

The Odd Position of the Melancholic – The Loss of an Explanatory Model?

Dr. Helena De Preester
Faculty of Fine Arts – University College Ghent
J. Kluykensstraat 2 - 9000 Ghent - Belgium
Helena.DePreester@hogent.be

Abstract

Aristotle explained brilliance of mind and the exceptionality of great men in literature, politics, philosophy and the arts in terms of melancholy – melancholy being the temper of genius men, close to madness. The model of melancholy, which houses a perplexing multitude of phenomena and which is not very coherent as a whole, has served for centuries as a background and even as an explanatory model for creativity and its concomitant dark or painful elements.

With the turn of the 19th century and the rise of modern psychiatry, melancholy has been withdrawn from this broad cultural embeddedness, and has become a pathological syndrome in which the absence of creativity and the lack of directedness to the world are the main features. With Freud's intervention, in his essay 'Mourning and Melancholia' (1915), melancholia and clinical depression became intimately associated. At the same time, the model of melancholy lost its cultural significance as an explanatory frame in which creativity or artistic giftedness can be made explicit or intelligible. What does such a loss mean – and does it mean anything at all? – for the ways in which creativity and the gifted can be approached since the collapse of the older philosophical models of melancholy?

Keywords : Aristotle, melancholy, creativity, *perittos*, giftedness, outstandingness.

For as men differ in appearance not because they possess a face but because they possess such and such a face, some handsome, others ugly, others with nothing extraordinary about it (those whose looks are ordinary); so those who have a little of this temperament are ordinary, but those who have much of it are unlike the majority of people. For if their melancholy habitus is quite undiluted they are too melancholy; but if it is somewhat tempered they are outstanding [περιττοι]. (Aristotle, 954b21-27)¹

1. Melancholy and Modern Meanings

“Why is it that all those who have become eminent in philosophy or politics or poetry or the arts are clearly melancholics², and some of them to such an extent as to be affected by diseases caused by black bile?” (*Problemata* XXX.1 953a10-14, translated by E.S. Forster, Oxford, 1927) This is how the monograph on melancholy opens, written by an author from Aristotle's *Peripatos* (and most probably not by Aristotle himself³). This monograph has inaugurated a longstanding tradition in which 'melancholy' crosses the cultural, philosophical, artistic and medical history. In

¹ This is the translation by Klíbanký et al. (1964, p. 26).

² Some translations circumscribe the notion *μελαγχολικοί* (*melancholikoi*) as 'of an atrabillious temperament'.

³ For the sake of convenience, however, we will refer to Aristotle as the author of the monograph.

contrast to the way ‘melancholy’ is understood nowadays, ‘melancholy’ was an explanatory notion, with as the *explanandum* the exceptional giftedness of talented men. In modern speech, the notion of ‘melancholy’ does no longer bear this explicit reference to talent, creativity, imagination or inspiration. What Klibansky et al. (1964) stated in their magnum opus *Saturn and Melancholy*, is still valid. ‘Melancholy’ refers now to a mental illness, characterized by attacks of anxiety, deep depression and fatigue. Here, Freud’s seminal essay ‘Mourning and Melancholy’ (1917), functions as a landmark, indicating a cultural context in which melancholy is, for the larger part, definitively cut off from its longstanding – though confusing – history. A second meaning of ‘melancholy’ in modern parlance refers to a rather temporary state of mind, which may be also painful and depressing, but is also milder, and can be just pensive and nostalgic. Here, it is a subjective mood, which can be transferred to describe the external world in terms of ‘melancholy’ (e.g. the melancholy of the evening hours). A third connotation is of course a type of character (with a concomitant physical appearance). The ‘melancholic’ is one of the four types in the system based on the four humors (next to the sanguine, the choleric and the phlegmatic) (cf. Klibansky et al., 1964, p. 3, for these modern meanings of melancholy). The modern usage of the notion of melancholy differs in many respects from the (very) diverse and not very coherent contexts in which melancholy was used as an explanatory notion in the past centuries. Of course, it is true that melancholy has always been associated with states of mind that are somehow troubled and burdened, and the diagnostic of (pathological) melancholy has roots as ancient as melancholy as an explanation for outstandingness or eminence. The crucial point is that Aristotle had the boldness of connecting both intimately, and the cultural image of the artist (or another gifted man) as a talented man who not only *enjoys*, but also *suffers* from his exceptional condition has never disappeared. There must have been something in Aristotle’s writing that hit the mark and that has kept on resonating for almost more than 2000 years. We will not access or even assess the history of melancholy here, nor even work out its specific relations to the black bile⁴. Instead, we want to go back to Aristotle’s seminal text, in order to better assess what has changed in modern times.

2. The Gifted is *Perittos*

It is important to note which term Aristotle uses for indicating the men he designates as melancholics. The English translation reads that these men have become ‘eminent’, ‘eminent’ being the rendering of *περιττοι* (singular: *perittos*). In ancient Greek, *perittos* has a number of remarkable and ambivalent meanings. *First*, it means ‘great beyond measure’. *Second*, this can turn into two directions. The ‘beyond measure’ can mean ‘exceptional’ (in the sense of extraordinary), ‘excellent’, ‘outstanding’ on the one hand, but it can also mean ‘exaggerated’, ‘excessive’, and therefore ‘superfluous’ or ‘useless’ on the other hand. A *third* meaning is ‘remaining’, ‘left-over’, ‘residual’. And a fourth use refers in the context of numbers to ‘odd’ or ‘uneven’.

‘Perritos’ is moreover related to ‘perritoma’, meaning ‘remainder’, or rather ‘surplus’, since in antique medicine the term is used to indicate surplus substances in the body, e.g. a surplus of black bile. The one who is ‘perittos’ deviates from the norm, is characterized by exaggerated,

⁴ Detailed and excellent studies of melancholy are available. Klibansky et al. (1964) offer a detailed study of melancholy in antiquity until Dürer’s engraving *Melencolia I*. A very nice anthology has recently been edited by J. Radden (2000), bringing together and introducing texts on melancholy from Aristotle up to the twentieth century.

excessive or eccentric behavior. These characteristics are clearly evaluated in a negative way, because they point to the instable nature of the man being ‘perittos’. However, these failings also have a reverse side, because the melancholic also achieves outstanding and excellent works, be it in the domain of the arts, philosophy, politics or poetry. In this sense, ‘perittos’ also refers to genius and creativity, and to inspired work. The man being ‘perittos’ escapes the norm, he does not follow the paths of normal human rules and laws for healthy, rational behavior, but this is precisely intimately connected to his genius and the outstanding results of his activities.

Aristotle thus connects the giftedness of the outstanding man to his physiological-bodily condition. With this, he offers a bottom-up explanation for the phenomena of talent, genius and creativity. This bottom-up model opposes the top-down model Plato offered, and in which the poet is inspired by the divine, in a state of divine madness (*mania*). Being possessed by the divine (cf. the literal meaning of ‘enthusiast’), a person (poet, oracle, lover ...) is inspired *from without*. In Aristotle’s text on melancholy, the ‘eccentric’ position of the gifted is not caused by some divine source. Just like Aristotle refuses to explain the origin of dreams predicting future events as dreams sent by the gods, he refuses Plato’s metaphysical solution for genius and madness. A person is not ex-centered and mad because of his communication with the divine. The position of the Aristotelian melancholic is much more painful: as ‘perittos’ he balances between the excellent, the exaggerated and the left-over. Being in this very ‘odd’ position that is difficult to cope with, the ‘perittos’ is inspired *from within*. Therefore, instead of focusing on the precise meaning of melancholy, its vicissitudes in the further history, we want to pursue the idea of the *perittos* and his position.

3. The Odd position of the *Perittos* in Aristotle

It is also important to note that Aristotle does not consider the *perittos* as diseased. As we already know, melancholia is due to an excess of black bile, a substance present in everyone, but the melancholic suffers from a *surplus* amount of it. Moreover, black bile has the qualities of hot and cold, and is an extremely variable substance, in the sense that it is prone to large fluctuations in temperature. These fluctuations influence the temperament of the melancholic. Much cold black bile renders a person “dull and stupid” (Aristotle, 954a32-33), whereas people with much hot black bile “are elated and brilliant or erotic or easily moved to anger and desire, while some become more loquacious. Many too are subject to fits of exaltation and ecstasy, (...)” (Aristotle, 954a31-34).⁵ It is very remarkable that *between* these two types of melancholics – the chilled and the overheated – a third type exists, the melancholic *genius*, who suffers from an excess of black bile, but is able to maintain *within* this situation of imbalance a precarious balance. “Since it is possible for this variable mixture to be well tempered and well adjusted in a certain respect — that is to say, to be now in a warmer and then again a colder condition, or vice versa, just as required, owing to its tendency to extremes — therefore all melancholy persons are out of the ordinary, not owing to toilness [*νοσόν*]⁶, but from their natural constitution.” (Aristotle, 955a35-

⁵ This is the translation by Klibansky et al. (1964, p. 24). The translation by E.S. Forster says that these melancholics become “frenzied, or clever or erotic or easily moved to anger and desire”.

⁶ Other translations in English and Dutch prefer to translate ‘νοσός’ as ‘disease’, which is perhaps more adequate than ‘toilness’.

59).⁷ Again, the term ‘perittos’ appears here, translated as ‘out of the ordinary’ or as ‘having remarkable gifts’. The last part of the sentence – not by disease but by nature (ου δια νοσον, αλλα δια φυσιν) – gives the melancholic genius a natural, though exceptional, status. Within the natural order, or within the possible natural variations of the physiology of a person (i.e. variations not resulting into disease or illness, madness or dullness), the melancholic maintains an exceptional balance. It is a balance *within* the excess, a balance on top of a major imbalance, and it is here, between the exaggerated and the useless, that the true meaning of being ‘perittos’ lies, i.e. the outstanding giftedness as a fragile position that is difficult to maintain.

4. Resistance to the Position of the *Perittos*?

Teaching philosophy at an Academy of Fine Arts, I had with a small number of students both from the fine arts institute and the music conservatory a reading group, in which we focused on texts related to the history of melancholy, inspiration and imagination (Plato, Aristotle, Galen, Marsilio Ficino, Robert Burton, Friedrich Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud, Thomas Mann, Antonin Artaud ...). To my perhaps somewhat naive surprise, there seemed to be a double resistance against the notions of imagination, melancholy and inspiration.

First, the notion of melancholy is pushed to the side of a very subjective and personal discourse, and seems to have lost its all-pervading cultural and historical meaning, which was very helpful in directing discussions about (artistic) creativity, inspiration and imagination. The use of the word ‘melancholy’ in the personal psychic economy of an artist is still present, but in a very idiosyncratic way, tending to the meaning of nostalgia and sadness. On another occasion, I asked an artist if the notion of melancholy and its historical meaning was still useful for him, and if he was familiar with its history. The answer was simple and striking: “Yes, I know the meaning of my *personal* history of melancholy,” including the meaning it had for his artistic work.

Second, the term ‘imagination’ is not very popular anymore: young artists or students in the arts often prefer to say that it all comes down to working very hard and to having the accidental (and economic) luck of becoming famous. And third, ‘creativity’ is an effect of working very hard, but it does not figure in a broader discourse on inspiration. The notions of ‘imagination’, ‘creativity’, ‘melancholy’ and ‘inspiration’ thus seem to have become vague and private notions, which rather block than deepen a discussion on the specificity of artistic creation and the position of the artist. Artistic activity seems to be held hostage into an economic and sociological discourse, in which an artist is someone *unexceptional*, and who produces – due to technical skills, training, and perseverance – works that might (or might not) enter the art market. The latter is due to having good personal and business contacts, to being able to occupy a strategic place on the market and, also, to having the luck of being accepted by the media.

In further discussions with art students, their position turned out to be less cynical. The main problem seemed to be that they just did not know the *meaning* of these terms. That is to say: they seemed unable to situate and use them in a non-private and articulated cultural and social discourse. Creativity or originality are transformed into accidental processes of artistic labor: an

⁷ This is again the translation by Klibansky et al. (1964, p. 29). The translation by E.S. Forster reads as follows: “And since it is possible for a variable state to be well tempered (*eukraton*) and in a sense a favourable condition, and since it is possible for the condition to be hotter and then again cold, when it should be so, or to change to the contrary owing to excess, the result is that all atrabilious persons have remarkable gifts, not owing to disease but from natural causes.”

explanation for creativity can turn out to be simply a lucky coincidence, pure chance⁸. To present outstanding results this way might mean several things. It may be a faithful report about the experience of artistic creativity. Or it might be an utterance of conceptual helplessness that indeed renders the experience as such. Behind this privatization or subjectification of, broadly put, melancholy, the decision to take up the position of the *perritos* has become rather difficult. To present the artist as someone who occupies an exceptional position is experienced as the remnant of a romantic attitude that is no longer allowed. And this seems to be the problem behind it: not inspiration, creativity and imagination are problematic, but their exceptionality. A strategy often opted for, is that the romantically experienced *surplus* is being ironized. Surplus and excess, leading in Aristotle's point of view to an explanation of outstandingness, are aimed at only in an oblique and ironical way⁹. As such, the surplus, which was for ages a surplus of melancholy, is detached from the exceptional position it implies. Or rather, because the surplus does no longer function in the discourse, the problem of the position of the gifted, often can no longer be tackled outside of the self-irony in which it is floating. To be gifted, is also to be ironical about this giftedness, or to occupy an ironical stance towards the surplus one is sometimes confronted with. Arts students seem to be unable or no longer seem very willing to take up the position of the *perittos*, and the pervading irony in works of art sometimes seems to be a reflection of this new kind of discomfort experienced by a person being *perittos*.

5. References

Aristoteles (2001). *Over Melancholie* (translated in Dutch and introduced by Ph. Van der Eijk). Groningen: Historische Uitgeverij.

Aristotle (1984). *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, Vol. II (ed. J. Barnes, translated by E.S. Forster). Princeton: Princeton University Press.

R. Klibansky, Panofsky E. & Saxl F. (1964). *Saturn and Melancholy*. London: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd.

J. Radden (ed.) (2000). *The Nature of Melancholy, from Aristotle to Kristeva*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

6. Acknowledgment

I would like to thank dr. H. Schinzel for the inspiring e-mail conversation we had related to the above topics.

⁸ A nice illustration of this is the following statement by Jeff Wall, in an interview with a restorer: "Many things happen by accident" and "Original is not important. *You* can think about it, for me it means nothing" (H. Schinzel, personal communication). Left aside if this statement matches his creative process, one might still ask how he would explain the success of this 'accident', and the serendipity of it. Aristotle says that the arrows of the talented or the gifted that hit the mark, as if by accident or luck, ask for an explanation too, and this is not unrelated to creativity.

⁹ One might say that the democratizing discourse (often in the context of governmental support for artists and the social importance of their work for democracy) is also a symptom of the ironizing discourse, in which the position of the artist is being leveled out, since the surplus or the imbalance is no longer problematic, but accepted *in advance*.