsaid, the unsayable, the powerful inchoate feelings and affinities which dispute with us the control of our lives, as inner. We are creatures with inner depths; with partly unexplored and dark interiors." Despite the fact that Taylor is attempting to describe a modern experience, his outline could apply just as well to Horace or to Seneca.

Reading from the ancient texts so far surveyed, we may take things a step further. I would like to link this sense of self with the ability to stand outside oneself, to watch, to weigh up, and to react to one's emotional and physical

state almost as if it were other. Anyone who has ever experienced boredom of anything more than the simple frustrated variety will have felt that awful intrusion of the self between, as it were, one's emotional being and the world around, between sensation and volition. The indisputable painfulness of this condition is heightened by an oppressive sense of almost otiose inner self. Boredom, in its more intense phases, is built upon the self's sense of estrangement from the world around it. Perception is therefore directed relentlessly and sharply inward but in a dulled fashion outward.

Such a sense of self involves the extended highlighting of a person's inner mental and emotional processes. It involves not just a partitioning between the inner self and the outer world; it also seems to involve a partitioning between the body (approximating not only the "outer" world but also a person's emotional world) and the self (approximating the "inner," the soul, the animus, the *thymos*, or whatever term is used for it). It is as if the individual stands at a remove from his or her emotional reactions, as if, almost, he or she were alienated from these. The individual watches his or her reactions and feels powerless in their face. There comes into being a disjunction between the body and a person's consciousness of it, between a person's emotions and his or her sense of them. The sense of division is then represented dramatically as, say, the alienation of *veternus* in Horace or the estrangement of *nausia* in Seneca.⁴⁸ Such a sense of personal estrangement may lead easily to the disintegration of the personality. Consider again Horace's self-portrait as a victim of the *veternus* or Seneca's portrait of Serenus. Both individuals seem to experience a turning away from friends and even perhaps their community, as well as a turning away from constructive activity. In some cases, Seneca tells us, the estrangement can become so great as to lead people to suicide. We will meet this type of self-destructive disengagement of the personality in the next chapter.

This developed sense of the self, as we see it through "inner" boredom, comes at considerable personal risk. Consider the sorts of characteristics we might associate with these forms of boredom. Above all, there is to be found in *veternus* or *nausia* (or the *situs torpentis animi*), passivity, yielding, withdrawal, isolation, and estrangement. A chain of other qualities may also be associated with boredom of such varieties. Associated as they are with self-consciousness and self-understanding, these conditions are particularly to be linked with the private; with interiority, the mind, "depth"; and even, in some cases, with viscera. These last two qualities may be less apparent than they really are: for Seneca boredom manifests itself *physiologically* as illness, something within the sufferer that disturbs the individual's very constitution. To detect it, one must be able to interpret (or read) the *signs* of this illness—it is as if this were a *literate* illness. Other characteristics follow: the condition is

associated primarily with present time (we guess that earlier eras did not suffer it), with an urban and individualist lifestyle. It is something to be associated with humans, not with animals. All of these characteristics, not especially dangerous or life-threatening in isolation, are potentially lethal in combination. Rather like the application of hellebore, in small or controlled doses their combined effect may produce positive results: it can lead to an inchoate or highlighted sense of the self and personal autonomy. But, as easily and as we witness in the instances of Horace and Seneca, it can lead to a personal estrangement that can result in madness (and even death). The risk, then, of this highlighted sense of self, is, through its associated estrangement, the total disintegration of the personality.



Emotional states that can be survived as a child cannot always be survived as an adult. What may be normal in a child may represent a psychosis in an adult.⁴⁹ In a child the sense of self is built upon the eventual realization of difference to the world. A rupture between the child and the world about it takes place somewhere between the ages of two and three. Some of us can even remember the trauma.⁵⁰ This debilitating moment of cognitive self-awareness, I suspect, is healed by play—in part, because play teaches the child how to master its environment, how to manipulate objects, how to create things; in part, because so much of play is built upon a pleasurable purposelessness, whose essence is constructed on a disjunction between oneself and the world about.⁵¹ Play exploits this disjunction for pleasurable ends and, in so doing, renders it not merely bearable but even to be desired. Learning to negotiate the gulf between the self and the world increasingly comes to be seen as learning to sustain a social personality.

The sense of loss and of mourning that is engendered by this childhood rupture is most usually lost to memory. It is never lost in the analogies of desire. Trauma is what one willingly forgets. So it is that literature is crowded, if not with representations of this rupture, at least with representations of return to the primordial world of the senses, uncomplicated by our subjectivity.⁵² Hence we have literatures on mystical afflatus and on the pathologies of crowd identification, the myths of the Golden Age or the Age of Saturn, and texts that evoke the possibilities (however limited their success) of homecoming and the establishment of harmony (the *Aeneid* and Statius's *Thebaid* as much as the *Odyssey* and the *Oresteia*).⁵³ Probably all creative literature, insofar as it is a revocation of lost time, is rooted in the moment of the subject-object rupture. Creative literature attempts to recapture what was lost by the onset of language

itself. So the mystic privileges silence (the disarticulation of language toward the primacy of experience). In literature, we invest words with the weight and presence of what they designate. As symbols, they replace the immediate objects of the lost world of early childhood but are linked to them precisely because of their power to designate. By recovering language from its bored, fallen dullness in the currency of everyday conversation, the writer hopes to restore his or her vanished past to its mint condition.⁵⁴

But I am moving too far from boredom and the concept of the dangers of blurring the boundaries of the self and even the possibility of the disintegration of the self of the personality. What I am suggesting is both simple and straightforward. The pestilential power of psychic or “inner” boredom is so great in its intensity precisely because it recapitulates the childhood experience, masked but not forgotten, of the rupture between the self and the world. When an adult, through personal or social circumstance, must once again confront emotionally this utter disjunction, he or she risks reactivating the trauma and, thus, risks the utter disintegration of the personality.⁵⁵