



Robert Burton's Work "The Anatomy of Melancholy"; Its Literary & Philosophical Values in the English Literature

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Abstract

The book is nominally, an anatomy, an overview, a dissection, an analysis of melancholy. But melancholy is a broad term, a common affliction with many causes, symptoms and, possibly, cures. Because of that, Burton is determined to consider each and every variation on the theme. It is a famous book with a well-known title, but rarely seen. It has been essentially, out of print for some time. Now "The Anatomy of Melancholy" has been republished in a convenient single volume by New York Review Books. Burton's book is encyclopedic. Burton acknowledges that he has read many books and every book ever written or published until that time. Indeed, he appears to quote from every one of these books in "The Anatomy of Melancholy" – from the earliest Greeks to his recent contemporaries. Arguably, the Anatomy is the last book that encompasses the entire learning of Western culture, and the last successful effort to embrace it all into one volume. It is a book of references woven together. There is both madness and method here – to convince a huge mass of readers to the arguments brought forward. The book is literally and philosophically overwhelming. It ranges across nearly all subjects: medicine, astronomy, philosophy, literature and all the arts, politics, nature. It runs from quote to quote to reference. The book is presented as being by "Democritus Junior". Lewellyn Powys called it "the greatest work of prose of the greatest period of English prose-writing," while the celebrated surgeon William Osler declared it is the greatest of medical treatises. Samuel Johnson considered it one of his favorite books, being "the only book that ever took him out of bed two hours sooner than he wished to rise".

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1. Introduction

The work is divided into three partitions; the first partition is devoted to the more common, generic sort of melancholy, focusing on causes and symptoms. Melancholy can be found everywhere. Burton explores every possible reason for that sinking melancholy feeling. From God to bad nurses, bad diet to overmuch study, Self-love, Praise, Honor, Immoderate Applause to covetousness, "A heap of other accidents" to education. The symptoms are more straightforward, though also more varied than one might expect. The second partition suggests cures for melancholy, ranging from lifestyle changes to medical solutions (from blood-letting to herbal alternatives). Burton himself suggested: "I write of melancholy, by being busy to avoid melancholy". (And he was very busy at it). The last partition then is devoted to the most complex and irrational mind ailments: love melancholy and religious - melancholy.

2. Topic Description & Analysis

Melancholy, the subject of our present discourse, is either in disposition or in habit. In disposition, is that transitory Melancholy which goes and comes upon every small occasion of sorrow, need, sickness, trouble, fear, grief, passion, or perturbation of the mind, any manner of care, discontent, or thought, which causes anguish, dullness, heaviness and vexation of spirit, any ways opposite to pleasure, mirth, joy, delight, causing forwardness in us, or a dislike. In which equivocal and improper sense, we call him melancholy, that is dull, sad, sour, lumpish, ill-disposed, solitary, any way moved, or displeased. And from these melancholy dispositions no man living is free, no Stoics, none so wise, none so happy, none so patient, so generous, so godly, so divine, that can vindicate himself; so well-composed, but more or less, sometime or other, he feels the smart of it. Melancholy in



this sense is the character of Mortality.

Melancholy was responsible, according to Burton and others, for the wild passions and despairs of lovers, the agonies of religious, devote the frenzies of madmen and studious ales traction. He wrote The Anatomy of Melancholy largely to write himself out of being a lifelong suffers from depression. The Melancholy is used for a very deep feeling of sadness the reason for which is hard to explain and the feeling also lasts for a long time.

Much of the book consists of quotations from various and medieval medical authorities, beginning with Hippocrates, Aristotle, and Galen.

Robert Burton's The Anatomy of Melancholy (1621) is arguably the first major text in the history of Western cognitive science: not because Burton is the first to theorize the nature of cognition or engage in cognitive modeling, as is made plainly evident by the many quasi-plagiarisms and numerous references to other thinkers which appear in Burton's text, but because of the thematic underpinnings and encyclopedic nature of Burton's vision. As Floyd Dell (XIX c.) has pointed out, "early 17th-century medicine, at the time Burton wrote, was humbly relying upon the authority of the great Greek and Arabian physicians, Galen, Hippocrates, Avicenna, etc.; there was no new scientific knowledge to serve as the basis of any large and illuminating generalizations upon the subject of morbid psychology." In the absence of such information, Burton focused his gaze upon the widest scope of previous thinkers about cognition available to him. There is hardly a previous thinker or school of thought on humanity which is not referenced in Burton's text, and Burton's own references show that he was familiar with nearly all the medical, astrological, and magical books then extant (still actual and alive - U.Kazimova).

As its title suggests, the bulk of Burton's text is devoted to cataloguing the many variants, manifestations, and causes of the mental "disease" Melancholy; but before Burton begins his dissection of the anatomy of melancholy, he first embarks upon a more general discussion of overall cognitive functioning, believing it "not impertinent to make a brief digression of the anatomy of the body and faculties of the soul, for better understanding of that which is to follow."

If we gaze back to the history of philosophy and the world literature, we may find wide-scale interpretations referring to the background interpretations of interactions of human body and soul, reasons of melancholy and its etiology. Some pre XX theories interpreted this depression in various ways. Let us more closely review some of them. For example, King Saul is described as experiencing depression and committing suicide because of it in the Old Testament. Even before these theories on mental illness and depression existed. However, it has not always been seen as separate from other types of mental illness. Therefore, it is not possible to look at the etiology of depression without paying some attention to the development of psychiatry as a whole. This, in turn, is not an isolated event. Advancement of scientific knowledge occurs in spurts that are greatly influenced by the attitudes of time, particularly ideas about (bound) human behavior which is not just directly connected with science. That is he mentioned that he had tried to create flavors of the periods the theories developed in, in order to understand better the background and consequences of them in society as a whole.

It is thought that ancient man saw mental illness as possession by supernatural forces. Ancient human skulls have been found with large holes in them, a process that has become known as trepanning. (Merely-opening holes-U. Kazimova).The accepted theory is that it was an attempt to let evil spirits out. He could not be certain of that, but did know that again and again human kind had been returning to the idea of mental illness be caused by "evil forces".

The great cultures of old, such as those of Egypt and Mesopotamia, fluctuated between naturalistic and supernatural explanations of diseases. Empedocles (490-430 BC) developed the humoral theory, based on what he regarded as the four basic elements; each was characterized by a quality and a corresponding body humor:

Element	Quality	Humor
Fire	Heat	Blood (in the heart)
Earth	Dryness	Phlegm (in the brain)
Water	Moisture	Yellow bile (in the liver)
Air	Cold	Black bile (in the spleen)

Disease was said to be caused by imbalance among these humors and the cure was to administer a drug with an opposite quality to the one out of balance.

Hippocrates (460-377 BC) lived at the time of Hellenic enlightenment, when great advances were made in all



areas of knowledge. He applied Empedocles' theory to mental illness and was insistent that all illness or mental disorder must be explained on the basis of natural causes. Unpleasant dreams and anxiety were seen as being caused by a sudden flow of bile to the brain, melancholia was thought to be brought on by an excess of black bile, and exaltation by a predominance of warmth and dampness in the brain. Temperament was thought to be choleric, phlegmatic, sanguine or melancholic depending on the dominating humor.

Plato (427-347 BC) had a retrograde influence on psychology in that he reintroduced a mystical element. He believed in two types of madness, the first was divinely inspired and gave the recipient prophetic powers; the second was caused by disease. He conceived of two souls:

Soul	Mortality	Location
Rational	Immortal	In the brain
Irrational	Mortal	Emotions located in various parts of the body e.g. anger and audacity in the heart.

The second type of mental disorder resulted when the irrational soul severed its connection with the rational, resulting in an excess of happiness, sadness, pleasure seeking or pain avoidance. The reason for the abandonment of reason was due to the imbalances explained in Hippocrates' humeral theory.

Aristotle (384-322 BC), Plato's pupil, believed in the two parts of man's soul. However, he said because reason was immortal it must be immune to illness, so all illness, mental or otherwise, must be rooted in man's physical structure.

Through the Punic wars (264-146 BC) Rome came to dominate much of the civilized world. The Romans produced few notable physicians and instead imported Greek ones for the treatment of injured Roman soldiers. These physicians eventually began to practice in Rome itself. Therefore, many of the advances in Roman thinking about mental disorder came from physicians steeped in Greek tradition.

Asclepiades (dates unknown) was one such physician. He regarded mental disorders as stemming from emotional disturbances, in his terms "passions of sensations".

Cicero (106-43 BC) was a philosopher, not a healer. He went further than Asclepiades and rejected Hippocrates' bile theory, stating that emotional factors could cause physical illness, "What we call furor they call melancholia, as if the reason were affected by only a black bile, and not disturbed often by a violent rage, or fear, or grief". The difference between physical and mental disorders was that the former might be caused by purely extraneous factors, but "perturbations of the mind may proceed from a neglect of reason". Man could help with his own cure through "philosophy", which would nowadays be known as psychotherapy.

Arateus (AD 30-90) was the first to suggest that the origin of mental disorder might not be specifically localized. It could originate from the head or abdomen and the other could be affected as a secondary consequence. He had begun to see that an individual functions as a unitary system. He also worked on ideas about premorbid personalities and discovered that individuals who became manic were characteristically labile in nature, easily irritable, angry or happy. Those who developed melancholia tended to depression in their premorbid state. Emotional disorders were merely an extension or exaggeration of existing character traits, a very original idea for the time. He also observed that mania and depression could occur in the same individual, thereby anticipating Kraepelin's work on mania and melancholia being part of one disorder by many centuries.

Galen (AD 30-90) did not so much develop highly original ideas as sum up the thinking of the Greco-Roman era. He again divided the soul into two areas:

Souls	Location	Function
Rational	Brain	Controls internal and external functions. Internal imagination, judgment, memory, apperception, movement. External: the five senses.
Irrational	Heart and liver	Control all emotions

He suggested again that infection of one area could be secondary to something else. He stated that food passed from the stomach to the liver where it was transformed into chyle (lymph cells-U. Kazimova) and permeated by natural spirits (which exist in every living substance). The veins carried the material to the heart. Air, which held



the vital principle, combined with the natural spirits, thereby producing the vital spirits. These rose into the brain and were converted into the animal spirits. Mental disease/disturbance of animal spirits arose because either because the brain was directly afflicted (mania and melancholia) or because it was affected by disorder in another organ. These theories by Galen contrasted greatly with the period of thought that was about to begin.

Melancholy was brought to English literature by metaphysical philosophers and philosophical language of the verses. The new style in English poetry during the 17th century was that of the metaphysical movement. Metaphysics is that portion of philosophy which treats of the most general and fundamental principles underlying all reality and all knowledge. The metaphysical poets were John Donne, George Herbert, Andrew Marvell, Thomas Traverse, Henry Vaughan and others. The metaphysical poets were clearly trying to understand the world around them and the spirit behind it, instead of accepting of dogma on the basis of faith.

One can easily find some commonalities and differences between the literary style and philosophical values of the works epigrammatist Owen and Barclay and Robert Burton. It has been rightly observed that the first half of the seventeenth century may be reckoned eminently the learned age, and the authors who form the subject of the present chapter carry, each in his own way, this mark of the period. Two of these, the epigrammatist Owen and Barclay the writer of satire and romance, delivered themselves in Latin, one producing the best known body of Latin epigrams since Martial, the other the most famous work in Latin prose fiction since Apuleius. From Burton, we have his own confession that it was not his original intention to "prostitute his muse in English," but, could a printer have been found, to publish his huge medical and moral treatise in Latin. Yet, while the frame of the book is in his native English, Latin is never far away. We find it in phrases interwoven with the text, in formal citation on page or margin, visible through the paraphrase of the sources from which he drew. Composition in Latin, at a time when that language was still international, was, in itself, no special sign of learning, but Barclay and Owen give proof of wide and apt knowledge, and possess an individual style and flavor. In their day, they are remarkable instances of men of real literary inspiration, who chose to speak in a past tongue. For width of reading, rather than precise scholarship, Burton may count among the most learned of English men of letters. The study of all three was Man. To a modern mind, the way in which tradition and direct experience often lie side by side unblended in seventeenth century literature is strange. An eager interest in human character and activity consorted with something that is hard to distinguish from pedantry. But the impulse of the classics was then stronger if less delicate, and the relation between life and books has been variously apprehended at various epochs.

Many later writers were deeply influenced by the book's odd mix of pan-scholarship, humor, linguistic skill, and creative (if highly approximate) insights. This influence was so strong that later writers sometimes drew from the work without acknowledgment (such accusations were leveled at Laurence Sterne's book).

"The Anatomy of Melancholy" is a book which has been universally read and admired. This work is, for the most part, what the author himself styles it, 'a cento;' but it is a very ingenious one. His quotations, which abound in every page, are pertinent; but if he had made more use of his invention and less of his commonplace-book, his work would perhaps have been more valuable than it is. He is generally free from the affected language and ridiculous metaphors which disgrace most of the books of his time. (Granger's Biographical History.)

Samuel Johnson considered it one of his favorite books, being "the only book that ever took him out of bed two hours sooner than he wished to rise". The book has continued as a favorite among many 20th and 21st-century authors, such as Anthony Burgess (who said "Most modern books weary me, but Burton never does"), William H. Gass (who wrote the introduction to the 2001 omnibus edition), and Llewelyn Powys (who dubbed it "the greatest work of prose of the greatest period of English prose-writing"). Apart from *The Anatomy of Melancholy* Burton's only other published work is *Philosophaster*, a satirical Latin comedy. Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* is valuable book", said Dr Johnson. "It is, perhaps, overloaded with quotation, but there is Great Spirit and great power in what Burton says when he writes from his own mind Even the contemporary English Puppet theatres count it necessary to stage scenes of Melancholy for its evergreen and everlasting literary views and philosophical significance.

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