



Melancholy and media

Description

In an intellectually astute observation about his own Olympic success, cyclist Bradley Wiggins said, “There is almost slight melancholy. I realised on the podium that that is it for me. I don’t think anything is going to top that. To win the tour and then win Olympic gold in London at 32. I’ll look back in 10, 15 years and think that was as good as it got.” (Orange News)



of sadness. Aristotle assumed melancholy was integral to who have become outstanding in philosophy, poetry or the arts

Melancholy haunts the temple of delight. According to a poem

by Keats, “in the very temple of Delight veiled Melancholy has her sovereign shrine” (Ode on Melancholy). Positive submission to the sublime power of sadness is an abiding theme in Romanticism. It’s linked to creativity.

In moments characterised less by achievement there are some who seem simply to enjoy being miserable, at least for some of the time. Is it a contradiction to be sad about one's happiness, or to enjoy being sad? Melancholy is in the company of other complex moods about moods, or meta-moods.

Meta-moods

Here are some other meta-moods: being bored with being happy; angry at being fearful; worried that I don't care; optimistic about depression; curious about my own insistent questioning.

A mood is an emotion without a specified cause. So a meta-mood is not strictly speaking a mood about a mood, but a feeling about a mood, or perhaps an ability to talk about the mood one is in. It's about the difficult task of speaking about your own mood rather than being articulate on the subject of other people's moods.

Of course *enjoying being sad* may just mean enjoying sad music, watching sad films, or talking about sad things. Mood is about language as much as an internal affective state, and language is social. So *enjoying being sad* is also about sharing a mood.

Emotional intelligence

In a seminal paper on emotional awareness empirical psychologists Peter Salovey and colleagues defined three meta-mood conditions highlighting that it takes a certain skill to talk about moods (p.136).

- **awareness** of moods, ie being able to talk about them
- **experiencing** your moods clearly, ie knowing whether you are happy, sad, afraid, or contented
- trying to **regulate** your moods, ie deliberately trying to snap out of it, or induce a pleasurable mood

The strong contention is that people who are mood-aware in these ways are better able to recover from negative emotional experiences, such as watching a scary movie, or a documentary about car accidents, or actual traumatic life events, such as losing a close relative. Emotional intelligence of this kind engenders a kind of resilience.

Meta-mood skills help in coping with stress, abetted by friends, counsellors, therapists and (perhaps) social media. The mass media also provides a means of regulating mood. Sometimes we read a book, look at pictures, watch television shows or listen to music to regulate moods. I wonder how many people read about or watch Olympic success or failure to nudge them into a mood.

Here's a picture of Christ on Mount Olympus by Max Klinger in the Museum of Fine Art, Leipzig designed to incite a mood – perhaps melancholy tinged with eroticism, and bafflement.



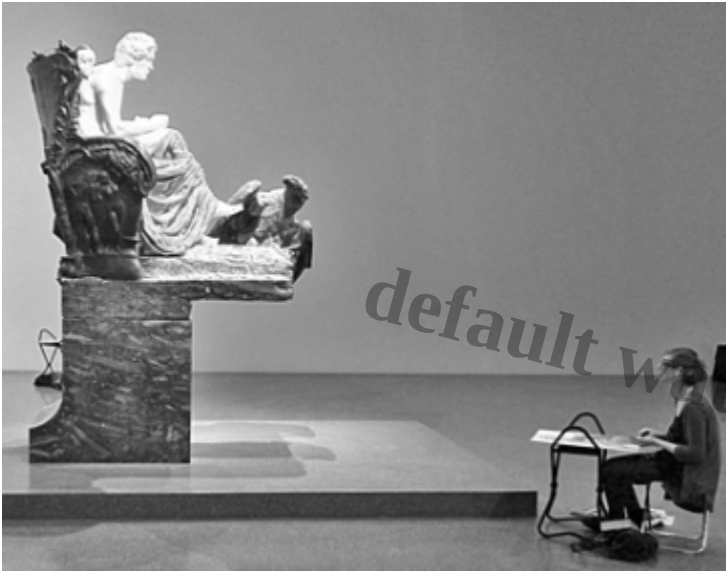
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Notes

- According to Samuel Butler (1659), the melancholic “takes Pleasure in nothing but his own unsober Sadness.” in “A Melancholy Man” from *Characters*, excerpted in Radden, p.158.
- For Freud, someone who has lost something valuable to them (a loved one, a job, a prize) might reasonably experience *mourning*. On the other hand someone who is melancholic isn’t aware of what they’ve lost: “This would suggest that melancholia is in some way related to an object-loss which is withdrawn from consciousness.” (p.254)

- According to the OED, melancholy implies a profound sadness, rather than a mental illness. The word comes from the Greek (μελαγχολία) via Latin and French, and simply means a condition of having black bile, associated with ill-temper. Melancholy carries more interesting cultural overtones than *depression*. For Jonathan Flatley melancholy is a way of being interested in the world. It's the condition of modernity: losing the past.
- Web search on "why do I enjoy being sad?" returns many more hits than "why do I enjoy" just about anything else: being bad, glad, happy, mad, intelligent, sexy, fit, curious, funny or a winner.



Category

1. Culture

Tags

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