



**THE ANATOMY OF
MELANCHOLY**

ROBERT BURTON

INTRODUCTION BY
WILLIAM H. GASS

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THE ANATOMY OF MELANCHOLY

ROBERT BURTON (1577–1640) was born in Leicestershire and educated at Oxford, where he became librarian of Christ's Church College, a position he held for life. He was also the vicar of St. Thomas, Oxford, and the rector of Seabrope, Leicestershire. The first edition of *The Anatomy of Melancholy* appeared in 1621 and was an immediate popular success. Burton continued to revise and add to his great book, which went through a further five editions, until his death.

WILLIAM H. GASS was born in Fargo, North Dakota, in 1924. He is the author of five works of fiction, among them *Omensetter's Luck* and *The Tunnel*, and six volumes of criticism. He lives in St. Louis, where he is the director of the International Writer's Center.

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ROBERT BURTON

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INTRODUCTION

DURING the early seventeenth century men everywhere in Europe were beginning to realize that the institutions that had seemed to offer them hope and keep them from care were actually making them fearful of their fate, and encouraging them to trade their lives for lies. The world was now wider than anyone had previously imagined—ships had sailed it round; the heavens were on quite another course than had been sworn to; social organizations were being drastically revised and power was slipping from popes to princes, from the universal Church to the secular State; former methods of deciding things were now utterly up in the air; rude and vigorous vernaculars were driving back Latin everywhere (Dante, Descartes, Hobbes would ennoble several vulgar tongues by their employment); people were lifting their heads from canonical books to look boldly around, and what they saw first were errors, plentiful as leaves. Delight and despair took turns managing their moods.

The past is never lightly thrown off, though it often seems doffed like a hat with a flourish or carelessly tossed like a cape into a corner; it is only a cap that's been removed, only an old coat there in its puddle. Young men were watching the new day dawn with old minds, and traditional intentions. Robert Burton (1577–1640) boldly chastises the clergy for their ceremonious pomp, hypocritical zeal, and scandalous lapses, but it is the pomp, the zeal, the lapses he is after, and he is careful to keep his new faith clear of the old church's ritual forms and corporate grip. Sir Thomas Browne was rewarded for his royalist loyalties with a knighthood, and his

most popular book, about vulgar errors, the *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*, omitted a number of crucial ones, while he keeps helpfully at hand the “unspeakable mysteries” of the Scriptures; Descartes aimed to set his religion back on sound foundations, even if he did make its bones dance, and rightly feared Bruno’s burning at the stake; Burton’s skepticism, like Montaigne’s, and Descartes’ later, is persistent but programmatic, an epistemological strategy not a deep state of mind; Thomas Hobbes, playing both sides of the English Civil War to perfection, would place Cromwell’s face on the giant whose image would serve to front his *Leviathan* (a body politic literally made of a crowd of bodies squeezed into the outline of a sovereign), while on that Protestant head he impressed a Catholic crown; Bacon, More, and Montaigne all sought ways to release Science to follow every scent Nature might emit so long as it never treed Divinity.

Of all the habits that were hard to break, being bookish was perhaps the most difficult. Now, in addition to the scriptures, there would be all the classical authors you had the opportunity to cite—the honor of the first quote in Burton’s address to the reader goes to Seneca—thereby showing generosity in the “loan” of the resources of your library and by your readiness to “spread the word,” just as you also took good care to gather books and manuscripts, diligently copying passages from the volumes which had to pass through, rather than remain in, your hands. Guided by a genius, the pages of a commonplace book could be transformed into an original and continuously argued text as Ben Jonson did with *Discoveries*—a form which Burton’s *Anatomy* sometimes resembles though it never mimics.

These new authorities, who often elbow Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John to one side, supply evidence of two kinds: first, of the breadth of the author’s learning, and second, of the rightness of his opinions, because the facts that matter are still those mostly found in books, not those picked like

posies out of a meadow or distilled in an alembic; moreover, the words themselves are magical; you cannot have too many of them; they are like spices brought back from countries so far away they're even out of sight of seas; words that roll, Poloniously, into the reader's ken in lists that subside only to resume in no time at all with words even more exotic, redolent, or chewy; for instance the names and kinds of terrestrial devils that lurk about to pester us: lares, lemurs, genii, satyrs, fauns, fairies, wood-nymphs, trolls, and foliots, those visitors to forlorn houses, about whom you may not be familiar, who make "strange noises in the night, howl sometimes pitifully, and then laugh again, cause great flame and sudden lights, fling stones, rattle chains," and if you wake to find your beard shaved and your chin smooth, they will be the impish cause.

To ridicule superstition or succumb to it, embrace the new learning or belabor it, celebrate change or condemn it, relate every tale or tell none; or, more characteristically, to quote, testify, enlarge upon every subject with such serious thoroughness there could be no response but laughter: in Robert Burton these impulses blew like winds; no one was ever more an arena for the contest between what was pagan and what was pious, what seemed demonstrable to science and mathematics or what seemed sensible upon textual scrutiny and harmonious with settled doctrine, than this nonconformist clergyman, this quiet monkish man who would pursue secular studies behind the walls of a famous college, a skeptic whose credulity was a welcome you could count on, a pessimist and melancholic whose great celebrational comedy will last as many years as its thousand pages.

Robert Burton may have momentarily put aside his pen on December 5, 1620, to declare his work done; however, since sales were solid and five fresh editions needed, he let his baby grow from gigantic to gargantuan. We have ourselves continued to manufacture material for his *Melancholy*, and were Burton as immortal as his book he could keep the

Anatomy routinely up to date with the distraughts, foul humors, and tragedies that trouble us today and will beset us tomorrow. What the present reader may find strange is Burton's eager allowance of hearsay and observation, myth and science, superstition and common sense, to help him in his hunt for causes, and provide more than cosmetic in the makeup of his explanations: not merely citing heredity, disease, dotage, and personal loss as sources of melancholy, while displaying a skepticism as ardent as his faith; but blaming God, evil angels as well as devils, a bad balance among the four humors, the discoveries of chiromancy and physiognomy, indurate dishes and sharp sauces, unsuitable parents, odors of the earth, even the stars themselves.

What may strike one as quaint and unfashionable at one time may be the latest wisdom to another. When I was first engaged to Robert Burton's book (my copy's flyleaf says Dec. 1944), the mother's womb was sturdier and more insulated than it is believed to be now, so, when I read that if the mother "be over-dull, heavy, angry, peevish, discontented, and melancholy, not only at the time of conception, but even all the while she carries the child in her womb . . . her son will be so likewise affected," I thought the risks overstated; for wasn't the moat of amniotic fluid about the baby nearly unswimmable?—what else was it there for?—but I would not think so now—now everything, including noise, gets through, and, unless it is the music of Mozart, wreaks havoc.

Unlike Erasmus' famous work, this is no praise of folly; it is, however, a parade of them: every day in Burton's year is St. Patrick's, bands brag in the streets, beer is the only proffered drink, and the beer is green. Moreover the parade has a settled order of march; the word "anatomy" signifying its dissected analytical layout, its deployment of commentary descending through partitions, sections, members, into subsections, and adding to those body parts appendices, poetic addresses, a daunting synopsis, and a preface nearly the length

of an ordinary book. The analytical outline should not daunt. Burton pays as much attention to his own schematisms as he pays to the syntax of his sentences. Imposing indeed are his interconnections, but it is rather as if a net had been flung down on top of fish who continue to roil and flop freely about beneath it.

Nor is there much that's melancholy, in our present sense of the word, about the *Anatomy*; and the principle reason for this is that the illnesses Burton discusses and the causes and cures he proposes have not, in the main, been drawn from bedsides, battlefields, or courts, but from books and reports, descriptions and disquisitions; for it is easy, even agreeable, while enjoying the safety of the page, to face without qualms a situation and its solution as they are set down in some chronicle or almanac, harsh or bizarre as they may combine to be, when in life what it is being reported may encourage harrowing practices and produce deplorable pains, such as drilling a hole in a patient's skull to release noxious vapors that have gathered there, or latterly, prevailing on leeches to bleed a body already badly in need of its blood.

What is not secondhand are Burton's pages on the melancholies of the scholar, the vices of princes, and the deficiencies of the Catholic Church. He has both read and lived these—through an impending Civil War, contending clergies, the machinations of a parliament seeking new powers, and royals protecting traditional privileges. Yet when one's nose is in a book it is as alive and alert as if it smelled smoke in the house or anticipated the serving of soup—more so, because it is bent over concepts; it is breathing Forms; it is becoming acquainted with minds. For Burton, learning is the disease that will cure his other ailments the way consolidating your debts will bring due only one—still crushing—lump sum payment.

But Thomas Hobbes, who had Burton and Browne and Montaigne in view, was of a different, and, as usual, impressively put opinion:

From whence it happens, that they which trust to books, do as they that cast up many little summes into a greater, without considering whether those little summes were rightly cast up or not; and at last finding the error visible, and not mistrusting their first grounds, know not which way to cleere themselves; but spend time in fluttering over their bookes; as birds that entring by the chimney, and finding themselves inclosed in a chamber, flutter at the false light of a glasse window, for want of wit to consider which way they came in." [Leviathan, Pt. 1, Ch. 4]

If he could have had his way, Burton would have preferred to be a poet and playwright, and he does write a comedy in Latin verse his students perform in the Hall of Oxford's Christ Church in 1617. We have several samples of his occasionally charming doggerel in front of us, one with the well-known refrain, "None so sweet"—so sad, so sour, so harsh, so damned—"as melancholy." He would also have preferred to write in Latin, but publishers were increasingly reluctant to constrict their sales to the rich and learned; what, after all, was the vernacular to Dante, Descartes, and Hobbes but a paddle to place across the rumps of the schoolmen and punish their inhibiting pedantries? The languages of Italian, French, and English were those of increasingly secular states and their mercantile interests. Robert Burton would also seek a popular public, but under a protective *nom de plume*, in the shelter of a life whose movements rose and fell as calmly as a cork amidst the tumults of the times.

If Burton had wanted us to know who the author of the *Anatomy* was, he should not have chosen a pseudonym behind which to hide (as he, himself, says); yet if he had not wanted us to know who he was (as he claims) he should not have chosen a name like "Democritus" behind which to pretend to conceal himself, for that name plainly points to-

ward a position on the nature of things that is material, quantitative, and scientific; moreover one that soon would have, in the strengthening temper of the time, two great spokesmen—Thomas Hobbes and René Descartes—to represent the rational spirits of Galileo and Copernicus in whom the Renaissance was realized. But it is the life and character of Democritus (taken from authorities as unreliable as ancient) that our coy author wishes to suggest bear a semblance to his own, and that his epithet, “the laughing philosopher,” is one Burton also deserves: the sage’s quiet, solitary regularities, his ardent devotion to his studies, the elevation that philosophy confers upon his occupations, such as Burton’s ministry allowed, and with an interest in mathematics they could share, the enjoyment of rueful laughter, as well as a fondness for the rhetoric of skepticism—the same with men like Montaigne, Lipsius, and Muret, who left their busy lives to dwell in sheltered cells where their amusement at human behavior would disturb not even the sobriety of birds.

As Democritus Junior, Burton is free to parade folly after folly past Democritus Senior’s amused yet scornful eye. The operative phrase is “what would he have said” were he to have thought X, felt Y, seen Z; although the indictment that follows the question has been drawn up by Burton alone. Concerning wars, for instance (the dots signify omitted quotations):

What would he have said to see, hear, and read so many bloody battles, so many thousands slain at once, such streams of blood able to turn mills, through the mad guilt of one person, or to make sport for princes, without any just cause . . . whilst statesmen themselves in the meantime are secure at home, pampered with all delights and pleasures, take their ease, and follow their lusts, not considering what intolerable misery poor soldiers endure, their often wounds, hunger, thirst, etc.,

the lamentable cares, torments, calamities and oppressions, that accompany such proceedings . . .

The book was so popular it went into six editions during Burton's lifetime, and its gratified author was eager to doff his anonymity after the first. It should have been popular. Although it gave expression to the pains of the people (always a kind of comfort), his *Anatomy* recounted so many sorts of follies that most of them had to have been performed or believed by others rather than ourselves; we could then happily send a hearty guffaw around the common table like a pitcher of ale, and drink to the dunces who had so deluded themselves as to think thus, do such. When the mind enters a madhouse, Burton shows, however sane it was when it went in, and however hard it struggles to remain sane while there, it can only make the ambient madness more monstrous, more absurd, more bizarrely laughable by its efforts to be rational.

For a contemporary Robert Burton whom we might imagine sitting down now with unwearying zeal and sorrow to record our melancholy lot, there'd be no lack of data either, and the sections he'd have planned for his book would fill up faster than a thimble. What about bad diets as a cause of nervous illness? Both Burtons would have room for that. Or foul air? They could jointly bewail it. Or immoderate exercise? Or a love of gambling? Nothing unfamiliar there, nor with the desperations of imprisonment or the glooms that follow prolonged study, or the despairs impoverishment brings on. What of the consequences, both devious and direct, of festering discontents, of local resentments and historic hatreds, concerning which we have always had an apparently inexhaustible supply? Or the dangerous delusions brought on by self-love and vain-glory in an era of shameless self-promotion like our own? Surely our obsession with sex and what Burton calls its artificial allurements would shock our scholar, while the space in the plan of his book set aside for the miasmas of

religion would find sects jostling one another for booths from which to sell their latest absurdities and repeatedly boast of their unique merits and cry aloud their bewares.

Burton himself will pretend to be a plain speaker, and plainly enough he does speak, if one considers the time, and the artificiality of his predecessors; but when he says that his book is "writ with as small deliberation as I do ordinarily speak, without all affectation of big words, fustian phrases, jingling terms, tropes, strong lines, that like Acestes' arrows caught fire as they flew, strains of wit, brave heats, eulogies, hyperbolical exornations, elegancies, etc., which many so much affect," what are we now to think? "Strong lines" refers to a preference orators had, in that time, for balance, gnomic terseness, and an elevation of thought and diction which could seem, when it failed, to yield the artificial, riddling, and bombastic; nevertheless, Burton's looseness can only be called "exuberance" now, "celebration," and indicative of a nominalism that feels that if every person huddling under an umbrella is not named they shall have no protection.

One can only listen. Robert the Ranter rails. It is delicious.

To see [we are still in this rhetorical mode of address, so it is Democritus Senior who is the imagined observer] a man turn himself into all shapes like a chameleon, or as Proteus . . . to act twenty parts and persons at once for his advantage, to temporize and vary like Mercury the planet, good with good, bad with bad; having a several face, garb, and character for every one he meets; of all religions, humours, inclinations; to fawn like a spaniel . . . rage like a lion, bark like a cur, fight like a dragon, sting like a serpent, as meek as a lamb, and yet again grin like a tiger, weep like a crocodile, insult over some, and yet other domineer over him, here command, there crouch, tyrannize in one place, be

baffled in another, a wise man at home, a fool abroad to make others merry.

The sentence indeed does unravel, but into a flouncy tuffet, not into a maze or a strew. Meaning, motion, and emotion are superbly fused. It achieves the tone of a tirade that, in the midst of its fury, smiles at itself—recognizes itself as a recital of fearful changeabilities and confident clichés. I am also tempted to admire (for it may be merely a textual error, of which in the *Anatomy* there are so many) the odd and awkward phrase “and yet other domineer over him” as a creative misprint for “let.” In its anger, its energy, its rhythm, its terminological greed, its sermoniacal excoriations, this prose is a seedbed for the high semi-sacred styles of Browne’s *Urn Burial* and Taylor’s *Holy Dying*.

Be prepared to proceed slowly and you will soon go swiftly enough. Read a member a day; it will chase gloom away. The late section on religious melancholy has been particularly admired. I also have a special fondness for Burton’s pages on museums and libraries. But above all, it is the width of the world that can be seen from one college window that amazes me; what a love of all life can be felt by one who has lived it sitting in a chair; and Robert Burton’s unashamed display of his lust for the word—his desire to name each thing, and find a song in which each thing can be sung—is a passion that we might emulate to our assuredly better health.

—WILLIAM H. GASS