TO RESIST: RILKE'S WAY TO SURMOUNT MELANCHOLY

The melancholy of the geniuses

The well-known German psychiatrist Hubertus Tellenbach, first in his transcendental work "Melancholy" and later in his study "*Gestalten der Melancholie*" (Forms of melancholy) – referring in both cases to the famous Book XXX of Aristotle's *Problemata* – describes a form of depression proper of geniuses, which he calls *Schwermut,* and which would be different from depression as an illness. He bases his description on the study of literary characters such as Hamlet or Werther as well as the biography of poets and philosophers like Hans Grillparzer, Soeren Kierkegaard and Charles Baudelaire. Based on the self-descriptions of each one of these authors Tellenbach concludes that melancholy consists of the failure of the capacity to transcend towards creative work. "Melancholy is being dominated by the torturing sensation of not being able to free one's own capacity (from a sort of confinement)" (Tellenbach, 1984). According to this author, the difference between melancholy and pathological depression lies, among other things, in the fact that the latter jeopardizes corporeality and biorhythms much more than the former.

To try to understand this concept of melancholy of the geniuses, we will dwell a moment on the well-known text from Aristotle. He starts by asking himself, "Why are all extraordinary men melancholic?" And later he adds: "… and they are up to such a point, that many of them suffer from pathological manifestations whose origin lies in black bile". This means that he clearly distinguished between a "genial" melancholy and a "pathological" melancholy and even suggested the possibility that a genial person, who suffers from those episodes which are, in a way, inherent to him, can become an ill person. It is not unlikely that this theory was inspired by the tragic case of Empedocles of Agrigento, the universal man, Parmenides' disciple, who excelled as a philosopher, physicist, physician, man of letters, politician and

even mystic and preacher. Empedocles was admired by his contemporaries as a kind of semi-god. However, one day, he unexpectedly withdrew from public life, took refuge in the mountains and then threw himself into the crater of Etna volcano. Thus his death became one of the most famous suicides of Antiquity. Three centuries later the Roman writer Luciano referred to this act as the consequence of a deep melancholy. It is also well known that Friedrich Hölderlin wrote three different tragedies inspired on Empedocles' life and death (1797).

Now, we need to remember that the Greeks also stated the difference between depression and euphoria as an illness and other quite permanent mood oscillations, which were characteristic of a type of personality, called the bilious type. For Aristotle, this distinction, already insinuated by Plato, even has biological grounds. According to him and his disciple Theophrastus, who the chapter about melancholy is partially attributed to, the "bilious" type or temperament would show a predominance of bile over the other moods, but temperature would remain in balance. This is what would guarantee the creativity of genial work, since an excess of temperature would lead to the pathological manifestations known today as episodes of euphoria or mania, while excessive cooling would lead to depression as an illness.

In the last decades several authors have attempted to elucidate the mysterious relation between geniality and affective disorders, in particular bipolar disorder. Besides the well-known, rather empirical works by Nancy Andreasen (1987) and Kay R. Jamison (1993), the works by Pies (2007) and Akiskal (2007) are worth mentioning. Like Tellenbach, both start from the analysis of the famous text from Aristotle. Pies sustains that Aristotle had already described the bipolar spectrum as it is known today, and later, based on the detailed analysis of the same text by the philosopher Heidi Northwood (1998), he comes to the conclusion that there would be a third type of melancholic patients – in addition to the unipolar and bipolar ones – who manage to control the variations of humor and would be more creative than average. Akiskal in the descriptions of the Greek philosopher recognizes not only the bipolar spectrum, but also the analogies with his own theory of the

temperaments. Finally, and somehow in agreement with Tellenbach's concept of *Schwermut*, Akiskal considers that it is not the classical manic-depressive or Type I illness, but rather the Subtype II, characterized by cyclothymic and hyperthymic temperaments, which would be linked to creativity and geniality ("intellectual and/or artistic eminence"). He even postulates – following Ludwig (1995) – that the manic-depressive illness would be a genetic reservoir of geniality.

Rilke and melancholy

The poet Rainer Maria Rilke (Prague, 1875 – Valmont, Switzerland, 1926) represents one of the summits of 20th century German poetry but also was of great importance to the development of existential philosophy. His influence on Heidegger and Gadamer is undeniable and two other remarkable philosophers, Romano Guardini (1953) and Otto Friedrich Bollnow (1956), dedicated extensive books to the analysis of his work.

As we have sought to demonstrate in another paper (Doerr-Zegers, 2001), the Rilke case corresponds without doubt to Tellenbach's *Schwermut*, but also to Akiskal's melancholic temperament with hyperthymic elements. Let us remember that he suffered not only from periods of anxiety and depression, but also from moments of great exaltation, as he himself described in a letter to Princess Marie von Thurn und Taxis, when he finished to write the Elegies:

"Finally, Princess, finally the blessed day (…) in which I can announce you the conclusion of the Elegies: ¡Ten! (…) All in only some days; it was like an irrepressible storm, a hurricane in the spirit (as then in Duino Castle); all ligaments and tissues have crushed in me. I even forgot eating. Only God knows who fed me. But now it is. It is. It is. Amen." (February 11th, 1922).

Strikingly his best known biographers, like Hans Egon Holthusen (1968) and Wolfgang Leppmann (1981), do not dwell on the description of these states, although both agree that for a long period prior to the First World War between 1910 and 1914 – and even until 1915 with the only exception of that brief rapture of inspiration which

allowed him to write, in Duino, the two first elegies and parts of the third and the sixth – the poet lived immersed in a state of melancholy and of very little creativity and great suffering. Let us remember that Rilke was a declared anti-war manifestant and enthusiastic supporter of a united Europe and that his extraordinary sensibility allowed him to intuit the disaster the mentioned war would mean for our civilization and culture. This crisis also coincides with the exhaustion he experienced after the publication of this only novel, "Malte Notebooks", in which he describes all the pains he suffered during childhood, his youth and in his first maturity. Two years after the publication he still asks himself in a letter to Lou Andreas-Salomé whether the decline of his hero did not drag him down with him with a greater strength than the one which he then – while he wrote it –himself had wanted to suppose (letter from December 28th, 1911).

The best way of approaching Rilke's periods of "depression" is through his own descriptions, recorded in his epistolary. In the first place, we would need to say that he had experienced these crises since a very young age. In a letter to Lou dated June 30th, 1903, he says that

"…in the fevers accompanying the disease of my childhood… tremendous and indescribable anxieties came upon me… fears before something very big, very hard, very near, deep, ineffable anxieties, which I perfectly remember. These same anxieties have appeared again, but not needing either the night or the fever."

We find a magisterial description of his great crisis of 1911 in a letter to the same Lou dated December 28th of that year:

"Dear Lou: Almost two years have passed and only you will be able to understand how (…) painfully I have spent them (…) I awake every morning with frozen shoulders, waiting for a hand to take me and shake me. How is it possible that I, a person prepared and educated for the (artistic) expression, am here without vocation, (completely) spare? (…) Are these the symptoms of this long convalescence which is my life? Or are they the symptoms of a new disease?" (Briefe, Band I, pp. 369-371).

A few days later (01-10-12) he writes to her again:

“What most distresses me is not so much the long of the (creative) pause, but perhaps a sort of blunting, of aging (…) It may be that the state of permanent lack of concentration in which I live has perhaps a physical cause, like a thinness of the blood (for example) (…) I get up every day with the doubt if I will succeed in making something and this distrust increases before the fact that weeks and months can pass in which I, and with the greatest effort, am hardly able to write five lines of an indifferent letter (…)” (op. cit., p. 373).

Before this dramatic situation, his wife, the sculptress Clara Westhoff, who received psychoanalytical treatment with Viktor von Gebsattel, recommended him to contact him to see about the possibility of finding some relief in that therapy. Surprisingly Lou Andreas-Salomé, who by then frequented the Freudian circles and would later become herself a psychoanalyst, was against such treatment for the poet, a decision she later based on a work of hers titled “Narcissism and double orientation” (1921), with the following words:

“With respect to psychoanalysis applied to artists who are in process of creation, I believe it is necessary to be extremely careful and to strictly distinguish two possible effects over them: an effect liberating from the creative potencies through the sublimation of inhibitions and of tensions and another effect which can be dangerous, because it can touch that dark side of the artist, there where the fruit is germinating”.

In any case, in his letter dated January 14th, 1912, Rilke describes his psychic state to von Gebsattel with the following words:

“You…are aware of how, since two years, I am here lying and I do not do anything, as if I tried to incorporate myself, gripping on one or on another who passes by my side and living from the time and from the capacity to hear from those whom I induce to remain by my side. It is proper of this state that it is transformed in a complete disease if it lasts too much…” (op. cit., p. 383).

In another letter to Lou Andreas-Salomé, written on January 20th, 1912, new descriptions about his state of health appear:

"The fact goes on existing that even corporally I feel very bad… The hypersensitivity of the muscles is so great that (it is enough) something of gymnastics or some exaggerated posture (for example, when shaving) for it to have immediate consequences, such as pains, swellings, etc., phenomena to which then anxieties, fears and sensations of every type are again associated (…)" (op. cit., pp. 384-385).

Later, in March 1913, we find him suffering again. And thus, it continues periodically until his death: "What should happen for me to feel something?", he writes to Princess Marie von Thurn und Taxis (op. cit., p. 456). And little more than a year later, in another letter to Lou Andreas-Salomé (06-08-14), he says: "…after these months of suffering I have had to realize that nobody can help me, nobody…" (op. cit., p. 532).

We will set aside the deep reflections Rilke makes about the psychoanalytical treatment and the reasons he had to reject it. We developed this theme *in extenso* on another occasion (2001). What interests us in this context is to highlight, through these citations, the unquestionable fact that Rilke suffered from repeated and deep periods of anxiety and depression, but which, in our opinion, do not correspond to depression as an illness, be this unipolar or bipolar. We think that, besides the differences posed by Tellenbach (1960, 1961, 1984) and Akiskal (2007), these cases differ in terms of the attitude towards the future: in depression as an illness, according to the intensity of the case, the future is more or less closed, while the geniuses, during their melancholy, at all times yearn for recovering the flow of the temporality and, consequently, their creative capacity. In other words, their future remains open.

Overcoming and/or resisting: Rilke's way to surmount melancholy

In a well-known article of the sixties, Tellenbach (1963) analyzes the story of Hiob from a novel and illuminating perspective. He asks himself how it is possible that Hiob had not fallen in a melancholy, in a deep depression, though having suffered so many losses and disgraces and, above all, having noticed that they ultimately

came from his very God, Yahweh, who he adored and whose most faithful server he had ben. We must also remember that many of his laments have a clearly melancholic aspect: “Why did I not expire in the bosom of my mother? Why did I not perish when leaving her bowels?” (III, 11). “What I fear, comes to me and what frightens me catches up with me. I do not have tranquility, peace or rest, because in every moment a new adversity seizes me.” (III, 25-26). “My skin, blackened, becomes detached and my bones have been dried by the fever” (XXX, 29). Nonetheless, Hiob does not get depressed and fights until the end, and even demands justice from God himself. Tellenbach finds the answer in what he calls Hiob’s capacity to transcend. Unlike the *typus melancholicus*, in a way imprisoned in the different orders of existence and who lives in a world of the fixed, the constant, the ruled, the sure, etc., Hiob, “from the limitation without hopes, he escapes towards the questioning of desperation, that is, towards the spirit. Hiob got back up again after all the falls thanks to his untiring praying for a deeper manifestation of divinity and if he was saved it is because he searched for a more authentic way of relation with God than in happy times” (op. cit., p. 15).

The question is whether Rainer Maria Rilke, who, like Hiob, also suffered from repeated losses and privations, as well as from states of desperation, had any particular attitude that enabled him to face those losses and those states of anxiety and creative dryness and not to fall in hopelessness and suicide, that is, in pathological depression. Let us remember that his sufferings were not small: his mother, who did not want to accept the untimely death of her first daughter, dressed the poet like a girl until the age of 7 – which he always experienced as a deep humiliation – and then abandoned him when he was 9. His father, a retired military, never understood his son’s sensibility and as soon as he turned 11, sent the boy to a military academy, where he stayed almost 5 years. His uncle and protector, Jaroslaw von Rilke, obliged him to study first economics and then law, studies which the poet interrupted precociously anyways, but which meant useless efforts and sufferings. His fundamental uprooting and his condition, in a way, of stateless, led him to live in a permanent exile. This situation got to an extreme at the end of the First World War, when the Austro-Hungarian Empire collapsed. He lost his passport

and Switzerland for months and years refused to grant him the residence. His relationship with women, whom he loved very much, was also a constant loss as none of them accepted to occupy the necessary second place in Rilke's life after his absolute commitment with the work of art. Finally, his long and painful illness, leukemia, which by then had been belatedly diagnosed and had no treatment and made the last months of his life a true agony.

We think that Rilke, like Hiob, was able to transcend the situations of includence and remanence, including the periods of weakness of creativity followed by anxiety, which could have drowned him in the most absolute hopelessness and psychotic depression. But unlike Hiob, with his sthenic attitude, who goes to the extreme of challenging God himself, Rilke faces the suffering and the often such terrible destiny with an attitude apparently more passive but of perseverance without concessions. Thus, por example, in his study about Rilke's work, the philosopher Otto Friedrich Bollnow (1956, 1963) draws the attention to the frequency with which the poet uses, both in his work and in his epistolary, verbs which have the connotation of resistance: *aushalten* (resist, endure), *ertragen* (bear, cope with), *bestehen* (be successful in a test, resist), *überstehen* (overcome, surmount). In our opinion, they are fundamental categories under which Rilke tries to understand life.

This is how for the poet one needs to know how to resist (*aushalten*), from "long meals" until the abandonments, going through every type of pains. But also, life itself, as he expresses it in the final verses of the Requiem for the Suicidal Poet Wolf von Kalkreuth (1908):

> "Do not shame if the dead touch you
> the other dead, who resisted until the end".

And little before, Rilke had reproached the young suicidal to have interrupted his life and his creative work untimely, before his work was mature:

“That you have destroyed! That this must be said of you
until the end of times!”

But not only life must be resisted, inspiration too. For Rilke poetic work was not a voluntary act, but a passive and painful reception. His biographer W. Leppmann affirms rightly that “Rilke did not feel as the creator (of his work), but as its receiver, as a recipient in which it was poured or as a prism against which the rays of inspiration are broken and dispersed” (1981, p. 340). The description made by Princess Marie Thurn und Taxis-Hohenlohe of the very moment when Rilke received the inspiration of the First Elegy is notable: “Suddenly, in the middle of his ruminations, he stopped, as if a voice had talked from the noise of the storm. He remained attentive, listening, and then he whispered in a hardly audible way: ‘What is this? What comes now?’” (1966).

Another way of expressing this particular form of facing life Rilke proposes is through the verb *ertragen* (to bear, to cope with). In Sonnet No. 4 of the First Part of the Sonnets to Orpheus the poet tells us:

“Don’t be afraid to suffer; replace
the heaviness back on the earth’s own weight:
the mountains are heavy, so are the seas.

You couldn’t support even the trees
you planted as children, they’ve grown so great.
Ah, but the breezes … ah, but the spaces …

Everything which is heavy, everything which is opposed to the flight of the spirit is endured. Though not only the sufferings, the “regrets”, the “heaviness” weigh, but

also solitude, the night, the awareness of death, even God. And thus, in the First Elegy the poet tells us:

> Not that you could
> Endure the voice of God!

But perhaps the most impressive example of the importance the attitude of bearing (in the sense of *ertragen*) has in life is that famous verse of the beginning of the First Elegy, which says:

> Because beauty is nothing
> But the start of terror we can hardly bear.

And immediately after that he affirms that that beautiful, perfect and unreachable being, which is the angel, “is terrifying” too. This affirmation which is repeated in the Second Elegy: “Every angel is terrifying”. The experience of beauty and of perfection can become unbearable and, therefore, terrifying. Such happened to Dostoyevsky’s Prince Myshkin, in search of medical help in Switzerland, the first time he contemplated Lucerne Lake.

It is necessary to resist difficulties, it is necessary to bear sufferings, but it is also necessary to surmount them and to cope with everything that happens and is heavy on us. It is necessary to surmount childhood (“They have surmounted childhood”, he says with respect to some young people who did their Confirmation), travelling (let us remember that Rilke stayed in the same place for very little time and was always travelling), “the summers in the big cities” (experience magisterially described in his only novel, Malte notebooks). Illness is surmounted, but, surprisingly, also love (“Let us surmount the night. And then the illness and then the love.”). And in this respect,

the poet teaches us that it is necessary to cope with it from the beginning, as he expresses in the Second Elegy:

> And yet, when you have survived
> the fear of that first look, the longing of the window,
> and that first walk in the garden, once: lovers,
> are you still the same?

But is also necessary to cope with the absence of the beloved, like in the Renaissance the poetesses Gaspara Stampa and Maria Alcoforado, the famous Portuguese nun, managed to do.

But the great task is to cope with fear, terror and anxiety, something the poet dramatically expresses in the second part of The New Poems, regarding a saint:

> He knew anxieties, whose apparition
> was already like dying, almost impossible to surmount".

We find another clear example of this conception of life as a burden and as suffering to surmount in the well-known Sonnet No. 13 of the Second Part of the Sonnets to Orpheus, where he begins alluding to the pain of goodbyes:

> Be ahead of all departure, as if it were
> behind you like the winter that's just passed.
> For among winters there's one so endlessly winter
> that, wintering out, your heart will really last.

The image of the winter that never passes to spring is warning us that in life there are sufferings that do not yield and threats which never become securities. Therefore, the only thing remaining is to resist and overcome them. Does this mean that we have no way out and that we will never be able to free ourselves from anxiety, since it constitutes the nucleus of life itself? The solution Rilke gives us consists of two aspects: one associated to his conviction that it is always possible for a change to occur, and the other associated with a deep paradox which is essential to life and whose acceptation could be the formula to avoid falling into depression and in suicide.

The first way to face existence (*bestehen*) and overcome it (*überstehen*) it is to hope for a turnaround (*Umschlag*). In the Letters to a Young Poet he tells us:

"If we only arrange our life in accordance with the principle which tells us that we must always trust in the difficult, then what now appears to us as the most alien will become our most intimate and trusted experience. How could we forget those ancient myths that stand at the beginning of all races, the myths about dragons that at the last moment are transformed into princesses? Perhaps all the dragons in our lives are princesses who are only waiting to see us act, just once, with beauty and courage. Perhaps all terrifying is strictly not more that the unarmed calling for our help."

We find another example of this turnaround or switch which it is necessary to always wait for, in an draft written in Paris in the winter of 1913/1914:

Oh life, life, miraculous time,

which advances from contradiction in contradiction.

Often your step is so clumsy, so slow and so heavy;

but then, suddenly, you open your wings, of untold width,

like an angel.

Oh time of life, you incomprehensible!

In a fragment, preparatory for the Elegies, the poet expresses this conception in an even clearer and more decided form: “The danger, the whole and pure dangerousness of the world is transformed into protection in the same measure in which you experience it”. But as Bollnow (1956) observes very well, this turnaround which at some moment must occur, does not mean a permanent transformation nor does it take place just once in life. On the contrary, in every opportunity it will be necessary to wait for that *Umschlag* to come again, for which an attitude of resistance sustained to the limit will be needed.

The second way of overcoming that the poet proposes to us is the acceptation of the contradictions and paradoxes of existence. Rilke manifested this idea in different forms and places, but nowhere in a more categorical way than in a dedication to his friend Lucius von Stoedten in a copy of his novel “Malte notebooks” in June 1924. Strictly spoken, it is not a simple dedication, but a poem and one of the most profound to have ever been written in any language. In this context we cannot reproduce it entirely, let alone intend to interpret it in the mystery it encloses and its infinite resonances. I would only like to dwell on the first part and on one of the final verses, since they directly bear on our argumentation. The first part is the following:

> As well as nature abandons the beings
> to the risk of their obscure desire
> and does not protect any of them either on the ground or on the branches,
> thus we are neither much loved by the fundament of our being;
> it risks us. Except that, unlike the plant and the animal,
> we walk with this risk, we want it,
> and sometimes we are riskier than life itself
> (and not for own convenience), etc.

In the first part of the poem Rilke shows us that the essence of man is risk, to live in danger, and to live in danger in two senses: in the first place, because we share with rest of the beings – plants and animals – the abandonment to which nature delivers us. In the second place, because we, unlike plants and animals who are passive, when willingly assuming our condition and even coming to love that risk, by being more daring than life itself, we create a space of freedom which will then allow us to accede to "the open" (*das Offene*) and to the "pure relation" (*der reine Bezug*), that is, to transcendence. We cannot now linger over these two fundamental concepts of Rilke's metaphysics.

The other verses are very brief, but they somehow represent the climax of the whole poetry and the definite consecration of what we have called before the paradox of the existence.

> Because what definitely shelters us
> is our being abandoned…

In the first place, we need to remember the analogy between these verses and the famous verse of the poem "Patmos" by Hölderlin, written somewhere between 1800 and 1803 and which says:

"Since where there is danger, the savior grows there too".

Like the Gospel teaches us, man loses their life when they try to keep it and to protect it at all costs and, in contrast, they gain it when they forget about themselves. Similarly, Rilke and Hölderlin state that we will only find security and, ultimately, salvation precisely in the opposite, in danger, in insecurity, in abandonment and in anxiety. From this conception of human life, so close to that of the philosophy of

existence, we understand Rilke's call to resist until the end and to overcome all the sufferings life can yield us. It was his way to avoid depression and suicide, but also that which he recommends to all and each one of the mortals.

I would like to finish here with the final verses of the Requiem for Wolf von Kalkreuth, the suicidal poet, verses which – according to the teachings by my master Hubertus Tellenbach in my years of education in Heidelberg (1962-1966) and which I later saw confirmed in some declarations of the writer Gottfried Benn (H. Holthusen, 1968) – constituted the motto of the youth, both civilian and military, who participated in the resistance against Nazi tyranny and who were brutally tortured and murdered after the failure of the attempt of July 20th, 1944, carried out by the Count Claus von Stauffenberg.

> The great words of those times, when
> the events were still visible, are not for us.
> Who speaks of victories? To resist is everything.

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