

18th-Century **BLUES**

Exploring the melancholy mind

Shipleigh Art Gallery, Gateshead

21 June- 31 August 2008



The Woman with the Spider's Web
1803

Caspar David Friedrich
Woodcut on paper

©The British Museum, London

Introduction

18th-Century Blues is an exhibition organised as part of the research project, 'Before Depression: The Representation and Culture of the English Malady, 1660-1800'. This is a joint undertaking by the English Divisions at the Universities of Northumbria and Sunderland and is funded by the Leverhulme Trust.

'Depression' was not a particularly common term in the eighteenth century, at least not in the modern psychological sense. Samuel Johnson in his famous *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755) has three definitions for the word, none of which is to do with mental dejection. Only with the verb 'to depress' is one definition given as 'to humble, to deject, to sink'. While 'depression' was sometimes used in its modern sense during the period, other terms were far more current, including melancholy, hypochondria (and its popular versions, such as hippish), spleen, vapours, and a host of others, all expressing variants in terms of supposed cause and anticipated effect of the basic experience of 'depression'. One purpose of the project is to attempt to recover the associations of many of these terms in the popular mind, as well as in changing medical understanding, and one purpose of *18th-Century Blues* is to display some of the ways in which visual artists of the period depicted the different modes in which eighteenth-century people suffered from and explained 'depression'.



Melancholia 1 1514
Albrecht Dürer
Engraving on paper
©Hatton Gallery,
Newcastle University

To read casebooks by physicians of the period, and to look through any of the profusion of publications by medical men, is to see the extraordinary frequency of depressive patients, albeit attributed to different causes, and differently treated, depending upon the particular doctor's favourite theories. While many of the causes and symptoms are intricately interwoven with degrees of religious belief, the pattern of suffering remains very recognisable. Equally, to see a catalogue of those well-known people who suffered from 'depression' under one or more of its labels is to be present at a virtual roll-call of late seventeenth and eighteenth-century achievement: Samuel Johnson, James Boswell, John Bunyan, Anne Finch, Thomas Gray, Robert Burns, George Romney, Mary Wollstonecraft, Oliver Goldsmith, David Hume, Joseph Wright – the list goes on. It was, in short, an age of depression before the term was current.

Many of the accounts we have of these mental states, therefore, are heavily based in personal experience, which is also the case with many visual representations. At the same time, 'blues' in the eighteenth century did not come without a long legacy of understanding. People had been depressed long before this period, and had developed sophisticated systems of explanation and representation to help deal with the condition and with its implications for their understanding of the universe, of God, and of the nature of human existence. These explanations inevitably drew



Design'd and Engrav'd by W. Hogarth.

Published according to Act of Parliament, March 3, 1764.

THE BATHOS'S
ore Manner of Thinking, in Sublime Paintings,
inscribed to the Dealers in such Pictures.

The Cause herein is
 Beauty and strength
 of Judgment in
 Art. For the World
 of Sense is not
 the People.



"I have chosen to use an object having
 uniform, solid texture with human con-
 sideration, and which bears resemblance to
 an obelisk." — "The Bathos" Lib. 2

"I have a further notice, my friends,
 I mean with me, usage of female, your
 other Subjects."

"In the manner of the engraving, your
 other Subjects in many respects Old
 Pictures by engraving, but not by A
 more, as often, perhaps, than you can see."



Line of Beauty as it
 the English or
 of a drawing
 of those that
 do not occur to
 the other. "Bathos"
 in of the study
 • fig 36

The Bathos 1764 William Hogarth Etching on paper ©The Whitworth Art Gallery, University of Manchester

on such issues as divine will, original sin, the movement and conjunction of the planets, the nature of the humours within the human constitution, and the prevalence of myths and symbols from classical ages.

The most famous, and most influential, representation in this respect was Albrecht Durer's *Melancholia I* (1514). This extraordinary engraving can be seen as giving currency to, and acting as a repository for, symbols and beliefs concerning melancholy for a long line of representations to come. The fallen angel, and the accompanying fallen cherub, are surrounded by a range of tools and objects relating to alchemy, to theory of number (and particularly to the significance attached to the number four), to freemasonry, indeed to various systems of esoteric knowledge, as well as to the dominance of time and its passing, all of them key factors in explaining melancholy through religious, mystic and planetary concepts. Significant forms and the precision of symmetry are placed in a context of inertia in which tools and systems lie idle, life is wasting away (for example the emaciated dog, itself a creature lastingly associated with melancholy) and thought is static. Everything has meaning, but nothing matters.

Durer's vision haunted later periods and, while eighteenth-century representations were increasingly informed by the personal experience

of mental suffering in a changing world, his figures, symbols and mood linger behind the period's reworking of depression – most explicitly in William Hogarth's comic version, *The Bathos* (1764), but also in the long line of men, women and scenes where life is caught as it wanes, where light fades and human endeavour is rendered futile. This exhibition includes examples of landscapes, natural objects, buildings and persons, seen through different dispositions of light and, especially, of dark, of colour, perspective and proportion, as artists drew or painted differently nuanced varieties of experience and response. People, as always, and as they still do, struggled to make psychological suffering their own. To do so, however, they, as we, also had to engage with what had become the visual language of 'depression'. *18th-Century Blues* is a collection of some of the results.

Signs and symptoms

Depression, both now and in the past, is not so much a particular illness as a spectrum of moods and conditions. Nobody can go through life without being saddened at some point by bereavement, or the break up of a relationship, or the disappointment of some aspiration. Lowness of spirits caused by such events is perfectly normal, and would only warrant medical intervention if the depression were longstanding, or very disabling, or disproportionate to its cause. The fact that depression can be seen as both a normal and an abnormal state is something that inevitably affects the nature of pictorial representations of it.

Another difficulty in representing depression is its internality. Nowadays we see the condition as being concerned with the brain, and as being treatable, in one way, through the correction of chemical imbalances in that organ. Before the eighteenth century, however, it was more often connected with humoral imbalances in the body as a whole. Either way, the seat of depression remains a hidden, internal one, and so artists depicting melancholy have always been faced with the task of representing visually an essentially non-visible condition.

One way of indicating depression is through particular kinds of visual iconography. In Caspar David Friedrich's *The Woman with the Spider's Web* (c.1803), the central character sits, hand on head, amidst a thicket of thistles and prickly leaves, with the bare, jagged branches of two trees



Maria and her Dog Silvo 1781
Joseph Wright of Derby
Oil on Canvas
©Derby Museums and Art Gallery

looming over her. A spider's web is slung between the trees, just above her head. The physical imagery is designed to convey an impression of her mental state, made up of feelings of entrapment mixed with sharp darts of mental anguish.

As well as intimating the depressive state through imagery, artists have often used allegorical figures to externalize the inner contents of the mind. In Maria Cosway's *A Girl by the Sea repelling the Spirit of Melancholy* (date unknown, probably c.1800), the girl throws her arm back to fend off the encroachment of melancholy, allegorized as a slightly dishevelled female figure beseeching her attention. We can compare this to the comic image of *A wretched man with an approaching depression* (1713) in which a gang of little devils or mental demons surrounds the unkempt and mournful central figure.

While we naturally view depression as a mental ailment, it is not exclusively so. It has been suggested that the true opposite of depression is not so much happiness as vitality. Acute depression often causes listlessness and ennui, and sufferers can even end up being bed-ridden. Most visual representations of the condition depict some sense of the physical depletion that depression causes. George Romney's *Serena in the Boat of Apathy* (c.1781), for example, depicts Serena lying lifelessly in her seat, her neck slightly drooped. The classic melancholic posture is that of

a figure sitting or stooping with head in hands, or with the head being touched or propped by the hand. Such images seem expressly designed to indicate physical symptoms stemming from an interior, mental cause.

As will be seen from the images on display, the physical posture associated with the depressive state during the eighteenth century was often standardized. However, the meanings suggested by images of an ostensibly similar nature can be quite different. Joseph Wright of Derby's painting of *Maria and her dog Silvio* (c.1781) is an interesting case in point. The figure of Maria, a character derived from the novelist Laurence Sterne, occupies most of the centre ground of the canvas, with the lush foliage of two trees arching over her. She is bowed, her head resting on her arm, while her faithful dog nestles at her feet. In Sterne's story Maria becomes distracted after being abandoned by her lover, but in Wright's representation, despite her despondent posture, she appears as beautifully contemplative. The image suggests that melancholy, rather than being associated with medical disorder, can alternatively be seen as a condition in which we express our deepest and most human feelings.

Diagnosis and treatment

The striking image of Balthasar Bekker and (probably) Christian Thomasius sieving diseases from devils (1695) shows just how far away we in the twenty-first century Western world are from the eighteenth-century diagnosis and treatment of depression. Bekker was a warrior of modernity, fighting against the superstitious medieval notions that diseases and other worldly events were caused by the devil and his minions. Bekker was part of that movement loosely termed the 'New Science', which arose in the late seventeenth century out of the experimental science of Isaac Newton and William Harvey and sought to explain the human and natural world in terms of secular, rational enquiry rather than religion.

Bekker himself was a religious man, but was also a follower of René Descartes, the notorious French thinker who argued for a firm division between the soul and the body, and who paved the way (along with Newton and Harvey) for the mechanistic science which still dominates our society. One of the diseases that Bekker sieves out is Melancholia, a disease of the mind which it appears is similar to our modern depression: Bekker argued that Melancholia had natural causes, not, as had been previously assumed, because some devil was mischief-making with the human mind.

So, with this brave new world of modern science came an understanding of depression as having social and physical causes. Doctors began to think



The Hypochondriac 1788

Thomas Rowlandson, after James Dunthorne

Etching with watercolour, on paper

©The Wellcome Library

of melancholy and the various terms used interchangeably for depression as perhaps caused by disturbances in digestion (which might interfere with the traffic of 'animal spirits' to the brain and cause problems with the imagination itself), or possibly some emotional problem such as unrequited love (especially in women), or financial worries (largely the male province at this time).

Thomas Rowlandson's famous etching of *The Hypochondriac* (1788) shows the depressed middle to upper-class patient haunted by the demons of his own mind, not the 'real' devils previously assumed to cause depression. There is a moral here: the man is a miser, as we see from the chest kept close by his side, so much so that 'the sage MD', as the caption tells us, might not receive his 'reluctant fee'. The caption also implies that the doctor might put the man out of his misery by dosing him with 'one pitying bolus' that not only puts him to sleep but might also kill him!

Jean Baptiste Leprince's engraving of an old physician taking a young woman's pulse (1755) is a classic depiction of the wise doctor diagnosing lovesickness, a condition accepted as perfectly capable of resulting in love-melancholy since the time of the Greeks at least. The grinning assistant is mixing a physical remedy, but he and the doctor know that the only real cure is possession of the object of desire.

Physiognomy was also a popular form of diagnosing and representing depression. The illustrations of depressive individuals by Charles LeBrun and Johann Caspar Lavater were attempts to assess character through external, physical features. Physiognomy was a classical concept which had regained status in the seventeenth century.

Treatment for severe depression was primitive to say the least: Bedlam – Bethlem Hospital in London – was notorious for being a combination of prison and freak-show. Thomas Bowles's plagiarism of William Hogarth's *Rake's Progress* (1735) shows various types of lunatic, including the melancholy man (shadowed bottom left). Caius Cibber's famous statues of 'raving' and 'melancholy' madness crowned the gates of Bedlam, again reflecting the physiognomical approach to diagnosing depression. The satire of the painter Maria Cosway as *Maria Costive* (constipated) (1786) is an indication of the social insensitivity to mental illness common in the century. It was not until the creation of the Quaker York Retreat in 1790 that more humane methods of treating the depressed were implemented, which paved the way for our contemporary attitudes and treatments.

The creative imagination

Depressive states have long held a deep fascination for the creative imagination, with melancholy exerting a particular appeal in the eighteenth century. Melancholy reflects the darker side of human experience, where life seems to lose much of its meaning and individuals can be overcome by feelings of pointlessness. It brings to mind the uncertainty of existence and the vulnerability of the individual when confronted by superior forces. One of the great symbols of this condition is to be found in the figure of Job, singled out for a series of harsh trials by God. The three illustrations from William Blake's *Book of Job* (1825) present us with Job first of all in despair, then in amazement when Christ appears to him, and finally in a happier state with his daughters, having been restored to God's favour.

Depression and melancholy encourage a tragic view of the human condition, and the ability to represent this has always been highly prized. Aristotle claimed that when this was achieved on stage it could have a cathartic effect, revealing just how little separated us from those arbitrarily chosen by fate to experience suffering. To inspire such a response in the audience has generally been considered as the pinnacle of dramatic art, and the actress pictured in George Romney's *Miss Wallis as 'Mirth' and 'Melancholy'* (1788-9) clearly made a deep impression on the artist, who, as a newspaper of the time reported it, 'was so forcibly struck



A Wall in Naples 1782

Thomas Jones

Oil on paper, laid down on canvas

©The National Gallery, London

with the agitation she showed' in her acting, 'that he begged her to sit to him'.

Poets have traditionally been considered prone to melancholy, and there is a striking specimen of the type after Joseph de Ribera, where the poet seems sunk under a veritable weight of troubles. Thomas Chatterton, a suicide at the age of seventeen, is often seen as the archetype of the doomed poet, and Henry Wallis's *The Death of Chatterton* (1801) constitutes a highly romanticised image of the destructive effect of despair. Edward Young's *Night Thoughts* (1742-5) is a sustained reflection on such serious themes as death and immortality, and the illustration to the fourth poem of the cycle captures the air of melancholy that pervades the work.

For Laurence Sterne, the human condition is fraught with problems brought on by a malign fate, and there is a melancholic tone to much of his fiction. It was a view which proved very influential with his contemporaries. Sterne's characters invariably seem to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, often suffering devastating mishaps in consequence. One of the principal ways they cope is through sentiment, a recognition that none of us is in full control of our destiny and that we should therefore sympathise with the plight of others less fortunate than ourselves. Joseph Wright's *The Captive* (1775-7) is an image drawn from

A Sentimental Journey (1768) and is designed to evoke a cathartic response in its audience, who are being invited to empathise with an unfortunate victim who seems bereft of all hope.

Artists of the period were very aware of the ability of places and landscapes to evoke a sense of melancholy in the viewer. Jacob van Ruisdael's *Ruined Castle Gateway* (c.1650-5) brings to mind the mutability of things, exemplifying how all human ambitions must succumb to the passing of time. Thomas Jones's *A Wall in Naples* (c.1782), with its rather shabby setting, has a sad air, as if life had ground to a halt there. Giovanni Piranesi's work, on the other hand, conjures up a feeling of the sublime, a critically important aesthetic concept during the eighteenth century. The monumental scale of his architectural creations seems to reduce humanity to insignificance, inspiring an impression of awe that could engender depression and despair. The vast scale and dramatically charged atmosphere of John Martin's paintings also places him in the tradition of the sublime. In *Solitude* (1843) the solitary figure is lost in a lurid sunset landscape, an emblem of human loneliness. Once again viewers find themselves having to confront their own inner fears and apprehensions.

Case study: Luke Clennell (1781-1840)

Within this exhibition are representations of the exterior world that invoke the interior mood of melancholy and works by artists who suffered from a melancholic state of mind, whether temporary or permanent. The inclusion of works by the local artist Luke Clennell encompasses both of these aspects, his moody rendering of local scenes made more poignant by his own history of mental illness.

The son of a farmer, Clennell was born on 8 April, 1781 at Ulgham, near Morpeth, Northumberland. His natural gift as a draughtsman was spotted at an early age and is said to have so impressed the young Lord Morpeth, son of the Earl of Carlisle, that an introduction was made to the engraver Thomas Bewick, who had recently published the first volume of *British Birds* (1797). On his sixteenth birthday Clennell was indentured to Bewick for seven years. His fellow apprentice, Edward Willis, later described Clennell as being 'rather little, somewhat in-kneed, and having a peculiar look in his eyes'.

After his apprenticeship officially ended, during which he became a major contributor to the second volume of *British Birds* (1804) Clennell continued to work with Bewick on David Hume's *History of England* (1754-62), the publishers of which invited him to pursue his commission in London. He moved quickly into the milieu of London engravers, renewing his acquaintance with Charles Nesbit, another Bewick pupil, and



Self portrait
about 1810
Luke Clennell
Pencil drawing on paper
©Laing Art Gallery,
(Tyne & Wear Museums)

meeting new ones, in particular Charles Warren, whose daughter Clennell later married.

Clennell received many commissions as an engraver and his work came to the attention of Benjamin West, president of the Royal Academy, who encouraged him to become a painter. In 1810 Clennell began to exhibit watercolours at a time when that medium was becoming established as a major art form. In 1811 he received confirmation of professional success as an engraver when he was commissioned to produce 60 out of the 76 illustrations for Sir Walter Scott's *The Borders Antiquities of England and Scotland* (1814-1817). For each of his illustrations Clennell made preparatory watercolours, such as those for *Warkworth Hermitage* (c.1814) and *Tynemouth Priory* (c.1813), which seem to reflect a sombre and introspective mood, as well as presenting his subject matter as attractive and romantic. Also represented here are the engravings of *The Chapel in the Castle at Newcastle* (1812) and *Part of the Interior of the Castle at Newcastle* (1812). The oil painting *The Baggage Waggon in a Thunderstorm* (c.1812) was shown at the Royal Academy in 1816, based on the earlier version shown in this exhibition.

It is tempting to apply knowledge of an artist's mental illness to his chosen subject matter but Clennell does appear to have had an exceptional gift for conveying a melancholic atmosphere. The cliff-top

position of Tynemouth Priory made it a popular subject for many North-East artists, ancient ruins against a stormy backdrop too dramatic to resist, but Clennell's use of light that gently illuminates the ruins seems to suggest melancholic and perhaps futile hope in the face of inevitable decay, whereas the lightning storm that impedes the progress of the baggage wagon and that frightens the horses, and the scale of the characters in relation to the sky, is suggestive of the ineffectual efforts of man against the elements of the natural world. This is a scene that Clennell revisited over and over again; there are at least three versions of it still in existence.

It is difficult to establish whether Clennell's mental illness was a slow decline or a sudden breakdown but there appears to have been a crisis point around 1817 which cut short his maturity as an artist and the undertaking of his most substantial work. In 1814, a banquet was held at London's Guildhall to celebrate what was thought to be the end of the Napoleonic Wars, and Clennell was commissioned to make a record of the occasion. The work was to contain the portraits of over a hundred guests, and sketches were made of them, accommodating all their foibles and vanities as sitters. In 1817, when this preliminary work had been completed, a depression seems to have descended upon Clennell from which he could not emerge. Eventually, he turned the picture to the wall

and refused to discuss it, and shortly afterwards, aged thirty-six, he was committed to a London asylum. During the 1820s his condition improved and he was transferred to the care of a doctor in Salisbury and by 1827 Clennell was back in Northumberland living with relatives, his wife having died shortly after he was first committed. It is unclear how his depression evolved into what was described as 'uncontrollable insanity', or what form this took, but his mental health was such that, by 1831, he was incarcerated within a Newcastle asylum. He died on 9 February 1840 and is buried in St Andrew's churchyard in the city.

Conclusions

The 'Before Depression' project is ongoing, but some early conclusions can be suggested, especially at a time like the present when different treatments for depression are being widely debated. One conclusion would concern the extent to which the very use of a term, 'depression', actually hides what may be the individuality of a set of symptoms and experiences. Another would be in terms of the possible value of variety: more terms available to describe a condition, as in the eighteenth century, could mean more useful engagement with the reality, and therefore perhaps with the deep-seated causes, of an individual's depression. The eighteenth century, while medicine was unarguably primitive compared to our own, might nevertheless have had insights into the roots of people's depression that could be valuable to us today.



Samuel Johnson
about 1769
Joshua Reynolds
Oil on Canvas
©The National Portrait
Gallery, London

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