

Lynn White on Black Bile, and Other Comments

Winter, 1965

Raymond Klibansky; Erwin Panofsky; Fritz Saxl. *Saturn and Melancholy. Studies in the History of Natural Philosophy, Religion and Art.* xviii + 429 pp., 146 pits., indices. New York: Basic Books, 1964. \$20.00.

This book will long remain the foundation of studies of humoral physiology and psychology. In 1923 Panofsky and Saxl published Dürer's *Melencolia I*, a classic in the history of iconology. It went out of print almost at once; so the three present authors started an expanded treatment of the subject, which soon transcended the exegesis of Diirer to become a general study of the doctrine of complexions with particular emphasis upon the saturnine. In the 1930's the authors fled Germany, but by 1939 the book (in German) was set in type near Hamburg. During the war the type was destroyed, and the authors decided on an English version. In 1948 Saxl died, and another sixteen years passed before publication. The footnotes are thus two decades out of date, but the scholarship of this volume is so largely based on original sources that nothing of importance would have been altered if the manuscript had been fresh.

While the present reworking lacks the excitement, the immediacy, and perhaps something of the elegance of the 1923 acorn from which it sprouted, the gain in scope is obvious. The idea of the four humors sprang up early in Greek cosmological thought and rapidly permeated medicine. By the ninth century Arabic-writing scholars began to identify each of the four with a planet, specifically, the humor of black bile with Saturn. In the twelfth century this elaborated theory was absorbed by the Latin West; gradually the intellectual bent of the melancholic temperament grew until at last one gets the equation of the Diirer masterpiece: Melancholy = Saturn = Geometry.

Like so much of the work of the Warburg Institute group, with its passionate commitment to the study of the classical tradition, this book is curiously, almost deliberately, removed from some of the dominant concerns of the twentieth century which might be thought natural to the topic. Great sections of *Saturn and Melancholy* are part of the history of psychiatry during two millennia. If they were presented as such, they would not seem, to many good minds which have the misfortune to be merely contemporary, to be encapsulated antiquarianism. Too exclusive saturation in ancient and inherently magnificent thoughtforms, which in our time have ceased to be culturally functional, interferes with communication.

Again, the remarkable process by which, in the fifteenth century, the melancholy humor was transformed into the idea of genius is robbed of part of its potential significance for most of us today by the conscious spurning of Edgar Zilsel's *Die Entstehung des Geniebegriffs* (Tubingen, 1926) which, it is said (p. 249, fn. 21), has not done justice "to the notions of Saturn and melancholy in this connection." True: Zilsel, a Viennese Marxist of extraordinary intellectual sophistication, merely tried to show that Renaissance artists and architects fabricated the idea of genius as an instrument for raising themselves in the social scale above the level of artisans. Klibansky, Panofsky, and Saxl have demonstrated the origin and design of this instrument as Zilsel did not; but

Zilsel offered a good hypothesis to explain (as the present book does not) why anyone bothered to create such an ideology at that particular historical juncture.

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