

# IDLE CLASSIC

CHRIS MILTON reviews Robert Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy*

Despite its title, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, by Robert Burton, is a ludic rather than a lugubrious work. First published in 1621, it is one of the great comic works of English literature, and one of the most idiosyncratic and strange. It has been out of the reach of the general reader for decades, but a new paperback edition from New York Review Books finally blows the dust from this wonderful volume, liberating it from the collectors, cognoscenti and academics.

Burton is one of literature's most celebrated recluses and eccentrics, and little is known of the details of his life. He was elected a Student of Christ Church, Oxford in 1599, and later became Vicar of St. Thomas, Oxford. Apparently a "merry fellow" in his youth, this brilliant scholar was subject to violent mood swings. He would chase off the "black dog", it is said, by going down to the river to listen to the bawdy badinage of the boatmen. "I have lived a silent, sedentary, solitary, private life in the university... penned up in my study," he writes in his preface. Yet, sequestered in his study, Burton let his encyclopedic mind range over all the known world and its history to complete this massive, manic and bitter examination of human experience, comic and pathetic in its excess of tragedy and squalor.

Although Burton wrote "I write of melancholy, by being busy to avoid melancholy," melancholy is only ostensibly

the book's subject – its true subject is man and his folly. *The Anatomy of Melancholy* defines and discusses the causes, symptoms and cures of melancholy (by far the longest section – by this most monkish of men – is that on "love melancholy"). But by a method of intermission and digression he glances at almost every human interest or endeavour "... like a ranging spaniel, that barks at every bird it sees." It is a (gloriously and inevitably) failed attempt to shape all human diversity into a coherent whole, choosing melancholy as its focus.

*The Anatomy of Melancholy* has a fascinating structure that is *sui generis*. It is, largely, a book made of books, a crazy quilt of quotes, a vast assemblage of knowledge gleaned from authors of all ages and countries. There is hardly a previous thinker or school of thought on humanity which is not referenced – including all of the medical, astrological and magical books extant at the time. No mere literary curio, it is itself highly quotable and much filched from (by Beckett, that other comedian-pessimist, and notoriously by Sterne, in *Tristram Shandy*). Burton's own rhetorical gifts are considerable; in one of his many amusingly self-deprecating asides about himself and his work, Burton describes this structure as: "... a confused lump... a rhapsody of rags from several hills, excrements of authors, toys and fopperies confusedly tumbled out."

This mad miscellany, full of lists,

catalogues, jeremiads, apothegms, illustrative narratives, anecdotes, re-told tales, sustained invectives, paraphrases, references and quotes, is characterised by a mercurial shifting and turning and a contradictoriness that is implicit in, and germane to, its subject. He treats the discomforts of constipation, the mischief of bad angels, murder and suicide with equal seriousness. He clarifies and quotes upon a subject to prove a point only to contradict himself later (tobacco is praised as "divine rare and superexcellent", then later condemned as "hellish, devilish and damned").

This is at times sententious, but rarely tedious, and often hilarious. Burton's prose is unpolished, earthy and colloquial, yet elegant, with a free and flowing syntax. His sentences writhe and roll and sometimes seem to almost spin out of control. His incantatory style is addictive, his diction as rich and strange, succulent and juicy as unicorn meat. Robert Burton is also the first master of the lyrical rant, unmatched until Thomas Bernhard in our own age. An extract from his (contemporarily relevant) diatribe against the iniquities of the market illustrates this and gives a good feel for his prose style:

"What's the market? A place, according to Anarcharsis, where they cozen one another, a trap... A vast chaos, a confusion of manners, as fickle as the air, a madhouse, a turbulent troop full of impurities, a mart of walking spirits, goblins, the theatre of hypocrisy, a shop of knavery, a flattery, a nursery of villainy, the scene of babbling, the school of giddiness, the academy of vice: a warfare, where you have to fight whether you will or no, and either conquer or go under, in which kill or be killed; wherein every man's for himself, his private ends, and stands upon his own guard. No charity, love, friendship, fear of God, alliance,

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affinity, consanguinity... Old friends become bitter enemies on a sudden for toys and small offences, and they that were erst willing to do all mutual offices of love and kindness, now revile and persecute one another to death..."

*The Anatomy of Melancholy* is a long, thick brick of a book, with a pleasing perfect-murder-weapon heft to it. But it does have its *longeurs* (what these are is subjective) and things of little interest to most contemporary readers – which can be skipped without shame. It is arranged into various "sections", "members" and "sub-sections" which you can and should ignore (Burton does). It is the ideal dipping-in and thumbing-through book, a rainy-day kind of a book to have kicking around, and there's no reason why it should be read linearly, from cover to cover. Burton's work will endure for as long as there are "fools and knaves" in the world. It was quixotically negative and critical in a genuinely optimistic and dynamic age; it is perhaps of even more value in a darker age that is falsely optimistic and rather entropic. ☹

*The Anatomy of Melancholy* is published on 23rd August, priced £20