

I

PASSING

A surprising number of people don't like the word 'passing' used for 'dying'. They see it as an act of avoidance or cowardice, a refusal to face facts. She hasn't *passed*, they say, she's *dead*, she's *gone*, she has been utterly extinguished, snuffed out like a candle. Apart from being irritated by the pedanticism of the complaint – after all, everyone knows what the word means in this context – I actually like using passing for, or as well as, dying, for a couple of reasons. The first is that I sympathise with the urge to soften the subject, or to gloss over it, disguise it. Sometimes we are just not able to take in the sudden and harsh reality of death. That is why we have not only invented euphemisms to soften its impact, we have gone even further and denied its finality by persuading ourselves that death was not an end, it was a door to another room.

Our beloved dead have not left us for ever. They have passed on or passed through this life to another life beyond, where we will meet them again when our own time comes. It takes a mean spirit and a narrow heart to deny the bereaved the comfort of this kind of hope. It is so persistent in human experience that only the invin-

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cibly ungenerous would deny the consolation it promises. And it is testimony to the existential impossibility many find in accepting that someone they had loved utterly and dependently could just disappear like that. King Lear caught the tone at the death of his daughter Cordelia in the cry: 'Thou'lt come no more, Never, never, never, never, never! The word *passing*, far from being weak and evasive, seems to me to catch the complex feel of dying.

But my other reason for liking the word is that, as well as catching the feel of human death, it captures the feel of human life. *Passing* is what life also feels like, because it is what time does, and time is the medium in which we have our being – till it runs out on us, and we stop.

The thought of time widening behind us like the wake of a ship, and diminishing in front of us as we draw close to port, can prompt the kind of reflective sorrow we call melancholy, a mood that has to be distinguished from its grim cousin, depression. Melancholy is what I am writing about here; melancholy, the mood that invades us when we realise how time is drifting away from us into the past, always into the past.

On Sundays,
when the rain held off,
after lunch or later,
I would go with my twelve year old
daughter into town,
and put down the time
at junk sales, antique fairs.

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There I would
lean over tables,
absorbed by
lace, wooden frames,
glass. My daughter stood
at the other end of the room,
her flame-coloured hair
obvious whenever –
which was not often –

I turned around.
I turned around.
She was gone.
Grown. No longer ready
to come with me, whenever
a dry Sunday
held out its promises
of small histories. Endings.

When I was young
I studied styles: their use
and origin. Which age
was known for which
ornament: and was always drawn
to a lyric speech, a civil tone.
But never thought
I would have the need,
as I do now, for a darker one:

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Spirit of irony,
my caustic author
of the past, of memory, –

and of its pain, which returns
hurts, stings – reproach me now,
remind me
that I was in those rooms,
with my child,
with my back turned to her,
searching – oh irony! –
for beautiful things.¹

This poem has the classic marks of the state we call melancholy, an almost pleasurable sadness at the memory of the loss of a person or a place; a grateful mourning, an affectionate regret, a tender sorrow. It is a mood I am prone to, and it is one I find in many poets and other writers, so I am in interesting company. When I was reading Jan Morris's *Trieste and the Meaning of Nowhere*, I was pleased to discover that the philosopher Aristotle thought all interesting people had a touch of melancholy in their make up. However, 'melancholy' is a word with a past, and we can't just take it as we understand it today without thinking about its history. Words are dynamic realities that keep shifting their meaning, and *melancholy* is a good example of this verbal dynamism.

It began life as a term associated with the Greek physician and father of medicine, Hippocrates (460–370 BCE) – based on the ancient theory of the four elements or 'humours' – that described one of the quartet of

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human temperaments that were believed to control not only our biology but our personalities as well. They were: phlegm, blood, choler and black bile. Following this classification, we get the *phlegmatic* or apathetic person, the *sanguine* or enthusiastic person, the *choleric* or bad-tempered person, and the *melancholic* or depressed person, each formed by the humour that dominated their biological make up. In the case of the melancholic, the dominant element was believed to be black bile, in Greek, *melan-cholia*. Reading that, I don't like the sound of it. And as someone who occasionally suffers from acid reflux, I don't like the feel of it either. My dictionary describes bile as 'a bitter greenish-brown alkaline fluid that aids digestion and is secreted by the liver and stored in the gall bladder'. No wonder its over-production was associated with distress and depression, as anyone who has ever suffered from the acidic bite of a stomach ulcer will testify.

The theory of the four humours was an early example of biological determinism, and versions of it are still around today. But big questions hang over the theory. Does our inherited biological make up dictate our personalities, or is it the other way round? Or is it a bit of both? When a friend of mine was dying of cancer, she was accused by someone of not looking after herself, the implication being that her cancer had been self-inflicted. Unfeeling as that remark was, we do acknowledge today that there is a body-mind continuum, a feedback system that makes it hard to separate human biology from human psychology. The popularity of the mindfulness movement and other versions of self-culture testify to that, as do

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circular debates about the relationship between the brain and the mind.

Freud was interesting on the subject. He would not have agreed with the biological detail of the theory of humours, but he accepted the premise that human afflictions could be psychogenetic rather than purely somatic in origin. This is what he said about melancholia:

Melancholia, the definition of which fluctuates even in descriptive psychiatry, appears in various different clinical forms; these do not seem amenable to being grouped together into a single entity, and some of them suggest somatic rather than psychogenetic diseases.³

Whatever line we take on it, it has to be admitted that human personality is complex, and human personalities cover a wide spectrum. And whether or not we associate it with the painful over-production of digestive acid, there *is* a type of person we usually describe as a ‘moaner’, someone for whom life and its normal stresses are experienced as being uniquely burdensome. I seem to have known quite a few people like this over the years. Translated in this way, for melancholics life is hard and filled with difficulty. The pressure of coping with it may even pull their mouths down into a permanent droop, so they end up looking like a version of the ancient mask of tragedy. ‘Woe is me,’ they complain, ‘no one understands what miseries I endure.’ That, I guess, was the original version of the melancholic: the person for whom life was heavy-going, the droopy-faced moaner.

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But there was always a seed of something else in there as well. Not so much moaning about their own life, as seeing into the sadness and sorrow of life itself. A classic version of this understanding of melancholia is found in the epic poem the *Aeneid*, by the Roman poet Virgil (70 BCE–19 CE), which describes Aeneas's escape from the flames of ruined Troy and the long journey that brings him at last to Rome. In the passage in question, journeying Aeneas is in a Carthaginian temple gazing at a mural that depicts the deaths of some of his friends and countrymen in the battles of the Trojan War. Moved to tears at the sight, he cries out: *'En Priamus. Sunt hic etiam sua praemia laudi; sunt lacrimae rerum et mentem mortalia tangunt.'*⁴ 'See, there's Priam; even here honour gets her due; there are tears at the heart of things and the fleeting nature of everything overwhelms the mind.' That captures the deepening understanding of melancholia. Melancholics are not moaners, it is just that they have a piercing awareness of the tears at the heart of things, and the sorrow and loss that characterise human history. No longer the acidic bile of the solipsistic moaner, melancholia is now understood as a sorrowing empathy for the constant defeats of the human condition. Freud would have nodded in agreement here and pointed out the close relationship between mourning and melancholy.

The correlation between melancholia and mourning seems justified by the overall picture of the two conditions. Further, the causes of both in terms of environmental influences are, where we can identify them at all, also the same. Mourning is commonly the

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reaction to the loss of a beloved person or an abstraction taking the place of the person, such as fatherland, freedom, an ideal and so on. In some people, whom we for this reason suspect of having a pathological disposition, melancholia appears in place of mourning.⁵

By the time of the poet John Milton (1608–74) the evolution of the understanding of melancholy had taken a definite turn in this direction. In his poems, ‘L’Allegro’ and ‘Il Penseroso’, Milton compared and contrasted the happy man with the serious or thoughtful man, or, in the typology of the four humours, the sanguine with the melancholic. Here’s L’Allegro, the happy man, dismissing his gloomy opposite number by multiplying metaphors for the black bile that was supposed to provoke melancholia:

Hence loathèd Melancholy
Of Cerberus and blackest midnight born,
In Stygian cave forlorn
’Mongst horrid shapes, and shrieks, and sights
 unholy;
Find out some uncouth cell,
Where brooding Darkness spreads his jealous wings,
And the night-raven sings;
There, under ebon shades, and low-brow’d rocks,
As ragged as thy Locks,
In dark Cimmerian desert ever dwell.⁶

And here’s Il Penseroso, the serious or thoughtful man, returning the favour:

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Hence vain deluding joyes,
The brood of folly without father bred,
How little you bested,
Or fill the fixèd mind with all your toyes:
Dwell in some idle brain,
And fancies fond with gaudy shapes possess,
As thick and numberless
As the gay motes that people the Sun Beams,
Or likest hovering dreams
The fickle Pensioners of Morpheus' train.
But hail thou Goddess, sage and holy,
Hail divinest Melancholy . . .⁷

There has been a distinct shift in the meaning of our word. It has moved from seeing the melancholic as a depressive who is always moaning about how tough life is, to understanding the melancholy person as thoughtful and reflective, the opposite of the pleasure-seeker who flits from sensation to sensation as if afraid to look too deeply into the tears at the heart of things. In a phrase from another poem by Eavan Boland, the melancholic has become the kind of person who knows 'how to teach a sorrow to speak'.

By the time we get to the twentieth century and the writings of Jan Morris, this is the meaning the word has. Melancholy has become a kind of grateful sadness at what life has given us but which we can never cling to, because it is constantly *passing*, disappearing into the past. Melancholics find it impossible not to keep looking back at what time has wrought as it slips away behind them like the wake of a ship. And it was because she felt the pull

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of melancholy with particular force when standing in her imagination on the waterfront of the city at the end of a strip of Italian territory between Slovenia and the Adriatic Sea that Jan Morris calls it her Trieste mood. This is how she describes it:

There are moments in my life when a suggestion of Trieste is summoned so exactly into my consciousness that wherever I am I feel myself transported there . . .

None of my responses to these scenes are exuberant, but they are not despondent either. I am homesick, I am thinking sad thoughts about age, doubt and disillusion, but I am not unhappy. I feel there are good people around me, and an unspecified yearning steals narcotically over me – what the Welsh call *hiraeth*. Pathos is part of it, but in a lyrical form to which I am sentimentally susceptible, and at the same time I am excited by a suggestion of sensual desire. The allure of lost consequence and faded power is seducing me, the passing of time, the passing of friends, the scrapping of great ships! The Trieste effect, I call it. It is as though I have been taken, for a brief sententious glimpse, out of time to nowhere.⁸

As I have already said, I am susceptible to this mood myself and I am conscious of it as I am writing now. In Jan Morris's words, I am pierced by the sweet sorrow of 'the passing of time' and 'the passing of friends'. Why are some of us afflicted with the compulsion to go back to places in our past that have an enduring hold on our imagination, places that soothe and hurt

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us at the same time? And why is it a tendency that afflicts so many writers? Or have I maybe got that back to front? Is it that the insistent pressure of the melancholic mood forces some of us to become writers in order to save as much of the past as we can from the oblivion it hurtles towards? Is that why we go back to places that once held meaning for us, not in hope to recover the meaning but to revisit the place where we once possessed it? In my case it may be to an old graveyard in a former monastery where I spent my formative years. Or to a road up a purple hill I walked with my mother, when I was young and she was still beside me. Or to a road up a green hill I walked with my children, when they were young and were still beside me. Walking into the past like this is what the Scottish poet W.S. Graham (1918–86) did one day on the edge of old age, when he went up the hill behind Greenock, where he had been born, to revisit Loch Thom.

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1: Just for the sake of recovering
I walked backward from fifty-six
Quick years of age wanting to see,
And managed not to trip or stumble
To find Loch Thom and turned round
To see the stretch of my childhood
Before me. Here is the loch. The same
Long-beaked cry curls across
The heather-edges of the water held
Between the hills a boyhood's walk
Up from Greenock. It is the morning.

And I am here with my mammy's
Bramble jam scones in my pocket.
The Firth is miles and I have come
Back to find Loch Thom maybe
In this light does not recognise me.

...

My mother is dead. My father is dead
And all the trout I used to know
Leaping from their sad rings are dead.

3: I drop my crumbs into the shallow
Weed for the minnows and pinheads.
You see that I will have to rise
And turn round and get back where
My running age will slow for a moment
To let me on. It is a colder
Stretch of water than I remember.

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The curlew's cry travelling still
Kills me fairly. In front of me
The grouse flurry and settle. GOBACK
GOBACK GOBACK FAREWELL LOCH THOM.⁹

But why do this? Why heed the call of the poet to GOBACK, GOBACK? Interrogating my own experience suggests that it is because the actual process of living is like watching a movie that can never be paused, only rewound. And only when it is over, and it is too late. Our good fortune and our tragedy are that, though we cannot stop the present to bless it as time runs on, we can go back in memory to mourn and hallow it when it is over. That is the sweet hurt poets are brilliant at capturing. We heard it in Eavan Boland's recollection of her twelve-year-old daughter.

I turned around.
I turned around.
She was gone.

And in W.S. Graham's

. . . I will have to rise
And turn round and get back where
My running age will slow for a moment
To let me on.

Freud has already reminded us that in some people melancholia appears in place of mourning.¹⁰ But why 'in place of mourning'? Why can't we understand melancholia as

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itself a kind of mourning, mourning for lost time and the dead past, now only available to us through the séance of memory? Which is exactly what the writers I'll be quoting in this book do. They summon up the dear, dead past. They take us back to moments in their lives that prompt sorrow as well as a mysterious sweetness.

But, to return to an earlier question, why do writers go to all this bother? Why can't they just *be* melancholic, sense the tears at the heart of things, the passing of everything? Why do they have to *write* about it, and share their sorrow with the rest of us? Indeed, why am I bothering to anthologise their wistfulness in yet another book? To get personal: do I think the world, already drowning in words, needs to hear more from me? I was once accused by a friend of leaving no thought unpublished. An exaggeration, I thought, but I pleaded guilty, nevertheless. But why go on doing it well into my ninth decade? Is it vanity, a sense of my own significance, the conviction that I have something to say that people need to hear? I think I have found the answer to that self-accusatory question, and I'll get to it later, but because I revere him as one of the most ruthlessly honest and self-examined writers of the twentieth century, I want to look first at how George Orwell went about answering the same question. Though he doesn't say it directly, he comes close to my own earlier suggestion that it is melancholy that forces some of us to become writers in order to record the past before it is swallowed by oblivion.

In an essay he wrote in 1946, called 'Why I Write', Orwell concluded with these words:

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All writers are vain, selfish and lazy, and at the very bottom of their motives there lies a mystery. Writing a book is a horrible, exhausting struggle, like a bout of some painful illness. One would never undertake such a thing if one were not driven on by some demon whom one can neither resist nor understand. For all one knows that demon is simply the same instinct that makes a baby squall for attention. And yet it is also true that one can write nothing readable unless one constantly struggles to efface one's own personality. Good prose is like a window pane. I cannot say with certainty which of my motives are the strongest, but I know which of them deserve to be followed. And looking back through my work, I see that it is invariably where I lacked a *political* purpose that I wrote lifeless books and was betrayed into purple passages, sentences without meaning, decorative adjectives and humbug generally.¹¹

The endearing and reassuring thing about that passage at the end of his essay is that it seems to contradict what he had written at the start. Here's how he began:

From a very early age, perhaps the age of five or six, I knew that when I grew up I should be a writer. Between the ages of about seventeen and twenty-four I tried to abandon the idea, but I did so with the consciousness that I was outraging my true nature and that sooner or later I should have to settle down and write books . . . When I was about sixteen I suddenly discovered the joy of mere words . . . the sounds and association of words.¹²