
Acedia, Tristitia and Sloth: Early Christian Forerunners to Chronic Ennui

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This article focuses on the relevance of early Christian writings on *acedia* and *tristitia* to the primary modern and postmodern maladies of the subject, i.e., chronic ennui, alienation, estrangement, disenchantment, angst, neurosis, etc. The focus will be on the 'chronic ennui cycle' which has been extensively discussed by Steiner (1971), Bouchez (1973), Kuhn (1976), Healy (1984), Klapp (1986) and Spacks (1995).¹ It can be described as a cycle of boredom and addiction which robs individuals of meaning and a sense of the *élan vitale*. This cycle has undergone various mutations of form over the centuries. Many of the writers mentioned above have plotted its course of development from classical times to the present. Such discussions begin with the descriptions of *taedium vitae*, *luxuria* and the *horror loci* supplied by Roman philosophers and writers such as Lucretius, Petronius and Seneca. They also encompass analyses of the spiritual illnesses of *acedia* and *tristitia* written by the Desert Fathers and of the various emotional and medical conditions described by Medieval and Early Modern poets and medical profes-

¹ George Steiner, *In Bluebeard's Castle* (1971); Madeleine Bouchez, *L'Ennui* (1973); Reinhard Kuhn, *The Demon of Noontide: Ennui in Western Literature* (1976); Sean Desmond Healy, *Boredom, Self and Culture* (1984); Orrin Klapp, *Overload and Boredom* (1986); and Patricia Spacks, *Boredom* (1995).

sionals, e.g., *saturnine melancholy*, spleen, fits of the mothers, and 'The English Malady.'

Due largely to the immense sociocultural changes that struck Europe in the nineteenth century the problem of chronic ennui (sometimes termed 'the spleen,' *hypp*, *languer*, nerves and disenchantment) inevitably became a major theme (if not obsession) for romantic and realist poets and thinkers. By the late nineteenth century it became tangled up with the concept of 'degeneration' and also with the *fin de siècle* phenomenon. By that stage it signified a particular kind of subjective suffering brought about by prolonged exposure to certain types of social institutions and sociocultural stresses. In short chronic ennui was associated with the costs to the subject of urbanisation, bureaucratisation and the industrial revolution. In a sense, then, the concept was used to illustrate the dark side of modernity. The decadents and later modernist poets, writers, artists, culture critics and philosophers made use of it in discussing *alienation*, *reification*, *absurdity*, *aboulie*, *anomie*, *desacralisation*, *angst*, *bad faith*, *neurosis*, *character armouring* and so on. As said, this essay will consider the contributions of the Early Christian Fathers to modern conceptions of 'chronic boredom,' with particular attention to the problem of the 'ennui cycle.'

Some Modern Descriptions of the Ennui Cycle

From the beginning of the eighteenth century the French idea of 'chronic ennui' signified a particular kind of subjective suffering. At the deepest level the idea signified a cycle of subjective discontent, a cycle that—at least at the level of symptoms—progressed invariably through three distinct phases. The first stage was one of anxious boredom, of nameless objectless anxiety, which was accompanied by fantasies of release from that anxiety. This mood, in due course, gave way to a second stage characterised by bursts of frantic activity designed to defeat or flee from the inner feelings of discontent characteristic of the previous stage. This activity had as its goal the denial of the previous feelings by immersion in various more or less repetitive (sometimes absurd) habits. This flurry of activity gave way to a third stage of psychospiritual numbness which allowed a person to feel temporarily free from the anxieties and impulsive acting out typical of the previous periods. We may see this third stage as a state of non-being similar to that experi-

enced by the heroin or smack addict, the sex addict, the gambler, the food addict, or the drugged patient in a psychiatric ward.²

This cycle need not be particularly spectacular. The ritualistic activities of the second stage, for example, may revolve around hundreds of routine actions, activities, sayings (rationalisations), and thoughts which in combination act to keep the subject fundamentally disconnected from more wholesome experiences of selfhood.

We may list the various specific symptoms attached to the ennui cycle. Although such symptoms are experienced differently by different people—i.e., according to gender, race, class, age, and so forth—the core description of the malaise nevertheless seems to reveal a certain degree of consistency across social positionings and, as we shall see with the writings of the Desert Fathers, across time. The core symptoms are:

Consistent symptoms.

1. States/feelings of subjective worthlessness and meaninglessness.
2. Feelings/intimations that the subject is missing out on life. The feeling also that time is a burden and that one is old before one's time.

3. States of being periodically possessed by certain malign impulses/forces over which one has little or no effective control.

4. Feelings that the subject is estranged from/divided within/dispossessed of his/her 'healthy self'—that is, a feeling that the way one acts or experiences oneself in the world seems to be merely an act, or worse, an act that is destructive in that it leads to a narrowing of life possibilities.

5. Feelings of revulsion toward, or obsessive fascination with, one's own body and bodily functions or with the bodies and bodily functions of others. (Various social and cultural commentators on modernism, e.g., Ihab Hassan, have described a particular state of ambivalence toward the realm of the feminine, the female body and the specifically female biological functions.)

6. Impulses to act violently or maliciously towards others, towards one's self or towards the world in general. These may be ex-

² Such comparisons are more than coincidental. The discovery of the endogenous opiates in the mid 1970s highlighted the fact that many people in having recourse to various substances and activities do so in order to 'self-inject' themselves with various internally manufactured opiates. It is now known that a large proportion of the human psychobiological system is geared to pain management—physical and psychological. In due course this third stage returned the person to the suffering of the first stage.

treme or petty—indeed, pettiness as manifested in moods of jealousy, envy, backbiting, greed, etc., are features of the ennui cycle and are connected to the nineteenth-century critique of bourgeois culture in general.

7. A sense that ‘objects’ out there in the world resonate in the consciousness of subjects as though they are *malign* and have special powers over human moods, desires, and impulses, and over a subject’s fate or destiny.

8. The loss of an animated, enchanted state of identification with the world/cosmos/nature, with others in society, and with one’s own needs and desires. Many nineteenth-century poets and thinkers described this stage as the loss of ‘vision’ or as the loss of the communal religious experience.

9. Physical feelings—long-lasting in nature—of being burdened, weighed down, exhausted, by the normal activities/interactions of everyday existence.

Where persons blame others for this state of being or give themselves wholly over to flight from self, writers as diverse as Kierkegaard, Sartre, Schopenhauer, Camus, and George Steiner have spoken of ‘normative,’ ‘active,’ or sometimes ‘bourgeois’ ennui. Those who are to some extent aware of their malaise are often deemed to be afflicted with ‘creative boredom/ennui’ or ‘spiritual ennui.’ Since the nineteenth century this form of *l’ennui morbide* has been characterised by an additional symptom:

10. The feeling or intuition that society and its institutions are in some way connected to, or nurturant of, the particular experience of ennui suffering felt by a given subject—that perhaps the norms of society are in some way ‘generative’ of the malady. The artists and theorists who have expressed this intuition link the phenomenon of subjective ennui to the great economic, technological, social, political and religious changes that shook Europe in the early modern period, e.g., secularisation, urbanisation, industrialisation, the rise of the bourgeoisie, bureaucratisation, the political revolutions of the period, the scientific revolution, etc. From George Cheyne (*The English Malady*, 1733) onwards, symptoms associated with ‘subjective ennui’ have been linked to various kinds of socio-cultural phenomena.³

³ Reinhard Kuhn (1976) in following this line suggests that ennui must be seen as the major subjective psychospiritual malady that affected individuals in the early phases of modernity.

The connections of ennui with many other post-Enlightenment (usually secular) concepts describing subjective disintegration, melancholia and psychic torment are many. It is no understatement to suggest that variations on this relatively simple subjective cycle of consciousness were at the core of many of the great nineteenth- and early twentieth-century critiques of modernity. In this sense ‘ennui’ in conjunction with other words has long had the potential to launch a full-scale critique of Western civilisation. The perils facing the subject raised on modernity may equally be the perils of the collective. George Steiner, for example, speaks of ‘The Great Ennui’ as a defining characteristic of post-traditional Western society in general. He sees it as a central motivating force behind the many calamities of the twentieth century, notably two world wars, the ecological crisis, the technocratic tendencies of modern social structures, anti-Semitism and other forms of minority scapegoating, and, finally, the advent of the atomic age.

“Great Ennui” characteristic of post-traditional society.

Acedia: Forerunner to Chronic Ennui

Judging by the dearth of primary sources the problem of chronic ennui (then termed *taedium vitae*) was not a major issue for classical writers and poets; other themes far and away predominated. Among the Ancient Greeks the problem was virtually unheard of and it is only in the early decades and centuries of the first millennium that the problem is mentioned with any degree of alarm among Roman intellectuals. Likewise, what is reported is nothing like the mood of chronic ennui as described by those who would follow.⁴ It was only in the late Roman period that the malaise of chronic ennui began to assert a major and continuous pull on the imaginations of the literate—thanks mainly to the writings of the Desert Fathers of Christendom.⁵

Whilst the Desert Fathers were developing specifically Christian perspectives on humanity’s psychospiritual relationship to God, self, society and the cosmos, they were also writing about a new way of looking at psychospiritual suffering. Their writings

⁴ See Kuhn (1976, 36 and 39) and Healy (1984, 16).

⁵ In particular the following figures and texts are seminal: Evagrius of Pontus’s (b. 345) *Of the Eight Capital Sins*, St. John Chrysosthomos’s *Exhortations to Stagirus*, Nilus’s *Treatise on the Eight Evil Spirits*, and Johannis Cassian’s *The Foundations of Coenobitic Life and the Eight Capital Sins* and *Collationes* (or *Conversations*).

formed the foundations of Christianity's understanding of chronic ennui, foundations which stayed firm for almost one thousand years.⁶ Whether Christianity itself was the cause of the malady or whether it merely provided the most thorough diagnosis of chronic ennui for the age is open to debate,⁷ but what is certain is that during the fourth century A.D. the classical conceptions of *taedium vitae* underwent certain crucial developments. The *horror loci* and the various vices of diversion that the Romans had associated with these two states of being were incorporated into a fundamentally Christian view of the soul-affirming and soul-destroying passions. The developments led many people to invent new terms to describe what they and others were feeling. In this sense, various modern commentators have noted that modern discussions of chronic ennui owe much to earlier religious discussions of the temptation of *acedia*.⁸

⁶ Bloomfield's *The Seven Deadly Sins* (1952) is still one of the best discussions of the moral system behind medieval Christianity. The best overview of chronic ennui's kindred term *acedia* as it figured in theological and religious texts during the medieval period can be found in Wenzel's *The Sin of Sloth: Acedia in Medieval Thought and Literature* (1967). For in-depth discussion of the actual relationship between *acedia* and modern forms of ennui see Kuhn (1976, Ch. 3). Kuhn, like many commentators, sees the concept of *acedia* as a medieval subspecies of chronic ennui. In the same context see Healy's comments on *acedia*: 'With the development of Christianity into a religion of the people at large, the vice (of *acedia*) went through immense complexities of definition and attribution as it changed from being an exclusively eremitic affliction, an occupational hazard as it were, into a weakness capable of besetting any Christian' (1984, 17).

⁷ Of those who have dealt with the historical questions raised by chronic ennui in general, and normative ennui in particular, most have tended to ignore the earliest outbreaks of the malady and have instead concentrated on the historical and social forces that contributed to the great epidemic of chronic ennui that struck Europe during the onset of modernity. Only a few writers, in particular Kuhn (1976, 41-42), have approached the important question of just why chronic ennui's ancestor malady '*acedia*' took such a grip on the early Christian imagination. Kuhn cites as reasons the rigorous spiritual lives experienced by the Desert Fathers, the fact that states of normality seemed rather boring in comparison to the mystical heights to which the monks attempted to soar, and the actual arid surroundings in which the monks lived. Such reasoning does not account for the fact that *acedia* became a base for—in Kuhn's words—the 'secularisation' and 'universalisation' of the ennui malaise in the later medieval period. Nor does it solve for us the question of whether Christianity as a cultural phenomenon could be blamed for the later explosion of the malady or whether we should look elsewhere for the causes, e.g., to economic and social factors or to other cultural factors.

⁸ Flaubert, Kierkegaard, Baudelaire, Racine, Balzac, Sainte-Beuve, Maurice Barrès, Marcelle Tinayre and Paul Bourget have all written on or dramatised the

Of the many terms used at that time to describe states of consciousness similar to chronic ennui—some of the most well known being *tristitia*, *siccitas*, *desidia* and *pigritia* (sloth)—the word *acedia* came to predominate.⁹ It now seems likely that some of the Desert Fathers associated *acedia* with the dreaded ‘noonday demon’ of Psalm 90:6.¹⁰ Indeed the hour of noon seems to have been a particularly dangerous time for the solitary monks since, when the noon-tide demon arrived, he often brought with him a whole host of additional temptations (viewed as combinations of demons and evil thoughts, λογισμοί) which could assuage the monk’s feelings of chronic boredom and make him abandon the coenobitic life forever.¹¹

The concept of *acedia* thus denoted both a ‘movement of the soul’ and a specific ‘evil spirit.’ In this sense it must be understood in relation to dualistic conceptions of humanity’s place in the cosmos current in the late Roman period. It is now known that the Desert Fathers drew on dualistic tendencies inherent in Iranian, Hellenistic, Stoic, Gnostic and Judaic worldviews to formulate the so-called ‘demonological’ view of the capital sins or temptations. The demonological system held that human actions in the world were influenced by both good and bad angels or spirits. The bad spirits were believed to be under the control of Satan and the good were said to be under God’s control. The bad spirits skewed the innate passions (the πάθη) in non-life-affirming directions. They did

connection between *acedia* and forms of chronic ennui. Kuhn (1976, 42 and 55) discusses the many post-Enlightenment writers who had pointed to the connection. Healy (1984, 16-18) also speaks of the historical dimensions to this connection. See also Clive’s comments (1965, 359). He says chronic ennui is “the *acedia* of the twentieth century—the experience of being ‘condemned to freedom’ in a world seemingly devoid of objective values.”

⁹ See Appendix One ‘Etymology of *Acedia*, Ennui, Spleen and Boredom,’ for a discussion of the point where *acedia* took on cultural meanings similar to that of the modern day term chronic ennui.

¹⁰ See for example Cassian’s comments (ed. Waddell, 1974, 229) in *De Institutis Coenobiorum* (*Foundations of Coenobitic Life*), 425 A.D.:

Our sixth contending is with that which the Greeks call, and which we may describe as tedium or perturbation of heart. . . . [S]ome of the Fathers declare it to be the Demon of Noontide which is spoken of in the xcth Psalm.

¹¹ Cailliois (1937, 54-83 and 143-86) relates the Demon of Noontide to *les démons de midi*, i.e. various classical spirits (mainly female) of mischief and temptation who made their presence felt around midday—e.g., sirens, nymphs, harpies, nereids, etc.

Acedia, or
sloth, among
the worst
temptations.

this by inciting evil thoughts or passions (λογισμοί). Evil thoughts, according to Evagrius,¹² could become attached in consciousness to remembered or desired objects which thus became invested with destructive emotional energy, e.g., gold could become attached to a greedy state of mind. Such evil thoughts may eventually gain control of the rational mind at which point non-life-affirming deeds might result. Every capital sin, temptation, or evil thought was attached to a specific demon or evil spirit. The Desert Fathers sought peace (ἡσυχία) from the incessant war between sin and virtue by trying to make the passions subservient to the rational intellect. This state was known technically as ἀπαθεια, which meant 'to be at one with God.' To many of the Desert Fathers *acedia* was one of the worst temptations (demons) because it tried to make the monk give up the religious life completely. It was thus one of the major hurdles to controlling the passions and thus to the monk's salvation and desired union with God.

Of the many descriptions of coenobitic *acedia*¹³ perhaps the best summary of its early medieval characteristics is to be found in Cassian's *De Institutis Coenobiorum (Foundations of Coenobitic Life)* where *acedia* figures as the sixth of the eight major temptations.¹⁴ In this work the older classical descriptions of *taedium vitae*, melancholy and black gall are clearly reworked to fit into a specifically Christian framework. Various symptoms are discussed, many of which replicate classical symptoms of chronic ennui, e.g., *horror loci*, inexplicable sadness, addiction to objects (*luxuria*) and a certain desire to do anything rather than confront the negative emotional forces (temptations) that were trying to possess one's being:

Our sixth contending is with that which the Greeks call 'a-kedia' (from *a-*, 'not'; *kedos*, 'care') and which we may describe as tedium or perturbation of heart. It is akin to dejection [*tristitia*], and especially felt by wandering monks and solitaries, a persistent and obnoxious enemy to such as dwell in the desert, disturbing monks

¹² Evagrius, 'Texts on Discrimination in Respect of Passions and Thoughts' (1983, 38-52).

¹³ See the Checklist of Authors for comments on the theme of *acedia*/ennui as it relates to the works of Nilus, St. John Chrysostomos, St. Jerome and Evagrius of Pontius.

¹⁴ For comments on the role of *acedia* as the 'Demon of Noontide' in *The Foundations of Coenobitic Life* and *The Eight Capital Sins* see Wenzel (1967, Chapters 1 and 2). See also Rivers (1955, 293) and Revers (1949), esp. Chapter 1 'Die *Acedia* bei Johannes Cassianus.'

especially about midday, like a fever mounting at a regular time, and bringing its highest tide of inflammation at definite accustomed hours to the sick soul . . .

When this besieges the unhappy mind, it begets aversion from the place, boredom with one's cell, and scorn and contempt for one's brethren, whether they be dwelling with one or some way off, as careless and unspiritually minded persons. Also, towards any work that may be done within the enclosure of our own lair, we become listless and inert. It will not suffer us to stay in our cell, or to attend to our reading: we lament that in all this while, living in the same spot, we have made no progress, we sigh and complain that bereft of sympathetic fellowship we have no spiritual fruit; and bewail ourselves as empty of all spiritual profit . . . and we that could guide others . . . have edified no man, enriched no man with our precept and example. We praise other and far distant monasteries, describing them as more helpful to one's progress, more congenial to one's soul's health . . . Finally we conclude that there is no health for us so long as we stay in this place, short of abandoning the cell wherein to tarry further will be only to perish with it, and betaking ourselves elsewhere as quickly as possible.

Towards eleven o'clock or midday, it induces such lassitude of body and craving for food as one might feel after . . . hard toil. Finally one gazes anxiously here and there, and sighs that no brother of any description is to be seen approaching: one is for ever in and out of one's cell, gazing at the sun as though it were tarrying to its setting: one's mind is in an irrational confusion . . . one is slothful and vacant in every spiritual activity, and no remedy, it seems, can be found for this state of siege than a visit from some brother, or the solace of sleep. Finally our malady suggests that in common courtesy one should salute the brethren, and visit the sick, near and far. It dictates such offices of duty and piety as to seek out this relative or that . . . far better to bestow one's pious labour upon these than sit without benefit, or profit in one's cell.¹⁵

This demon is said to work "hand in hand with the fifth demon 'Dejection,'" which also has much in common, at the symptom level, with various forms of malevolent boredom. We also note similarities between the state described and modern forms of depression.

The modern secular mind might hastily jump to the conclusion that the monks were bored for good reason and that the desire to flee their cells was merely a natural response to the absurdities of an ascetic lifestyle. Such a conclusion does not account for the fact that these states of consciousness were, in a sense, courted by the

¹⁵ Cassian (ed. Waddell, 1946, 229-231).

Need to
confront
one's
demons.

monks. The demons had to be brought out of hiding, so as to speak, before one could truly experience *απαθεια* (spiritual oneness with God by control of the passions by the rational mind). The monks very probably chose such inhospitable surroundings and arduous lifestyle as means to bring on a state of spiritual catharsis. They perhaps sought to improve themselves by a series of confrontations with aspects of their lives which normal living kept submerged. In this sense the goals of their practices could be seen (with certain reservations) as creative and thus in opposition to normative forms of ennui. The very fact that the fathers spent so much time and energy trying to sort out the destructive passions from the 'angelic' ones might suggest that acute forms of normative ennui existed outside religious circles and that perhaps some people opted for the ascetic life as a means of overcoming such addictive and ultimately destructive states of being.

Cassian's other work, *Collationes*, or *Conversations* (425 A.D.), also deals with *acedia* as experienced by the Desert Fathers. Particularly relevant is the interview with Father Daniel, one of the Desert Fathers. What emerges from the conversation is the idea that chronic boredom is something through which one passes in order to experience new heights of spiritual oneness with God. Something like the 'creative,' solitary ennui of later artists, poets and writers, and the spiritual ennui of shamans, priests/priestesses, and mystics of many traditions seems to be the goal. Cassian has one of the monks relate the following experience:

We feel overwhelmed, crushed by dejection [*tristitia*] for which we can find no motif. The very source of mystic experiences is dried up . . . the train of thought becomes lost, inconstant and bewildered We complain, we try to remind our spirit of its original goals. But in vain. Sterility of the soul! And neither the longing for Heaven nor the fear of Hell are capable of shaking our lethargy.¹⁶

Pope Gregory I (The Great) wrote his *Morals on the Book of Job* some 150 years after Cassian's *Foundations* and *Collationes*. In the process, he added the final touches to the medieval idea of *acedia*. He reduced the number of capital sins from eight to seven, merging *tristitia* and *acedia* into one sin. He also helped universalise the ideas of the Desert Fathers since he wrote for a larger audience. As a result, all Christendom came to believe that the Capital Sins were central to the Christian moral system. One of those sins was the

¹⁶ Johannis Cassian, *Collationes* [or *Conversations*] (425A.D.) [IV, 2].

temptation of *acedia* which would later take the title of sloth.¹⁷ In the process of its universalisation the solitary, sometimes excruciating and cathartic, confrontation between the self and the Demon of Noontide gradually lost its emphasis as a mode of attaining salvation. Despite centuries of pronounced theological debate there were few alterations to the concept of *acedia* from this period on.¹⁸

The Efficacy of Demonological Approaches to Acedia

In surveying the numerous early medieval texts concerned with *acedia* it seems clear that it was an early form of morbid ennui. On this I agree with Kuhn's conclusions.¹⁹ Many of the symptoms described as indicative of *acedia* (e.g., *horror loci*; *tedium vitae*; chronic depression; unwarranted sadness; crippling lethargy; lack of joy; lack of at-peaceness with the universe; addiction to activities, objects, or states of mind which give no true fulfilment; the constant desire to flee from ascending states of deep anxiety by resort to such addictions; and, lack of mystic vision or imagination²⁰) certainly carried over into later descriptions of the various forms of chronic boredom.

The spiritual techniques (fasting, prayer and solitude) by which the demon of *acedia* was made manifest, and the internal conflicts which the Church Fathers experienced and described in their works, seem to have much in common with shamanic and religious practices endemic to many other world traditions. (Traditional shamans, for instance, routinely confronted various demons, devils, and spirits of discord and decay.²¹) In more recent times many art-

¹⁷ See Kuhn (1976, 54-55) for comments regarding the contribution of Gregory The Great and his work *Morals On the Book of Job* to medieval and modern conceptions of *acedia* and chronic ennui.

¹⁸ Readers who wish to take up all aspects of the theological debate over *acedia* as manifested in Scholasticism and later medieval monasticism are directed to Wenzel (1967, esp. Chapter 3).

¹⁹ Kuhn (1976, 53-64) makes a strong case for the similarities between *acedia* and modern forms of chronic ennui.

²⁰ Though chronic ennui is rarely these days associated with specifically Christian perceptions of the absence of joy or inspiration, the idea that human beings have lost touch with 'spiritual powers,' however vaguely imagined, remains.

²¹ Roccatagliata (1986, 4) argues that the exorcism of demons by resort to solitude, fasting, drugs, intense prayer chanting/singing, and dance has long been central to 'demonological' approaches to mental illness. He says that at the time the church fathers were writing, mythological, animistic, biological and humoral approaches to 'disturbances of the soul' were more or less in decline in favour

ists and poets have described their sufferings from chronic ennui in terms of exorcistic, cathartic and mystical imagery similar to that used by the Desert Fathers. One usually confronts such destructive psychospiritual forces for the purpose of purifying the self and thus of protecting the community from the harms that could result from the passions turned noxious. One faces the abyss, pursues the *via negativa*, in order to become spiritually and emotionally whole.²² The states of chronic ennui associated with such a confrontation are far removed from the forms of the malaise that currently afflict Western civilisation—what I have labeled ‘normative ennui.’ So prevalent is the malady of ‘normative ennui’ in the West today that people who see value in contemplation, in spiritual disciplines designed to improve themselves emotionally, are derided and even stigmatised as lazy and non-productive.

It is quite possible that the early Church Fathers were confronting a malaise nurtured by the great urban centres of the age. They were, perhaps, taking on a disease nurtured by empire—by urbanisation and bureaucratisation. Such a reading would suggest that they were taking on powers that would one day station themselves at the very centre of Western civilisation. If so, the showdown between the Demon of Noontide and the monks of the new religion in the arid wastelands of the African deserts is one of the most neglected psychospiritual events of Western history.

of the Christian demonological system. According to Roccatagliata (p. 14), the Church Fathers and the church Apologists ‘unified animistic and sacred outlooks, as well as the mystical ideologies led by Orpheus, Pythagorus, and the philosophies of Plato and the Stoics’ in order to create their new approach. It is thus likely that some of the Church Fathers saw themselves as what we would term ‘therapists’ in relation to both the major psychological disturbances of the age and the more existential disturbances of the soul experienced by ‘normal’ people. Both types of unease merge in the concept of *acedia*, both had a spiritual solution: exorcism of the evil spirits in the name of the Christian deity. Such a reading of the struggles of the Desert Fathers would suggest that their ennui was more similar to what I have called ‘creative ennui’ than to the other major ennui categories, i.e., ‘dysfunctional’ or ‘normative’ ennui.

²² Kuhn (1976, 45) also points to the cathartic element in the practices of the early Church Fathers. In particular, he speaks of the relationship between *acedia* and the *via negativa*: “. . . *acedia* is almost a precondition for a life of eternal bliss . . . it is the ‘*noche oscura del alma*’ that lay between Saint John of the Cross and divine grace. . . . The *via negativa* that passes through *acedia* is a road fraught with hazards and with promises. It represents ‘a dangerous proving ground through which the soul can purify itself and sometimes it serves as a prelude to the joys and beatitude of ecstasy.’”

We are led to perhaps the most important question: did medieval Christianity nurture or counteract *acedia*? The question is important for any modern assessment of chronic ennui, especially since George Steiner has recently suggested that this secular version of *acedia* is still, essentially, a religious problem.²³

My own position on these early Christian commentaries concerning the causes and cures for the problem is ambivalent. It could be argued that in the shift from the often solitary confrontation with *acedia* in the inhospitable deserts of Northern Africa to the universalised confrontation with it characteristic of the later medieval period (diagnosed for all Christians under the title of *sloth*) there was lost that element of catharsis which has been encouraged by many traditional peoples to treat states of psychospiritual disintegration. In my opinion, the switch represented the end of serious attempts by mainstream, institutional Christianity to tackle the ennui/*acedia* malaise. From about 1200 on the mystics, poets, and artists of the West took up the struggle instead.

From an ethical perspective the confrontations with ennui experienced by the early Church Fathers were conditioned by a specific kind of religious belief system, a system that often confused noxious passions with perfectly healthy ones and which privileged masculine forms of the rational intellect over the body (particularly the functions of the female body). In this sense some of the *acedia* experienced by the monks must be attributed to their attempts to live basically 'passionless lives,' i.e., to reify their experience of the lifeworld and live instead in the world of reason and the spirit. Consequently, they may have treated one form of chronic ennui (normative ennui) with a religious form of the same malaise. This may be part of the reason that Christianity has been essentially unable to defeat the joylessness associated with the various forms of the ailment. It is a tendency, I believe, peculiar to the moral systems developed by the monotheistic religions.

Yet the monks were fine psychologists, and it is clear that on many occasions they saw *acedia* and the other capital temptations as distortions of otherwise life-affirming passions. If there is one essential lesson to be learnt from their writings it is that we should respect the power and subtlety of the malaise they confronted in

²³ See my analysis of *In Bluebeard's Castle* in my Ph.D. thesis entitled *Uncomfortably Numb: The Emergence of the Normative Ennui Cycle* (1998, chapter 8).

their own beings. The Demon of Noontide was no pushover: it could erode the will, afflict the body and darken a person's emotional terrain with depression, madness and thoughts of suicide. It could also offer escape from cathartic confrontation with self by insinuating into consciousness all manner of inauthentic desires, pseudo-needs, and fantasies of relief which, though serving to ward off the worst excesses of *acedia*, could ultimately lead only to spiritual ruin. In this sense the courage of the Desert Fathers as they attempted to name and confront this subtle and destructive psychospiritual entity surely deserves our admiration if not our awe. For this reason alone the writings of the Desert Fathers must surely contribute something to our attempts to understand modern forms of chronic ennui. If Rome can be seen as the origin of the concept of 'normative ennui,' then the deserts of northern Africa may be seen as the site of the first major creative and spiritual response to that malaise.

Postscript: Postmodernist Ennui

Early Christian descriptions of *acedia* and related vices did not view 'society' as the cause of the subjective suffering described. This is in sharp contrast to most modern descriptions of *acedia's* progeny terms, e.g., chronic ennui, anomie, and alienation. Romantic, modernist, and postmodern uses of these words invariably encompass the idea that something is wrong with the link between the self and the 'other' of society. In this sense such concepts often represent an implicit critique of modernity. The depression, *languer*, and melancholy that characterised nineteenth-century *ennui* contradicted the great Enlightenment bourgeois ideals of progress, competition, scientific and technological advancement, and social evolution in general: *ennui* played gollum to the sturdy hobbit of liberalism.

Understanding the enormous implications of our current distrust of the social apparatus may allow us to better define and illustrate the immensity of the new crisis of the subject currently afflicting Western societies. In this new phase chronic ennui has become associated with schizophrenic, depressive, narcissistic and psychopathic symptoms and with what Bouchez (1973) terms the 'de-realisation' of subjective life characteristic of the late twentieth century.

How relevant then are terms like *taedium, vitae, acedia, tristitia, siccitas*, saturnine melancholy, 'The English Malady,' *l'ennui morbide*, etc., to discussions of the postmodern maladies of the subject? I would argue that 'chronic ennui' is more virulent than ever in the postmodernist phase of our society (though different in character from earlier outbreaks). It can be argued that postmodernist ennui represents a specific disintegrative response to the particular social formations characteristic of advanced capitalism and advanced statism in general.

It is my argument that the fragmentation of the subject occasioned by the new phase of modernity (sometimes called 'high modernity' or 'postindustrialism') lies on a continuum with, but is qualitatively different from, earlier states of subjective suffering. The web of society and culture that is supposed to help sustain people's material and psychospiritual needs is perhaps more toxic than ever to the real needs of subjects. In this new phase the norms of the social web bespeak an advanced state of normative schizophrenia and psychopathology. If we wish to find a way out of the soul-destroying routines of the postmodern ennui cycle with its consumeristic addictions (see Perec's *Things*), its narcissism and love of empty spectacle, its insane hunger for more and more objects to fill up the void of a life without meaning, I would suggest that we reassess the long tradition of writings on the maladies of the subject. We might ask ourselves where exactly the Desert Fathers went wrong, and just as importantly, where they were on the right track. Like George Steiner in his work on the 'Great Ennui' in *In Bluebeard's Castle* (1971), we might admit that our current maladies of the self (and their social manifestations) are deeply related to the more general problems of the history of human spirituality. If this is the case, and I believe it is, then the battle between the Desert Fathers and the Demon of Noontide is of the utmost significance for modern discussions of the history of subjectivity.

Destructive norms.