



ACADEMY OF THE SOCIAL SCIENCES IN AUSTRALIA



THE FLINDERS CENTRE
FOR GLOBAL FUTURES



THE UNIVERSITY
of ADELAIDE

THE J. M. COETZEE CENTRE
FOR CREATIVE PRACTICE



The Paradox of Melancholia: Paralysis and Agency 22nd June – 23rd June

An Academy of Social Science Workshop held in collaboration with Flinders Centre for Global Futures, the J.M. Coetzee Research Centre for Creative Practice and supported by the Ian Potter Foundation.

Conveners: Professor Brian Castro, Professor Anthony Elliott, A/Prof Jennifer Rutherford.

A notoriously slippery concept (Burton 1926; Radden 2000), melancholy has been understood as a disease (melancholia), an affect, a mood, a style, a zeitgeist, a form of political dissent and a form of political reaction (Bénard, Blandine and Tcounji 2006; Klibansky, Panofsky and Saxl 1994; Prigent 2005). Shifting in its meaning from one historical epoch to another, and understood in contradictory ways in the competing discourses of medicine, poetics, and politics, the various melancholies nevertheless share some defining traits. If melancholies don't all look the same, they share — to borrow Wittgenstein's (1953) concept — a family resemblance. Over its long history, melancholy is a concept that links a series of twinned opposites: illness, disequilibrium, spleen, loss, grief, pain, paralysis, a-sociality *and* art, poetry, politics, protest and even that other outmoded concept genius. As Aristotle famously asked: “Why is it that all those who have become eminent in philosophy or politics or poetry or the arts are clearly of an atrabilious temperament, and some of them to such an extent as to be affected by diseases caused by black bile?”.

In contemporary social and cultural theory however, there is general distrust of this long association of melancholy with creativity. Philosopher Jennifer Radden (2009) sees attempts to reconnect melancholy and creativity as a form of neo-romanticism. Radden dubs this the “charm theory” of melancholy and has drawn attention to the identity politics in play in the return to self-valorising models of melancholy. (See also Schiesari 1992). Citing Kramer's (2005) argument that the historical association of melancholia with creativity is as deluded as the 19th century association of tuberculosis with romantic character, Radden seeks an analytic separation between causal models of melancholy/depression and the need for sufferers to exercise some dominion over available representations of the ill self. The conveners of this workshop contend, however, that the contradictions that have freighted melancholy since antiquity are core to understanding how the interior states of melancholy translate into social forms and forces. They are also core to recognising why melancholy matters — not just as a scholarly topic — but as one of the principle ways that unspeakable forms of suffering and loss find expression in the cultural realm.

Our aim in this workshop is to reframe melancholy as a productive affect and to explore the way melancholy

moves from an individual state into works that in turn impact upon collectivities. As German sociologist Wolf Lepenies (1992) demonstrated in *Melancholy and Society*, melancholy is an affect that, time and again, has played a salient role in galvanizing political dissent. Historically, the expression of melancholy in literature and art has often given voice to the marginalized and the disempowered, hence the rhetoric *contra* melancholy that one finds in authoritarian regimes. It has also been linked historically with the imagining of political futures. Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621), for example, included the first known Utopia in English. We seek to shed light on how melancholia, an illness involving disturbances in language, inertia and withdrawal also has this other social life distinguished by its expressivity. This project will bring a new lens to this paradox in an innovative workshop that brings together writers, artists, psychoanalysts and social cultural theorists to investigate the paradox of melancholia — as both paralysis *and* agency.