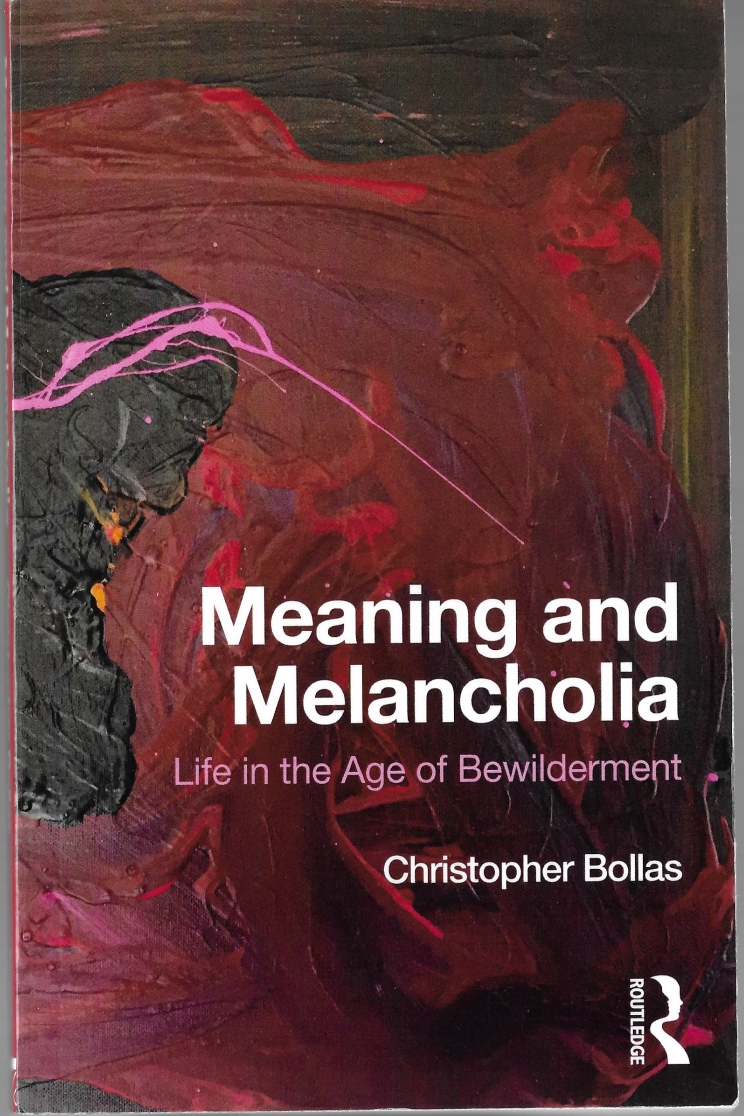
Meaning and Melancholia
Life in the Age of Bewilderment
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ROUTLEDGE

This is a *psychological* problem. Although it must also be addressed from many other vantage points (economic, environmental, human rights, etc.), if we do not understand the dynamics of this collective psychological "charge", we risk losing contemporary societies to explosive entropy.

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The pieces of the puzzle

I began this study by noting the emergence of a manic frame of mind that permeated Europe and then America in the nineteenth century. The revolutionary leaps forward in industry, technology and military power intoxicated nations with a heady grandiosity, and this powerful shift in society overwhelmed matrices of belief held over many centuries. A meaningful life was decreasingly represented by the fulfilling of one's position in the social fabric – as a parent, friend or community member – or in that sense of measure in which selves find meaning in the creative life, whether through a vocation or through work, be it as a craftsperson, teacher or assembly-line worker. Spiritual and humanist pursuits – in the religions, in fulfilling dreams of living an interesting life, in the challenges posed by self-reflection – declined, giving way to the compensatory: in particular, to the search for material accomplishment, the accumulation of wealth and power as an end in itself.

The search for meaning involves a particular relation that each person seeks and establishes with themselves, and for many it may never rise to the level of objective thought. It is rather a sense that one's being is imbued with witnessed purpose, as if we are watched over by a muse who guides us through our life. In the lives of writers or painters that figure may be well known as an imaginary presence but, from a psychoanalytical point of view, we might say that most of us feel guided by the unconscious trace of a caring other, an internal sense and function that we owe originally to our mother. This maternal presence will express itself in our

relation to an internal companion, as we transform our mother's love of us into our love of an ideal self that would fulfil her wishes.

Eventually the sense of seeking, and being looked after by, a caretaking other permeates the relationship of our self to our mind. We look to our mind to help us sort out an infinity of problems, guiding our self (consciousness) through the complex matrix of everyday life and its transcendental spin-offs – reveries, inspirations, and the dreams to follow that night. This suggests that the search for meaning has always been connected with the renewing rediscovery, throughout our existence, of a form of love – the loved self – that was there in the beginning of our lives.

For Martin Buber, this muse was God. In *I and Thou*, he wrote: "There is divine meaning in the life of the world, of man, of human persons, of you and me." That relation which yields a sense of divine meaning requires what we might think of as a "local habitation and a name", a certain kind of inner stillness that accompanies the solitude of living. With the ruptures begun with the Industrial Revolution, we have been torn out of many historically meaningful environments, but perhaps the greatest loss has been the relation we have always had to our self as an object of love and care.

We have less time for this now and little transgenerational memory of it.

In the nineteenth century, caught up in the thoughtless greed and industrial power of capitalism, selves were subsumed by the eros of mass psychology, giving themselves over to a collective manic state that propelled them with psychotic exuberance into the Great War. The reality of this war shattered the manic mood, and when Europe emerged from its depressive aftermath, it was never to be remotely the same again. All the beliefs that humankind had developed – from the Judeo-Christian faiths to humanism, from Enlightenment axioms to progressive liberalism – were rocked. The muse unconsciously sought by all of us was displaced by the maddening crowd and the din of militarism.

Writers, philosophers, musicians, artists and sophists reacted with something of an "all hands on deck" approach – they were an avant-garde trying to get ahead of the future

– and for some twenty years, society's depression was met with a sort of counter-mania. But such efforts would not last. The Europeans had learned nothing from the Great War, and after their victory over Germany their psychological ineptness set the stage for World War Two.

This book has discussed how certain seminal writers had previously registered profound psychic changes. Virginia Woolf notes a change in personality in 1910; in 1922 T.S. Eliot describes us as "hollow men" living in a "wasteland"; in 1926 Ernest Hemingway views the Great War as castrating men, rendering them incapable of loving women. In 1942, Albert Camus writes that we are left with one sole question: whether or not to commit suicide. These writers saw a West that had once believed in itself becoming lost: sexually impotent, relationally destroyed, emptied of the human soul.

The aftermaths of the Great War and World War Two produced a waning of self-reflection, self-examination and self-accountability. The values, shaped cumulatively over the preceding centuries, which assumed that human life was inherently meaningful and mentally progressive, were now displaced. We embraced our industries, our capitalisms and the new social structures that gave us prosperity, but increasingly we abandoned our conscience and entered an underworld populated by the most destructive elements of human nature.

The logic of pre-war mania had been to deposit unwanted parts of the self into an enemy, whose annihilation would then create a feeling of righteous cleanliness. In the lead-up to the Great War, Germans certainly felt a sublime aestheticism of self, and this was to reach its apogee in Nazi ideology, which proposed a pure Aryan race, striding heroically across the globe, trampling the faecal remnants of mankind that must be evacuated in order to purify the self. Although Germany lost the war, it can be argued that it advanced the possibility of a structural division between a pure nation and an impure nation. Psychoanalysts might say that this idea was transferred from German self-idealization to the Americans, the Soviets and others, unconsciously and with nuanced differences, but still with a compelling logic.

This manic-depressive division did not manifest as a conscious affective state; it had become structuralized – it was simply part of the order of things. The West split off its depressive side and projected it first into the colonized world and then their own working-class populations, whom they then dominated. The manic aspect was embodied in the military and industrial complexes of the West and the Soviets. For manic forces to retain their position, they must continue to accrue power and domination, and id capitalism afforded those in power nourishment for their greed.

World War Two, the atomic bomb, the Holocaust and the Korean War ended the rosy pictures writers and political leaders could paint about humankind. Although the USA celebrated victory and enjoyed remarkable post-war prosperity – a prosperity eventually disseminated to Europe and the Far East – this luxury was based on what Scheidel[1] terms "mass mobilization warfare": the annihilation of millions of people reduced "wealth inequality" and became "the great leveller", as the gap between rich and poor was reduced through killing.

Over the next half century, billionaires would return to running the world, largely out of sight and often out of mind. The sense of guilt endemic to being part of this manic power structure – the guilt of those who clearly benefit from the current neo-liberal system and libertarianism – was offset in part by conspicuous acts of philanthropy. The Mellons, Rockefellers and Morgans of the twentieth century were followed by the Gates, Buffetts and Zuckerbergs in the twenty-first. A "protective shield" was set up between the dominant class and the ordinary citizens, supported, ironically, by a widespread popular idealization of these giants of industry and capitalism.

In response to the manic-depressive splitting in the mid-twentieth century, a new form of personality emerged. The borderline mind was divided into two parts – one that perceived the world as idealized and another that could register only the negative. It was the perfect reflection of the split in society. The idealizing part of borderlines leaders could love the manic side of their leaders, as we see particularly in

the right wing, when the oppressed love and admire their oppressors. The negative part of the borderline, usually found in the left wing, would seek out the depressing dregs of existence, feeding off misfortune and identifying with a powerful grievance and sense of outrage.

The aim of borderline splitting is to allow both states of mind to co-exist in the same personality without ever communicating with one another. When a society divides in accordance with borderline logic, the split generates the extreme views on both sides, making it impossible for the right wing and the left wing to communicate, even though both views actually co-exist in the same "body".

Although the existentialist movement mourned this horrific trend, and tried to find some redemption within its terms, it failed. Sartre offered some consolation, suggesting that our lives still had one precious feature: we were free to decide how to think and how to live. And in his answer to his own question about suicide, Camus suggested another: in our decision not to kill ourselves we find a redemption through a vote against a negative. But these philosophical solutions eventually fell on deaf ears.

If the pragmatic and utilitarian worlds of empirical philosophy, along with their psychological correlates such as behavioural modification theory and cognitive behavioural theory, continued apparently unaffected by this psychosocial turbulence, they did so because they had always eschewed the "larger issues" of life, denying their relevance and even their existence. If there was no self anyway, how could we be in mourning?

The phenomenologists and structuralists, followed by the postmodernists, tried to find meaning in the dense fabrics of their theories, but in the end they were exhausted by this and expired – not with a bang but with a whimper.

The left sought relief in identity politics. At first it was civil rights, then women's rights, then gay rights, and then as the decades rolled by more and more groups of people made valid claims for their group identities in a world often hostile to their causes. Inside these movements too, however, splitting was enacted. We can see in the psychodynamics of identity politics a collective effort to find meaning, but this

was achieved through a narrowing of the issues. People would define themselves as a black person, a woman, a gay man, a lesbian, a transgender or as the victim of something – alcohol, anorexia, drugs, gambling. Identity groups might try to form "rainbow coalitions", and in doing so created Kumbaya moments that generated good feelings. But by choosing to affirm a special and separate identity, there was always the risk of losing sight of a wider and more embracing goal: a collective alliance of humanism with science, politics and religion, which might bring together millions of people with otherwise disparate cultures and identities, joining forces to face the challenges of the wider societal psychodynamic.

From the 1950s, in parallel with the rise of the borderline personality came the proliferation of the normopathic self, illustrated vividly in its early twentieth-century incarnation by E.M. Forster in *Howards End*. The normopath takes refuge from loss and mourning by abandoning any wish to explore the inner world, or the wider range of lived experiences to be found under the auspices of "the spiritual". Instead s/he seeks the good life by celebrating material comforts. The joys of driving a car, or going boating, or playing sports, offered an escape from the conundrums posed by the catastrophes of the twentieth century. Whereas the borderline split the loving and the hating parts of the self, the normopath replaced subjectivity with conventionality. Whereas the borderline might suffer profoundly from the effects of his oscillations in personality, the normopath aimed to create an affectless self that would not be tormented.

By dulling intellection and opting for material wealth, recreational pursuits or "new age" therapies, people were aiming to get rid of the mind. The chosen meeting place was no longer the church or temple, the college or university, the local branch of a political party or labour union. In such locations people risked contact with the depressive sides of the societal situation. In order to stay away from the depressions that had now become structuralized, it was as well to steer clear of the bad news industry.

Then came globalization and the advent of IT and AI. The fast pace of social media and globalized interconnections

and networking meant that a human response time to fast-breaking news was now redundant. With alarming political and environmental conflicts on the horizon, the fear of our inadequacy left us bewildered, and many sought refuge in identification with the system, as transmissive selves. The psychology of the millennial generation aimed to shield the self from the disturbing mental contents of national and world events by becoming part of the machinery that delivered the content.

Paradoxically, however, the surge of internet users across the globe were now faced with horrifying news brought to them by their own devices. This is the twenty-first-century equivalent to the shock facing the nuclear scientists of the late 1940s and 1950s, who were compelled to emerge from the bliss of identification with the remarkable nature of nuclear fission when they realized the horror of what they had created. The internet, meant to serve our wishes, now turned on us, bringing nightmare scenes of terrorism, political leaders revealed as inept, corrupt, despotic or psychotic, and a world in which climate change was no longer a theory but a deeply disturbing fact.

The factors that have emerged in this study make the rise of Trump hardly surprising. The death-drive backlash against globalization that voted itself into office through his victory, was, in part, a psychological response to a technological world that millions were finding overwhelming. Trump's displacement of scientific and social facts with "alternative facts" spoke for millions of people who found in his garish mania an invitation to mentally annihilate what the world had created. However, as his administration deregulated the offices that governed the country, his act of undoing caused consternation, both nationally and in the rest of the world.

The dynamics of the anti-globalization movement were driven by a paranoid retreat from complexity, allowing selves and nations to feel that militant positions and military might were sufficient to deal with a world that was out of control. Set against this fundamentalist simplification there was a parallel reality in which those who could afford it increasingly split themselves off, living their lives at a

distance from the vast majority of their fellow human beings. In these privileged enclaves they were removed, too, from the democratic process. Like Trump, they were creating an alternative reality.

There is no doubt that our world is deeply endangered, both by the threat of nuclear arms and by environmental damage. But perhaps the most serious climate change lies within the human mind itself. Unless we find some way to get selves to come out of their retreats, be it religious fundamentalism or normopathic materialism, our societies will continue to deteriorate and the political process will be emptied of that intellectual vitality and communal effort essential to the survival of *homo sapiens*.

The fight against the pandemic of corruption in all walks of life is not a quaint humanist ambition; it is a crucial form of social psychotherapy in which we struggle to bring ourselves out of a malignant depression that has stripped our societies of their self-esteem, leaving us disabled by the loss of those generative parts of ourselves that had always accompanied us in the quest to create meaningful lives and a better world.

Mentally impaired nations with nuclear weapons and cyber-warfare techniques can make a man-made catastrophe seem almost certain. The quiet evolution of democracy – both as a system of government and as a frame of mind – offers hope. But if we are to exist together, we urgently need to agree new terms for collective life. We may be unable to cast aside our fear and hate of one another, but we must find a way for all players on the world stage to maintain discursive communication.

Democracy is a form of "talking cure", a process that enables people holding very different views to take part in a group mind that embraces and integrates divergent perspectives. Its political priorities are echoed in the various psychological approaches, from psychoanalysis and analytical psychology to Gestalt, transactional analysis, and the theory and practice of group relations. Utilizing the wisdom of these psychologies is vital to the task of understanding the psychological processes that bring nations into war with one another, giving us tools with which to face the irrational bases of our behaviour.

To revitalize democracy, however, we need to confront an unconscious cynicism that pervades the West and other parts of the world.

Trump's victory marked a turning point in Western consciousness. For a hundred years or more, the print media had brought to our attention the corrupt sides of our lives: from the international arms trade to human trafficking and the slave trade; from the corruption endemic to international finance and trade relations to industries – which put profit before human life and health. When Trump boasted that he could shoot someone on the streets of New York and his supporters would still vote for him, he tapped into a dark river of moral bleakness that objectified a shift in Western values.

We had reached a point where we no longer believed in the value of human life and in the ethical mandate that we try to improve the human condition. We had given up on ourselves. In so doing we had abandoned both the individual and the collective search for meaning, and in passively giving in to the emergence of corruption in all areas of life, our manic grandiosity had given way to a collective, endemic depression.

We have changed.

With the loss of a sense of meaning – the feeling that our lives can make a contribution – mourning has turned into melancholia. When we are melancholic we are angry over the losses we have suffered, and we unconsciously blame that which has apparently left us. We now feel abandoned by the humanist predicates of Western culture and the network of belief systems that seemed to offer a progressive vision of humanity, and we have turned our rage against social efficacy itself. This anger takes many forms, from a passive acceptance of all forms of corruption to right-wing identifications with cynical enterprises and murderous solutions.[2]

Those born in the midst of this regression in our civilization are witness to a collective paralysis. Some have cut themselves loose to be "start-ups"; it is a generation left to its own devices as the social fabric that supported prior generations has disappeared. We are now united, not by a

sense of moral purpose but by a shared bleakness – the "moral crisis" of which the Institute for Policy Studies warns us. We share the experience of mass bewilderment, dispossessed of a sense of how to find our way out of what seems the ineluctable end to our species. Millennials may not know about the sequence of social psychological events over the last two hundred years that have brought us to this point, but they inherit the effects. Even though youth will always try to find the bright side of life, our melancholia seeps into their veins.

The depth psychologies have always placed a high value on the examined life, on looking into selves and their societies in order to gain insight into those mental and social forces that paralyse us. The democratic process, free of corruption, offers the only solution, through the use of psychological understanding and psychosocial change.

A political psychology can help leaders, and all participants in political processes, to rediscover the freedom provided by the democratic frame of mind. This will require us to understand why and how we have blamed ourselves for our losses and given way to masochistic immersions in hidden forms of self-loathing, but before embarking on that task we have to reclaim the parts of our minds (individually and collectively) that we destroyed in the various stages of our despair. And in order to restore our capacity to think, we shall first have to confront our widespread psychophobia.

Psychoanalysis and the depth psychologies may be imperfect but their ambition is not. They are "works in progress" that point towards a crucial function. We have always known that we needed to "know thyself" and this is as true now as it has been over the millennia. If we are to reverse our current state of affairs and preserve our species, it is essential to realize that, along with the many social causes of human suffering and disablement, whether economically or politically determined, our mental life must be taken into consideration.

If Western leaders can mitigate their grandiose rhetoric they will reduce the manic substructure that has generated the malignant aspects of nationhood. By offering a model for a more modest life, they can create an antidote to greed and

corruption. By declining the mass psychological urge to project a society's destructive ambitions into proxy countries they can substantially reduce the need for militarization and the prospect of war. By expressing regret for crimes committed against other nations they can discover that saying "we are sorry" can provide some healing for the victims of aggression.

This work has attempted to explore a vital need to return to the creation of meaning, in our lives and in our societies, by making use of psychological insight within the experience of democracy. This offers a platform for national and international discourse predicated not on the free market of disturbed states of mind, but on a new form of collective understanding in which humans can turn once again towards becoming humane beings.[3]

Notes

1 See the essay by James C. Scott. "Take your pick", *London Review of Books*, 39(20), 19 October 2017, 23–44. He reviews Walter Scheidel. *The Great Leveler: Violence and the History of Inequality from the Stone Age to the 21st Century*. Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 2017.

2 It would be foolish to underestimate the pleasure we take in greed and violence. The wars and genocides of the twentieth century illustrate all too clearly our penchant for "wargasm": the eroticism of mass murder. This allows us to experience the bliss of total annihilation of human structures and the triumph of the id, as the shadow side of the humane self leads the disturbed sides of personality into victory.

Judith Butler traces CNN's coverage of the invasion of Iraq, which provided, she suggests, an "aesthetic dimension to war" (148). Mesmerized by "shock and awe", the "media becomes entranced by the sublimity of destruction" (149). Any opposition finds it almost impossible to "intervene upon this desensitizing dream machine in which the massive destruction of lives and homes, sources of water, electricity, and heat, are produced as a delirious sign of a resuscitated US military power" (149). See Judith Butler. *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. London, Verso, 2004.

Shocking as this "desensitizing dream machine" is, it would be nothing compared to the ultimate wargasm. If Trump were ever to "decide" that he had enough of "Rocket Man" and