

“My purpose and endeavour is, in the following discourse, to anatomize this humor of melancholy through all his parts and species, as it is an habit, or an ordinary disease, and that philosophically, medicinally, to shew the causes, symptoms, and several cures of it, that it may be better avoided,” writes Robert Burton in the introduction of his literary legacy *The Anatomy of Melancholy*. First published in 1621 under the pseudonym Democritus Junior, each subsequent edition of Burton’s study of melancholy is supplemented with countless amendments and digressions. His foreword, a book in itself, launches with a direct appeal to the reader, *“When you see the cover, why ask about the thing hidden?”* With some urgency he attempts to dissuade his readers from identifying the ambiguous author: *“Seek not after that which is hid; if the content pleases thee, and be for thy use, suppose the man in the moon, or whom thou wilt to be the author; I would not willingly be known.”*

Burton’s authorial persona then proceeds to cheerfully dismantle this ironic, proposed identity even further with increasing ruptures, reflections, distractions, guises and exaggerations. The entire introduction to *The Anatomy* serves as a stage for an anti-illusory theatre, where the author presents himself in ever changing masks and literary styles. A treatise on Democritus, Burton’s half-hearted alter ego, is followed by an excessive revelation of his own mediocrity: he claims to have seen nothing of the world except maps, and compares his studies to a dog barking at every bird it encounters. *“I have read many books, but to little purpose, for want of good method; I have confusedly tumbled over divers authors in our libraries, with small profit, for want of art, order, memory, judgement.”* The apparent modesty and intimacy of these confessions is followed by stream-of-consciousness passages which touch on issues ranging from the publishing culture of the time, to the appropriation of knowledge, politics, trade, war and peace, work, sport and cosmology, thus revealing Burton’s encyclopaedic scope.

Again and again he returns to himself, linking his position as author with forays into the unintelligibility of his accumulated erudition, proactively addressing his critics and justifying his dense use of quotations: *“I do not deny it; I have only this of Macrobius to say for myself, ‘tis all mine and none mine.”* These tautological doublings in which content repeats in semantic form characterize the entire book, and Burton’s digressive style and diverse topics create an impression of randomness that seems to be a conscious attempt to make contingency tangible. *“So that a river runs, sometimes precipitate and swift, then dull and slow; now direct and winding; now deep and shallow; now muddy, then clear; now broad, then narrow; doth my style flow: now serious, then light; now comical, then satirical; now more elaborate, then remiss, as the present subject required, or as that time I was affected.”* He describes his writing style, apparently naturalizing it at the same time: *“I am a water-drinker, drink no wine at all, which so much improves our modern wits, a loose, plain, rude writer and as free and loose, I call a spade a spade, I write for minds not ears, I respect matter, not words; remembering that of Cardan, words exist for things, not things for words.”*

This play with tautology and paradox becomes particularly clear in a passage where Democritus himself is revealed as a philosopher with a depressive disposition, which, in short, implies that Burton’s *Anatomy of Melancholy* may be a therapeutic self-experiment: *“I write of melancholy, by being busy to avoid melancholy (...) to ease my mind by writing, for I had a heavy heart and an ugly head, a kind of imposthume in my head, which I was very desirous to be unladen of, and could imagine no fitter evacuation than this. Besides I might not well refrain, for one must needs scratch where it itches.”* Here Burton claims to use the poison as the cure, finding an escape from the torpor - the leaden numbness of idleness - by writing about it. Designing his self-assertions according to a deficient, elusive self-image, he finds form in its diffusion. This strategy of a crafted formlessness allows Burton to juxtapose the vast knowledge of his time with a literary counterpart, while claiming the idiosyncratic and associative twists as part of the discovery process.

And yet particularly in the three main parts of his treatise, his digressions constantly lead back to

the theme of melancholy. Like a white whale he trails the black bile of the four humors theory to the devil, fairies, goblins and superstitions in general; manages to draft his own social utopia; deliver theories on age and heredity; connect the idleness of animals to systemic and social apathy; consider nutrition and diets; and muse on love, loneliness, and religion. He devotes himself to the concept of freedom; debates poverty and poor education; and of the discomfort of his own class he notes, *“Now for poets, rhetoricians, historians, philosophers, mathematicians, sophister, etc., they are like grasshoppers, sing they must in summer, and pine in the winter, for there is no preferment for them.”*

Black bile - the physical manifestation of melancholy in medieval humorism - serves as a prism through which Burton bundles his present knowledge of the world, and the resulting aberrations draw the contours of this necessarily gargantuan literary form. Despite all the mysticism, weirdness, idiosyncrasy and discursion, it is perhaps primarily an attempt to locate pathology socially, using the collected knowledge to decouple melancholy from the prevailing metaphysical narratives. On this note, Robert Burton is somewhat of a forerunner of modern psychiatry on the path towards a contemporary concept of depression, a harbinger of modernism in its literary form, and a figure of consistent ambivalence as a writer: *“I shall lead thee over steep mountains, through treacherous valleys, dew-clad meadows and rough plowed fields, through variety of object, that what thou shalt like and surely dislike.”*

Moderne Stoffe | Schwarze Galle, Niklas Lichti, 2018
Modern substances | Black bile