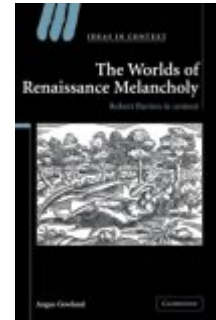




Angus Gowland. *The Worlds of Renaissance Melancholy: Robert Burton in Context.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006. xii + 338 pp. \$99.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-521-86768-9.



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When faced with an encyclopedic work like Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621), sprawling and asymmetrical in its organization, seemingly exhaustive in its reference matter, it is tempting to draw the misleading conclusion that the work was primarily concerned with its scholarly engagements--along with the equally misleading conclusion that, as a work of scholarship, it was relatively unconcerned with the political and social conflicts of its day. Certainly, as the most well-known critical responses suggest, whether favorable or invidious (Dr. Samuel Johnson famously rose from bed "two hours early" just to read from its pages, while Charles Lamb saw no better use for the book than to hold dust in place), the *Anatomy of Melancholy* was a study in language and learning, the more erudite the better--fodder rather for that proverbial Baroque man who studied libraries than his Renaissance counterpart who studied the world. Among more recent generations of scholars, an interest in the stylistic qualities of Burton's language, ranging from adulatory praise to the rigorous analysis,

has additionally suggested that as a writer, Burton was particularly attuned to questions about the status of language, its relation to the material that it sought to anatomize, and to the reader who tried to make sense of it. Such critical undertakings certainly are valuable contributions to our overall understanding of the *Anatomy of Melancholy*, yet it helps to recall that throughout the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, the book's importance had more to do with its demonstration that certain manifestations of religious radicalism had their origins in mental illness, and more broadly with what Angus Gowland describes in his new book as Burton's "general call for moral and political reform" (p. 297).

Burton is partly responsible for his own privative legacy, no matter how misleading. As he made explicit in his preface, he began to write about melancholy to avoid the controversies and pamphlet wars that passed, in his day, for discussions on divinity; yet his most original section, and the section that underwent the heaviest revision, was the section on religious melancholy, in

which he made clear his support for official ecclesiastical policies, no matter how much controversy they stirred up among his contemporaries. It is perhaps this internal inconsistency that makes so valuable Gowland's recent study, *Worlds of Melancholy*, since Gowland undertakes to show how, despite Burton's disposition to avoid day-to-day politics, the *Anatomy of Melancholy* did, in fact, engage with pressing political and social concerns; and paradoxically, how his concern for reform was inseparable from his scholarly autonomy, along with its sense of detachment. At the outset, Burton claimed that the world itself had become afflicted with melancholy; and in turn, this original and striking claim enabled him to describe the world in its entirety under the all-encompassing rubric of diagnosis and cure.

This is an ambitious project, to say the least, and it is a lot of terrain for a scholarly analysis to review. In the course of placing Burton in his intellectual context, Gowland considers, among other topics, the following: long-standing disputes within the medical tradition, including the famous humanist attacks on physicians; contemporary struggles regarding the ever-provocative Archbishop Laud's controversial ecclesiastical policies, particularly with respect to their effect on university life (where Burton would have felt their warmth directly); and certain habits of political misconduct, abuse, and corruption, such as he observed them (albeit from a safe distance) throughout the royal court. Not since, perhaps, Lawrence Babb's *Sanity in Bedlam: A Study of Robert Burton's Anatomy of Melancholy* (1959) has a scholar sought to bring together so many spheres to assemble something that might be called Burton's world outlook. But rather than simply reproduce Babb's project with a more "up-to-date" look and feel, Gowland is particularly attentive to the ways in which Burton actively engaged his contextual materials to stake out his positions on the overall health of the commonwealth. Indeed, as he suggests in his introduction—one must assume playfully—the *Anatomy of*

Melancholy is less an encyclopedia than a cento. Inasmuch as his book reads as a compilation of passages taken from other works, their strategic inclusion and arrangement within this new and deliberately estranging context infuses them with new and entirely unexpected significance; one thinks of Walt Benjamin and his designs for the study of the Paris arcades to come up with a critical project that comes close to resembling what Burton set out to accomplish.

In a more important respect, Gowland departs from previous surveys of Burton's intellectual tradition by offering a more critically sensitive, though, inevitably, a frequently speculative analysis of just what those positions amounted to. For Gowland, Burton undertook this project in the name of a humanistic tradition (Erasmus proves a key figure), which espoused the importance of scholarly independence even as it insisted on the solemn task of improving public welfare by providing learned counsel to rulers of state. To be sure, Burton remained something of a conservative, even a passionate conservative whose polemical features were felt precisely to the extent that he pretended to adopt a more middle of the road approach. Burton himself gave the lie, since he lent his support to Laud from an early point in his career—unlike others, he did not face the embarrassing task of "backtracking" from an earlier, more distinctly Calvinist doctrinal viewpoint—and, in fact, Burton adopted an increasingly anti-Calvinist tone in each successive edition. But as Gowland suggests throughout, and with increasing emphasis as he moves from chapter to chapter, Burton's conservatism may also have been an expedient, and not altogether harmonious, compromise rather than a commitment to the positions he adopted—a stance that is perhaps best captured after all by that clever contortion, "avant-garde conformist." At the very least, it is made evident through such assertions as, for instance, "Arguably Burton's work came to support Laud more by accident than by design" (p. 194).

The *Anatomy of Melancholy* did not itself present a single cohesive argument, and as Stanley Fish has shown, any reader who tries to follow what appears to be a guiding thread runs the risk of becoming tangled in the effort. It is no surprise, then, that while Gowland is persuasive in general, the details of his argument often seem to suffer under the strain of Burton's cagey style (which Gowland acknowledges to be a crucial aspect of the *Anatomy of Melancholy's* impossible utopianism). Many conclusions are not explicitly shown, but rather need to be inferred, and while the inferences are insightful, they tend to raise as many problems as they solve. Thus, Burton is taken to be at his most critical of church policy in precisely those sections where he seemed to go out of his way to show support, notably in the famous passage where he declared his allegiance to the 1633 publication of the Declaration to the Articles of the Church. In a characteristically ironic move, Burton went so far as to quote a passage from Erasmus, which, while ostensibly designed to refrain from polemics, nevertheless furtively suggested that Laud bore signs of a tyrant. This passage is well-covered ground among recent criticism. For his part, Gowland wonders how Burton could have gotten away with such an apparently gauche remark, and while he suggests several likely possibilities, in the end what makes the passage so important is its suggestions about Burton's method, namely to suggest without directly stating.

In another telling moment, in the chapter that follows, Gowland cites a passage in which Burton unequivocally praised the monarch for being the sound head of a particularly healthy domestic body politic, but then doubts Burton's sincerity on the grounds that England faced too many threats of foreign invasion and breaches in domestic security for any but the most naïve to be able to fall for the image of "such perfect and uninterrupted domestic security" (p. 236). In his final chapter, which undertakes a meticulous and thoughtful analysis of Burton's utopia, Gowland argues that

the specific components of his ideal commonwealth ultimately reveal the self-contradictory nature of his political ideals. The most explicitly political section of the *Anatomy of Melancholy* is marked by a profound frustration, if not despair, over the prospects of applying a traditional humanistic ideal of learned counsel to contemporary political affairs; and it is only a short step for Burton to affirm the autonomy of scholarship, even to the point of its miserable detachment from the world with which it originally sought to engage. The point becomes something of a refrain for Gowland in the final pages, but it gives emphasis to the notion that, in the end, Burton was less interested in proposing too many specific reforms than in demonstrating their impossibility, as even the most sustained attempts at political reform that he could imagine inevitably would be dashed by their own internal contradictions.

In the end, Gowland suggests that the conflicts he finds in his analysis of Burton's utopia might be extended to account for the *Anatomy of Melancholy* as a whole. Making an admittedly paradoxical claim, Gowland notes that if the original purpose of the *Anatomy of Melancholy* had been to provide some comfort or relief for melancholy, the process of seemingly endless scholarly investigation ultimately feeds the very condition that writing seeks to ameliorate. The cento thus becomes a deadly cure. While Burton extended his investigations under each successive edition, the more the *Anatomy of Melancholy* grew, the more deeply it was marked by a melancholy skepticism regarding contemporary world affairs. One does not need to go so far with Gowland as to believe that Burton's death was a suicide after all. The argument is based less on external evidence than on a supposition that the stoic in Burton got the upper hand, while the Christian in him (and more important his colleagues) gave it a charitable enough response. It is enough to follow the course of Burton's critical reception, and to recall that the *Anatomy of Melancholy* had been transformed from being a hammer against religious

radicals—even a precursor to certain Enlightenment principles—to being an object lesson on scholarly learning, and its incompatibility with the world around it, to sense that Gowland gives a persuasive account of the book's ambitions, as well as its failings. Gowland does not turn Burton into a controversialist. Instead, he shows how Burton's commitment to idealistic, if untimely principles, and more important his commitments to scholarship, made political intervention impossible, no matter how desirable it may have seemed. As an account of Burton's context, not only the intellectual background from which he drew, but also the always directly invested "Reader" whom Burton took great pains to address, Gowland's study should prove indispensable.

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