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Empathy and Melancholy in Ancient Times

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Was Empathy a Way out of Melancholy in Ancient Times?*

Dr. Miteva's programmatic text in the conference leaflet postulates a connection between melancholy and empathy¹. The aim of the following study is to discuss this very claim, which seems to be self-evident to a modern reader: is this connection to be found in the classical antiquity or in the middle ages? Which notions could possibly correspond to our idea of empathy, in the previous historical periods?

The idea that empathy can be a way out of melancholy immediately evoked two texts in my memory.

One is from Baudelaire's *Poèmes en prose*²:

Je chante les chiens calamiteux, soit ceux qui errent solitaires, dans les ravines sinueuses des immenses villes, soit ceux qui ont dit à l'homme abandonné, avec des yeux clignotants et spirituels : « Prends-moi avec toi, et de nos deux misères nous ferons peut-être une espèce de bonheur ! »

The other one is from Victor Hugo's *Choses vues*³.

Il faisait froid, le temps était sombre, j'étais triste moi-même ; c'était le cas d'aller consoler quelqu'un.

And next I remembered that the two of them, Baudelaire and Hugo, coined two very famous phrases in French culture that play the theme of empathy, while expressing, so forcefully, its basis, which is the so to speak the equality – the sameness – of us all. Baudelaire dedicated his *Fleurs du mal* to the

* I would like to thank Dr Andrew Krema for his remarkable observations, which greatly improved the text.

¹ Here is for example its very beginning: « Melancholy and empathy mirror each other. Melancholy raises our sensibility for the grief of others, thus making us more thoughtful - and empathical. »

² C. Baudelaire, *Petits poèmes en prose* (also called *Le Spleen de Paris*), Paris, 1868, « Les Petits Chiens » : « I sing the unlucky dogs, whether those who wander, solitary, in the winding ditches of immense cities, or those who with their blinking, spiritual eyes have said to abandoned men: "Take me with you, and perhaps out of our two miseries we can create a kind of happiness!" » (transl. Raymond N. MacKenzie).

³ V. Hugo, *Choses vues*, Paris, 1887 and 1900, 7 December 1845: "It was cold, the weather was melancholy, I was melancholy myself ; this was the time to go and console some- body. Consequently I went to see Villemain".

*Hypocrite lecteur, mon semblable, mon frère !*⁴

And Hugo said in the preface of his *Contemplations*⁵:

Ah ! insensé, qui crois que je ne suis pas toi !

This is all the more intriguing since one could not find two more diverse souls than Hugo and Baudelaire. True, Baudelaire admired Hugo, and Hugo understood Baudelaire's new poetry. While in exile, Hugo praised Baudelaire's "empathic" poems, entitled *Les Sept Vieillards* and *Les Petites Vieilles*, which were dedicated to him.

Que faites-vous quand vous écrivez ces vers saisissants [...] que vous me dédiez et dont je vous remercie ? Que faites-vous ? Vous marchez. Vous dotez le ciel de l'art d'on ne sait quel rayon macabre. Vous créez un frisson nouveau⁶.

But he also tried to recruit Baudelaire in his fight for progress. He sent Baudelaire a book with these two words: *jungamus dextras*, let us join hands! But Baudelaire was not off for revolution. He wrote Manet:

Hugo avait écrit sur le volume : à Charles Baudelaire, *jungamus dextras*. — Cela, je crois, ne veut pas dire seulement : donnons-nous une mutuelle poignée de mains. Je connais les sous-entendus du latin de Victor Hugo. Cela veut dire aussi : unissons nos mains, pour SAUVER LE GENRE HUMAIN. Mais je me fous du genre humain, et il ne s'en est pas aperçu⁷.

⁴ "Au lecteur", 40: « Hypocrite reader! — You! — My twin! — My brother! »

⁵ « Est-ce donc la vie d'un homme ? Oui, et la vie des autres hommes aussi. Nul de nous n'a l'honneur d'avoir une vie qui soit à lui. Ma vie est la vôtre, votre vie est la mienne, vous vivez ce que je vis ; la destinée est une. Prenez donc ce miroir, et regardez-vous-y. On se plaint quelquefois des écrivains qui disent moi. Parlez-nous de nous, leur crie-t-on. Hélas ! quand je vous parle de moi, je vous parle de vous. Comment ne le sentez-vous pas ? Ah ! insensé, qui crois que je ne suis pas toi ! »

⁶ Letter from Hugo to Baudelaire, 6 October 1859: "What are you doing when you are writing these striking lines [...] that you dedicate me, and which I thank you for? What are you doing? You are walking. You endow the heaven of art with some unheard of macabre ray. You are creating a new shivering"

⁷ Letter from Baudelaire to Manet, 28 October 1865: "Hugo wrote on the volume: Charles Baudelaire, *jungamus dextras*. — This, I gather, does not only mean: let us give each other a mutual handshake. I know the innuendos of Victor Hugo's latin. It also means: let us unite our hands, IN ORDER TO SAVE MANKIND. But I don't give a shit about mankind, and he did not notice."

Beyond the very recognizable, ‘bohemian’, *pose*, there is an authentic difference between the two. Both know melancholy; both are empathic souls. But Hugo believes in his capacity to rescue humanity from evil, while Baudelaire has no hope whatsoever. They are total antipodes of each other.

But still, I think the onetime concordance between the two lines I have just quoted – and I want to stress here the etymological meaning of concordance, two hearts beating along – this onetime coincidence between two of the greatest poets, two of the greatest spirits of modern culture, is all the more significant.

I think these texts strike a chord in all of us. They sound familiar. Something, I would say, rings true. It feels like we are all endowed with an almost magical gift to escape melancholy through empathy, and thus to turn melancholy into “a sort of bliss,” as Baudelaire said, into an *espèce de bonheur*.

But was it always so? Is this impression of a “natural” feeling grounded in some universal human nature, or does it come from the culture to which we belong? And if so, when did it appear?

*

What we call “melancholy” is not what the ancient Greeks and Romans used to call “melancholia.”

In our culture, “melancholy” is a state of mind, characterized by sadness. It is often synonymous for “depression.”⁸ What the ancients called “melancholia” is not a state of mind. In the ancient theory of humors, melancholia is the “black bile” (μέλαινα χολή). As such, it inhabits the body of every animal, not only the human one, along with the other three humors: blood, phlegm, and the “yellow bile.” In some people, the “black bile” dominates. This does not mean that these people are not healthy. There is a melancholic kind of healthiness.⁹ But it means that these people more than others are exposed to specific physiological and psychological troubles and disorders. Other people, even though the “black bile” does not dominate the mixture of their humors, can experience a sudden rise of the “black bile” in their body, and thus be affected by the same kind of troubles.

⁸ Cf. e.g. Pigeaud 2008; Lawlor 2008, 25: “Depression was not called depression in classical writings, either medical or popular. Rather, the term ‘melancholia’ commonly indicated a long-running mental illness.”

⁹ Cf. e.g. Pigeaud 1988, 43: “il existe une santé du mélancolique.”

What are these troubles? Some of them are the same we ascribe to modern melancholy: sadness, depression, despair. But some are very different: euphoria, for example, or fear, anxiety, anger, uncontrolled violence, madness, terrifying dreams, or visions and hallucinations, poetic inspiration¹⁰, and also, at times—very surprisingly for a modern mind—prophetic inspiration.¹¹ The physician, Rufus of Ephesus,¹² mentions another symptom that does not fit our understanding of melancholy. “He stated that some melancholics might have a single obsessive and delusional notion even while they were perfectly sane: one man believed he had swallowed a viper, another that he had no head, another that his skin had become as dry as parchment, and one thought he was a pot.”¹³ Others thought they were wolves and went haunting graveyards at night, howling at the moon. This was called *lycanthropia*. Significantly, “it remained in medical nosologies well into the eighteenth century and beyond under the traditional category ‘wandering melancholia’ (*melancholia errabunda*).”¹⁴

But some troubles were also purely physical. A typical physical symptom of melancholy was epilepsy. There were also digestive problems (indigestions, flatulence and a distended stomach, pains in the abdomen) and skin problems (pimples, mange, bleeding hemorrhoids, ulcers, for example). Aristotle said that one could recognize the fact that Hercules was a melancholic as much through his incidents of madness, as when he killed his sons and his wife, and as through the bursting of ulcers.¹⁵

But *we* are the ones who draw a line between psychological and physiological disorders.¹⁶ Most ancient philosophers and physicians saw the mind or the soul as a physical substance. If the black bile produced ulcers instead of sadness or madness or inspiration, it was directly related to its location in the body, near the place of the soul, be it the heart, the stomach or the brain, or near the surface of the skin. A psychological condition was therefore always inseparably a physical condition.

As you can see, there was an enormous variety of melancholic troubles. There were

¹⁰ Cf. e.g. Pigeaud 1988, 48-54.

¹¹ Cf. Aristotle, *Problems*, 30, 954a34: “But many too, owing to this heat (sc. the hot black bile) being near the location of the intelligence, are affected by diseases of madness and inspiration, whence come Sibyls and Bakides.” “Bakides is the plural of the proper noun Bakis, used traditionally to designate an ecstatic or inspired seer. “Bakides” here has the generic meaning of “seer”, cf. Bernabé 2016, 39.

¹² Rufus’ treatise *On Melancholia* was considered the best on the subject. Cf. Bell 2014, 62.

¹³ Lawlor 2008, 36.

¹⁴ Bell 2014, 53. See also Borgeaud 1988, n. 130 p. 237.

¹⁵ Another example is the Spartiate general Lysander. Cf. Aristote, *Problemata physica*, 30, 1, 953a19–21.

¹⁶ Pigeaud 1988, 38: “Nous ne saurions distinguer entre des maladies “mentales” et des maladies somatiques [...] Tout dépend du lieu de la bile noire dans le corps”.

also differences between the various theories of melancholy. But this variety should not prevent us from recognizing that in the common knowledge of ancient people a melancholic character was someone who longed for solitude. Aristotle sees Bellerophon as a melancholic because he sought out solitude:

But after Bellerophon was hated by all the immortals, he wandered alone about the plain of Aleion, eating his heart out, skulking aside from the trodden track of humanity¹⁷.

And centuries later Rufus noted, “It is common for melancholics to crave solitude”¹⁸. This is why ‘melancholy’ was often a synonym for ‘misanthropy.’ This link between melancholy and the longing for solitude explains the link between melancholy and lycanthropy, for wolves were supposed to be wild, lonesome animals. (Ethologists have taught us that, on the contrary, wolves are extremely social and civilized animals, but this is another story¹⁹.)

So much, then, for melancholy as a possible starting point to empathy.

But did one use empathy to cure the melancholic? To answer this question, we must first ask ourselves if something like empathy existed in ancient times.

The word existed, but did not have at all the contemporary meaning of empathy. *Empatheia* in Ancient Greek means a passion, an affection of some kind, even a physical one. But if a word denoting empathy in our sense was lacking, did it exist, using other words to designate it?

Pity and compassion existed, but I think we should very carefully distinguish them from empathy if we want to use this notion in its full (modern) force.

¹⁷ Aristotle, *Problems*, 30, 953a21-25, quoting Homer, *Iliad*, 6, 200-203. See also (pseudo-)Galen (*Introductio seu medicus* 14.740.16): “The cause of melancholy is black bile, a colder and gloomy humor. Therefore such people [sc., melancholics] are gloomy and downcast. They are suspicious of everything and rejoice in solitude, as did Bellerophon, as Homer explains” (quoted by Toohey 2004, 39).

¹⁸ Rufus, 37. This survived into more recent times of course, even in popular culture. See for example what the old man says to Trelawny (1887, 68) searching for Shelley in the midst of a wilderness: “With no landmarks to guide me, nor sky to be seen above, I was bewildered in this wilderness of pines and ponds; so I sat down, struck a light, and smoked a cigar. A red man would have known his course by the trees themselves, their growth, form, and colour; or if a footstep had passed that day, he would have hit upon its trail. As I mused upon his sagacity and my own stupidity, the braying of a brother jackass startled me. He was followed by an old man picking up pine cones. I asked him if he had seen a stranger? ‘*L’Inglese malinconico haunts the wood maledetta*. I will show you his nest’.” (emphasis mine).

¹⁹ Cf. Schleidt & Shalter 2003.

Ancient pity was very different from ours. I will tell you a story that I think captures that difference very well. It is the story of a Roman nobleman named Lucius Quinctius Flaminius.

As consul in 192 BC he campaigned against the Ligurians. One day at dinner his lover – whose gender we do not know, for this lover is referred to as a *scortum*, a neutral term, which means a prostitute, and the infamy of that character is rendered even more palpable with this uncertain identity – complained that it/he/she had never seen a man be put to death. So the consul had a Ligurian noble, who had deserted and sought asylum in the Roman camp, be brought in and beheaded. One source says that Flaminius even beheaded the man himself. Eight years later Flaminius was expelled from the senate by Cato the Censor for having “befouled the maiestas of his high office by so foul a crime.”²⁰

Now, the expulsion of Flaminius from the Senate provoked an immediate public reaction that is astonishing for a modern conscience. One day at the theater he passed by the first seats, the ones reserved for the senators, and climbed up to the most remote ones. But the people clamored for him to take his place among the senators, so he went back down to sit among them.²¹

What we see here is that pity is status-related. While we would pity *the victim* of Flaminius as a fellow human being, no ancient pitied him because he was a barbarian. What produced indignation in Flaminius’ crime – indignation, not pity – is the fact that a magistrate of the Roman people betrayed his duties toward a barbarian who had appealed to the *fides* of the Roman people and did so to please a *scortum*. But once Flaminius was debased, once he was “downgraded” on the social scale, the contrary is true: while we would certainly not pity a man we would consider a war criminal as he goes to sit in the back rows (and a man that did not suffer any punishment other than a loss of honor), the Roman people pitied him precisely because of his status. For them it is terrible and heartbreaking to see this offspring of a glorious noble family, this former senator and consul, obliged to leave his seat and go see the spectacle from the “lower seats.”

Let us now leave Rome and history for Greece and tragedy, that is, the very place

²⁰ Valerius Maximus, 2, 9, 3.

²¹ Plutarch, *Life of Flaminius*, 19, 4.

where modern scholarly consciousness often wanders when it ponders the ancient roots of modern conscience (of which empathy may be seen as one of the newest names). We still see that pity is status-related. Antigone wants to bury her brother not because she defends a universal right to dignity, but because he is her brother; she even says that she would not have undertaken all the trouble had it been for a husband;

This is my recompense! And yet to those
With clear thoughts I did well to honor you.
For I would never have assumed this burden,
Defying the citizens, if it had been
My children or my husband who had died
And had been left to rot away out there.
In deference to what law do I say this? —
Were my husband dead, there could be another,
And by that man, another child, if one
Were lost. But since my mother and my father
Are hidden now in Hades, no more brothers
Could ever be born—²³

In another tragedy where the same problem arises, we see Ulysses defending, in

²³ Cf. Sophocles, *Antigone*, 905-912 (translation Reginald Gibbons and Charles Segal). The passage, needless to say, shocked modern humanist sensibility: Goethe declared it to be a “stain” and suspected it to be an interpolation, cf. *Gespräche mit Eckermann*, 28 march 1827: “So kommt in der Antigone eine Stelle vor, die mir immer als ein Flecken erscheint und worum ich vieles gehen möchte, wenn ein tüchtiger Philologe uns heiviese, sie wäre eingeschoben und unecht. Nachdem nämlich die Heldin im Laufe des Stückes die herrlichsten Gründe für ihre Handlung ausgesprochen und den Edelmut der reinsten Seele entwickelt hat, bringt sie zuletzt, als sie zum Tode geht, ein Motiv vor, das ganz schlecht ist und fast ans Komische streift. Sie sagt, dass sie das, was sie für ihren Bruder getan, wenn sie Mutter gewesen wäre, nicht für ihre gestorbenen Kinder und nicht für ihren gestorbenen Gatten getan haben würde; denn, sagt sie, wäre mir ein Gatte gestorben, so hätte ich einen anderen genommen, und wören mir Kinder gestorben, so hätte ich mir von dem neuem Gatten andere Kinder zeugen lassen. Allein mit meinem Bruder ist es ein anderes: einen Bruder kann ich nicht wiederbekommen ; denn da mein Vater und meine Mutter tot sind, so ist niemand da, der ihn zeugen könnte”. Goethe’s judgment led many philologists (for example Dindorf, Nauck, Wolff, Wecklein) to put the text between brackets. On this “arch-disputed ground of philological, stylistic, and psychological controversy”, see also Steiner 1984, 279-280.

opposition to Agamemnon, the right for Ajax to be buried. But here again, it is very striking to see that not a word is said about something universal. Ulysses expressly says that he defends Ajax' rights because Ajax was a hero.

He was my enemy, too, the man I hated most

After I won the arms of Achilles, but even so

I cannot rightly begrudge him his due honors.

I have to admit, he was the best fighter of all of us

Who sailed to Troy, except perhaps Achilles.

It is not right that you treat him with such contempt;

You are not hurting him, but the laws of the gods.

To dishonor a brave man in death is wrong,

Even if you hate him with all your heart²⁴.

His compassion for the body that lays unburied is thus directly linked to Ajax' prestigious status.

Even though ancient pity is only roughly equivalent to modern empathy, were pity and compassion used to cure melancholic disorders, especially the drive to solitude? Not at all. Most ancient and classical philosophers saw pity and compassion as affections and passions typical of the fool, and as such unworthy of wise men. Zeno initiated a centuries-long tradition when he said, *neminem misericordem esse nisi stultum et leuem. Viri non esse neque exorari neque placari*²⁵. The Stoic wise man should assist, condole and console his fellow human beings, but without feeling anything:²⁶

²⁴ Sophocles, *Ajax*, 1336-1345 ; see also 1355 : "He was my enemy, but he was also a noble man." (Translation by Peter Meineck and Paul Woodruff)

²⁵ Cf. e. g. Zeno, fr. 214 Von Arnim (= Cicero, *pro Murena*, 61): *neminem misericordem esse nisi stultum et leuem. Viri non esse neque exorari neque placari*.

²⁶ Epictetus, *Enchiridion*, 16: ὅταν κλαίοντα ἴδῃς τινὰ ἐν πένθει [...] πρόσεχε μὴ σε ἢ φαντασία συναρπάσῃ ὡς ἐν κακοῖς ὄντος αὐτοῦ τοῖς ἐκτός [...] μέχρι μέντοι λόγου μὴ ὄκνει συμπεριφέρεισθαι αὐτῷ, κἂν οὕτω τύχῃ, καὶ συνεπιστενάξαι· πρόσεχε μέντοι μὴ καὶ ἔσωθεν στενάξῃς. Cf. Trapp 2017, 367. A today's heir to this tradition is Paul Bloom (2016).

When you see someone weeping in sorrow [...] take care not to be carried away by the impression that he is involved in externals that are bad. [...] As far as words go, do not shrink from sympathizing with him and even, if the opportunity arises, from groaning with him; but be careful not to groan inwardly, too.

So this ancient form of empathy could not have been a remedy. It was *per se* a sickness to get rid of. Remember that the aim of tragedy, for Aristotle, was the liberation from fear *and* pity.²⁷ The Greek word he uses, *katharsis*, has been recognized for a long time as a medical term.

So, let us put aside pity and compassion. Not only are they only very distantly equivalent to “our” empathy, but it would have also been unthinkable to use them as a remedy.

There was something else that seemed to bear a resemblance to our empathy, namely, the sense of human solidarity. It, too, existed in antiquity. It was called *philanthropia* in Greek, *humanitas* in Latin²⁸. But again, this is not exactly what we call empathy.

Empathy, as Dr. Miteva says in her text, is a drive or an ability to *reach out to the other*, to put oneself in their shoes, not necessarily in order to pity them or even to help them, but above all to understand their feelings, and at times even defeat them through this very understanding²⁹.

The ancient sense of human solidarity does not at all imply that one understands the other. There is no *Einfühlung* here. It is a virtue, which the virtuous have in them either naturally or through education. If someone is in danger, I must help him – a paradigmatic scene of *humanitas* is Pliny the Elder’s going to rescue people on the shore suffocating under the ashes of Vesuvius – just as I must welcome the wanderer in my house. It does not mean that I understand the feelings of the endangered, or of the homeless, but because virtue commands that I help my fellow humans. Lucretius’ famous first lines (*suaue mari magno*, etc.) were a deliberate provocative paradox. One should not, as is often the case, explain away

²⁷ Cf. Pigeaud 1988, 28 : “La pitié, comme la crainte, sont des passions nuisibles, si elles ne sont pas réduites à un état de moyenne ; elles risquent de rendre excessif le rapport à autrui de l’individu qui peut se perdre dans l’autre, ou au contraire donner trop de valeur à sa personne”. On pity and fear as emotional impulses of tragedy, cf. Plato, *Phaedrus*, 268 c-d.

²⁸ On *humanitas*, see Vesperini 2015.

²⁹ Cf. e.g. Aschheim 2016, 23: “As Lou Agosta has noted, torturers have to be empathic if they are to grasp the effect they are having upon their victims”.

the enormity of the claim, to use Thomas Creech's 1695 translation (from *noblesse oblige*, for Creech lived and died a melancholic):

'Tis pleasant, when the Seas are rough, to stand
And view another's Danger, safe at Land.
Not 'cause he's troubled, but 'tis sweet to see
Those Cares and Fears, from which our selves are free³⁰.

Lucretius here deliberately wrote uncommon lines, reversing the ubiquitous norms of *humanitas*, without any parallel in the ancient extant literature, and their success arises among other things from their paradoxical aura on the brink of scandal³¹.

To turn back to *humanitas*: it was a virtue, not a feeling. And a socially rewarding virtue, for in a face-to-face society, in which many people prized honor over life—Maecenas' self-proclaimed fierce grasp onto life was scandalous³²—it brought along good reputation and even glory (as in the case of Pliny the Elder).

But even so, even though this sense of solidarity is not exactly our empathy, was it a cure for melancholy, and particularly for its forms that are most familiar to us, like sadness, depression, and the longing for solitude? It was not. For virtue cannot be a cure for the sick. To do so would have been to be as foolish as the psychiatrist who told Virginia Woolf: "Equanimity – equanimity – practise equanimity, Mrs. Woolf." "As the door closed behind us", commented Leonard Woolf in his beautiful memoirs, "I felt that he might as usefully have said, "A normal temperature – ninety-eight point four – practise a normal temperature, Mrs. Woolf."³³

What were, then, the remedies used to cure melancholy? Since the melancholic

³⁰ Lucretius, *de rerum natura*, II, 1-4 : *Suave, mari magno turbantibus aequora ventis, | e terra magnum alterius spectare laborem; | non quia vexari quemquamst iucunda voluptas, | sed quibus ipse malis careas quia cernere suave est.*

³¹ Cf. Prospero 2015, 31: "Far from ignoring how the image of the impassive watcher would impact on his readers, [Lucretius] deliberately chooses to shock them".

³² Maecenas, fr. 4 Morel⁴ (ap. Seneca, *Epistles to Lucilius*, 101, 10) : *debilem facito manu, debilem pede coxo, | tuber adstrue gibberum, lubricos quate dentes: | vita dum superest, benest; hanc mihi, vel acuta | si sedeam cruce, sustine.* "Fashion me with a palsied hand, weak of foot and a cripple. Build upon me a crook-backed hump. Shake my teeth till they rattle. All is well if my life remains. Save, oh save it, I pray you, Though I sit on the piercing cross"(translation Richard M. Gummere).

³³ Woolf 1967, 51.

disorders originated in the black bile, these remedies consisted first of all in purgatives: bloodlettings, emetics, laxatives. Famously, hellebore was used until the 19th century precisely for its purgative virtues. Exercise (walking, for example) was also supposed to remove excessive quantities of black bile. These were the most familiar treatments.

But some psychological treatments existed as well:

Causes of fright [should be] excluded, good hope rather put forward; entertainment sought by storytelling, and by games, especially by those with which the patient was wont to be attracted when sane; work of his, if there is any, should be praised, and set out before his eyes; his depression should be gently reproved as being without cause; he should have it pointed out to him now and again how in the very things which trouble him there may be cause of rejoicing rather than of solitude.³⁴

Diversions and distractions can help. Long and extended journeys provide distraction and amusement (Rufus, 51). Deep sadness can be relieved by amusements such as music (Rufus, 69). Soranus suggests the theatre.³⁵

Very characteristically, all these psychological treatments consider the melancholic to be passive, not an agent. He is the one that others have to reach out to in order to alleviate his burden: they must distract him, talk to him, and even preach to him on the unfoundedness of his affliction. So there is not the slightest hint that one could advise him to reach out to others in order to cure himself.

To sum up: we cannot date the melancholy–empathy nexus back to antiquity because we find neither our understanding of melancholy nor empathy in antiquity.

I did not find it in the Middle Ages or the Renaissance, either. The contribution that *acedia*, i.e. the subtle mix of boredom and depression that plagued monastic life, makes to the construction of modern melancholy is its purely spiritual nature. *Acedia* does not involve any humor, but demons and our sinful nature.

I have not found any medieval source linking either *acedia* or *melancholia* to empathy. The medieval melancholic, plagued with *acedia* (with which melancholy will end up merging

³⁴ Celsus, *De Medicina*, 299-301. Quoted by Lawlor 2012, 35

³⁵ Bell 2014, 69.

by the end of the period), is also inaccessible to any relationship with others. The *acedia*-ridden monk hates his brethren. Here again, the impulse to reach out to the other is not so much a feeling or an emotion, as a virtue: *caritas*. I think, for example, of the crowds accompanying Gilles de Rais to the stake, who had slain so many children in his seigneurie, and praying for him. No one did it because they felt what he felt but because as sinners themselves they were deeply concerned about his soul after death and prayed for him that he may not go directly to hell (for all eternity)³⁶. It was an act of *caritas*, a free act of the will and an act of mercy...

Apart from this *caritas* based on the awareness of sin, the relation to the other is also based on the famous precept “do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets”³⁷: it was not grounded in sinful human nature, and could even be recovered as an expression of natural law by modern rationalist (or pre-rationalist) thinkers,³⁸ as Rousseau’s famous “*maxime sublime de justice raisonnée.*”³⁹

The paradigm of the Renaissance melancholic is the man of genius. Although this traditional link between melancholy and genius can be traced back to antiquity, it is really in the Renaissance that it becomes almost omnipresent in the biographies (fictitious or real) of great artists and writers. Apart from this, it is in the Renaissance that melancholy extends its field so as to embrace the whole of human phenomena. If Burton’s *Anatomy of Melancholy* always reminds us of Montaigne, it is precisely because, just as Montaigne’s self was a pretext to discourse on the whole range of human affairs, melancholy provided this *prophasis*, this pretext, to Burton.⁴⁰ For these two reasons – melancholy as a required condition of the artist, and melancholy as a principle of explanation and interpretation of any aspect of human condition – one can say that the Renaissance is truly the Golden Age of ancient melancholy.

But again, I did not find in this epoch the idea that melancholy might paradoxically give way to empathy or that one could cure melancholy with empathy.

³⁶ I thank Andrew Krema for his observations on this point.

³⁷ Matthew, 7: 12 ; Luke 6: 31.

³⁸ See for example what Naudé said to his friend Patin : “La loy de nature est la vraye regle d’un honneste homme pourveu qu’il en pratique le 1er. point : *quod tibi fieri non vis, alteri ne feceris*” (ms. Patin, Vienna [Staatsbibliothek, ms. 7071], p. 39 ; quoted by Cavallé 2014, 223). See also Bolingbroke in Gay 1967, 55.

³⁹ Rousseau, *Discours sur l’origine et les fondements de l’inégalité parmi les hommes*, 1755, 1.

⁴⁰ Cf. Burton’s “Thou thyself art the subject of my discourse”, quoting Martial (10, 4, 9-10): “No Centaurs here, or Gorgons look to find, | My subject is of man, and human kind”.

So when and where do melancholy and empathy appear in the forms that are so familiar to us?

If we want to discover this origin, I think we should focus less on melancholy, a notion freighted with ancient legacies, as on empathy. What strikes me about the latter concept is the fact that it is so close to us and so remote from the ancients. There is an enormous amount of literature on the subject today. It seems to be a hallmark of contemporary culture: ethologist Frans de Waal (2009) talks of an “age of empathy” and Jeremy Rifkin of “an empathic civilization” (2010). Empathy is thriving on the self-help shelves: it is “Life’s Most Essential Skill” (McLaren 2013)⁴¹. Lacking it is psychopathic⁴². The plethora of empathy literature has arisen from philosophers and psychologists, but also from neurologists (e.g. Zaboura 2009), business managers (e.g. Parker-Hall 2008 or Fischer 2008), educators (e.g. Cooper 2011), designers (e.g. Chapman 2005) and architects (Derix & Izaki 2014). Even a former US president has decided to partner with Netflix to make films that “promote greater empathy and understanding between peoples.”⁴³

In this “empathy rush,” a kind of symbolic “gold rush” of our time, we talk about empathy as though it were something universal and timeless, something that has always been there, and should be there. This is why we hear so many outcries over Mr. Trump’s alleged lack of empathy. This is why we hear so many people worrying about the demise of empathy among children and teenagers. We all have read stories about young people gleefully beheading their fellow humans, one of them saying it reminded him of a TV reality show dedicated to cooking⁴⁴.

It is as if we were witnessing the end of something that should have always been there. But are we sure that before our time children and teens were naturally kind and benevolent to

⁴¹ Cf. also e.g. Krznaric 2014 or Famery 2014.

⁴² Cf. e.g. Schouten & Silver 2012.

⁴³ *The Guardian*, 21 May, 2018: “Barack and Michelle Obama to make films for Netflix”. Here is the complete statement: “One of the simple joys of our time in public service was getting to meet so many fascinating people from all walks of life, and to help them share their experiences with a wider audience. That’s why Michelle and I are so excited to partner with Netflix – we hope to cultivate and curate the talented, inspiring, creative voices who are able to promote greater empathy and understanding between peoples, and help them share their stories with the entire world.”

⁴⁴ Cf. what David Thomson says on *Libération* (“Les vidéos d’exécution de l’Etat islamique ont un réel pouvoir de recrutement”, 17 novembre 2014): “Chacune de ces vidéos galvanise littéralement tous les partisans de l’EI. Ils s’en amusent, ils font des blagues à leur propos. Par exemple, dans celle d’hier, beaucoup ont fait un parallèle entre les couteaux et l’émission Top Chef... Mais ce sont bel et bien ces vidéos qui attirent les candidats au jihad. Pour eux c’est la preuve que l’EI est prêt à tout pour attaquer les ‘ennemis d’Allah’. Et ces vidéos facilitent le passage à l’acte parce qu’elles le banalisent. Elles ont un réel pouvoir de recrutement.”

each other?⁴⁵ That US presidents, or Western leaders in general, were particularly empathic characters? Are we sure that before our time no one took pleasure in beheading or killing other people? We can look to the experience of one of our major poets, Blaise Cendrars, who was no Ernst Jünger, as a soldier in WWI to see that this demise is not new:⁴⁶

Et voilà qu'aujourd'hui j'ai le couteau à la main. L'eustache de Bonnot. « Vive l'humanité! » Je palpe une froide vérité sommée d'une lame tranchante. J'ai raison. Mon jeune passé sportif saura suffire. Me voici les nerfs tendus, les muscles bandés, prêt à bondir dans la réalité. J'ai bravé la torpille, le canon, les mines, le feu, les gaz, les mitrailleuses, toute la machinerie anonyme, démoniaque, systématique, aveugle. Je vais braver l'homme. Mon semblable. Un singe. Œil pour œil, dent pour dent. À nous deux maintenant. À coups de poing, à coups de couteau. Sans merci, je saute sur mon antagoniste. Je lui porte un coup terrible. La tête est presque décollée. J'ai tué le Boche. J'étais plus vif et plus rapide que lui. Plus direct. J'ai frappé le premier. J'ai le sens de la réalité, moi, poète. J'ai agi. J'ai tué. Comme celui qui veut vivre.

To me, then, what is really new is not the demise of empathy; rather, it is the sense of and demand for empathy. This demand for empathy as the demand for democracy, for social justice, I would argue, is all the more pressing, all the more insistent because it is a very recent idea, that is, something very fragile and precarious, something that is not at all entrenched in our culture.

It was born just over two centuries ago; and two centuries, in the perspective of anthropological history (or *Kulturgeschichte*) is tantamount perhaps to one hour.

Now, when I say two centuries ago, someone could object that the word, *empathy*, was coined much later in 1873. But here again, the birthdate of a notion does not necessarily coincide in the birthdate of a word. The idea of empathy already appears in the German *Dichter und Denker* of the late 18th century, notably in Herder, Kant, Novalis, and

⁴⁵ In this case one should read Pergaud's *Guerre des boutons* or Musil's *Törless*.

⁴⁶ *J'ai tué* (1918). Quoted by Audoin-Rouzeau & Becker 2000, 54. "And here today I am with a knife in hand. "Long live humanity!" I feel a cold truth summoned by a sharp blade. I'm right. My past of sporting youth will suffice. Here I am, wired nerves, taught muscles, ready to leap into reality. I defied the torpedo gun, the canon, the mines, the fire, the gas, the machine guns, all an unknown, evil, systematically blind machinery. I will defy man. My fellow man. A monkey. An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. Now, let's fight it out. Punching, stabbing. Without mercy. I jump on my antagonist. I give him a terrible stab. The head is almost detached. I killed the Boche. I was sharper and faster than him. More direct. I struck first. I have a sense of reality, me, the poet. I acted. I killed. As one who wants to live".

Schopenhauer.⁴⁷ And it could not have been otherwise. For the idea of empathy presupposes one Self and one Other, one *ich* and one *du*. If empathy is not merely a synonym for sympathy, but a real projection of the Self onto the Other and back again in order truly to experience one's feelings, one's emotions, one's experience, one's story and one's consciousness, then it cannot happen without a consciousness of one's own Self, an awareness of one's own Self, or subjectivity.

And it is really in this extraordinary spring of German thought and literature that the idea of subjectivity, the modern idea of the Self, was best expressed: one can find of course precedents in Rousseau's "singularity" (*Public Advertiser*, 13 Jan. 1766)⁴⁸, which had a decisive influence on German culture, and one can find parallels in England. But nowhere, I think, was the discussion of subjectivity and the literary and artistic creation that accompanied this discussion more consequential for the history of our culture than in Germany.

Of course, I know that the birth of subjectivity is often situated much earlier, for example, very commonly, in Petrarch, or even earlier in the Middle Ages, or in antiquity, but I think the idea of subjectivity only appears when it is totally rid of social status – when I am what I am and who I am regardless of social status, indeed, sometimes, as opposed to my social status. Proust thus opposed the « soi extérieur », the one that mingles with society, to the « moi profond », « [moi] qu'on ne retrouve qu'en faisant abstraction des autres et du moi qui connaît les autres, [...] qui a attendu pendant qu'on était avec les autres, qu'on sent bien *le seul réel* ». My true Self is not me as a knight or a cleric, as a nobleman or as a bourgeois, as a wife or as a mother, as a successful businessman or as an Instagram icon whose story can be "shopped" online, but me, once deprived of all my social attributes.

And this idea of the Self, I would argue, really appears and flourishes around this moment of German culture, a moment in which educated Westerners and modern scholars in human sciences owe so much of their sensibility and so much of the categories that organize their understanding, their *Verstand*.

⁴⁷ Cf. e.g. Stern 1898, 4-5; Makkreel 1996, 206 ff; both quoted by Stueber 2006, 6-7.

⁴⁸ See also of course *Confessions: Je ne suis fait comme aucun de ceux que j'ai vus ; j'ose croire n'être fait comme aucun de ceux qui existent. Si je ne vaud pas mieux, au moins je suis autre*. No one (and certainly no one from such a humble background) could have previously talked in these terms, yet anyone could thereafter. The relationship between Rousseau's "singularity" (which owes some of its traits to classical melancholy, but should not be confused with it) and the movement of empathy and embrace he sparked across Europe, notably based on the notion of *pitié* (cf. his *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes*), is a chapter of the history I am only brushing upon here. His responsibility in the Revolution is as much due to his *Contrat social* as to the way he shaped sensibilities (granted, sensibilities that were already ready to be shaped this way) through the *Nouvelle Héloïse*. On Rousseau's singularity, see the recent work of Lilti 2014, 177-184.

Now, this idea of the Self that appeared at that time in European culture is anything but solipsistic. The Self is always related to the Other and, apart from the Other, to the World. The romantic Self (the most eloquent version of this subjectivity) feels a connection to the whole world. And even though, very often, the Self appears under the guise of the solitary (*der Einsame*), the vagabond (*der Wanderer*), the *proscrit*, or even the criminal (suffice it to mention the enormous success of Byron's heroes: Cain, the Giaour, Manfred, etc.), this solitude is always a wound that is related to the absence of this Other, which produces the various wounds of the romantic self: grief, nostalgia, a sense of guilt, unreciprocated love, or an indefinite quest to some unknown soul mate – and the absence of God in the world.

This is, then, the cultural landscape in which empathy finds its archaeological soil.

And it is no wonder that it is also in this cultural landscape that melancholy as we moderns conceive it finds its birth, too. For modern melancholy is not exactly sadness or depression. First of all, while depression is always a “*fatigue d'être soi*” (Ehrenberg 1998)⁴⁹, there is no modern melancholy without the modern Self. One could almost say that melancholy is a necessary stage in the construction and experience of the Self. Why? Because modern melancholy appears to be the result of a breach between the Self and the order of the world, whether that be its social order (social inequalities, social conventions⁵⁰), or its natural order (illness, death), with all the limitations they impose on one's aspirations and desires. Because this melancholic state is profoundly linked to the conscience of the Self, it also brings, along with a feeling of sadness or loss, a certain feeling of happiness. Someone who feels melancholy also feels he is “at home” inside himself, brooding maybe, but still, “at home.” There is some pleasure, then, taken in a melancholic state of mind. Many writers noted it like Trakl, for example:⁵¹

*Immer wieder kehrst du, Melancholie,
O Sanftmut der einsamen Seele.*

And very often, along with this modern romantic melancholy comes the movement to reach out to the other. I have given some emblematic examples of it in my introduction.

⁴⁹ See also Benasayag 2015.

⁵⁰ “Sex is not my gender.” Today's fight for rights related to gender issues (homosexual marriage, right to adoption, right to use specific bathrooms, etc.) is a direct (as curious as it may appear) cause of this “1800” invention of subjectivity. A good example is also Stendhal.

⁵¹ Trakl, « In ein altes Stammbuch » (1913).

Hence comes the importance of love, where the Other gives the Self its harmony (or condemn him to misery, if it does not return his feelings).⁵² This is what Karoline von Günderode called

...der Liebe ewig Sehnen

Eins in zwei zu sein.

One line by Shelley admirably captures at once the self-affirmation of the Self, the porous boundaries shared with the Other, and the break from the classical tradition of love:⁵³

I am not thine: I am a part of thee.

Hence comes the importance of friendship, too: a friendship that unites two souls but is also meant to embrace the whole of humanity. Here Schiller may be the most influential author on friendship, with his creation of the ideal friend, the marquis of Posa, in *Don Carlos*, and his Ode to Joy, where the ideal of friendship (*eines Freundes Freund zu sein*) extends to universal fraternity.⁵⁴ Here, we are dealing with a brotherhood rooted in intersubjective relationships, not with the abstract *humanité* proposed by the *philosophes*. Voltaire did not feel he was a brother of Calas or the chevalier de la Barre. He was a perfect pupil of the Jesuits, that is, of classical rhetoric, and thought himself an heir to the Roman orators, defending the victims of injustice and using all the tools necessary for that purpose to excite pity and indignation (*mouere*).⁵⁵ But as we saw, pity is not to be confused with empathy.

Empathy and melancholy are then linked to the experience of being one Self and the experience of a global, indefinite, sense of wound without which the modern Self could not build himself. In earlier societies, the experience of this particular sense of wound could not be had because everything was integrated in a theological-political order. To put it like the poet Malherbe, most people felt like passengers of a boat, who had not a word to say about

⁵² This “other” is of course very often a woman, but the contrary happens too, as in Karoline von Günderode’s love for Creutzer.

⁵³ *Epipsychidion*, 52. Quoted by George Steiner in his *Antigones* (1984, 12), where one will find very interesting pages on the theme of romantic love between brother and sister.

⁵⁴ Just as the friendship between Posa and Carlos is inseparable from their dream of a better future for humanity.

⁵⁵ What I find fascinating about Voltaire is precisely the fact that he lives until the end of his life entirely inside the rhetorical and aristocratic coordinates of the European classical culture he will unknowingly, but decisively, contribute to destroy. Here too he is the antipodes of Rousseau, of which Turgot could say, writing to Hume: “Personne au monde n’imaginera que vous ayez demandé une pension pour Rousseau afin de le déshonorer. Parce qu’excepté lui personne ne pensera qu’une pension l’eût déshonoré”. Quoted by Lilti 2014, 177 (emphasis mine).

the course of the boat.⁵⁶ But the Self – once liberated from this providential order and fatalism, deprived of any *théodicée*, which is also a *sociodicée* (to use Bourdieu’s neologism) and deprived of any hopes of a reward hereafter for his suffering in this world – experiences at once his aspirations (for himself but also for the others and for the world) and the limitations of these aspirations. Such are the conditions that produce this typically modern dialectic of melancholy and empathy.

This is obvious in literature. Many of the great figures of modern literature were notoriously melancholic and are commonly represented as solitary figures: Keats, Büchner (whose *Lenz*, inspired by the *Sturm und Drang* writer, can be read under our perspective), Leopardi, Nietzsche, Flaubert, Kafka, Proust, and Beckett. But if one looks closer, these figures also had deeply empathic temperaments. Flaubert explains in many letters that he avoids interactions with other people precisely because he feels too much what they feel and must be very careful with his nerves. He even wrote that he felt what his characters went through. He famously said that, while writing the pages on Mrs. Bovary’s death by poisoning, he vomited two dinners.⁵⁷ Nietzsche is an example of the whole world that separates pity, which he detested, from empathy, which was the source of his work.⁵⁸ Proust’s empathy is palpable everywhere in his work and also in his letters⁵⁹ or in the memoir left by his

⁵⁶ “Quant on lui parlait d’affaires d’État, il avait toujours ce mot à la bouche qu’il a mis dans l’Épître liminaire de Tite-Live, adressée à M. de Luynes, qu’il ne faut point se mêler de la conduite d’un vaisseau où l’on n’est que simple passage”. Of course, the very fact that Malherbe had to make this statement shows that some people challenged this view and thought (or implied) they should have their say on political matters. But: i) they were a minority, although a growing one: the *columbaria*, to paraphrase the clown Saccardino (Ginzburg 1986), was beginning to open its eyes; ii) one should carefully distinguish between talking about political matters (which people always did), and aspiring *to mend them, to do something about them*.

⁵⁷ « Quand j’écrivais l’empoisonnement de Madame Bovary j’avais si bien le goût de l’arsenic dans la bouche, j’étais si bien empoisonné moi-même que je me suis donné deux indigestions coup sur coup, - deux indigestions réelles, car j’ai vomi tout mon dîner. » (letter to Hippolyte Taine. – 20, November, 1866).

⁵⁸ See also *Fröhliche Wissenschaft*, 334 : “Man muss lieben lernen. — So geht es uns in der Musik: erst muss man eine Figur und Weise überhaupt hören lernen, heraushören, unterscheiden, als ein Leben für sich isolieren und abgrenzen; dann braucht es Mühe und guten Willen, sie zu ertragen, trotz ihrer Fremdheit, Geduld gegen ihren Blick und Ausdruck, Mildherzigkeit gegen das Wunderliche an ihr zu üben: — endlich kommecjert ein Augenblick, wo wir ihrer gewohnt sind, wo wir sie erwarten, wo wir ahnen, daß sie uns fehlen würde, wenn sie fehlte; und nun wirkt sie ihren Zwang und Zauber fort und fort und endet nicht eher, als bis wir ihre demüthigen und entzückten Liebhaber geworden sind, die nichts Besseres von der Welt mehr wollen, als sie und wieder sie. — So geht es uns aber nicht nur mit der Musik: gerade so haben wir alle Dinge, die wir jetzt lieben, lieben gelernt. Wir werden schließlich immer für unseren guten Willen, unsere Geduld, Billigkeit, Sanftmüthigkeit gegen das Fremde belohnt, indem *das Fremde langsam seinen Schleier abwirft* und sich als neue unsägliche Schönheit darstellt: — es ist sein Dank für unsere Gastfreundschaft. Auch wer sich selber liebt, wird es auf diesem Wege gelernt haben: es giebt keinen anderen Weg. Auch die Liebe muss man lernen”.

⁵⁹ See e.g. this letter to Gide (whom he despised), on 11 April, 1922: “À ce propos, comme on doit la vérité amie même à Platon, j’ai trouvé que vous parliez sur un ton bien dédaigneux à Wilde. Je l’admire fort peu. Mais je ne comprends pas les réticences et les rudesses en parlant à un malheureux”.

housekeeper Céleste Albaret⁶⁰. Everyone knows Kafka worked in an insurance company and hated his job. But it is much less known that he was deeply disturbed by the accidents the workers went through and that he wrote extremely precise reports with precise proposals to avoid these accidents. About Beckett, there is this testimony by his intimate friends Avigdor Arikha and Anne Atik (2001, 33):

Anyone who knew Sam well knew that his generosity did not stem from a deprived childhood for which he was trying to compensate; on the contrary, his early years had been happy, fortunate. He would even ask, uncomprehendingly, why people thought his writings must mean he had a miserable childhood. All they have to do, he added, is go to the window, read the papers, it is all there. A. [Avigdor] remembers being with him in a taxi, stopped at a traffic light, and Sam, looking out the window, suddenly throwing up his hands and murmuring, almost to himself, '*La détresse, la détresse*' ('Distress, distress').

Very often, if one brackets the conception of the great modern artist as a sovereign monad, one encounters this empathic dimension: for example in Byron, Tchekhov, Oscar Wilde, and today, maybe even in Woody Allen.

Another decisive realm of modern culture in which it is obvious is modern politics. It is very common, when a genealogy of the modern Left is drawn, to locate its roots in the Enlightenment. But one could say that this romantic dialectic of melancholy and empathy also animated many left-wing leaders and activists. Romanticism played as important a role as Enlightenment. Enzo Traverso showed it recently with his book entitled *Left-Wing Melancholia. Marxism, History, and Memory*⁶¹. I think that one of the most beautiful examples of this link between empathy, melancholy, and the will to change the world is Rosa Luxemburg. I would like to quote a letter she writes from Breslau, one of the most beautiful prose texts I know (as was recognized by Karl Kraus)⁶²:

⁶⁰ One particularly interesting page (among so many others) is when she describes Proust's ability to imitate, to do what the ancients called *ethopoiesis*. Proust's talent as *imitateur* is also confirmed by Fernand Gregh. It makes for a strange echo to Ancient melancholy, cf. Pigeaud 1988, 16: "[...] le mélancolique a en lui, comme possibles, tous les caractères de tous les hommes". See also *ibid.*, 25 ff., 44 ff., 61 ff.

⁶¹ New York: Columbia University Press, 2016. .

⁶² Letter to Sonja Liebknecht, mid-december 1917: "Oh, Sonyichka, I've lived through something sharply, terribly painful here. [...] A few days ago, a wagon arrived at the courtyard [where I take my walks]. The load was piled so high that the buffaloes couldn't pull the wagon over the threshold at the entrance gate. The soldier accompanying the wagon, a brutal fellow, began flailing at the animals so fiercely with the blunt end of his whip

Ach, Sonitschka, ich habe hier einen scharfen Schmerz erlebt, auf dem Hof, wo ich spaziere, [...] – Vor einigen Tagen kam also ein Wagen mit Säcken hereingefahren, die Last war so hoch aufgetürmt, daß die Büffel nicht über die Schwelle bei der Toreinfahrt konnten. Der begleitende Soldat, ein brutaler Kerl, fing an, derart auf die Tiere mit dem dicken Ende des Peitschenstieles loszuschlagen, daß die Aufseherin ihn empört zur Rede stellte, ob er denn kein Mitleid mit den Tieren hätte! „Mit uns Menschen hat auch niemand Mitleid“, antwortete er mit bösen Lächeln und hieb noch kräftiger ein ... Die Tiere zogen schließ an und kamen über den Berg, aber eins blutete ... Sonitschka, die Büffelhaut ist sprichwörtlich an Dicke und Zähigkeit, und die war zerrissen. Die Tiere standen dann beim Abladen ganz still und erschöpft, und eins, das, welches blutete, schaute dabei vor sich hin mit einem Ausdruck in dem schwarzen Gesicht und den sanften schwarzen Augen wie ein verweintes Kind. Es war direkt der Ausdruck eines Kindes, das hart bestraft worden ist und nicht weiß, wofür, weshalb, nicht weiß, wie es der Qual und der rohen Gewalt entgehen soll ... ich stand davor, und das Tier blickte mich an, mir rannen die Tränen herunter – es waren seine Tränen, man kann um den liebsten Bruder nicht schmerzlicher zucken, als ich in meiner Ohnmacht um dieses stille Leid zuckte. Wie weit, wie unerreichbar, verloren die freien saftigen grünen Weiden Rumäniens! Wie anders schien dort die Sonne, blies der Wind, wie anders waren die schönen Laute der Vögel oder das melodische Rufen der Hirten. Und hier – diese fremde schaurige Stadt, der dumpfe Stall, das ekeleregende muffige Heu mit faulem Stroh gemischt, die fremden furchtbaren

handle that the attendant on duty indignantly took him to task, asking him: Had he no pity for the animals? “No one has pity for us humans,” he answered with an evil smile, and started in again, beating them harder than ever.... The animals finally started to pull again and got over the hump, but one of them was bleeding ... Sonyichka, the hide of a buffalo is proverbial for its toughness and thickness, but this tough skin had been broken. During the unloading, all the animals stood there, quite still, exhausted, and the one that was bleeding kept staring into the empty space in front of him with an expression on his black face and in his soft, black eyes like an abused child. It was precisely the expression of a child that has been punished and doesn't know why or what for, doesn't know how to get away from this torment and raw violence.... I stood before it, and the beast looked at me; tears were running down my face—they were his tears. No one can flinch more painfully on behalf of a beloved brother than I flinched in my helplessness over this mute suffering. How far away, how irretrievably lost were the beautiful, free, tender-green fields of Romania! How differently the sun used to shine and the wind blow there, how different was the lovely song of the birds that could be heard there, or the melodious call of the herdsman. And here—this strange, ugly city, the gloomy stall, the nauseating, stale hay, mixed with rotten straw, and the strange, frightening humans—the beating, the blood running from the fresh wound.... Oh, my poor buffalo, my poor, beloved brother! We both stand here so powerless and mute, and are as one in our pain, impotence, and yearning. —All this time the prisoners had hurriedly busied themselves around the wagon, unloading the heavy sacks and dragging them off into the building; but the soldier stuck both hands in his trouser pockets, paced around the courtyard with long strides, and kept smiling and softly whistling some popular tune to himself. And the entire marvelous panorama of the war passed before my eyes”.

Menschen, und – die Schläge, das Blut, das aus der frischen Wunde rinnt ... Oh, mein armer Büffel, mein armer, geliebter Bruder, wir stehen hier beide so ohnmächtig und stumpf und sind nur eins in Schmerz, in Ohnmacht, in Sehnsucht. – Derweil tummelten sich die Gefangenen geschäftig um den Wagen, luden die schweren Säcke ab und schlepten sie ins Haus; der Soldat aber streckte beide Hände in die Hosentaschen, spazierte mit großen Schritten über den Hof, lächelte und pfiß leise einen Gassenhauere. Und der ganze herrliche Krieg zog an mir vorbei ...

One sees here I think that Rosa Luxemburg's fight was probably as much, if not more, influenced by her romantic Self than by her reading of Marx. When she says "Oh, my poor buffalo, my poor, beloved brother! We both stand here so powerless and mute and are as one in our pain, impotence, and yearning", she seems to echo the beautiful lines from *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*, so beautifully put to music by Mahler⁶³:

O Röslein rot

Der Mensch liegt in größter Not,

Der Mensch liegt in größter Pein

*

Today, one could say that this modern project of individual and collective happiness through the realization of the self is in crisis. It is challenged by another project of modernity, the one that unfortunately now prevails, which is a total subordination of nature and mankind to greed and profit. To speak this way would, in former days, have amounted to a declaration of political orientation. But today it borders on truism. And very characteristically this other project of modernity loathes empathy as much as melancholy. Empathy can be employed to use the other as a tool, so it can be "saved," but melancholy is definitely out.

People must get rid of their subjectivity (which is a systemic cause of depression and in some firms a systemic cause of suicides) to fill in the status that is required of them: that of workers, or better yet, functional agents. This can be conveniently illustrated by the DSM (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders), which split melancholy into a wide

⁶³ This *Röslein* was primitively the Virgin, the *Rosa mystica* from marial litanies. See A. A. Barb, "O Röslein rot", 1963, 139: "Tatsächlich finden wir auch in den [...] Varianten („Maria, du Röslein rot“ oder „Maria, rosenrot“) die Hl. Jungfrau ausdrücklich mit Namen angerufen".

variety of pathologies.⁶⁴ Even grief is forbidden, or at least restricted: beyond 2 weeks, the DSM considers grief as pathological, necessitating medication.⁶⁵ And of course people, that is to say, functional people, must not feel empathy. One saw it in a very eloquent and graphic way with which the outrageous “evaluations” that the disabled in Britain had to undergo to see if they “deserved” their benefits or were cheating the system, and above all to pressure them into going back to work. The British government entrusted this mission to a French firm run by a former minister of the economy.⁶⁶ It would be difficult to find a better illustration of the fact that in the current order, empathy is on the wrong side. And one could go on and on. Modern city councils design public furniture that prevents the homeless from sleeping on benches. A French peasant was recently convicted for having helped migrants.⁶⁷ In Venice, an African refugee drowned as tourists filmed on phones while laughing and making racist remarks.⁶⁸ No one jumped in to help him (and of course the video can conveniently be watched on any Italian mainstream news website).

I therefore wonder if this conference is not formulating today something that went unformulated for so much time because the aspiration on which it focuses our attention is in crisis like the whole complex of ideals it belongs to. And we all know that what is at stake here is the survival of humanity as a human species and a virtue.

⁶⁴ Pigeaud 2008, 17-18: “Il faut se méfier d’une mélancolie qui supprime la mélancolie en tant que concept, en tant que nom de maladie, pour la distribuer en symptômes placés sous d’autres étiquettes”.

⁶⁵ See e.g. Bellahsen 2014, 56; Benasayag 2015, 82-83.

⁶⁶ See now e. g. *Mirror*, 3 February, 2016: “Atos and Capita apologise to disabled people over fitness to work tests”.

⁶⁷ See e. g. *Mediapart*, 8 August, 2017: “Migrants: Cédric Herrou condamné à quatre mois de prison avec sursis”.

⁶⁸ *Il Fatto quotidiano*, 24 January, 2017 : “Venezia, migrante si uccide gettandosi nel Canal Grande davanti a centinaia di persone: la scena ripresa in un video”

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