



ANTIQUITY UNDER THE GUISE OF MELANCHOLY

Posted on October 1, 2021 by José Carlos Bermejo Barrera



In one of the problems in the Aristotelian corpus ([The Book of Problems](#), XXX, 1), which deals with those related to thought, intelligence and wisdom, its author asks: "why were all men who have excelled in philosophy, politics or poetry or the arts melancholic" (XXX, 1, 10-14), as were many heroes of mythology, such as, Heracles, and "in recent times so have been Empedocles, Plato, Socrates and many other notable men" (XXX, 1, 26-30).

The answer is that there is a direct relationship between melancholy and what we call creativity, as [Maria Grazia Ciani](#) has shown. The melancholy of the Aristotelian problem actually encompasses all forms of mental disorder. Aristotle relates it to the loss of control of the passions and assimilates it to drunkenness, and links it to sexual desire and to sleep disturbances in such a way as to give the impression that the common origin of all desires and passions, which later in St. Augustine and later in Sigmund Freud, will receive the name of libido, is the engine that contains the energy which allows for different types of artistic and intellectual creation. Thus, in this brief text we have the origin of the romantic idea of association of genius with madness, analyzed in recent times by the philosopher and psychiatrist Karl Jaspers. Before Aristotle, one of these melancholics, Plato, in his dialogue, *The Phaedrus*, (244 A) had already stated that "our greatest goods are born thanks to madness" (*mania*), and there being four kinds of it: the prophetic, whose patron is Apollo, the telestic or ritual, whose patron is Dionysus, the poetic, whose patrons are the Muses, and the erotic, [inspired by](#) Aphrodite and Eros.

Platonic mania is directly related to poetic inspiration, conceived as vision or trance; and therefore, it is also understood as a source of creativity. What happens with Platonic mania and melancholia is that they become metonymies, confusing the part with the whole, because in Hellenic tradition and medicine, mental illness, when conceived under an organic model, a model that coexists with the religious, in which the disease is understood as possession, and the philosophical, in which it is related to the passions and thought, is structured in a more complex morphology.

The Greeks in fact divided the alterations of the passions and thought, madness, into two large groups: delirium with fever, which corresponds to the inflammation of the brain, and delirium without fever, which would be our mental illness. This is structured in two great poles: mania, or agitated madness, with delusions and hallucinations, and sometimes accompanied by violence, and melancholia or sad and apathetic madness, reaching immobility and resemblance to death in catatonia. Next to these two great groups we have senile dementia, epilepsy, and the disease proper of women, hysteria.

Plato and Aristotle reduce all forms of madness to one, because what interests them is analyzing how the imbalance of the passions allows intellectual creation. The melancholic desires to live in solitude, like Heraclitus, the philosopher who wept, as opposed to Democritus, the philosopher laughed, in the Hellenic tradition. This solitude is the condition of his superiority, because it allows him to observe things and people objectively, thanks to the distance and detachment from passions. It is supposed that Heraclitus, like the Nietzschean Zarathustra, went to live in the mountains, became a vegetarian and, after returning to his hometown, died of dropsy, because of the water that accumulated in his body because of his diet. Euripides, the misanthrope of tradition, the first possessor of a library, is supposed to have lived in a cave; and Aristotle himself, who was called "the reader" in the Academy, made writing to be read, not recited or dialogued, the key to his philosophy. The first Christians practiced anachoresis as a way of life and a way of seeking knowledge; and with them was born silent reading, mentioned for the first time in history by St. Augustine in his [*Confessions*](#), when he recounts his surprise at seeing Ambrose reading silently in Milan.

Solitude and melancholy were considered the indispensable condition for observation; and the artist, the philosopher or the historian thus became neutral observers of the passions and catastrophes of others, as described by Pseudo-Longinus in his treatise, [*On the Sublime*](#), in which the scene of the spectacle of the shipwreck, seen from the cliff, as the source of the aesthetic feeling of sublime beauty, understood as that which overrides the passions and elevates thought, as opposed to the pleasurable feeling of the beautiful, [*became a key element*](#) in Western thought.

The paradigm of the melancholic spectator, observer of the past, or of the present, was fundamental in Europe from the Renaissance onwards. The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries saw a brilliant revival of melancholy. Robert Burton, an Oxonian clergyman, was the author in 1628 of a masterpiece ([*The Anatomy of Melancholy*](#)), that drew upon an exhaustive study of biblical and classical sources on this feeling.

For Burton, who was a neo-Stoic, all disorders of the soul are due to the uncontrolled passions of all kinds; and all of them are nothing more than different forms of melancholy in his monumental and erudite treatise. His study is so complete that all aspects of human life of the present and the past are reflected in it, for what is history but the study of the joys and sorrows, the ambitions, hatreds, loves, thoughts and feelings of human beings? The work of the anatomist of melancholy is to try to describe from a distance the story of all these passions, seen from the dispassion that provides academic isolation and the disenchantment of all passions, typical of the philosopher and historian, which would

lead Burton himself to also fall into melancholy.

Burton's book is situated on a very expansive context. Already in 1586, in England itself, [Timothie Bright](#) had devoted another book to the subject. And in France the same had been done by [André du Laurens](#) in 1594 and [Jourdan Guibelet](#) in 1603.

Melancholy came to know a bright future, in the literature of romanticism; and some sociologists, such as, [Wolf Lepenies](#) tried to associate it with the ways of thinking and feeling of the emerging and frustrated German bourgeoisie. For example, those whose role was essential in the birth and consolidation of classical studies, focused on the evocation of a vanished past. However, long before that, melancholy was directly associated with visions of the past.

The Greek author of the *Qoheleth*, better known as, *Ecclesiastes*, a treatise attributed to the wisest king, Solomon, developed a whole theory of history, which tried to make sense of the time he lived in, the Hellenistic era, characterized by its endless succession of wars, which would affect the Jewish people very directly.

According to the *Qoheleth*, history cannot recover the past, definitively lost and impossible to reconstruct:

"Vanity of vanities! Everything is vanity. What profit does anyone gain from all his labor at which he toils under the sun? One generation passes away and another generation succeeds it, but the earth stands firm forever. The sun rises and the sun sets; then it returns to the place where it rises. The wind blows southward and then veers to the north, constantly turning as it repeats its course. All the rivers go to the sea, and yet the sea never overflows, for the rivers continue to return to their place of origin. All things are wearisome and very difficult to express. The eyes are not satisfied with seeing and the ears do not have their fill of hearing. What has been will be so again, and what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun. Whatever is perceived to be new has already existed in the ages before us. Those people who died in ages past are no longer remembered, and the people yet to be born will not be remembered by those who come after them. I have seen everything that has been done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a chase after the wind" (Ecclesiastes 1).

The impossibility of recovering the past through the evocation of it that historians can do was a

substantial part of European thought, which contemplated it until the Renaissance under the rubric of melancholy. Here is just one example from [Jorge Manrique](#), when he says:

Let us leave the Trojans,
For we have not seen their evils
Nor their glories;
Let us leave the Romans,
Though we have heard and read
Of their victories.
Let us not care to know
What of the century past,
And how it went.
Let us come to yesterday,
Which is as well forgotten
as all of that (*Coplas*, XV).

These verses are especially pertinent because they deal with the classical tradition, never lost in the Middle Ages and again in force from the "Renaissance" of the twelfth century. Greek and Roman history, together with biblical history, is fully alive in Jorge Manrique, as well as in late medieval Spanish literature, as [María Rosa Lida de Malkiel](#) pointed out.

If we read one of the first incunabula, the [Weltkronik](#) by Hartmann Schedel, published in 1493, which is interesting not only for its text but also its hundreds of illustrations, we can observe how this history of the world that begins with the biblical creation intermingles, following the historiographic tradition of St. Augustine and [Orosius](#), the Jewish, Greek and Roman histories. All its characters are equally present in the text and the engravings, as are the oriental cities and those of the classical world in the miniatures. From all of them, from their lives and sayings, a moral lesson can be drawn, in the style of [Valerius Maximus](#). Here the loop of melancholy has been broken, for the past becomes present, but at the cost of anachronism and imitation of it, as will happen in the European Renaissance, incomprehensible without the birth of the printed book, which will later be key to understanding the role of classical studies.

The printing press was an essential agent of change to make the Renaissance possible, and also the Reformation and the scientific revolution; for without it, the codification and general transmission of

knowledge would have been impossible. In the case of Spain, for example, it was precisely the scarcity of printing presses and publishers which, together with the Counter-Reformation, largely explains the weakness of Spanish humanism, as Luis Gil Fernandez has shown in a very detailed study.

The birth of history and philology as sciences is inseparable from the overcoming of anachronism, which fully identifies the past and the present; and from the establishment of what is called estrangement, or the distancing of the present and the past. This process of estrangement makes it possible to create the necessary distance for the development of an objective method, as [Anthony Kemp](#) and [David Lowenthal](#) have pointed out. However, this distancing must be accompanied by an interest that promotes the study of a distant past and brings with it the birth of a certain process of assimilation.

The scientific study of all aspects of classical culture was institutionalized in Germany, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The importance of German scholarship was such that we can say that, just as classical Greece and Rome were the ideal homeland of many Germans, Germany itself is in a sense the common homeland of all scholars of antiquity.

In order to understand this process, two kinds of factors must be taken into account. External factors, referring to Germany's own political and social situation and the development of its new university system; and internal factors, which allowed the institutionalization of all this systematic body of knowledge, *Wissenschaften*, without which it is impossible to access the ancient world.

Germany at the end of the 18th century was a conglomerate of small kingdoms, with the exception of Prussia, and dozens of free cities, known today as "[Home Towns](#)," which the Germans called *Heimat*. Their population was more than 80% rural, and political domination corresponded to the nobility and the different churches. An average German town had between 3,000 and 5,000 inhabitants, was under the power of a local nobleman or ecclesiastical authority and its municipal life was controlled by guilds and corporations and was clearly restricted, which did not prevent the development of an important culture and a certain publishing industry. Germany's economic and industrial development was very limited and its industrialization took place late in the 19th century. For this reason, a significant bourgeois class did not emerge that would allow the social and economic advancement of, for example, the intellectual professions.

We may take as an essential and social model the figure of Friedrich Schiller, poet, playwright and

historian. Of humble origin, he trained as a military doctor, but became one of the first professors of history in Germany and author of the first great publishing success of the 19th century, his *History of the Thirty Years' War*. Schiller and Goethe lived under the protection, and many times the whim, of the nobles and petty princes; and both considered, like many German intellectuals, culture as a way out and an escape route from the situation of social constraint.

Heinrich Heine *said* that in Napoleonic times, England dominated the sea, France the land and Germany the air, thanks to its cultural creations. Culture was conceived as a way of sublimation and escape from the present, and it was thought that there could be full human freedom, civil, cultural and intellectual, without full political freedom, thus creating what Leonard Krieger called the German idea of freedom, a freedom under the cloak of authority, often times arbitrary.

Such freedom under surveillance and such constraint of a social class, the bourgeoisie, meant that culture was understood as a form of nostalgia for a past in which that freedom had been possible – and that was the role of Greek and Roman culture, evoked as absence in Schiller's own poems, which we can clearly see in his *Die Götter Griechenlandes*:

*Ja, sie kehrten heim, und alles Schöne,
Alles Hohe nahmen sie mit fort,
Alle Farben, alle Lebenstöne,
Und uns blieb nur das entseelte Wort.
Aus der Zeitflut weggerissen, schweben
Sie gerettet auf des Pindus Höhn,
Was unsterblich im Gesang soll leben,
Muß im Leben untergehn.*

*(Yes, they returned home, and everything beautiful,
Everything high they took with them,
All colors, all sounds of life,
And all that was left for us was the lifeless word.
Torn away from the tide of time, they float
They are saved on Pindus heights.
What shall live immortal in song,
Must perish in life).*

The idealized past of Greece is the poet's true homeland, as it was for Goethe; the land where the lemon tree blooms. The poet understands the evocation of the past, in which freedom and beauty were lost, as an essential function of poetry and historical narrative. This is also the case in Friedrich Hölderlin's epistolary novel, *Hyperion*. In this novel, Hyperion's letters to Diotima evoke both the loss of freedom, love and happiness, through creation and reading. The Germans created a culture understood as a remembrance of the national past and of a past they identified as their own in Greece and Rome. This explains the importance of the study of all aspects of the past in the development of their national culture. In it, this German idea of conditional freedom was directly linked to the idea of *Bildung*, or education and shaping of the mind and life of each individual; and fundamental in that *Bildung* was the creation of the new European university by Wilhelm von Humboldt, at the University of Berlin, under the protection of the King of Prussia.

Wilhelm von Humboldt created the so-called research university, in which a professor had full freedom to teach and research his knowledge and was provided with the means to do so. This professor, be it L. von Ranke, G.W.F. Hegel, K. von Savigny, J. Liebig and so many others, would train not only students but also researchers; and thus, the institutionalization of the *Altertumswissenschaft* became possible. The new university gave birth to a new social and personal type, the professor, with his specific ideology and ethics analyzed by *A.J. Engel*.

In Germany, the university and the liberal professions (doctors, lawyers, engineers, scientists), were the essential means of social ascent, in a country where the delayed industrialization did not allow until very late the birth of a rich bourgeoisie. The Jews, excluded from the university professions almost until the 20th century, took refuge in them. The German professors were free in their privileged world, isolated from politics by their knowledge; but they always depended on the political power in the public universities; and that is why they were always politically very conservative and could not react to the rise of Nazism, according to Fritz Ringer. Such was the internal framework in which the *Altertumswissenschaft* was institutionalized. Let us now see what it consists of.

The German word, *Wissenschaft*, designates any kind of systematic knowledge of a given subject, and is not exactly equivalent to the English term, "science." There is a *Judentumswissenschaft*, a set of knowledge necessary to be able to understand and study Jewish culture and history; and for the same reason there is a *Religionswissenschaft*, which does not consist in reducing religious phenomena to a science, because then the specifics of religious experience would be reduced to nothing. The *Altertumswissenschaft* is a whole system of knowledge necessary to be able to study what is considered

a strongly unitary phenomenon, which is the world of classical antiquity.

Its basis is the knowledge of two languages, Greek and Latin, in all their aspects: morphological, syntactic and semantic, the study of their history and all the metrical, stylistic and rhetorical forms necessary to be able to understand the texts in these two ancient languages. But this study of languages is only a part of it, since it also includes the study of archaeology, epigraphy and numismatics, as well as, of course, classical history and all literary genres: epic, lyric, tragedy, comedy, prose, history, oratory, and philosophy in its various parts, as well as all the sciences developed by the Greeks and Romans. [August Boeck](#) pointed this out in 1886; but he also indicated that philology was "the knowledge of what is known." By this he meant that its aim was to achieve the understanding, or in other words, the updating of the experiences lived in all fields, felt and thought by the men and women of Antiquity.

Naturally, only very few authors managed to master all these fields, although some did, such as [Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff](#), who wrote on Greek language, literature, history, philosophy and religion. By doing so, Wilamowitz maintained the idea of the unity of the subject of study, and because he was aware of the hermeneutic character of all these disciplines. A classical philologist turned philosopher, Hans Georg Gadamer, thus [developed a theory](#) that gave a perfect account of the work of the philologist, the historian and the philosopher. For Gadamer, these disciplines, called hermeneutics, were structured as follows.

A hermeneutic discipline studies a cultural and historical whole that is defined by the existence of a corpus of texts which is transmitted over time, while being studied and enriched. This body of texts shapes a cultural and personal identity and creates a sense of belonging. Think, for example, of the role of the Old and New Testaments in Christianity, the Talmud in Judaism, and the Koran for Muslims. Each member of that group is recognized as such through tradition. His identity is delimited by that tradition and through its identification with the corpus of its texts. But it is by immersing oneself in it that one constantly recreates one's identity and renews it, while at the same time keeping alive the tradition to which one belongs. Hermeneutic activity is based on reading, rereading and commenting on texts. In it, to read is to begin to write, and to write is to read again.

This going to the old textual corpus and then returning to the present is what Gadamer called the "hermeneutic circle;" and it is this circle, based on continuous and endless reading, that is the basis of the work of the historian, the philologist and the philosopher, three figures that overlap in the field of

Altertumswissenschaft. Without texts, without books and without reading, all these studies become meaningless.

David Hume once said that "reason is and must be the slave of the passions," to the scandal of moralists and Stoic philosophers. In reality Hume led a rather discreet and stoic life, and so what he meant by that phrase is that the motor of our psychic life is not thought, but feeling – passion. For that reason, it is incomprehensible that the gigantic effort, in all the disciplines necessary to be able to study classical antiquity, could have been developed, if there had not been some deep interest in it.

And, of course, there was deep interest in Germany. Greek and Latin formed the basis of the baccalaureate studied at the *Gymnasium*, the secondary school for those who would go on to university studies, and which, by the way, was attended by not even 10% of young German adolescents, since the majority who studied did so at the *Realschule*, where they studied modern languages, and sciences and techniques necessary for the development of commerce and economic or industrial activity.

The prolonged study of Classical languages made it possible to create a whole corps of professors and scholars, who made possible the massive work of study and cataloguing that made it possible in Germany to create the great *corpora* of inscriptions and texts, and to elaborate the great instruments of consultation, such as, the *Real-Enzyklopaedie*, a gigantic collective work, indispensable for study, even today; and which was developed over many years, like so many other working methods.

What did the Germans see in Greece and Rome? We might even say, why did they become obsessed with Greece, which exercised a kind of tyranny over German culture and thought? They no longer saw in it a nostalgic past, in which men had been free and happy, as had been the Greece of Schiller and Hölderlin, but a model to be followed in all areas of culture, for Greece had created philosophy, science, art and the best literature, and also provided the models on which European political systems were based.

The Altertumswissenschaft conceived Antiquity *sub specie aeternitatis*, as had been the model of *Roma aeterna*. Ever since Constantine moved his capital to Constantinople, the double idea of *translatio* and *renovatio* developed. Rome could remain Rome elsewhere and constantly renew itself. The emperors of Byzantium remained emperors of Rome, and then also the czars of Russia, who called themselves Caesars. And the same thing happened in the West, ever since the coronation of Charlemagne, which meant the creation of the Holy Roman Empire, which survived until the

Napoleonic wars, when it was neither sacred, nor an empire, nor Roman, nor Germanic, as Voltaire pointed out, but which was renewed with the Second Reich and then unfortunately with the Third Reich which was supposed to last a thousand years.

Greece and Rome were the timeless model to imitate for the entire German cultured society. If we read the 1878 book by Jakob von Falke, a jewel of German publishing for the quality of its engravings and binding, we can realize that, despite its shortcomings as a historical work, since for its time it does not cite either [Droysen's](#) or [Mommson's](#) works, it reflects very well the passion of the German bourgeoisie for the Classical world. It is a luxurious book of great size that could adorn a good bourgeois salon, attesting to the admiration for that vanished world.

The paradigm of classical history *sub specie aeternitatis* began to be criticized in the early nineteenth century by authors such as Tocqueville, and was the subject of fierce ideological battles, as each country tried to identify with the Classical past in its own way, creating antithetical models.

The Germans tended to identify themselves, following the model created by K.O. Müller, more with Sparta than with Athens, since Sparta, a traditional state, with an agrarian base and militaristic organization, was conceived as a kind of simile of Prussia at the beginning of the 19th century: agrarian, disciplined, militaristic and conservative, as Édouard Will [pointed out](#) years ago. Similarly, English liberals, such as [George Grote](#), identified Athens with their native England: maritime, commercial, democratic and enlightened.

And in the United States, where the presence of Classical studies [was always very limited](#) since the subject was not taught in secondary education, Classical models served on the one hand to justify their peculiar institution, slavery, but on the other hand, they were also a model for the drafting of their republican Constitution, conceived on a more Roman than Greek model. One of its drafters, however, proposed in an amendment that the new official language of the USA should be the Attic dialect, as they could no longer maintain the language of their metropolis.

In France, from the very moment of the Revolution, the Greek and Roman republican models were present, and for this reason numerous histories of Greece and Rome were published. This approach has always been present among French historians of the Classical world, even among those who had political commitments that were later very debatable, as in the case of [Jérôme Carcopino](#), in whose work this was always a fundamental component, since he believed that the study of the past could not

be dissociated from the present.

After the mark left by the numerous works of [Arnaldo Momigliano](#) on the development of the historiography of antiquity and Classical studies in general, the study of the historiography of ancient history is now an academically consolidated field. Luciano Canfora has published numerous books and articles on the subject. In all these works it can be seen how all political ideologies – liberal or conservative, Marxist, Fascist, Nazi, or of any other type have needed to be confirmed through the study of their precedents in antiquity. This need to find a justification in such origins is what has so far kept alive in many cases the interest in the ancient world, and to some extent continues to do so.

However, what is happening nowadays is that these justifications are no longer undertaken by means of documented research work, carried out in accordance with the rules of the historical method, but by means of informative books of a more or less propagandistic nature. This is what is happening in the USA with authors who seek in the Greek past a legacy according to which only a strong military power can be the guarantee of freedom, economic development and democracy, tending to change the Athenian model for the Spartan one, in cases such as that of the ideologist [Robert D. Kaplan](#). Although this new orientation is also present in the case of professional historians of Greek antiquity, such as, [Victor Davis Hanson](#).

The Russian Revolution, the birth of Fascism, Nazism and later the Second World War, and the process of decolonization of the world brought about profound transformations in Western societies that caused the Classical models, conceived under the paradigm of eternity, to enter into crisis. Nevertheless, Classical studies managed, until recently, to maintain their vigor, because the richness of Classical sources, covering all fields (medicine, science, philosophy), and all possible aspects of social and family life, and the expression of the most varied ideas and feelings, provided an excellent testing ground for all kinds of studies. Feminism, of course, drank profusely from ancient sources and also the so-called gender studies or the history of sexuality, a subject vetoed by the authors of the nineteenth century.

The Greek *sin par excellence* became the object of privileged study in the departments of gender studies. Dozens of books and hundreds of articles have been published, creating a field of work that has been synthesized by [James Davidson](#), a Classical philologist, in a comprehensive and exhaustively documented book that stretches into 634 pages. It is said that you can only study what you love, what you hate, or what you have already dreamed about. In that sense, and if we leave aside the enormous

effort involved in the study of Classical languages and philology, less than that of mathematics or physics, however, Classical studies should not be in crisis and be subjected to a certain shared melancholic sensation of seeming to live out its end.

Numerous voices of alarm have been raised. Victor Davis Hanson himself, along with John Heath, has asked the question: "[Who killed Homer?](#)" According to them, only the recovery of Classical wisdom as a whole that integrates what in the USA is called "humanities" can allow Classical studies to be saved, lost in a world that values publications only by their number, obsessed by publication for publication's sake, and in which the monographs of those who know more and more about less and less, and focused on insignificant topics supposedly very technical, have made the reading rate of the Classics decline sharply, in a parallel process to the loss of general knowledge among a good part of the professors.

In Italy, [Salvatore Settis](#) has asked himself the same question, as has a historian of Greek philosophy, [Giuseppe Cambiano](#). The idea is repeated. Reading the Classics is fundamental because of the richness of their contents and because we cannot understand our cultural legacy without them. But what would happen if we no longer recognized, or even wanted to recognize our cultural legacy? What if what we reject is the book itself and reading, two essential components without which neither history, philology nor philosophy would make sense? Could it be that the rejection of the world of books is global and therefore that the hermeneutic disciplines have become impossible? Some believe so.

Each society creates its own system of global communication (very different in oral cultures), and among cultures with different degrees of literacy and in the electronic, visual and digital world. Marshall McLuhan had already warned of this in his now classic book, [The Gutenberg Galaxy](#). These communication systems [do not absolutely determine](#) linguistic expression, much less thought. But they can do so, if they are used inappropriately.

Information can be processed in different ways and can be measured and quantified. All information is either assimilated or lost; and the process of assimilation takes place over time, since information is a flow. The assimilation capacity in a given time is inversely proportional to the speed of the flow. If speed is the result of dividing space by time:

$$S = s/t,$$

then the speed of the information is equal to its quantity divided by time:

$$S = Q_i / t,$$

being the assimilation the division between the information itself and time. That is:

$$A_i = Q_i / t^2$$

For this reason, the proliferation of information in the digital media, which of course is a great enrichment and creates very useful tools for consultation and research in the field of Classical studies and ancient history, becomes a toxic tool, if it is not used as a means to an end. The training of a historian or scholar of the humanities can only be based on the study of texts, on their reading, re-reading and analysis, and on the practice of reflective writing. Digital media are just that, media, as are printed dictionaries. A dictionary contains all the words; but in order to write, one must know how to handle language in terms of structured thought. Buying a dictionary is not enough. There are also all the letters on a keyboard; and they can be combined in millions of random ways; but a chimpanzee amanuensis will hardly create a good book.

Computer experts have drawn attention to the birth of a process of transformation of language and thought because of the abusive use of the Internet. [Nicholas Carr](#) points out that the Internet system favors parataxis over syntax. The user tends to move from link to link, in parallel processing, and to reintegrate links by superposition, not in a complex and durable structure. This explains the rejection of deep and long-term reading that is already being observed. Two Spanish professors of Greek literature have told me the same anecdote. None of their students had read the *Iliad*, in Spanish of course. One of them managed to get a Canto read, the other ordered it, but found that it just summaries of the "argument" taken from Wikipedia. This is not an exception, as the rejection of reading among humanities students is becoming the norm in philosophy, history and philology, sometimes supported by some professors.

The rejection of reading, and the idea that everything can be found on the Internet, contributes to the creation of what one computer engineer, Jaron Lanier, [has called](#) the "digital herd." If everyone searches for the same thing, with the same search engine, in the same set of files, they will necessarily find the same thing. Originality thus disappears, because in history and philology it consists of discovering little-known data and establishing relationships between them that had not been found before. This requires continuous, meticulous and patient reading over many years of training and apprenticeship, as well as knowing how to find new modes of written or other forms of expression. The problem is that many teachers are contributing to the destruction of the ability to express oneself

through the inappropriate use of PowerPoint.

PowerPoint is a program created for making advertising presentations. It is very useful for this and for processing images of all kinds, but not texts, which are reduced to almost childish outlines. That is why [Franck Frommer](#) considers it a program that can make us stupid. The information that is hackneyed, superimposed in a conventional way and expressed in a simplistic way is the opposite of creation and historical research and exposition, so it can be said that the history of antiquity and Classical studies will end up in a serious crisis, if we do not return to the only world that can make them possible, the world of texts, reading, reflection and [good writing](#).

An ancient history sub specie aeternitatis is no longer possible, because the regression of Classical studies in general education makes it impossible for most people to identify with that world and consider it as an eternal model to imitate, in a world that is changing rapidly in economic, political and military areas, and that seems to want to value continuous change, and on its own, in the development of communication technologies, which make them increasingly faster and which offer so much information that is impossible to process.

If there is no global and eternal model, we must return to the world of melancholy. As we have seen, it was a world in which the past, gone forever, appears in a fragmentary way. History sub specie melancholiae can only be the fragmentary reconstruction of that disappeared past, but also the evocation of its absence and the finite expression in a small text of our infinite desire to know and not to fall into oblivion. The Greeks believed that what distinguishes melancholy is the sensation of the loss of sense and perception of the future. There is no future for the melancholic who contemplates with distance the spectacle of his own life. We have seen, following Pseudo-Longinus, how the sublime emerges in the scene of the spectator before the shipwreck. There is no single spectator before the spectacle of the past and the present world; and therefore, as long as several spectators can communicate, there will no longer be room for individual melancholy; and there will be room for the hope of leaving for the future small traces and remains among the ruins of time.

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y Melancolía, El Gran Virus. Ensayo para una pandemia, and most recently, La política como impostura y las tinieblas de la información. He has published numerous works in academic journals, such as History and Theory; Quaderni di Storia, Dialogues d'Histoire Ancienne, Madrider Mitteilungen. He is a regular contributor to the daily press.

The featured image shows, "Clio, Muse of History," by Charles Meynier; painted in 1800.

