FOREWORD *Alberto Manguel*

The notion that the melancholic temperament is a characteristic of the creative mind has its roots in a fragment ascribed to Aristotle, or, rather, to the Aristotelian school. Throughout the centuries, especially in the West, this notion acquired both positive and negative connotations and was explored by relating it to somatic causes, psychic inclinations, and spiritual choices, and as a reaction to certain natural or cultural environments. The variety of such ascriptions (explored in their astonishingly vast range in László Földényi's *Melancholy*) is indicative of the notion's lasting attraction. From Aristotle on (and probably long before), philosophers, artists, psychologists, and theologians have attempted to find in the almost indefinable state of melancholia the source of the creative impulse, and even perhaps that of thought itself. Every study of melancholia (notably *Saturn and Melancholy* by Raymond Klibansky, Erwin Panofsky, and Fritz Saxl, but also legions more) is, in some sense, a reflection on the intellectual act itself.

It could be said that every one of Földényi's books is a reflection on that same subject. A specialist in aesthetics and artistic theories, Földényi (who was born in Hungary in 1952) is also an essayist and philologist. His numerous books include studies of the young Georg Lukács, the Romantic painter Caspar David Friedrich, Goya, and the reading of works of art (*The Veil of the Veronica*), as well as works on Heinrich von Kleist, on William Blake, and on the contrasting ideas of history in Dostoyevsky and Hegel, this last in a short essay with the irresistible title "Dostoyevsky Reads Hegel in Siberia and Bursts into

Tears.” Melancholia continues and deepens these reflections about the relationships among art, emotion, philosophy, and religion.

The Aristotelian quotation (which Földényi places in the first chapter of his book) is not a statement but a question: Why is it that all those who have become eminent in philosophy or politics or poetry or the arts are clearly melancholic? Notable in this question is the confidence implied in the words “all those” as well as in the specific “eminent”: melancholia is, for Aristotle, the pervading and necessary state of every creative act that is generally recognized as important. The assumption behind the Aristotelian question is that there is indeed such a state that allows for or even fosters creation. Inspiration (the Muses, the Holy Spirit, the poetic experience of the world) might provide the external spark, yet in order to burst into creative flames, the inspired subject must be “melancholic.” But what exactly is this preconditioned temperament common to all notable creators? Over the ages, the melancholic condition has been described as sad, meditative, withdrawn, reflective, morose, ailing, depressed, and bleakly ecstatic, and yet none of these epithets embraces everything that is meant by the word “melancholia.”

Jorge Luis Borges, in one of his late stories, to describe the creative state in the Aristotelian question, imagined a primitive race who engage in a curious ritual of literary creation. From time to time, one of the men will utter six or seven enigmatic words. If the words excite no attention, nothing else happens. But if the words move the audience, everyone will stand apart from him in holy dread. No one will look at him or speak to him, not even his mother. He is no longer a man but a god, whom all have the right to kill. The state this privileged man has entered is that of melancholia.

A related term, *nostalgia*, was coined by the Swiss physician Johannes Hofer in his 1688 medical dissertation, from the Greek *nostos*, “homecoming,” and *algos*, “pain,” to describe the mental state of Swiss soldiers on postings far away from their native mountains. “Nostalgia” carries its own etymological definition; “melancholia,”

in spite of everything that has been written about it, continues to beg the Aristotelian question.

Though this is not part of Földényi's exploration, it can be said that not only people but also places can suffer from melancholia, and a vocabulary of poetic fallacies has emerged to characterize some specific geographic instances: the *saudade* of Lisbon, the *tristeza* of Burgos, the *mufa* of Buenos Aires, the *mestizia* of Turin, the *Traurigkeit* of Vienna, the ennui of Alexandria, the ghostliness of Prague, the glumness of Glasgow, the dispiritedness of Boston, and the *hüzün* of Istanbul, the last a Turkish word whose Arabic root (it appears five times in the Qur'an) denotes a feeling of deep spiritual loss but also a hopeful way of looking at life. For the Turkish Sufis, *hüzün* is the spiritual sadness we feel because we are not close enough to God; for Saint John of the Cross, this melancholia causes the sufferer to plummet so far down that his or her soul will, as a result, soar to its divine desire. *Hüzün* is therefore a sought-after state; it is the absence, not the presence, of *hüzün* that causes the sufferer distress.

However, as Földényi points out, it was not suffering and malaise that were first associated with melancholia, but rather excellence and extraordinariness. Two centuries after Aristotle (or earlier, if we accept Földényi's contention that there are implicit references to melancholia in Homer), the extraordinary quality of the melancholic condition was thought to stem from an excess of black bile, one of the four bodily humors described by Hippocrates in the fifth century BCE. Melancholia then becomes a psychosomatic condition.

Melancholia marks in its sufferers the quality of singularity, the extremes of an extraordinary condition in "the one whom the finger of God crushes against the wall," according to Sartre's definition of genius. One such genial extreme is madness. "Madness is a consequence of their extraordinariness," notes Földényi of the Greek heroes Ajax, Bellerophon, and Heracles, "while they owe their extraordinariness to their inherent possibility of going mad." The writers of the late Roman age and those of early Christianity agreed that this

possibility did not grant the melancholics extraordinary powers. They equated madness with melancholia and argued that mad persons did not possess the gift of divination and prophecy, but were merely deprived of their common senses.

The other extreme of the melancholic condition is the despondency that comes from intellectual learning, as exemplified in the character of Goethe's *Faust*: a satiated sense of knowledge fostered by melancholia whose consequence is also melancholia. "A person who possesses knowledge is isolated from people who do not," states Földényi. Knowledge that lifts the spirit and its corollary, the revelation that one who is truly wise knows nothing, often lead to a state in which everything becomes questionable. This last is beautifully summed up twenty-three centuries after Aristotle in George Eliot's *Middlemarch*: "It is an uneasy lot at best, to be what we call highly taught and yet not to enjoy: to be present at this great spectacle of life and never to be liberated from a small hungry shivering self—never to be fully possessed by the glory we behold, never to have our consciousness rapturously transformed into the vividness of a thought, the ardor of a passion, the energy of an action, but always to be scholarly and uninspired, ambitious and timid, scrupulous and dim-sighted."

Because of such intellectual perversions, Christianity condemned melancholy under the denomination of *acedia*, for it could distance the mind from the thought of God, allowing it idly to rove in dangerous or forbidden realms. Dante condemns the melancholic to the fifth circle of Hell, together with the wrathful. There they blow bubbles of air while immersed in the marshy waters of the Styx, because, as one says to Dante, "Sullen we were / In the sweet air that the sun makes glad, / Bearing inside us the smoke of *acedia*." One of the many medical treatises of the fifteenth century, the *Hortulus reginae* of 1487, compares *acedia* to "the bite of a rabid dog." Echoes of this simile can be heard centuries later in Winston Churchill's de-

scription of his depression as “a black dog,” an expression that is first recorded as “to have the black dog on one’s back” in a nineteenth-century collection of proverbs and catchphrases. Modern psychoanalytic jargon has retained the expression.

It is not easy to distinguish between states of “black dog,” acedia, depression, and melancholia; depending on the context, all can appear in a positive or negative light. According to legend, in the fifth century BCE, the philosopher Democritus, to escape from the follies and distractions of the world, set himself up in a hovel on the outskirts of Abdera in what appeared to be a state of melancholy. The citizens of Abdera, appalled by his conduct, asked Hippocrates to use his medical skills to cure the stranger, whom they took to be a madman. Hippocrates, however, after examining Democritus, turned to the people and told them that it was they, not the philosopher, who were mad, and that they should all imitate his conduct and retire from the world to reflect in worthy solitude. Hippocrates took sides with the man who, bitten by acedia, retired to meditate in solitude on the world of which he wanted no part.

As Földényi notes, “A person longs for solitude and at the same time is fearful of it. He can be rid of God’s omnipotence only by elevating himself into an absolute. This, however, is just as depressing a state as God’s solitude.” Early Christians understood this conundrum. Human intellect was a faculty given to us in order to assist us in our faith—not to clarify the unclarifiable mysteries but to construct a logical scaffolding to support them. The evidence of things unseen would not, by reflection and reasoning, render those things visible but would allow the person of faith (the prerequisite of grace, as Földényi remarks) to ruminate and build upon such evidence. For that reason, the isolation of religious men and women in cells and caves and inhospitable deserts assisted the work willed by God. Sometimes the isolation was accomplished high upon a tower erected in a wasteland, such as the one in which, in the fifth century, Simeon Stylites,

as Donald Atwater put it in *A Dictionary of Saints*, “despairing of escaping the world horizontally, tried to escape it vertically” by spending high above his brethren the last thirty-six years of his life.

But concomitant with this need for seclusion to nourish the inner life ran an undercurrent of guilt, a self-censuring of the very act of quiet thinking. Humankind, the Church Fathers taught, was meant to use its intellect to understand what could be understood, but there were questions that were not meant to be asked and limits of reasoning that were not meant to be transgressed. Dante charged Ulysses with a guilty curiosity and an arrogant desire to see the unknown world. Retreating into solitude with one’s own thoughts might allow this same sinful desire to arise and, without counsel and guidance of one’s spiritual leaders, remain dangerously unquenched. Therefore, the person seeking God in isolation was to concentrate solely on questions of Christian dogma and remain within the confines of dogmatic theology; pagan authors were dangerous because they distracted, like the Sirens, from the true course.

The thinkers of the Renaissance tried to turn what the early Christians had seen as the sin of acedia into a virtue. In “On Caring for the Health of the Man of Letters” in his *Book of Life*, the great humanist Marsilio Ficino, commenting on his own melancholia and his habit of withdrawing into solitude (“which only much playing of the lute can sweeten and soften a little”), attempted to withdraw himself from the influence of Saturn and ascribed his state to what Aristotle had called a singular and divine gift, and Plato before him a divine furor. Though warning scholars to avoid both phlegm (which blocks the intelligence) and black bile (which causes too much care) “as if they were sailing past Scylla and Charybdis,” Ficino concludes that thin black bile is beneficial for the man of letters. To encourage its flow, Ficino gives detailed instructions: emulate not the energetic demeanor of the pilgrim, alert on the road, but the idling disposition of the philosopher, meditative and slow. “When you have got out of

bed,” advises Ficino, “do not rush right in on your reading or meditation, but for at least half an hour go off and get cleaned up. Then diligently enter your meditation, which you should prolong for about an hour, depending on your strength. Then, put off a little whatever you are thinking about, and in the meantime comb your hair diligently and moderately with an ivory comb, drawing it forty times from the front to the neck. Then rub the neck with a rough cloth, returning only then back to meditating, for two hours or so, or at least for an hour of study.” And Ficino concludes: “If you choose to live each day of your life in this way, the author of life himself will help you to stay longer with the human race and with him whose inspiration makes the whole world live” (*Book of Life*, trans. Charles Boer). In certain cases and under certain conditions, as a source for philosophical enterprise, melancholy came to be seen as a privileged state, part of the intellectual condition, as well as the source of inspired creation, and the reader, locked away in a solitary tower, as a maker.

Földényi discusses as well the descent of the term *melancholia* into the boredom and mere indifference to the things of the world, and the survival of this connotation into our age. Writers such as Hobbes, Baron d’Holbach, Locke, and Swift condemned melancholia for myriad reasons. The Anglican Robert Burton (says Földényi) accused atheism, Catholicism, and Puritanism of fostering melancholia; thinkers of the French Enlightenment said that melancholia was caused by Christianity; Georg Lukács, in the twentieth century, reproached Kafka, Joyce, and Beckett for indulging in “the melancholic disdain of reality”; Walter Benjamin mocked the poems of Erich Kästner for their “left-wing melancholia.” Kant saw melancholia as a sign of ethical self-consciousness. “Mention of melancholia,” writes Földényi, “creates palpable unease,” and adds with a certain defiance: “If psychiatry were to seek to return to the concept its due rights, . . . the closed system would be spectacularly thrown wide open.”

Földényi concludes his book bravely: “With every step he takes, man tries to smuggle some goal into nothingness. The melancholic is skeptical of those goals.” Rightly so, as Földényi shows. The melancholic Hamlet’s remark about being in the world, bound in a nutshell but thinking himself king of infinite space, is, in spite of all our arguments, our blessed common lot.