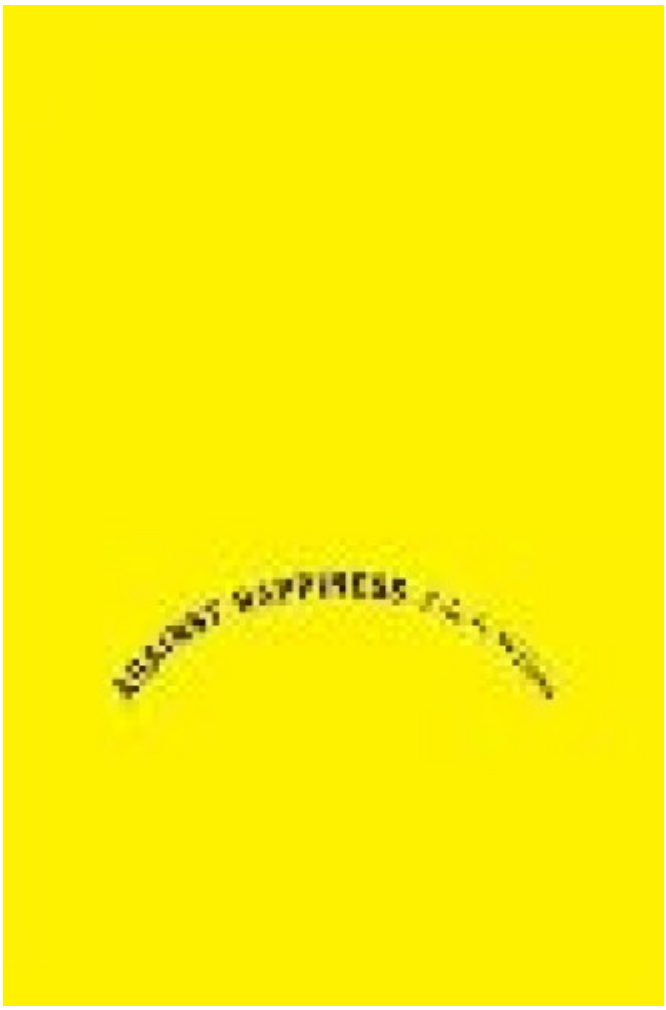
Against Happiness: In Praise of Melancholy

reviewed by Gordon D. Marino in the November 18, 2008 issue

In Review



Against Happiness: In Praise of Melancholy

Eric G. Wilson
Farrar, Straus & Giroux

In 1621 Robert Burton published *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, and now, nearly 400 years later, Eric Wilson has given us what amounts to an apology for melancholy. Aristotle and other intellectual immortals have observed that a disproportionate number of geniuses suffer from the inexplicable sadness that is melancholy. Like those thinkers, Wilson maintains that those of us who live in shadows share a visceral understanding of the fact that existence is a dizzying admixture of the unmixable: joy and suffering, life and death. In Wilson's reckoning, people affected by the blues ought to be commended for their ability to hold on to painful but fundamental truths.

A man of doleful countenance himself, Wilson is wary of romanticizing psychic states that he knows can develop into dangerous mental illness. Though he does not sufficiently develop the distinction, he suggests that what separates pathological sadness from the kind commended in this book is the "degree of activity." Depression is a cocktail of angst and chronic sadness connected with apathy and numbness. Melancholy, on the other hand, "generates a deep feeling in regard to this same anxiety, a turbulence of heart that results in an active questioning of the status quo, a perpetual longing to create new ways of being and seeing." Wilson goes so far as to speculate that it was the turbulent hearts and minds of saturnine cave dwellers that gave rise to the arts and culture.

As the cranky title suggests, this slim volume is more than a celebration of the wisdom of melancholy; it is also a polemic against what Wilson takes to be the American cult of happiness, a cult that medicalizes even the mildest forms of jangled nerves and malaise. He warns:

> I for one am afraid that our American culture's overemphasis on happiness at the expense of sadness might be dangerous, a wanton forgetting of an essential part of a full life. I further am wary in the face of this possibility: to desire only happiness in a world undoubtedly tragic is to become inauthentic, to settle for unrealistic abstractions that ignore concrete situations. I am finally fearful over our society's efforts to expunge melancholia from the system. Without the agitations of the soul, would all of our magnificent yearning towers topple? Would our heart-torn symphonies cease?

The desire to turn a blind eye to the rot and uncertainty of life has nurtured an aesthetic that appreciates only the beauty of abstractions and smooth curves. “It’s finally the smoothness that kills us,” Wilson insists:

> Happy types around the country seem bent on ironing out all the rough edges, not only the cragged corners of old houses and those weather-weary knots on old oaks. . . . The same is true of faces these days; they’re as unblemished as flat plastic. . . . You catch these smooth and expressionless faces when you walk down a city street. You can find not a trace of existence in these frozen masks.

The Botoxed individuals in the crosshairs of this critique would like to imagine that if they go to yoga three times a week and consume lots of foods rich in antioxidants, they will be able avoid going over the falls. In a vituperative vein Wilson continues, “You don’t want to stare too long at these overly finished exteriors; you might be blinded by the glare. Or worse, you might actually see this person for what he is— a husk, nothing but unfulfilled form.”

Wilson also pronounces judgment on the religious establishment for trying to repress awareness of affliction in life. Proponents of the notion that life is, or can be, a Happy Meal neglect to appreciate the extent to which Jesus himself became psychically unhinged on the way to Calvary and to a full self-understanding. True to Wilson’s aesthetic, which places the rough particular over the abstract, his honest writing moves along with a kind of limp. It is sometimes lovely, sometimes overwrought. With the aid of a strange mélange of melancholics, including Herman Melville and John Keats, Bruce Springsteen and Joni Mitchell, Wilson makes the case that mental disintegration is integral to the process of forming a heart and becoming a full human being.

As a depressive with my own mental health file, I am very sympathetic to the thesis that there can be deep insight in melancholy. Still, there is enough here to raise eyebrows. For all Wilson’s fretting about not wanting to underestimate the destructive force of chronic funk, he downplays the blight that depression can bring. Far from connecting us with essential realities, unmitigated sadness can lock sufferers up inside themselves and throw away the key.

Carried along by his powerful muse, Wilson can also make it seem as though the experience of melancholy were indispensable to the process of coming to terms with

the protean quality of life. While he nods to thinkers who acknowledge the value of existential grief, he does not sufficiently take heed of traditions that recognize both the flux and the suffering of existence but come to a different verdict on happiness. For instance, Buddhists, no less than the ancient Stoics, work toward equanimity in the face of the impermanence of all things but do not prize the suffering lionized in these pages. Indeed, the Dalai Lama himself is a mildly enthusiastic proponent of the use of psychotropic drugs. For the Buddhist leader, it is when you are released from suffering and are happy that you are closest to your essential nature and universal truth.

But these are only quibbles. In the final analysis, this singular book resounds with insights potent enough to bring the chronically sad of heart into a new and more respectful relation to their sadness. In that sense, it is a genuine work of edification.