

## I

## Sorrow and Fear



A Jew in France (saith Lodovicus Vives) came by chance over a dangerous passage or plank that lay over a brook, in the dark, without harm, the next day, perceiving what danger he was in, fell down dead. Many will not believe such stories to be true, but laugh commonly, and deride when they hear of them; but let these men consider with themselves, as Peter Bayrus illustrates it, if they were set to walk upon a plank on high, they would be giddy, upon which they dare securely walk upon the ground.

(Burton, *Anatomy*, i.256)

When we talk about melancholy in its modern sense, we usually understand it to mean a state of sadness, dejection, and introspection. Fear does not enter into our definitions of it.<sup>1</sup> In the Renaissance, however, to be melancholic was to live in fear. Anxiety, terror, sudden frights, and phobias were all seen as hallmarks of the disease, along with sorrow. In *The Anatomy of Melancholy*'s English predecessor, Timothy Bright's *Treatise of Melancholy* (1586), fear rather than sadness is the disease's defining characteristic: it is 'either a certain fearful disposition of the mind altered from reason, or else an humour of the body, commonly taken to be the only cause of reason by fear in such sort depraved'.<sup>2</sup>

In this chapter we will consider what makes sorrow and fear the inseparable companions of melancholy and how these two emotions can play complex roles in the workings – or failings – of human minds and bodies. Burton claims that they are like cousins or even sisters, so close

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is their relationship with one another and with the condition he has dedicated himself to exploring. Not only the principal causes of melancholy, they are also its defining symptoms: he quotes Hippocrates' claim that sorrow is 'the mother and daughter of melancholy', both the origin and the offspring of mental distress. These emotions 'beget one another, and tread in a ring' (i.259). A bereavement may lead to a lasting, unshiftable sorrow. A sudden fright may turn into a lifelong phobia.

## Falling off a Log

The story Burton tells of the sixteenth-century Jewish Frenchman not only shows how strong the imagination can be, but also plays out an intriguing philosophical puzzle. A man puts his life at risk by crossing over a brook by night but, since he is unable to see, he cannot perceive the danger he is in. Instead, his perception comes after the event. The case is an unusual one – and so probably appealed to Burton – because normally fear is an emotion connected to something that is yet to happen. Aristotle describes it as a 'sort of pain or agitation derived from the imagination of a future destructive or painful evil'.<sup>3</sup> But in this case, the man's fear is connected to an event that has already occurred.

Burton found the story in the writings of the Spanish humanist Juan Luís Vives (1492–1540) on the soul. Vives uses it to illustrate the notion that our imaginations function by making something present to us, whether that something is in the past, future, or is completely non-existent. Darkness robbed the Frenchman of the sensory information he needed to interpret the risk of walking along the plank, so his imagination supplied it instead (but only later, since he did not know what he was doing

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at the time). Burton removes one interesting detail in Vives' original account, that the man was returning home by night on his donkey and had drifted off to asleep. Whereas Vives' version has him unconscious, Burton makes him alert but unseeing. When he revisited the scene the next day, the man saw what he could not have done by night, and died of shock at what might have been. A fall from a height may have put his life at risk, but it was imagination that killed him.

Vives' Frenchman walked in a long line of people who crossed dangerous bridges. Even Burton acknowledges that there are those who will doubt whether it is true, probably knowing that 'the man who walked along a plank' was a centuries-old test-case for the nature of fear. Variations of the story exist in many forms. It may originate in the writings of the eleventh-century Persian philosopher and physician, Ibn Sina (Avicenna), who notes that a man can

run fast on a plank of wood when it is put across a well-trodden path, but when it is put like a bridge over a chasm, he would hardly be able to creep over it. This is because he pictures to himself a fall so vividly that the natural power of the limbs accords with it.

The example was taken up by Western scholars interested in the mind's powers over the body. In his *Summa theologiae*, Thomas Aquinas follows Ibn Sina in remarking that 'because of his fear a man who sets out to walk across a plank high above the ground will easily fall'. But if the plank is lowered, he reasons, the man would be less likely to stumble and fall because he would not be afraid. 'Fear interferes with action', he concludes.<sup>4</sup>

Closer to Burton's time, in his 'Apology for Raymond Sebond' the French essayist Michel de Montaigne

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(1533–92) has a more extreme idea for putting a medieval theory to practical experiment:

Take a philosopher, put him in a cage made from thin wires set wide apart; hang him from one of the towers of Notre Dame de Paris. It is evident to his reason that he cannot fall; yet (unless he were trained as a steeplejack) when he looks down from that height he is bound to be terrified and beside himself.

We can test the limits of our reason without having to harm any philosophers, however:

Take a beam wide enough to walk along: suspend it between two towers: there is no philosophical wisdom, however firm, which could make us walk along it just as we would if we were on the ground.<sup>5</sup>

Whether or not Vives' Frenchman really lived out (and died from) the thought experiment that Ibn Sina, Aquinas, and Montaigne all posed, his story contains in miniature the twin features of the many case histories in *The Anatomy of Melancholy*. On the one hand, it is curious, extreme, and hard to believe. On the other, it is a story with which we might identify. While retrospective fear certainly seems like an outlandish cause of death, everyone has experienced the physical effects of fright, such as a racing heartbeat and feeling short of breath. We may marvel or even laugh at these stories but – as Burton and Montaigne remind us – we would not be able to help feeling giddy if we were standing above the same precipice.

## Terrors and Affrights

Sorrow and fear can cause melancholy when they are excessive in proportion to the object, when they come



FIGURE 1.1 Face of a frightened soldier (left); the human face in an animal state of fear (right). Etching by B. Picart, 1713, after Charles Le Brun (1619–90).

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on too quickly, or when they become engrained. In the case of Vives' Frenchman, there was not time for his fear to become a longer-term condition because he was killed so suddenly. The fear he might have felt gradually, as he prepared to cross the plank, came upon him all at once the next day. Burton is fascinated by the phenomenon of terror, and moreover by the sheer power of the imagination to bring on extreme consequences: 'sometimes death itself is caused by force of phantasy', he remarks. 'I have heard of one that, coming by chance in company of him that was thought to be sick of the plague (which was not so), fell down suddenly dead' (i.256). But if not all cases are instantly fatal, they can certainly have unforeseen consequences.

Burton treats 'Terrors and Affrights Causes of Melancholy' differently from other kinds of fear. This is partly a question of degree – they are at the extreme end of the emotional spectrum – and partly because that severity makes for sudden and acute effects on the body and mind: 'Of all fears they are most pernicious and violent, and so suddenly alter the whole temperature of the body, move the soul and spirits, strike such a deep impression, that the parties can never be recovered, causing more grievous and fiercer melancholy' (i.335; see Figure 1.1). The cause might be an imminent danger, but it could just as well be a trick of the imagination.

Such was the case of the Swiss gentlewoman and the dead pig. Burton recounts a story from the casebooks of the physician Felix Platter of one of his patients, a lady from the city of Basle who happened to see a pig being butchered. A doctor (not Platter himself) was standing nearby and noticed how much the smell and sight of the

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pig's entrails was upsetting the woman. Not blessed with tact, he quipped that 'as that hog, so was she, full of filthy excrements'. At this discovery of what the insides of her own body looked and smelled like, she had an instant reaction which became a long-lasting one:

she fell forthwith a-vomiting, was so mightily distempered in mind and body, that with all his art and persuasions, for some months after, he [Platter] could not restore her to herself again; she could not forget it, or remove the object out of her sight. (i.337)

As is often the case with melancholy, what might be for most people only a passing annoyance is, for one person, the trigger for long-term illness. Burton calls these 'our melancholy provocations' and warns readers who are tempted to be dismissive of them that we should not judge by how we might respond to the same stimulus. We cannot measure another person's suffering by our own reactions, 'for that which is but a flea-biting to one, causeth insufferable torment to another' (i.145).

While the melancholy brought on by shock, fear, and grief affects individuals in unpredictable ways, it can also assault whole populations. The 'terrors and affrights' which Burton records include the mental trauma brought on by cataclysmic events, the effects of which can be felt long after they have passed. On 30 December 1504, a terrible earthquake struck Bologna in Italy, one of many that the city has endured over the centuries. It started at eleven at night, forcing its citizens out into the streets. Among them was the humanist scholar Filippo Beroaldo, whose eye-witness account Burton uses as a source for the *Anatomy*. The whole city shook, Beroaldo recalls, and

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‘the people thought the world was at an end ... such a fearful noise it made, such a detestable smell, the inhabitants were infinitely affrighted, and some ran mad’ (i.338).

While many were driven to wild distress by the terrifying events of that night, one or two bore more severe mental scars. Beroaldo tells the strange story of one citizen, Fulco Argelanus, ‘a bold and proper man’, who was ‘so grievously terrified with it, that he was first melancholy, after doted, at last mad, and made away himself’ (i.338). This description shows the way that mental illness was distinguished in the Renaissance, not so much by different types, as by degrees of severity: as Argelanus’ state of mind deteriorated, he went from melancholy to dotage to madness, each successive name describing a more acute state. Melancholy verges into madness when the sufferer has lost all control of his or her reason. In his retelling of the story, Burton suppresses several details that were in Beroaldo’s original account: that the man first attempted suicide by cutting his throat, and that he finally threw himself off a high building. A violent natural disaster leads to a violent personal tragedy, but one that in this case is the result of delayed mental trauma rather than immediate physical damage.

Earthquakes were notorious in the Renaissance for their powers to endanger not just the body but also the mind. One reason for this was the noxious vapours they produced. During earthquakes in Japan in 1596, witnesses reported both a terrible noise and a filthy smell, and at Fushimi ‘many men were offended with headache, many overwhelmed with sorrow and melancholy’ (i.338). As is so often the case with melancholy, outer and inner causes and symptoms were intertwined. The toxic fumes



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affected the victims' brains and gave them headaches, even as the horrors being witnessed terrified the imaginations. While the effects on them were immediate, the damage could become permanent: 'many times, some years following, they will tremble afresh at the remembrance, or conceit of such a terrible object, even all their lives long, if mention be made of it' (i.338).

## Refrigerating Passions

Why are fear and sadness so dangerous and self-propagating to melancholics? The answer is partly down to their intrinsic nature. From antiquity onwards, philosophers classified fear and sorrow as passions. Also known in the Renaissance as affections or perturbations of the soul, passions are similar to what we would now call emotions, but the way that they were conceptualised by writers of the period reveals a far more fundamentally embodied sense of what it means for humans to feel. The passions stand between our inner motions (our willpower and cognition) and our outer motions (our hearing, seeing, etc.) and they share something with both our senses and our reason – but not equally. After all, Renaissance theorists note, animals as well as humans have passions, and animals have no reasoning ability. The Jesuit writer Thomas Wright describes human passions and senses as like naughty servants who are disobedient to their master, reason, and who pay far more attention to one another, as friends in league.<sup>6</sup> Over the centuries, there was much debate over how many passions there were – answers ranged between two and eleven – but the basic set classified by Aquinas is four: fear, sorrow, joy (or love),

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and hope. Two of them live in the present: joy and sorrow. Two are concerned with what is to come, which we either wish for or want to avoid: hope and fear. All the other passions derive from these four, among them anger, envy, pride, jealousy, avarice, and shame.

The passions are a common cause of melancholy because, just as the bad humours of the body can work upon the brain and damage it, so the passions can alter the body's humoral balance. The consequences can be severe: as Burton puts it, 'the mind most effectually works upon the body, producing by his passions and perturbations miraculous alterations, as melancholy, despair, cruel diseases, and sometimes death itself' (i.250). He describes the actions of the passions in visceral terms: 'giving way to these violent passions of fear, grief, shame, revenge, hatred, malice, etc., they are torn in pieces, as Actaeon was with his dogs, and crucify their own souls' (i.259). Those who fall prey to the passions are victims, but Burton's words also hint at their personal responsibility for what happens to them: they are not crucified by the passions, but crucify themselves.

The story of Vives' Frenchman shows just how extreme the actions of the passions can be, 'producing ... death itself', as Burton puts it. These effects were deemed to be more severe in certain groups of people: women, for instance. Renaissance readers would probably have found significance in the fact that the Frenchman was Jewish (Vives himself was the son of *converso* parents, that is, Jews who converted to Christianity). In the *Anatomy* Burton records several cases from his medical sources of Jewish sufferers from melancholy, where their susceptibility to the passions is a defining feature. The Italian