

Grey Hope

Sigrid Sandström with Gavin Morrison

Your absence is felt today maybe more than ever. The party is over: the crayfish eaten, the songs sung. And as the festivities dissolved into the night, a few remained, wordlessly looking out over the flat-black lake. In the past, languid, late-summer nights, such as this one, witnessed our repeated failures to disentangle the cultural vestiges that entwined our particular melancholy. But now, with your departure southwards, I wonder how much this sadness is specific to these high latitudes? Though it evidently persists with you, to some extent, given the heroic pessimism that infuses your correspondences. But despite your perfect words, I feel my solitude more acutely through your absence tonight. And as I continue to pursue this specter of melancholy I wish you were here to help.

It must be curious to be away from the flat Nordic light and be living under the brutal intensity of near-equatorial sun. That dry, desolate environment seems contrary to all we've come to know of melancholy. And yet, you are now closer in a certain sense to its cultural wellspring, named and diagnosed, as it was, by the Greeks who thought it a result of dryness. Yet, those of us from the North are beholden to a belief that ours is a geo-graphically determined soul, predisposed to the rising of this dark humor; convinced that not only are we more prone to its incursions, but also that we indulge them with a greater elegance. Like a mild perversion, this irrational impulse to actively seek such a comprehensive sadness, and so eagerly inhabit it, is in fact a contingent aspect of the totality of melancholy: the desire is an active part of the disposition. Of course, in melancholy's prosaic composition – as a chronic mental unraveling – the resultant absence of logical continuity would be crippling. But in its more benign, everyday sense – where the stability of our mental processing is more subtly disrupted – there is a reflexivity that reveals the psyche's inherent ambivalence to reason. The texture of consciousness slips out from the strict cartographic depictions of a complete, coherent structure to a more unsettled and ambiguous terrain.

Perhaps this goes to explain why we always welcomed the presence of melancholy. In those moments of sadness, we escaped the extolled capacity of rationality for exp-

lanation through expectation, which forms such a foundation for humanity. Instead, we side-stepped those intractable conditions by drawing a type of solace from the insights afforded by this melancholy to the brute character of existence. As a result, it raises uncertainties: not just of the coy, philosophical type (such as a protraction of the Cartesian problems of interaction) but rather the uncertainty is greater and more palpable, that of an ability to feel an abject isolation from ourselves. Where the stratifications of being are usually integrated, the incursion of melancholy occasions a coming apart: we are forced to recognize multiplicity where an undifferentiated whole was thought to persist. Yet we are so unaccustomed to this structural shift of being that we are left without the apparatus to comprehensively negotiate the resultant lacunae. As Michel de Montaigne discerned, "we have no communication with Being; as human nature is wholly situated, forever between birth and death, it shows itself only as a dark shadowy appearance, an unstable weak opinion."¹ It is not that any knowledge is specifically lacking, for that which is absent is in actuality a perspective, a functional stand-point, from which to make knowledge viable. It is as if that most fundamental knowledge – self-knowledge – is made to seem possible in the reverie of melancholy, only to be instantly obscured by the manifold of consciousness. In our state of being we can't escape from ourselves to gain that perception; it is only through the incursions of such experiences as this melancholic disintegration of the psyche that we become aware of its presence, as a ghost within ourselves.

Yesterday, while walking, I thought I felt that specter pull from the shadows. The landscape started to close in, compressing, taking over, consuming the entire sky. A low rainbow rose from the horizon. Its presence returned me to your bullish assertion of the inadequacies of the recurrent cultural tropes of melancholy: the lone figure isolated in a great expanse, the dark forest, the distant bluish mountain range or the storm-laden sky, and the sense that these visual leitmotifs risk being incomplete and riddled with cliché but also fundamentally naïve, for that which prompts the experiential encounter of this gloomy presence is rather more arbitrary.

In looking at that rainbow I felt unconvinced by the cultural precedent of considering it as symbol of hope and optimism; rather, it felt like an unmitigated burden, a gross weight. Perhaps this relates to the fact that even in this most bucolic occurrence there is a darkness, a shadow is necessitated. Alexander of Aphrodisias (the ancient Greek philosopher) first described how a doppelganger and an invariable blackening accompany those supposed ephemeral talismans of hope and rebirth. Rainbows are caused by the refraction of light through water particles in the atmosphere, but during this process not all the light escapes on the first encounter. Some remains trapped within the particle, reflected on the inside of the droplet, only to be refracted later, higher in the sky, as a second fainter rainbow with a reversed color spectrum. And between the two rainbows, the sky is darkened. With the light being split, there is nothing remaining to illuminate this section of the sky. This great grey arc does not provide a strong contrast to the rainbow's colors, but also exemplifies the potential of melancholy over the tyranny of optimism. Paradoxically, there is a commonality between hope and melancholy, since each can be objectless: a general feeling of melancholy and a pervading sense of hope, for example. Yet where they diverge is in the ability of "hope" to have a particularity that appears absent with melancholy; the latter is a deep, pervading sadness without a referent object. Indeed it can be induced, exacerbated, or provoked by particular places and things, but it is not directed at those things. Therefore, the rainbow functions as a parallax upon the psyche, generating an experiential shift and re-orientating the world and our attitude towards it. As hope is leached from its presence, it stands as a self-depreciating object, covertly undermining that which it may seem to advocate.

But must hope be one of the first casualties to be lost in the shadow of melancholy? (Though there was nothing more pleasing than your derision so eloquently directed against the Panglossian optimists of the world.) With the melancholic void taking over, the future becomes lost in the sudden deepening of the present, but does this require hope to be abandoned with little

more than a pessimistic shrug? Even though the future acquires a sense of the arbitrary for the melancholic, perhaps hope need not be a fatal victim or, rather, a different hope emerges: a grey hope. This subsists within the deeper reaches of the blackness, not as a prevalent attitude but as a paradoxical enigma. Being lost does not necessarily indicate absence; rather it is a homelessness, a failure to find a definitive place. Think of ski-flyers, those quixotic warriors who launch themselves into the winter's sky. As they propel from the end of the jump, their arms fixed by their sides, eyes looking far into the valley, we are locked in the empty belief that falling is a version of flight: a brief cessation in our knowledge that the impending pull of gravity will force them back to earth. A transformation occurs in these moments of parabolic falling: hope regresses through an enacted fiction of flight and the epic sadness of inevitable failure. Hope fades into this background but never entirely disappears. Its presence is barely perceptible until one comes across a ski jump in summer. This folly to the wintry Icarus, sited amongst dark trees, assumes a different import; there is a sadness that resonates with a quiet but distinctive hope. In this temporal isolation, detached from its required climatic conditions, its monumentalism engenders a sense of longing for the distant season and past heroics. It ceases to be a functional object and assumes the place of a totem; the structure speaks of an act, a gesture of improbable being. The absence of activity subsumes the locale under a cloud of absence, but one lined with hope that ceases to be optimistic: that grey hope.

Now, I am alone on the foreshore of this lake – the others having gone – accompanied only by my stumbling recollection of your thinking. The inelegance of these memories not only betrays your erudition upon this persistent darkness but also induces a sense of affinity between myself and the gawkiness of Baudelaire's captured and ridiculed Albatross. The failure of these lurching and graceless attempts does not dampen my zeal to find a way to qualify this abiding specter. However, the more ink I shed in trying to describe its presence, I realize that I actually create more shadows in which it can lurk, avoiding detection. Perhaps this is why I

crave your presence, with your grace and devotion to that grey hope, and with it your commitment to a lived engagement with melancholy that serves as a foil to purely empirical and explanatory endeavors.

NOTES

1. Michel Eyquem de Montaigne, "An Apology for Raymond Seband," in *The Essays of Michel de Montaigne* (London: Penguin, 1991), 680.