Mood swing in Classic and Biblical literature

Aristotle, Ajax and Hercules, David and Solomon

By Marlies ter Borg

The suicide of Ajax, Black Figure Ware Greek, Amphora, Exekias, 540 BCE

David by Bernini, Italy, 1624
Literary expression of mood swing in Bible and Classic literature

Aristotle, Hercules and Ajax, David and Solomon

By Marlies ter Borg

“Why is it that all those who have become eminent in philosophy or politics or poetry or the arts are clearly melancholics?” Aristotle, on Melancholy Problamata XXX.1

Aristotle On melancholy
This famous question was attributed to the Greek philosopher Aristotle. For 20 years he was considered the most brilliant member of the Academy established by Plato. When after his master’s death a lesser scholar was made head, he left and, turning crisis into opportunity, he became the tutor of Alexander the Great. Aristotle had a direct experience of eminent personalities, and he obviously was one himself. The question quoted above shows that the link between affective disorder and creativity was publically debated in Greek antiquity. The illness Aristotle referred to was not hidden behind a taboo. Neither were its victims marginalized objects of disdain. On the contrary, the examples the philosopher mentions refer to the great and the famous. Not only were the outstanding poets melancholics; tragedy writers such as Homer, Sophocles, and Euripides. The tragic heroes were also examples of melancholics. Aristotle specifically mentions two heroes well known to this day: Ajax and Hercules. That these classic examples of prowess and courage, whose very names are still invoked today to inspire sports, films, and the marketing all kinds of products as tough and manly, were also disastrously sick, has hardly penetrated the modern conscience. From the honest debate in classical antiquity we have much to learn. For Aristotle was not the only one to discuss the link between affective disorder and creativity. Plato was of the opinion that: ‘Our greatest blessings we owe to mania, at least, when we receive it as a gift from the gods.’ Phaidros, 244A

Mania and melancholy were considered as states of the soul or psyche which could have both sickly and creative aspects. For Aristotle, mania, both in its lighter productive and heavier, destructive forms, is a part of ‘melancholy’. This word has been diluted over the ages to signify a somewhat sad, nostalgic romantic sentiment. For Aristotle, son of a physician, melancholy was much more: a serious disorder of the soul stemming from a chemical imbalance, a surplus of ‘melainè cholè’ or black bile. Melainè cholè can affect the mind in
different ways, comparable to wine. One melancholic is sad without reason, another extremely cheerful.

“The action of black bile being variable, melancholics are variable, for the black bile becomes very hot and very cold”. Melancholy in cold condition “can induce paralysis or torpor or depression or anxiety. If it is overheated it produces cheerfulness, bursting into song, and ecstasies.” So melancholy, according to Aristotle, found expression not only in despondency or depression but also in frantic joy. Aristotle’s ‘melancholy’, in other words, is bipolar. “Those who possess much cold black bile become dull and stupid, whereas those who possess much hot bile are elated and brilliant or erotic or easily moved to anger and desire, while some becomes more talkative.”

I read this in a little book called ‘On melancholy, which I had picked up at a bookstall at a philosophy conference. I read it through standing near the stall. Silently I exclaimed: This is me! I had just recovered from three deep depressions in a row, feeling elated and creative in the period between them. I felt better now that I was taking Lithium. I couldn’t believe that this ancient philosopher was actually describing what I had experienced some two and a half millennia later.

Melancholics, Aristotle told me, are unstable by nature. The character of one and the same person can suddenly change, his or her mood can quickly pass from one pole to its opposite. Sober, taciturn people can suddenly become talkative. Loquacious persons can abruptly fall silent. The manner in which a melancholic reacts to a situation differs, depending on the temperature his black bile has at that particular moment. Sometimes he is frightened and cowardly, at other times he faces up manfully to great danger. “To sum up: the action of black bile being variable, melancholics are variable, for the black bile becomes very hot and very cold.”

Within a single mood, differences in degree can be noted. Somebody who is sad for no reason can suddenly become so desperate that he commits suicide. Well I didn’t thank goodness, but I had been on the brink. A self-confident person can become overconfident, impertinent, even aggressive and violent rage. Such a manic condition can culminate in a tragedy if the deranged person, without realizing, becomes violent towards family or friends. Well I hadn’t experienced a full psychotic mania, but I had quarrelled with my family for no particular reason. My depressions didn’t bother them too much, but my excited moods were rather trying.

In the table below I sum up the characteristics of the cold and the heated state of melaina cholè.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cold Melaina Cholè (depressed)</th>
<th>Hot Melaina Cholè (hypomanic/manic)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Uninspired, vexed, out of tune, (athumia)</td>
<td>Inspired, enthusiastic (entered by thuos=god)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eats his own feeling</td>
<td>Good humoured, (euthymic) cheerful, exalted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tearful, despondent, sad without cause</td>
<td>Ec-static (standing outside or above oneself)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling hated</td>
<td>Optimistic, hopeful,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pessimistic, despairing, desperate</td>
<td>Energetic, intense, obstinate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slow, paralyzed</td>
<td>Good speaker, talkative, inclined to sing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slow speaker, lacking words, silent</td>
<td>Lively, energetic, needs less sleep,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sluggish, slow, lazy, looking bad or tired</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Sluggish feeling
Sluggish thought, stupid, forgetful, confused
Searches out lonely places, like a hermit
Avoids the path of men
Cowardly, anxious, frightened
Inclined to self-destruction, to hang himself

Agile, graceful, slender, beautiful
Sensitive, emotional, passionate, irritable
Full of ideas talented, brilliant, decisive
Sociable, philanthropic, quickly touched.
Erotic, quick to fall in love, to kiss
(over)confident, brave, not fearful (a-pathos),
Irritable, irascible, aggressive, violent
Manic followed by confusion, even in coma

Tragic extremes are a potential threat to outstanding melancholics, liable to diminish or even destroy their creative capacities. Only the milder forms of melancholy give rise to exceptional achievement. ‘For if their melancholy habitus is quite undiluted they are too melancholy; but if it is somewhat tempered they are outstanding.’ This is what is today called hypomania. ‘Those, however, in whom the black bile’s excessive heat is relaxed towards a mean, are melancholy, but they are more rational and less eccentric and in many respects superior to others either in culture or in the arts or in statesmanship.’ For if their melancholy habitus is quite undiluted they are too melancholy; but if it is somewhat tempered they are outstanding.’ In the view of Aristotle exceptional performance is to be expected when the black bile is warm. The melancholic is extremely sensitive both to the outside world and to his own emotions and thoughts. ‘Due to the susceptibility and liveliness of their minds, they have a myriad of associations and ideas.’

This confirmed by Kay Redfield Jamison, the enhanced capacity for association in hypomania can lead to original ideas, although too wild thinking leads to mania. Aristotle talks of ‘fantasmata’. At first the melancholic stores the impressions he absorbs, all the ‘fantasmata’ or images of the outside world, deep down in his memory. He is unable to recall them at will, which leaves an impression of forgetfulness. But when the black bile warms up again, his memory is broken open and the bubbling up of the stored ‘fantasmata’ can no longer be stopped. The melancholic will suddenly see all sorts of novel connections between the impressions he received over time. Melancholics can be difficult people because they cannot and will not create on demand. They are obstinate. But once their creative, associative thinking has taken off, there is no way to stop it. It flies like an arrow fired from a bow, going straight to its target. ‘Through their intensity, melancholics can hit any kind of target from a great distance.’

It is the mild mood swing as such, the slight oscillation of the soul, light depression combined with hypomania that carries the possibility of excellence. ‘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– it follows that all melancholy persons are out of the ordinary, not owing to (a temporary) illness, but from their natural condition.’

Aristotle believes that all outstanding men are melancholic. Those with exceptional achievements are generally unstable compared to those of normal, average people. Their behaviour is non-conformist, unusual, they have strong feelings, but without being overtaken or paralysed by them. A heightened sensibility and intensity belong to great souls.
The nature of creative melancholics does not allow them to become entirely normal or stable. Abnormality is their strength. But also their weakness. They can fall prey to tragic excesses. They can wind up in the extreme of depressive lethargy, anxiety and even suicide: or alternatively in that of manic madness and violence. The great challenge for these outstanding melancholics is to avoid the extremes. In each case they should strive towards the opposite of their natural tendency at any particular moment. In his Nichomachean Ethics Aristotle describes the norm, the preferable behaviour as the mean between two extremes, which relate closely to the two poles of melancholy. Whenever out soul tends towards one of the two extremes, “we must drag ourselves away in the opposite direction for by keeping away from the immediate extreme, we will land somewhere in the middle.” II.ix.5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vice - deficit - too little</th>
<th>Virtue- the mean</th>
<th>Vice - excess - too much</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lack of appetite</td>
<td>Temperate</td>
<td>Self-indulgent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scared, cowardly</td>
<td>Confident, Courageous,</td>
<td>Reckless, Rash</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Without passion, sombre</td>
<td>Good tempered, Amiable</td>
<td>Irascible, hot tempered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bad humoured</td>
<td>Good humoured</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stingy</td>
<td>Liberal, munificent</td>
<td>Prodigal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unduly humble, Shy – too much respect</td>
<td>Respectful, Honourable, modest</td>
<td>Unduly Proud, disrespectful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boring, critical contributes</td>
<td>Witty</td>
<td>Vulgar, buffoon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nothing to conversation,</td>
<td>Tactful</td>
<td>Tactless, indecent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In his famous book on ethics, Aristotle advises melancholics to take medicine on a regular basis. Melancholics are in perpetual need of medicine, because their mixture of bodily fluids keeps their bodies in a constant state of irritation and their passions are continually active. Depending on coincidence, they can become the victim of either an extreme exuberance or deep sorrow. And through medical therapy these extremes become less pronounced. ‘Nichomachean Ethics, VII.xiv.6

Aristotle specifically refers to Helleborus Niger. The black roots of this plant, known to us as ‘Christmas rose’, were a popular medicine against melancholy in antiquity. It’s the physician’s job to determine when and in which dose this, in itself poisonous root, should be given to which patient. It was the task of the ‘pharmakeus’, the specialist in poison to carefully prepare the medicine from its natural source.

**The tragic death of Ajax**

Aristotle gives examples of the tragedies to which an extreme heating up or cooling down of melaina cholè can lead, even, or especially in outstanding persons. He names two mythical heroes, well known to the Greeks: Ajax and Hercules. Their tragic life histories were common knowledge to Aristotle’s contemporaries. Their fates had been described by the great poets Homer, Sophocles, and Euripides. For the Greeks their names were enough. The modern reader is not acquainted with their tragic stories. Some elaboration is desirable.
Ajax was famous for the heroic role he played as a Greek ally in the Trojan War. His pitiful end is depicted in *Ajax*, a tragedy by Sophocles. The Roman poet Ovid also refers to his tragic fate in *Metamorphoses*. Ajax is outstanding in his prowess and courage. Only he dared take on the Trojan hero Hector who had challenged the Greeks. He also saved the Greeks from ruin on the beach of Troy. This melancholic was willing to commit himself totally: but he did expect appreciation. Unfortunately, he did not receive the honour he had counted on. That went to the talker and that fawner Odysseus. Ajax was furious. He wanted to smash the Greeks for hurting his feelings. But the goddess Athena struck him with madness. He mistook a herd of sheep for his former allies. He took it out on the animals, certain that they were the Greek commanders. When he came to his senses he was overtaken by shame and despondency that. In spite of the pleas of his slave-girlfriend, of the pain he would inflict upon his parents, he committed suicide. As Ovid wrote ‘The man who could conquer Hector single-handed and so often confronted fire, steel, even Jupiter himself, was now by anger vanquished, the unvanquished now fell victim his own sorrow! He pulled his sword and cried: “This is still mine, or does Odysseus demand this too? This steel, so often bathed in Phrygian (Trojan) blood, is now towards me directed, and will cause its master’s wound. No-one will ever conquer Ajax, except Ajax himself.”’

The threat of suicide hanging over the melancholic is exemplified by the fateful death of Ajax. A manic episode was triggered by a minor incident. The melancholic Ajax overreacted because the temperature of his black bile shot up. In a rage he hacked away at the sheep, in a delusion that they were his former allies, the Greeks. Returning to his senses, the hero realized what he had done. Feelings of shame accompanied a fast cooling down of the ‘melaina cholè’. According to Aristotle that could lead to unexpected suicide. ‘Most of those men in whom the heat is extinguished suddenly make away with themselves unexpectedly, to the astonishment of all, since they have given no previous sign of any such intention.’

**The Manic Hercules**

The fate of Hercules shows the destructiveness of the manic side of melaina cholè. In his tragedy *The raging Heracles* (Heraklès Mainomenos) Euripides lets the choir sing of the twelve heroic tasks of this bastard son of Zeus. When the play commences the hero has not yet returned from his last assignment of dragging the three-headed hellhound Cerberus into daylight. Bystanders believed that this gruesome task would prove fatal to the champion. His family prepares for mourning. They themselves were at the mercy of the whims of the local tyrant, who threatened to kill them. But Heracles miraculously returned from the underworld, the realm of Hades. He seems reborn, raised from the dead. Despair turns into hope. Suddenly a demon appears who representing ‘Insanity’, who strikes the hero with madness. In a temporary fit of mania the hero murders his own wife and sons, mistaking them for his enemies. After his manic fury he falls into a deep sleep. When he awakes the atrocity of the deed dawns on him. He collapses, barely able to walk, and is on the verge of committing suicide, when Theseus, his ‘therapeus’ or brother in arms, stops him. Theseus had accompanied Hercules through the underworld, and now takes the broken hero to Athens, where he finds peace and forgiveness. Heracles recuperates, and continues his heroic life.
In a second play, *The Children of Heracles*, Euripides describes how at the end of his life Heracles becomes insane once more. He climbs onto a funerary pyre which he lights himself. From there the hero ascends to Olympus where he is welcomed by the gods. From Aristotle’s secular perspective Heracles’ descent into hell could be a metaphor for deep dysthymia or depression. He was lying down ‘as if dead’, his paralysed body corpse-like, and his soul supposedly in Hades. His victory over the black hellhound signifies that he overcame his dysthymia. He seemed reborn, raised from the dead. He returned home and found his family threatened by the local king and deserted by his former supporters. This injury strongly affected the oversensitive melancholic. His mood shifted to the other extreme. He entered a state of mania in which he no longer recognized his own family. An episode of outrageous violence was followed by deep sleep, a ‘coma’. Having woken up he was horrified by what he had done. He fell into deep despair and threatened to kill himself. His therapeus, who had also accompanied him on his journey through hellish depression, took him away to a place where he could rest and overcome his guilt. Heracles recovered and lived an exceptional life for years, in which he accomplished a whole series of impressive feats. Neither his visit to hell nor his episode of extreme mania had swept away his remarkable talents. Was his death tragic? On the one hand, yes: he finally committed suicide. On the other hand: he ascended to the gods and became one of them. By worshipping him as a god the Greeks confirmed that Heracles himself was not guilty of the deeds done during his manic episode; and that they did not cancel out their lasting appreciation for his exceptional achievements. U ‘Heracles:
“Oh, children I who gave you life and breath have taken them from you again. No advantage did my noble deeds bring you, performed for your sakes, meant to build for you a life of repute, a noble inheritance from a father. And you, poor wife, so patiently did you always care for home and hearth, how did I reward your loving goodness? – I killed you! Oh I weep for my wife and my children, for myself!” Euripides, *Heracles*, 1368

The relation between mood swing, abnormal behaviour and brilliance has continued to fascinate great minds throughout the ages. The Roman philosopher Seneca, who wrote two tragedies about Hercules, refers to Aristotle at the end of his treatise *On Peace of Mind*. ‘We can believe...with Aristotle...never did a great talent exist which was not also slightly mad. Only an agitated soul can speak in an exalted way and on a level that rises far above others. If and when it has freed itself from what is insignificant and ordinary, can it uncover that which is too great for the mouth of a mortal. The soul cannot possibly reach that which is hidden away in a high place unless she breaks loose; she must tear herself from the trodden paths, take over the reins and drag her driver up to the heights to which he himself would never have dared climb.’ *Seneca, On Peace of Mind* IX.10-11"
again, it could build forth on a long and respectable literary tradition. Even for non-believers like me the Bible offers treasures of exquisite poetry expressing the ups and downs of the soul or psyche. In this chapter I will focus on two Biblical figures, David and Solomon. These semi-mythical kings, whose personal history has yet to be empirically verified, have been linked to several Bible books. The Psalms were attributed to David. Ecclesiastics, Proverbs and Song of Songs, to his son Solomon. Whatever the actual source of this poetry is, they show that in the Jewish worldview and the Christian culture that grew out of it, mood swing was a respectable and much loved subject for public discourse. If great kings could suffer from despondency and ecstasy, extreme mood swing is nothing to be ashamed of. In terms of terminology and underlying worldview these works are not comparable to the Classic tragedies of Ajax and Hercules. They lay worlds apart. Thus, for the purpose of this chapter: gaining more insight into ancient literary expression of affective disorder – another method must be used. Departing from my own experience of the underlying patterns of mood swing, I feel able to recognise its expression in cultures unlike my own. I have simply arranged the quotes from these divers sources according to the cycle of episodes of bipolar disorder. I invite the reader to move with me through the Tragedies and Bible books sinking from light to dark depression; then thankfully rising to hypomania. For the unhappy few this leads to full blown mania. Although I have no personal experience of mania or psychosis I have some idea, extrapolating from my hypomanic episodes, what this means. Aiming at a certain level of intersubjectivity, I presented my findings to various persons who had experienced the full cycle. Like me, they were stunned by the recognisability of those ancient cries. ‘How could this king or hero who lived so many millennia ago, have known what I feel today?’ a friend exclaimed.

To make the link to our own time I sometimes insert a quote from one of our ‘outstanding melancholics’- Winston Churchill, Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath. It’s as if these members of the melancholic club, although living centuries and cultures apart, are actually conversing with each other about their and my common illness. I also link to that ‘cool but collected’ document DSM, (V) sometimes called the psychiatrists’ Bible1.

Symptoms of depression from DSM (V)

1 Depressed mood most of the day, nearly every day, as indicated by either subjective report (e.g., feels sad or empty) or observation by others (e.g., appears tearful)
2. Markedly diminished interest or pleasure in all, or almost all, activities most of the day, nearly every day (as indicated by either subjective account or observation)
3. Significant weight loss when not dieting or weight gain (e.g., a change of more than 5% of body weight in a month), or decrease or increase in appetite nearly every day. Note: In children, consider failure to make expected weight gain
4. Insomnia or hypersomnia nearly every day
5. Psychomotor agitation or retardation nearly every day (observable by others, not merely subjective feelings of restlessness or being slowed down)
6. Fatigue or loss of energy nearly every day
7. Feelings of worthlessness or excessive or inappropriate guilt (which may be delusional) nearly every day (not merely self-reproach or guilt about being sick)
8. Diminished ability to think or concentrate, or indecisiveness, nearly every day (either by subjective account or as observed by others)
Back to black
Depression can sneak in, without giving any notice. Its first sign is the ebbing of meaning. Everything one values, everything one is involved in or with, gradually becomes pointless, useless, senseless, in vain. The mythical king Solomon expressed this experience in his famous words: ‘Vanity of vanities, Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.’
This holds for the vast and impressive construction works the king initiated and for his fabulous wealth
“I built myself houses, and planted myself vineyards. I made myself gardens and orchards…Yes, I had greater possessions of herds and flocks than all who were in Jerusalem before me. I also gathered for myself silver and gold and the special treasures of kings… Then I looked on all the works that my hands had done, and on the labor in which I had toiled; and indeed all was vanity and grasping for the wind.

There was no profit under the sun.”
Surely this is what DSM calls: “markedly diminished interest or pleasure in all, or almost all, activities”? Even the gathering of knowledge and wisdom, a successful ‘academic career’, is worthless.
“I have attained greatness, and have gained more wisdom than all who were before me in Jerusalem. My heart has understood great wisdom and knowledge. I perceived that this also is grasping for the wind. For in much wisdom is much grief. And he who increases knowledge increases sorrow.” Ecclesiastes, 1-2
Depression makes all that one has achieved in life meaningless and empty. Depression’s loss of meaning is, Virginia Woolf’s words, as if a pane of glass is sliding between ‘me’ and the outside world. When the ‘normal’ evaluative mode of being in the world evaporates, an unbridgeable distance is created.
“But beauty was behind a pane of glass... He could not taste, he could not feel.” Mrs Dalloway, p. 88
The disappearance of value and meaning implies the flagging of involvement and responsibility. One enters the shadowy underworld where all is in vain, nothing matters. Seneca describes how the Lethe, the mythical river of oblivion flowing at the entrance of the underworld, relieves men of their ‘curas’: they lose everything they had ever felt for, been involved in, everything they cared for, took care of, or worried about.
‘In the immense abyss within, the River Lethe glides quietly with waters calm, and takes away all cares, (curas = caring);’ Hercules Furens, i 679-80
This impossibility to care about or for anything is described by Virginia Woolf. It produces an unbridgeable gap between me and my surroundings. It’s as if a pane of glass slides between ‘me’ and the outside world.
‘But beauty was behind a pane of glass... He could not taste, he could not feel.’ Mrs Dalloway, p. 88
It requires energy, involvement, commitment and care to maintain life at any level. If involvement disappears neglect will ensue. The depressive neglects his or her body and appearance, and also neglects his direct environment. In Seneca’s shadowy underworld devoid of meaning
‘An old man with unkempt, filthy clothes and appearance tends this river...His beard hangs

9. Recurrent thoughts of death (not just fear of dying), recurrent suicidal ideation without a specific plan, or a suicide attempt or a specific plan for committing suicide
uncombed, his shapeless cloak is fastened with a knot, he has deep-sunk, blazing eyes.’ The environment around him is equally desolate. ‘a barren desolation crusts over the… soil, and the foul earth languishes in perpetual stagnation.” Hercules Furens, 764-767; 710-02

As meaning and involvement disappear, the void is quickly filled with negativity. The flagging of sense, goes further than mere nonchalance or neutrality, leading to a loathing of life itself. The distance between ‘worth-less’ and ‘hate-full’, from ‘monotonous’ to ‘disgusting’, from boredom to despair can be very short.

“Therefore I hated life because the work that was done under the sun was distressing to me, for all is vanity and grasping for the wind. Then I hated all my labor in which I had toiled under the sun,” Ecclesiastes, 2: 17-18

Through the ages this experience has been worded differently. For centuries the source of meaning, without which a human being cannot exist, was called ‘God’. But even those like me, who don’t believe God will be touched by his desperate exclamation, which fits perfectly into the DSM criteria for depression: “feels sad, appears tearful.

“My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me? Why are You so far from helping me, and from the words of my groaning? O My God, I cry in the daytime, but You do not hear; and in the night season, and am not silent.” Psalm 22:1-2

The disappearance of the very source of meaning leads David into ‘insomnia' (DSM), sleepless nights of sorrow.

‘I am weary with my groaning; all night I make my bed swim; I drench my couch with my tears. My eye wastes away because of grief.” Psalm 6:6-7

Depression entails mourning, not for a single loss, but for the loss of everything, for the destruction of all meaning. Everything that gave life structure, colour, direction and perspective, which tied me to the outside world, to other people, has evaporated. Depression entails mourning, not for this or that, for one person or another, but for the loss of everything and everybody. Much more is at stake than one dearly beloved person. It is the possibility of human contact as such which is undermined. Other people have become hostile. David feels threatened on all sides. The people have paralysed him as if piercing his feet. They have blocked every possible action by transfixing his hands. Even his clothes are gambled away.

“For dogs have surrounded me; the congregation of the wicked has enclosed me: the assembly of the wicked have closed me in: they pierced my hands and my feet. They look and stare at me. They divide my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots.” Psalm 22, 16,18

Being familiar with the story of Jesus, via Sunday School and Bach’s Mathew Passion, which is performed every year in Holland before Easter, these lines from David’s psalms surprised me. Wasn’t it Jesus to whom all these things happened? Were not his hands and feet pierced when he was crucified? In retrospect I realized that the evangelists writing about the life of Jesus knew their psalms. Possibly they heard these passages as metaphors, expressions of deep dejection to which great men; kings and prophets were especially susceptible. This is a biblical variant if you will, of Aristotle’s statement on the link between melancholy and excellence. Going through death’s dark vale was the way great men went, and so did Jesus, born in the city of David. In puritan strands of Christianity however this fate, this cup which great men were destined to drink is reshaped into a norm for everyday life of every ‘true believer’. This was neatly summed up by Martin Luther in the 4th of the famous 95 theses he
hammered to the church door at Wittenberg: “Therefore cultivate mourning and sadness that is true penance.” Aristotle’s advice was to avoid such extremes, because extreme sadness and illogical mourning is part of an illness just as extreme exuberance is.

Oncoming depression brings with it ‘psychomotor retardation’ (DSM) the weakening of every aspect of mental and physical functioning. David felt the anguish of this loss.

“There is no soundness in my flesh, nor any health in my bones, because of my sin. For my iniquities have gone over my head; like a heavy burden they are too heavy for me.”

Psalm 38:7,4

The energetic rebel David, who once slew a giant, has lost his strength. The harp-playing psalmist, a magician of words, has been silenced. He has lost so much weight that his ribs show through his skin. He suffers from what DSM (V) calls ‘fatigue and significant weight loss’.

“I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint; my heart is like wax; it has melted within me. My strength is dried up…and my tongue clings to my jaws; I can count all my bones.”

Psalm 22

Depression affects the eyesight. Colours grow dimmer; the world becomes a dirty grey. That colourful artist Vincent van Gogh had this to say.

“Life has the colour of dishwater, it becomes a heap of ashes. I cannot hide from you this feeling of great anxiety, depression, a vague sense of hopelessness, despair even.”

Letter of Vincent van Gogh to his brother Theo, 3 February 1883

As he slips into depression, Hercules likewise loses the light, slowly but surely.

“At the outset, the way is not obscured by darkness: there falls a faint brightness from the light left behind, a twilight glow of the weakened sunshine, which baffles the eye. Such is the light, mingled with darkness, familiar at dawn or dusk. To travel is no toil: the path itself draws you down. As often a current sweeps ships unwillingly off course, so the downward breeze and the greedy void hurry you on, and the clutching shades never allow you to turn your steps backward.”

Hercules Furens, 668-678

As depression deepens, as sight becomes slow and the eye weary, colour fades until there is only one colour left: black. That in deep depression one goes ‘back to black’ - as Amy Winehouse sang- is not only a metaphor but a physiological fact. The eyes actually see less. The brain hardly registers any light.

"Black bedraggled foliage hangs in shadowy fronds on an overhanging yew tree...”

Seneca, Hercule Furens, * 689-690

But why doesn’t the melancholic rage, rage against the fading of the light? The reason is, he can’t. Depression brings on ‘indecisiveness’. DSM Both the strength and the will to fight have faded. Energy, courage, willpower, strategic thought, it has all been wiped out, washed away by the waters of the Lethe, the lethargic stream of oblivion, flowing, ever so slowly, past the gate of depressive hell. The way back, away, out of the grey shadowy underworld, is closed. The misleading river leading to the hell is a in the final analysis, a one way street.

‘and lest an opening for return should ever appear, it entwines its sluggish stream in many winding turns, just as the wandering Meander plays with its puzzled waters, bends back on itself and presses forward, uncertain whether to head for the seacoast or its source.”

Hercules Furens, 681-686

Entering deep depression, with all faculties, physical and mental, fading away, is like dying.

“You have brought me to the dust of death.”

Psalm 22: 15
Both the Greek underworld and the Christian Hell are abodes of the dead. Depression is often described as entering hell when one is still alive. What is the background of this recurring metaphor?

Somebody who is deeply depressed is often obsessed with ‘recurrent thoughts of death’. (DSM). He ponders death daily in vague terms, and sometimes more precisely in terms of his own suicide. The psychomotor inhibition accompanying deep depression indeed gives the once so energetic person a deathlike appearance. I remember sitting in a chair and then endlessly lying in bed, with eyes wide open, staring into the void or closed as in sleep. I was hardly eating or drinking, hardly reacting to anything. It looks as if in deep depression one’s mind and body have come to a standstill. If I talked at all it was about those obsessive thoughts turning in my head, about guilt about death. Isn’t that the essence of hell, sin surviving even death? For onlookers, somebody in a deep depression resembles a corpse. But, unlike the dead, depressed persons can, and probably will return to life - after a period of time. Sometimes this happens rather suddenly. He almost literally rises from the dead. So the person who entered depressive hell was alive all along? Or has he resurrected from death after so many days? Who knows? A living persons going through hell is an image of the ‘near death’ experience of deep depression. Depression is down, going down to the underworld. Hercules entered the shadow world down under. With the disappearance of meaningful connections to those who peopled his world, they have been reduced to shadows or even worse monsters. A deeply depressed person is in mourning, not for a single person lost or one disastrous incident. He is in mourning for everybody. Everything that gave his life structure, colour and warmth, has disappeared. The world has become grey and hostile. But above all he mourns the loss of himself. The certainty of ‘I am’, the centre from which one observes, knows, aspires, appreciates, loves, hates even: that centre has disintegrated. Sylvia Plath cries out: ‘My world is disintegrating, crumbling, ‘the centre doesn’t hold’. There is no integrating force.’ Sylvia Plath, Journals; nov. 3

With the disappearance of the meaning the identity, the value of the ‘I am’ disappears as well. DSM speaks of feelings of worthlessness. Indeed, David’s self-image has shrivelled. ‘But I am a worm, and no man; A reproach of men, and despised by the people. All those who see me ridicule me,’ Psalm 22; 6-7

The identity of Hercules was torn apart by the black hell hound, Cerberus. ‘Here the fierce...hound keeps the shades in fear and guards the kingdom, tossing his triple head with clamouring noise. Snakes lick his heads foul with puss, his manes bristle with vipers, and a long serpent hisses in his twisted tail.’ Seneca, Hercules Furens; 783-787

This is the animal Churchill had in mind when he coined the phrase for his oncoming depressions: “the black dog is here again.”

As that hellish dog grabs, skins and quarters the poor souls within its reach, their Me, their ‘I am’ is torn to pieces. All that remains of identity is shame and guilt, feelings of excessive or inappropriate guilt as stated in DSM (V) ‘Shame, too late, covers its guilty face.’ Hercules Furens; 692

King David is weighed down by sin. ‘There is no…rest in my bones because of my sin. For mine iniquities are gone over mine head; as a heavy burden, weigh me down.’ Psalm 38;3-4
The guilt of depression is not specific, it is general, structural. We have always been sinful, ever since we were born or even before. Sin entered us as we entered our mother’s womb. “For I acknowledge my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me.” Psalm 51:5

Deepening despondency absorbs the person, his world, and his sense of time. The Lethe, river of oblivion, erases the past as it does the future. The stars, beacons of meaning, direction and hope, disappear into the darkening night. With the shrivelling of identity time is stretched out to eternity. Depression, as eternal as hell, seems to last forever.

“Pain has an Element of Blank - It cannot recollect - When it begun - or if there were A time when it was not - It has no Future - but itself - Its Infinite contain - Its past - - enlightened to perceive New Periods - of Pain.” Emily Dickinson, Complete Works, 650

**Heading for the light**

Then comes the miracle: the upward swing of mood sets in, a wind sweeps away sorrow and guilt. The god of meaning, who forsook the soul, crying in the wilderness, turns around and gives answers. Meaning flows back. David calls out in exuberance:  

“For He has not despised nor abhorred the affliction of the afflicted; nor has He hidden His face from him; But when He cried to him, He heard.” Psalm 22:24

He, whose hands and feet had been pierced, who had lived in the dust of death, is healed! Where depression is being pressed down into the abode of death, awakening is a flight up.

“You healed me. O LORD, You brought my soul up from the grave.” Psalm 30:2-3

In my view, the term ‘healed me’ is correct, not simply a metaphor. We are talking here about a deep clinical depression, which often literally leads to the grave via suicide. But now obsession with mortality and mourning has evaporated, suicidal thoughts have dissolved. Once again, life is worthwhile. The body regains its powers as the soul once again fills with meaning.

“You have turned for me my mourning into dancing.” Psalm 30:1-12

David’s gait is upright, his feet dancing. The unexpected psycho-motoric acceleration makes the body strong and flexible. The soul sings with joy and the limbs want to join in. As things now stand, David will continue singing psalms indefinitely.

“O LORD my God, I will give thanks to You forever.” Psalm 30:1-12

Hercules finally overpowers that black dog of depression, that hellhound Cerberus. There it lies, with its three heads bowed, meekly, in the hero’s shadow.

‘With our twofold strength we dragged the hound, mad with rage and struggling furiously, and brought him into the world. Once he saw the bright daylight and glimpsed the clear expanses of the shining heaven, he shut his eyes tight to expel the hated light, turned his gaze aside and lowered each of his necks to the earth; then he lay his head in Hercules’ shadow.’ Seneca, Hercules Furens, 821-827

Awakening from deep depression is like finding an oasis, or the emergence of a wise king from the empty, arid desert.

“Who is this coming out of the wilderness Perfumed with myrrh and frankincense? The Song of Solomon, 3:6-7

The upward surge into hypomania, stirs senses, the libido are excited, birds sing, perfume is in the air. The empty desert of hate becomes a sensual oasis of love.
“O love, with your delights like a palm tree, I will go up to the palm tree. I will take hold of its branches. Let now your breasts be like clusters of the vine, the fragrance of your breath like apples, and the roof of your mouth like the best wine.”
The Song of Solomon, 7:6-8

As the ‘I am’ is reborn, reopening to love, reviving relations to the surroundings. The whole of nature awakens.

“The winter is past, the flowers appear on the earth, and the time of singing has come. Rise up, my love, my fair one.”
The Song of Solomon, 2:11-13

As with depressive agony, so fleeting hypomanic ecstasy seems eternal. The ‘I am’ cannot measure the duration of this euphoric mood, because it has been entirely absorbed into it. Looking back from this elevated vantage point, endless depression appears a mere instant. For David, the God-forsaken period was brief, compared to this extended elation of togetherness. “His anger is but for a moment, his favour is for life; weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning.”

Love-ly hypomanic happiness seems indestructible… for as long as it lasts.

“Many waters cannot quench love, nor can the floods drown it.”
The Song of Solomon, 8:7

A long long time ago, agony made time shrivel to a tiny, endless, monotonous present, the past forgotten, the future lost. Now Joy stretches out the past and weaves it into the exuberant present, unfolding perspectives of a shining future of universal harmony. The recently recovered well-being, the bliss of being in harmony with the world, appears to last at least a lifetime, if not far beyond.

“The LORD is my shepherd; He restores my soul; Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.”
Psalm 23:1,3 6

If the loss of meaning caused sadness, regained sense brings joy. Intense euphoria is typical of a hypomanic episode. Exaltation resounds throughout the world.

“Praise the Lord… You Mountains and all hills; Fruitful trees and all cedars; Kings of the earth and all peoples; Princes and all judges of the earth; both young men and maidens, old men and children, let them praise the Lord.”
Psalm 148: 7-12

David’s exuberance is answered by the heavens themselves.

“Praise Him, sun and moon; Praise Him, all you stars of light! Praise Him, you heavens of heavens.”
Psalm 148;1,4

My point here is not ‘the Lord’ in whom one may or may not believe. I don’t. But I do recognise the jubilant feeling rising from me and raising me up to heaven. As the German poet Goethe put it: ‘himmelhoch jauchzend. And, as one familiar with the bipolar character of mood swing can have, ‘zum Tode betrübt’.

If the loss of meaning caused obsession with death and intense illogical sadness, regained sense brings unreasonable joy. The exuberance takes the entire earth, the depths of the sea, and even the heavens in its arms. Exaltation resounds everywhere. But not for long. Usually hypomania soon fades into longer periods of what psychiatrists call ‘total or almost total remission.’ Sometimes however it can suddenly end in a dive down, back into deep depression. Then the inflated self shrinks again. As Solomon dryly remarks:

“Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall.”
Psalm 16:18

Or in the experience of Virginia Woolf
“Alas, divine goodness, twitching the cord, draws the curtain. To the lighthouse p. 146

The German philosopher Kierkegaard describes this turn of mood very precisely. “At one o’clock precisely I was at my best and had...reached the maximum, registered by no single thermometer of happiness.... at that precise moment, I plunged into an abyss of despair.” On Melancholy, p.12-13

**A time to weep and a time to laugh**

It is not easy to understand, let alone accept this bipolarity. It took me years of consternation. Eventually I was able to understand my depressions and hypomania as part of a cyclical process, rather than as separate incidents. Having gone through a few cycles of depression and (hypo) mania, I recognized the pattern in those puzzling ups and downs. Only then could I see the bipolarity to which the mythical king Solomon gave such eloquent expression. He showed how paralyzing sadness is relieved by joyful mobility. There is ‘A time to weep, and a time to laugh, a time to mourn, and a time to dance. A time to love, and a time to hate.’

Lust and love can turn into alienation and cold frigidity and vice versa. A sense of harmony alternates with distrust and enmity. The silence of the depressed person turns into a hypomanic urge to talk. There is ‘a time to keep silent and a time to speak;’ by now I understand that illogical silent sadness. Tears come easily, because of the demolition, the loss, the tearing up and dying of what was held dear. But that painful process creates new space to build up, energy to and retrieve, and strength to heal and give birth. ‘A time to break down and a time to build up. A time to rend, and a time to sew, A time to kill, and a time to heal, A time to be born and a time to die,’ It all seems so obvious to me now.

A believer like Solomon can see God’s hand behind undesired agony and undeserved ecstasy, but without really understanding the Divine plan. He feels that God has planted the changes of the season in him, and given him an ultimate, underlying sense of eternal peace.

This peace is also given to unbelievers like me, when they discover the pattern in their illogical changes of mood, and, with the help of medication and therapy, learned to accept this bipolar pattern as a part of their fate.

**Conclusion**

It’s many years since I became stabilized. I am thankful for my medication, which I take once a day. I have an excellent understanding with the psychiatrists who deal with bipolar disorder in Holland. They have encouraged me to write about the creativity linked to mild bipolar mood swing even for their won ‘Bipolar Textbook’. But the Dutch society still holds its distance. The taboo surrounding manic depression in this country is still as strong as ever. It’s a delight to see, that in other ages, there was a very open public debate on what was in Greek and Roman society, called ‘melancholy’ and can for Biblical times be characterized by the wise remark from the mythical king Solomon that for everything there is a time and a season. Not only did Aristotle develop a theory of bipolar melancholy, which comes very close to the present day knowledge reflected in the DSM, psychiatrists’ Bible. He also dealt seriously with the link between affective disorder and excellence, noting that by alternating light depression and hypomania talent can be expended to great heights. Apart from some work by Kay Redfield Jamison and a few others, a serious debate on this strange phenomenon is sadly lacking today.
What has particularly delighted and consoled me, is that great poets both have not to hesitate to tackle the dark and light sides of mood swing, resulting in some of the most moving poetry ever written. By interpreting well known verses as expressions of alternating depression and hypomania, I hope to elevate my own experience onto a more general plane. In so doing, I have felt comforted that I am not on my own, but belong to that ‘melancholic’ club which has survived the storm of centuries.
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