

Introduction

Methinks he is either melancholick, or one of those academick asses

—ROBERT BURTON, *Philosophaster*

The expostulation by Burton that serves as the epigraph for this introduction has often been leveled at me because of my interest in the subject of melancholy and boredom. It has been sometimes assumed that I am subject to the emotions myself or that I am the victim of a misplaced and pedantic obscurantism. I hope this book will demonstrate that neither assumption is necessarily correct.

My main concern is to demonstrate that there took place in the first and second centuries of our era (and to a lesser extent in the early Hellenistic period) a shift in the presentation of the self and of self-consciousness in certain key works of the literature of antiquity. There is—or was—a marked change in the mode by which such affective states as melancholia, love, lovesickness, and boredom and such affective registers as time (I mean this seriously) and even leisure (my topics for this book) are presented.¹ Increasingly, I will argue, they become a locus through which the self and self-consciousness gain vivid representation. There is, it appears to me, a thickening or a deepening of the manner by which these emotions and, flowing from this, the self are represented. The presentation, not just of self, but also of self-consciousness, is far more detailed and far more evident in these periods than it is in earlier literature.² This is a sense of self (or self-consciousness or self-definition, but not self-knowledge in the Socratic sense) as constituted by inwardness. It is built upon an opposition of “inside-outside,” a partitioning off of the self from the world about us. (And so it is with the various emotions and psychological registers upon which I shall focus.) “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 to observe that “[human] capacities or potentialities [are] ‘inner,’ awaiting the development which will manifest them or realize them in a public world.” So it is in this period, but at a cost.

We tend to associate such a presentation of self with recent, post-Enlightenment literary and social experience (e.g., Porter 1997; Mascuch 1997). Part of the purpose of this book (as was the case for Golden and Toohey 1997) is to demonstrate the comparability of this novel experience between its ancient and modern literary representations. To this end I have adduced a number of parallels between the later ancient and modern depiction of emotions such as those already noted—melancholia, boredom, lovesickness, suicidal urges, and the experience of time. The modern parallels for these emotions and for the presentation of self through them are drawn from a promiscuous body of material: novels, nonfiction books, newspapers, art, and ethnological reports. I have used a very broad range of evidence both modern and ancient: Greek and Roman prose and verse authors, Greek and Roman painting, modern prose and painting, and modern newspapers, magazines, and television. As Robert Burton might have objected, the resultant effect may seem at times to produce a “rhapsody of rags gathered together from several dunghills.” Notwithstanding such colorful objections, the citation of such material seemed to me to be the best way to go about demonstrating sameness. The range of evidence is justified because I am trying to demonstrate the similarities between the ancient and modern depictions of the various registers of the sentiments or sentimental registers surveyed in this book. In this way I intend to illustrate that these conditions were not recent inventions of periods such as the Enlightenment. How better can one illustrate parallel responses to similar stimuli than by appeal to a wide range of modern parallels?

To insist upon this sameness as it relates to the emergence and maintenance of human affectivities and psychological registers, as they are depicted in ancient and modern cultural and literary experience, is to insist these are not specific cultural or social artifacts. At any rate, I have demonstrated the common traits that are shared and exhibited by melancholia, boredom, lovesickness, monkish acedia, the perception and experiencing of time and leisure, and even the drive to do away with oneself. I have also looked briefly at a variety of contagious emotional states, such as the use of the evil eye, “boning,” and assault by voodoo. In doing so I have attempted to show how they fit within a single experiential template. Still other matters, such as literacy, utopianism, and notions of the Golden Age, are mentioned in passing. My conclusions are that the emotional conditioning to be associated with these topics and registers exhibits a sameness as it relates one to another and through time. The responses embodied in these topics and registers are shared and even predictable. They are capable of being mapped through time, almost in a structuralist fashion.

Despite this commonality, a degree of periodization is possible for the charting of the currency of the different forms taken by these conditions. I indicated

the existence of this periodization at the very outset of this introduction. Where such a periodization of the representation of emotions and of the self is possible, this seems to exist only in the simplest of senses. Thus, through time we see a simple alternation—or better perhaps, an evolutive progress—between apparent polar opposites: a movement from or between activity and passivity, body and mind (interiority), complicity and estrangement, assertion and yielding, complicity and isolation, participation and withdrawal, public and private, the mark and the sign, surface and depth, lack of control and control, and so forth. It will be my suggestion that this evolutive movement is evident in each of the affective registers treated or mentioned within this book. Thus they relate to the mapping of the self. In fact, the relations between these emotional states and their seemingly oscillating movements can almost be mapped. It is, then, partly through the movement from one set of these qualities to the other that I will attempt to establish an approximate periodization for the literary representation (the discursive representation) of emotions and of the self within the periods of the ancient world surveyed in this book.

In this book, as I have stated, I argue that there took place in the first and second centuries of our era (and to a lesser extent during the Hellenistic period) a shift in the presentation of the self in a number of key works of antiquity. This claim raises the issue of the recurrent problem, for historians of psychology and psychiatry, of whether an emotional state or sentiment is more prominently mentioned and discussed and defined in a particular era and whether this emotional state or sentiment is in fact more prevalent in that era.

To a large extent, my evidence is inconclusive. Most of the ancient witnesses that I will present are derived from literary texts. The evidence is essentially linguistic and therefore skewed by a variety of historical constraints: by genre, above all, but also by the period in which the form was used and by its host language's current linguistic resources, by the decorum of the language form itself, and even by the style of the language itself (Greek or Latin) in its regional and periodical base, not to mention the constraints under which individual authors composed. I have attempted to find both diachronically and synchronically parallel passages and utterances. The evidence that I present therefore tells us more, strictly speaking, about language (or discourse) than about real life. To be honest, I think that I must at least initially remain with that position, that I am in the first instance producing a conclusion that relates primarily to language or discourse. Having said this, however, my suspicion is that the increased frequency of usage in various periods points to a greater prevalence in real life.

How can this be justified? In chapter 1, I will argue that melancholia was understood in most popular ancient literature as an angry illness. This was largely

the case until the middle of the first century of our era. At that point popular literature began to take an interest in melancholia of a depressive form (a type that had been long acknowledged by medical writers). This is what we understand by the term *melancholia*. Does this suddenly increased interest in depressive melancholy point to an increased prevalence of the condition in real life? Conclusions become more possible if we survey other affective conditions. The registering of the response to erotic infatuation, which I will survey in chapter 2, follows a historical trajectory seeming to match that of melancholia. In popular literature down until the middle of the first century of our era, frustrated erotic infatuation produces an active or violent reaction, that which we could term mania. Subsequently the reaction privileged in popular literature is a depressive one, of the passive and fretful character that we associate with lovesickness. Boredom, the subject of my third chapter, appears to evince a close relationship to the pattern for which I argue in the first two chapters. As a passive, named, and “spiritualized” condition, it gains real prominence in the middle of the first century of our era.

The change taking place here is probably not so much to be related to melancholia, lovesickness, or boredom proper but, rather, as I have indicated at the beginning of the introduction, to a shift in the presentation of the self and self-consciousness in a number of key works of ancient literature. There was a thickening or deepening of the manner by which the emotions I have mentioned were described, and with this came a far greater stress on interiority and passivity.³

My fourth chapter looks at the famous disease of monks’ *acedia*, a form sometimes of melancholia, sometimes of boredom. Its symptoms match those outlined in chapters 1 and 3. Two aspects are of special interest in the case of *acedia*. First is the viral-like manner by which this illness was transmitted. One could literally catch this illness that closely resembled melancholia or boredom. Second, this illness has sufficient historical testimony to allow us to recognize that we are here dealing not with discourse but with real life. So what does this infection tell us about melancholia, lovesickness, and boredom? First, the striking resemblance between *acedia* and these conditions demonstrates the possibility and likelihood of a viral fashion of transmission for the conditions surveyed in chapters 1 through 3 and, relatedly, for this new mode of understanding the self. Second, the historical veracity of the existence of *acedia*, its transcendence of mere discourse, suggests to me that the same could be said for the new forms of melancholia, lovesickness, and boredom. We can, therefore, answer tentatively the historical question posed earlier in this introduction. In the case of the sentiments highlighted in chapters 1 through 3, their prominent mention should be equated with their prominent appearance in real life.

The affective registers surveyed in chapters 5 through 7 reinforce the conclusions that I have just put forward. Self and self-awareness seem to be registered in much the same way in reflections on suicide, time, and passing time (leisure) as in the cases of melancholia, lovesickness, and boredom. New modes of registering and reflecting on suicide, time, and leisure became prominent, I will argue, in the first century of our era. These reflect upon the presentation of self and, in its attendant vocabulary, are reliant on a language that underscores individual passivity and interiority. I have no doubt that we are here dealing with more than just discourse. The variety of the modes by which this new manner of representing the self is evident suggests to me that real life is at issue here.

Having said all of this, perhaps now I might be allowed one caveat. My periodization and my analysis aim to highlight tendencies, not rock-graven truths. Exceptions may always be found to the patterns and mappings and stratigraphies proposed here. These exceptions cannot be said to invalidate discursive realities.⁴ I should also note, furthermore, that my approach to history is open-ended, even experimental. I would not wish to see what is an essentially heuristic and analytic distinction (a model more than a set of rules) transformed into an ill-founded historical dogma. Criticisms that treat my suggestions as such will miss the point.⁵

It is with some hesitation that I use the ugly, amorphous, and modish term *self* within the argument of this book.⁶ I can think of no other adequate term. What makes this so difficult is that the “self” is so much a subject of debate in philosophical and political theory and in psychoanalytical circles (Alford 1991; Taylor 1992; Kohut 1971, 1977, 1985).

The debate can be as bewildering as it can be wearying. Definitions can veer wildly between two ends of a spectrum. At the one end is the apparently reasonable assumption that the self is a form of individual consciousness that uses “categories such as resemblance, succession, and causation, that provide the hidden thread holding discrete experience together” (Alford 1991, 4); at the other is Lacan’s belief (1977) that “what we take to be the self is actually a symptom of our inability to accept our inauthenticity” (Alford 1991, 4). These two poles are mediated by a concept of the “social self,”⁷ one that is constructed by “(1) how we imagine we appear to the other; (2) how we imagine the other judges us; and (3) pride or mortification as a consequence of number 2” (Alford 1991, 6; see too Baumeister 1986).

There are complications. The understanding of “self” will vary, depending on whether one is attempting to register and generalize upon one’s own sense of self or that of another.⁸ Registering that of another is perhaps easier: one looks in another person for a certain habitual style, attitude, “voice,” or emotional

response—character in short.⁹ Registering one’s own sense of self is more tricky. I suppose that the simplest way to think of this is to say that such a sense of identity (or self, or style, or voice, or character) is built on memory and the continuity it implies for potentially discrete experience.

What is memory? It, too, depends on your beliefs. In the most plain of understandings, it is consciously remembering the past and, from construing this, establishing a personal, mental continuity that holds “discrete experience together.” A Freudian would want to add subconscious memory to this suggestion; a Marxist, historical and social forces; a Pythagorean, the inherited soul; a Foucauldian, discourse. All of these, if they have any phenomenological validity, may modify conscious recollection and, with this, the construction of self.

Were we, however, to focus further on this simple sense of personal self, that built on conscious memory, experience would suggest that it is not something that can survive the vicissitudes of memory. Illness, alcohol, strokes, senility, Alzheimer’s disease, trauma, severe depression, drinking at the river Lethe, and many other comparable events both actual and metaphorical can destroy memory. Does this take the self with it? I would say yes. My mother, for example, had for my family and me the traces of her “self” or character after she had fallen victim to multiple infarct dementia. From my mother’s point of view, however, she clearly had no sense of self as she swiftly lost her ability to recognize us and to recall her past. It had vanished as her brain came sadly to resemble Swiss cheese.¹⁰

The “self” that I want to look at in this book is a very simple thing.¹¹ It is a personal self and relates to our perception of ourselves as autonomous beings, as creatures set apart from others and from the physical world.¹² This sense of separateness is not something that all creatures possess. Small children do not seem to possess this. Freud, Piaget, and even Lacan have described this childish condition more or less concretely.¹³ Many people (and I count myself among them) can recall the astonishing childhood insight that they were not part and parcel of the world around, that they had a separate existence. The very old can gradually lose this sense of separateness. Many animals, householders such as dogs and cats, can have little sense of this at all. Watch them.

Mental disease can create havoc with this human sense of separateness, by blurring dangerously the *boundaries of the self*. I could best explain what I mean by this blurring of boundaries by reference to mania and depression, on which two topics I focus much in this book. In the former state the individual easily loses a sense of himself or herself as an entity separate from the world about. There is a sort of a catastrophic communion between the individual and the world. The boundaries of the self expand outward and can become wholly blurred. We could compare the condition of the opposite pole, depression.

Here the individual becomes so drawn in on himself or herself that the outside world begins to cease to exist as a separate entity. Thus ensues a type of autistic state. The boundaries are set dangerously high but are no less blurred.

One should not confuse this form of self-awareness with the type of moral or philosophical self-knowledge urged upon us by the precept “Know thyself” or by Greek admonitions concerning the worth of the unexamined life. Nor should my use of the term *self* be confused with that relating to the *representation* of the self—in the autobiographical mode by which we represent ourselves and our apparent identity to the world (our race, gender, sexuality; our personality or “voice” or character—the normally visible *signs* of who we are) (see Mascuch 1997; Porter 1997). That “self” resembles our particular personal “signature.” Scholars such as Haijo Westra (2001) or Brian Stock (1994; see too Cary 2000) suggest that the appearance of this kind of self is very late in ancient literature. They associate this with Augustine’s *Confessions*. Literature to that point was dominated by topic, by a presentation of self that was conditioned more by generic constraint and even discourse than by a desire for autobiographical verisimilitude.

The “self” with which I am concerned is far less specific. I am using the term, rather, in the sense of “self-consciousness,” as a sense of oneself as a sentient being, separate from those about. Such a sense of self is built on a realization that what matters is within us. It is built finally on a sense of alienation from others and from the world. Such a sense of self is not shared by all creatures. As I have noted, observe your dog or cat (on most occasions), or your very young,¹⁴ or many of your very old.

When such a registering of self is apparent in literary texts, it is built upon an opposition of “inside-outside,” a partitioning off of the self from the world about. We could speculate that the sense of self evident in such texts may evince a standing outside oneself, a concern almost to watch, to weigh up, and to react to one’s emotional and physical state almost as if it were another. Such a representation of self may involve the highlighting of an individual’s inner mental processes. It may involve not just a partitioning between the inner self and the outer world but also a partitioning between the body (approximating the outer world) and the self (approximating the inner world). It is as if the subject stands at a remove from his or her emotional reactions. The subject watches his or her reactions and may feel powerless in their face. There emerges a disjunction between the body and a person’s consciousness of it. It is for this reason that I have made so much of Hostius Quadra in my final chapter in this book.

The sense of self I will discuss herein is built on, as I have stated, boundaries. These boundaries between the self and others and the world are not

achieved with ease. Throughout one's life, they require constant renegotiation and recalibration.¹⁵ In the first part of this book, I will demonstrate how in ancient literary experience, these boundaries could be blurred or even destroyed or could seem not to exist at all. I will illustrate the suffering that can result from the blurring of these boundaries. (So in the first four chapters of this book, I will illustrate how a variety of psychological conditions—melancholia, boredom, lovesickness, and acedia—can lead to the breakdown of the self and can lead an individual even to death.) In the second half of this book, I will illustrate how these boundaries, when threatened, can be remapped, renegotiated, and reformulated. (So, by examining some ancient experiences of suicide, time, and leisure, I will illustrate how the self can be shored up against disintegration, how it can, in the face of psychological trauma, be reformulated.) I will suggest that this process of renegotiation takes place through a self-assertion based especially upon an acceptance of alienation and estrangement. The psychological reintegration of the self is achieved through an acceptance of estrangement, or to put it another way, an acceptance of the slippery relationship between a person's "inner" and "outer" (almost words and things). This is not, I must admit, a very postmodern conclusion to reach. As good a critic of classical literature as David Wiles (1997, 14) maintains, following Lacan and others, that the self is fragmented and, in this sense, unstable. I agree with the latter definition, though not perhaps in the way meant by such Lacanians. As to the former, the protagonists I study in this book establish, almost by subterfuge, rock-solid psyches, mostly, I should emphasize, by complaining about their psychic fragility. Wiles also suggests that the self is "compounded of a series of discursive networks."¹⁶ That this cannot be the case (and I really do wish it were the case) is illustrated again and again by the experiential sameness of reactions produced by Australian Aboriginals and in the lovesickness of Sappho, Charicleia, and Chaereas. It is illustrated above all by acedia, as I survey it in chapter 4. What can I say? The ego is autonomous and highly developed. The self is the product of pain and alienation and a product of total otherness from family, from community, and, paradoxically, even from the self itself. It is defined by the chasm, enforced on a child at a very young age, between the individual and the world about. The sense of self, at least the sense of self exhibited by the characters analyzed in this book, is permanent and durable and is formulated from a basic set of constraints. It makes itself felt in a standard set of modalities. There is, I will show, neither anything terribly new nor anything terribly fragmented about the self.

One of the more unexpected conclusions of this mode of argument is that a measure of depression is as inevitable as it is good for you. That may sound like an offensive conclusion to the many sufferers of this condition. Yet the ad-

vantages provided by the self-awareness bestowed by a modicum of depression will become apparent. At least in the realms surveyed within this book, especially in chapters 5 through 7, it seems to provide a measure of protection against the sickness brought on by the blurring of the boundaries of the self. I have argued in chapter 8 that self-awareness is built on a sense of distance from oneself, on a capacity to observe oneself. This is a type of alienation that is tantamount to mild depression (can it be any other way?). I suggest in that chapter, furthermore, that should the distance become too great, the risk run represents a type of psychological disintegration to be associated with depression. Should the gulf become too narrow, even negligible, the risk run is that of mania and autism. Self-awareness, a concomitant of mild melancholy, seems, then, to guard against the dangers of suffering major reactive depression or mania (or to put it in other words, destructive inaction versus unthinking and destructive reaction). Self-awareness, I am saying, rests on the erection of boundaries between the self and others, between the self and the physical world. The alienation resulting from this is viscerally painful, but it does highlight the need for psychological and attitudinal vigilance. Instinct, thus, is controlled only by these boundaries, I believe.¹⁷

I have, like any number of Australians before me, been forced to work for a considerable time in geographical isolation. It follows that this is a more personal book than it might have been otherwise. It also follows that I have fewer deep personal and institutional obligations than might be expected. It is, therefore, with all the more feeling that I must acknowledge those who have helped me. My particular thanks are owed to Professors Mark Golden, David Konstan, Elaine Fantham, and Emanuele Narducci and to Mr. Peter Dale, who between them read most of an earlier draft of the manuscript. Peter Dale allowed me to print his translations of the poetry of Gioacchino Belli. I owe especial thanks to my daughter, Kate, for alerting me to the Eumenides Painter's Orestes, for stressing to me the importance of the paintings of Giorgio de Chirico, and for collaborating with me on the appendix related to his paintings. I also thank Professor Ian Worthington, Dr. Alan Treloar, Professor David Rankin, Dr. Hanne Sigismund Nielsen, Dr. John Dearin, Professor Martin Kilmer, Dr. Tom Hillard, Professor David Sansone, Dr. Suzanne McAlister, Dr. Françoise Wemelsfelder, and Dr. John Vallance. My former colleagues Rob Baker, Minor Markle, Roger Pitcher, Iain Spence, and Greg Stanton listened to me talk about this topic for a number of years. I extend to them my gratitude for their patience and help. Brennan Wales helped me, again and again, with Italian. Various people have provided me with reading material or answered specific queries: Dr. Joan Booth, Professor Beryl Rawson, Professor Herwig Maehler, Professor Sandra Citroni Marchetti, Professor Mario Citroni, Professor Martin Cropp,

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