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Editorial

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EDITORIAL

Introduction

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This special issue interrogates whether 'melancholia' continues to be a useful critical concept with which to analyse the condition of contemporary British and Irish literature. Melancholia was one of the dominant critical preoccupations of the twentieth century, and the term has a long genealogy in which it functions as a synonym for a sadness that has no distinct origin. It connotes a pervasive sense of 'stuckness', as if one were caught in the groove of a record. As a result, critical speculation on melancholia can sometimes feel like an exercise in navel-gazing, an unending and therefore beneficent area of inquiry which serves the melancholic subject at its core, and – more to the point – the critic who wishes to write about such a subject. The term itself has something of an in-betweenness to it, being distinguished as a particular variant of depression in DSM-5 but also widely applied to those with a reputation for maudlin introspection, from Hamlet to the Romantics to Morrissey. This indeterminacy is reflected in the stylistic ambiguity of Robert Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621), which appears to be a medical textbook but unfolds as a philosophical investigation, and in the fierce contrasts of John Keats' 'Ode on Melancholy' (1819), with its shifting modes of address and juxtaposition of the joyous and sexual alongside much more sober subject matter. Of course, it is Sigmund Freud's understanding of the term, and particularly his distinction between mourning (in which the ego desires an object that has been lost) and melancholia (in which it mourns an object that is unclear or obscured from it), that has been most influential on theorists of the twentieth century. Freud notes that 'in mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself' (1917: 246), an idea Jean Laplanche expands on when he considers the place of the object in relation to the melancholic subject: 'Far from being my kernel, it is

the other implanted in me, the metabolized product of the other in me: forever an "internal foreign body"' (1999: 256). Thus, the melancholic is the subject which has incorporated the lost object *into* itself. In *The Ear of the Other,* Derrida discusses this dead object, which 'remains like a living dead abscessed in a specific spot in the ego [. . .] The dead object is incorporated in this crypt – the term "incorporated" signalling precisely that one has failed to digest or assimilate it totally, so that it remains there, forming a pocket in the mourning body' (1988: 57). The essays in this special issue are concerned with revealing these pockets of mourning and asking whether, as represented in contemporary British and Irish literature, they continue to have anything to teach us.

Melancholia has recently enjoyed varied applications in literary and cultural studies, whether in relation to race (Sara Ahmed's melancholy migrants (Ahmed 2010) and Paul Gilroy's postcolonial melancholia (Gilroy 2004)), politics (Wendy Brown's left melancholia (1999)) or sexuality (Judith Butler's melancholic incorporation (1995)). In our pessimistic times, literature can both offer a space of articulation for that which haunts our contemporary moment but also be a haunted space, constrained by subject matter and political context. A theoretical interest in melancholia can be broadly aligned with some of the major critical ideas of contemporary literary criticism, such as spectrality and trauma. And it might be argued that, just as trauma theory emerged in the context of the politicisation of poststructuralist methodologies during the 1990s – a response to the accusation that the latter had become 'overly textual and far away from the "real world"' (Buels, Durrant and Eaglestone 2014: 3) – so the recent return of melancholia in critical theory might be thought of as an attempt to encourage forms of analysis that have tended to be overly preoccupied with textuality to speak to 'real world' situations. The usefulness of such a strategy is open to question: as Sam Durrant argued recently, 'In conventional Freudian terms, [the] refusal of verbalisation, substitution and abstraction would be pathologized as [. . . a] state of stasis' (2014: 104–05). But as he goes on to suggest, this stasis, this sense of constraint, might paradoxically be what enables melancholia to open up new political and ethical opportunities. According to this analysis, the stasis of the melancholic subject represents a

moment of suspension in which judgement might be exercised and a course of action decided. In 'refus[ing] to be moved, [. . .] refus[ing] the very temporality of mourning' (Durrant 2015: 105), the subject is granted the space she needs to reflect on her circumstances and arrive at a politically and ethically meaningful response to them.

Given the circumstances in which the UK and Republic of Ireland currently find themselves, and the speed at which fundamental changes in their cultural, political, constitutional and economic relationship are taking place (as well, of course, as in their relationship with the rest of Europe and the world), an opportunity now to pause and reflect would surely be welcome. The Call for Papers for this special issue was sent out before David Cameron, then British Prime Minister, made good on his election promise to stage a referendum on Britain's membership of the European Union. The essays were written during the referendum campaign, edited in the aftermath of the vote to leave and will be published in a moment of profound uncertainty about the future. They can therefore only be understood as commenting obliquely on the dramatic political circumstances of their composition, and should be read as comments upon the structures of melancholia prevailing in the UK and Ireland up to 2016. Naturally, however, the temptation is to interpret the relevance of these structures to the result of the referendum in June of that year. Melancholic spectres hung about the rhetoric of both campaigns, whether the hordes of immigrants central to the Leave platform or the Remain team's solemn 'What is lost is lost forever' posters. The current moment can easily feel saturated with the 'stuckness' of the melancholic, as certain political ideas have been incorporated, 'abcessed', rather than worked through. But it is this very stuckness that might provide the opportunity that is needed to think through the implications of the result; seldom do scholars get to discuss contemporary literature in such profound moments of political upheaval as this. The essays in this special issue will ask whether, within literature from the countries of the North Atlantic archipelago – comprising states, nations and regions engaged in an inward conversation about the relations that are pulling them apart and binding them together – the current moment is best understood as a time ripe for melancholy speculation or as a period of hopeless nostalgia, of mourning without end or purpose. The implications of this question could hardly be more urgent.

Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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