

Eric G. Wilson

an excerpt from

The Dark Art

The Day's Dark Chamber

When I was a young teenager, I longed most to spend my days, especially in summer, lolling about in my dark bedroom. My blinds dimming the morning sun to a gloomy beam, I would lie on my floor and stare for hours at the stains on my ceiling—a handprint that blurred into a purplish root, a smudge from a dead bug resembling a star. I thought of nothing in particular, but dissolved into the flitting shadows of my dissolute, nervous mind, now brooding over lost memories, now envisioning impossible futures. If there was any sort of persistent atmosphere to these vague images, it was a tremulous air of failure, a filmy focus on my broken heart, adolescent, among the fireflies or on those seven stitches from when I tumbled down my grandmother's stairs. The brisk chirp of a mockingbird outside my window enhanced this perverse joy, this decadence of embracing blackness while the world sprang into light. I loved my cold seclusion from song and flight, this winter of my mind's own making.

At noon on the dot each of those days, my dad would throw open my door, raise my blinds, and brusquely order me out of bed. Go play baseball with the other boys, he commanded, or go swimming, or call a girl. The sun's glare and his hard voice startled me every time. It was like being born again, thrown from the darkish and indiscriminate fluid onto a hot shore where everything is one thing and nothing else, where clocks clang and maps rule. I hated to have to move. But I always did. Fearing my father, I reluctantly adjusted to the demands of the daytime. I fitted myself into the white rules of the baseball diamond or used lucid sentences to convey thoughts. I killed reverie and endeavored to succeed. I pretended to be happy and forced myself to laugh.

This pattern seemed insignificant when I was in junior high. I thought nothing of my desire for darkness and my sham enthusiasm. It didn't occur to

me that there might be something strange about feeling alive in melancholy chambers and moribund among the robust masses. But when I got to high school, I realized that in the eyes of the collective I was aberrant, weird. My dad again stood for the status quo. He aggressively ridiculed me for spending sunny Sundays reading Kafka's nightmarish story about the man turned insect. He questioned my affinity for the morose John Lennon of "Eleanor Rigby." He made me get a physical when he found under my bed some poems I had written, one of which began, "Aphrodite is breasted with scythes. / Her lovers offer the gift of tongues."

I passed the physical and was made to start reading the Bible and to recommit to the game of football. I soon excelled at character and quarterbacking and was offered admission to West Point. I had turned, it seemed, from poetic brooding to brassy delusion. But soon I longed for the black sun again. I quit the military academy within four weeks, and football, too; I enrolled in a college in the wintry Blue Ridge Mountains and took to existentialism and nocturnal runs.

I know that these teenage vacillations between inner voice and outer code sound like clichés. Still, as I found out in high school and later in college, and as I continue to realize, this conflict between living darkness and dead light is far from idle. It has been one of the great struggles of my life. Ever since those days when my father ripped into my somber room with his antiseptic light, I have given over to guilt about my penchant for nervous melancholia. Moreover, I have realized that those bittersweet childhood reveries can in adult life turn acerbic and dangerous. They can keep a body in bed all day feeling comatose and fighting nauseated tears. They can throw a man out into the street, broken and confused and muttering about robins. They can tear a heart and murder a marriage.

Depression is for me no longer a self-indulgent pastime. It is a cruel vocation, exhausting and exact. I hate feeling so joyless all the time, yet I can't live without the unhappiness.

Under the Sign of Saturn

For those of us born under the sign of Saturn, the planet devoted to melancholia, delving into the heart's darkness is probably the only hope for vitality. This essay grows out of that hope. I want to explore the idea that manic melancholia

might be meditation—the soul’s challenge to superficial happiness, the soul’s hunger for profundity. As meditation, melancholy is negative energy inspiring positive—the emotional malaise that throws us into intellectual action. Finally—by this line of thought—melancholia, though seemingly a vacillation between nervousness and despair, is really the marker of a full and rich life attuned to and containing the stupendous antagonisms of existence: the flames and the shadows, the heights and the depths, the blithe failures and the edgy successes.

In focusing on the contemplative, creative, and capacious powers of discontent, I am making a conscious choice to favor one theory of manic melancholia over several others. I could have simply endorsed the prevailing theories: melancholy is but a chemical disorder of the brain, or a product of stressful environment, or a weakness of rational will. However, none of these theories is entirely adequate, and each is totally depressing.

The chemical and the environmental theories strip the soul of freedom, and though these might enjoy substantial scientific backing, they contradict my sense that I am not reducible to neurons and surroundings, that something in my being transcends these limiting factors. Certainly I cannot escape entirely my faulty neurotransmitters or my vexed history. However, I can choose how I interpret these boundaries: I can see them as important but not final factors in my melancholia, and I can see this choice as an enactment of my freedom.

The idea that melancholia is a failure of rationality assumes reason is the most important arbiter of proper behavior. Although this theory might have practical virtues, it fails to accommodate my sense that mysterious unconscious powers inform my heart and my mind. I can’t ignore the importance of my reason, but I must choose to take seriously the powers of the unconscious. I must temper my rational lights and listen to the darkness. I must try to balance unconscious determinism and conscious freedom.

My theory of melancholia feels right to what I will call my self or soul. It creates spaces for freedom, gives me the choice to embrace melancholia as a form of meditation or reject it as mere illness, to channel dark energy into creative thinking or to fear it as irrational force. At the same time, my idea of melancholia accommodates the fatal power of the unconscious, whose potencies drive dreams and reveries, inform the best ideas and the best language, and inspire unexpected insights and unsettling wisdoms.

Attuned to both freedom and fate, my notion of melancholia is synthetic. It maintains that human beings are tense sites of determinism and liberation.

We are controlled by chemical composition, environmental stress, and unconscious instincts. However, we have mental faculties to counter these pressures. The ego's empirical faculty, what Kant calls its understanding, can grasp and transform particular chemical disorders. The ego's intuitive faculty, termed by Kant its reason, can apprehend holistic realities and change them. The creative faculty, the imagination, can explore the unconscious and name freshly these dense exploratory experiences. Fate delimits freedom; freedom alters fate.

My own melancholia has led me to these conclusions. I cannot prove them scientifically. I cannot vouch for them ethically. However, I can say, from an aesthetic angle, that they feel beautiful. I hope others will agree that they elegantly describe our lived experience, that they bring into harmony the powers pulling us asunder. If these beauties do not approximate truth, nothing is lost; as long as these ideas suit our constitutions and possibly ameliorate our pain, their truth value is irrelevant.

The Psychology of Discontent

My first act is to announce my primary interpretation of manic melancholia. This pronouncement presses against the dictates of the status quo, against the cry of a society intoning that melancholia, nervous or not, is a disease for a pill or a weakness of will. My pronouncement is this: the Gnostic tradition, with its pursuit of spiritual knowledge, is the most powerful, liberating body of ideas for describing generative melancholia. In my darkest moods, this ancient current of thought has given me brief solace, because it is committed to this belief: in a world dead set against spiritual growth, anxiety about the status quo is rebellion.

Basilides in second-century Alexandria claimed that 365 false gods came between him and the true deity. He believed that the way to rebel against these oppressive creatures was not to acknowledge their existence but to enter into melancholy silence and confused blindness. Valentinus near Rome in the same century held a similar notion: the everyday world that most take for reality is a cosmic error, and the path out of this mistake is nervous paranoia, edgy suspicion. One hundred years later, Mani the Persian went even further, claiming that the universe is an evil prison. The key to liberation is active malcontentedness, a refusal to accept the codes of a depraved society.

Understandably, these unsettling reversals—happiness is craven, depression is noble—were demonized throughout history. However, a few brave men

attuned their souls to this underground Gnostic current. One such thinker was Marsilio Ficino, a fifteenth-century Florentine philosopher. Born himself under the sign of Saturn, he claimed that melancholia was a mark of philosophical brilliance, the ability to endure sullen doubt and question the status quo. Søren Kierkegaard, depressed in Denmark and dreaming of Hamlet, recovered this Gnostic tradition from the eighteenth-century Age of Reason. He argued that anxiety is a mark of spiritual potential, a sickness unto death that inspires the life of the soul. In the twentieth century, Carl Jung likewise praised the virtues of melancholia. Enconced in his dark Bollingen tower on the shores of Lake Zurich, he believed that descent into despairing moods grants knowledge unavailable to those who remain in the realms of happiness. He claimed that despair is information sent from the soul in need of healing. Depression hurls a person into life.

Mainstream culture reduces spiritual mystery to material commodity, so to be at home in the conventions of the society is to forsake full life, while to feel despondent in the face of the status quo is to prepare for vitality. What most people take for light is blindness; the darkness excoriated by the minions is a torch. Easy happiness is craven; durable melancholia is brave. These are the notes of this great Gnostic fugue.