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Books by the Same Author

John Skelton's Poetry
Surprised by Sin: The Reader in Paradise Lost
Seventeenth Century Prose: Modern Essays in Criticism

Self-Consuming Artifacts
The Experience of Seventeenth-Century Literature

By Stanley E. Fish

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acknowledge his position in the polarities it continually uncovers. The tract does not persuade or convert; rather it bullies, and in this final paragraph the basic pattern of the reader's experience is rehearsed for the last time. First he is asked to choose between two alternatives, as he was asked in the beginning to choose between two forms of church government, but no sooner is one of them proffered (and indeed urged) before its terrible consequences are visited: "with her shadow, all your dignities and honours, and all the glory of the land be darken'd and obscurd." The choice is, as it has been so many times before, no choice at all, and its rhetorical pretense is further subverted by the parenthetical "as nothing can be surer" which introduces the downward sweep of the concluding sentence. The form of that sentence is conditional ("if she be found to be malignant"), but because all the conditions have already been fulfilled, it becomes a command ("rain down your punishing force"), a command which has all the more impact because we have been implicitly included in the group in whose name it is issued, the elect people of God.

Inclusion is also the motion of Burton's prose in _The Anatomy of Melancholy_, but in his vision there are no elect, and God is prominent only by his absence.

I REFER IT TO YOU

The reader who manages to make his way through the preface to Burton's _Anatomy of Melancholy_ may be excused if he is unable to take its concluding sentences at face value:

but I presume of thy good favour, and gracious acceptance (gentle reader). Out of an assured hope and confidence therof, I will begin (123).¹

It is not simply that, given the treatment he has received, "gentle reader" is mockingly ironic, but that the same reader knows (if he knows anything at this point) that the promise Burton makes here will not be kept. The key word is "confidence." The conventional rhetoric implies the existence of a mutual and interrelated confidence in the speaker, in the reader, in the tractability of the material they confront, and in the possibility of carrying through with the proposed task. But it is precisely these confidences that have been eroded and finally destroyed by the experience of the prose, so much so that one is likely to respond with a wry and not altogether comfortable smile to the declaration, "I will begin." For beginning or ending or concluding or any of the other actions we associate with rationally discursive processes have (along with the

“gentle reader” been among the chief casualties of this amazing tour de force.

The erosion of the reader’s confidence, in himself and in everything else, begins on the first page, with the question, thrust on us by Burton, of the speaker’s identity. “Gentle Reader,” he says, “I presume thou wilt be very inquisitive to know what antic or personate actor this is... arrogating another man’s name; whence he is, why he doth it, and what he hath to say (15).” This deference to our presumed needs and desires is short-lived, however, as Burton immediately declares his independence of the reader and, indeed, of everyone: “I am a free man born, and may choose whether I will tell; who can compel me?... Seek not after that which is hid... I would not willingly be known.”

Scarcely have we adjusted to this new pose before it, too, is abandoned; the speaker, it seems, will honor his traditional obligations after all: “Yet in some sort to give thee satisfaction,... I will show a reason, both of this usurped name, title, and subject.” Of course, this does not reestablish the old relationship between speaker and reader. Too much has already happened for that. In fact, the overall effect of this opening address is to disorient the reader; he is off-balance, unable to predict the direction the speaker will next take, and this sense of disorientation is intensified by the first substantive sentence of the preface:

And first of the name of Democritus; lest any man by reason of it should be deceived, expecting a pasquil, a satire, some ridiculous treatise (as I myself should have done), some prodigious tenent, or paradox of the earth’s motion, of infinite worlds, in infinito vacuo, ex fortuita atomorum collisione, in an infinite waste, so caused by an accidental collision of motes in the sun, all which Democritus held, Epicurus and their master Leucippus maintained, and are lately revived by Copernicus, Brunus, and some others (15).

To a great extent the preface (and finally the whole of the Anatomy) is a series of false promises which alternately discomfort the reader and lead him on.2 Here the promises are at once syntactical, methodological, and thematic. Our general expectation is of an orderly defense of the name, title, and subject (after the “first,” a “second” and so on); more particularly, we expect the “lest” clause, which appears to be dependent, to be followed by an independent clause and a main verb (“lest any man... I will”); and within this syntactical expectation we are allowed to assume a continuing negative attitude toward the kind of “ridiculous treatise” the speaker promises not to deliver. But as a matter of fact, he does deliver it; for as the clauses in apposition to “ridiculous treatise” succeed one another, they take over the sentence which ends with an impressive list of those ancient and modern philosophers who have, in fact, maintained this “paradox of the earth’s motion.” With this shift in focus, the original direction (and promise) of the syntax is forgotten, and fortunately so, since the main verb and its independent clause never arrive. Also forgotten is the place of this sentence in the numbered and reasoned defense of the “name, title, and subject.” In fact, the Democritus who heads the roll call of atomists, seems strangely unconnected with the Democritus whose identity the sentence promised to clarify; and when a Burton (or Burton-Democritus) gestures toward the broken thread of his discourse with “besides,” the adverb has no clear argumentative referent. The sense of an argument is restored, momentarily, when the observation of Gellius is cited: “it hath been always an ordinary custom, as Gellius observes, ‘for later writers and imposters to broach many absurd and insolent fictions under the name of so noble a philosopher as Democritus, to get themselves credit.’” But if this is “a reason of the name (20),” it is not Burton’s, who mentions it only to disclaim it: “Tis not so with me.” (Not accidentally, this tends, retroactively, to discredit Gellius.)

It is at this point, just as the reader may be wondering if he will ever find out what is going on, that Burton finally tells him:

Thou thyself art the subject of my discourse (16).

This enigmatic announcement is typical of Burton’s strategy. On one hand it merely adds to the confusion; rather than a single clearly designated subject, we apparently have three, melancholy, Democritus Jr., and the reader (before the final word has been
spoken, we will know the many ways in which these are the same); but on the other, it provides, if not a reason for the name, a reason for going on. It is an appeal to the reader’s “self-interest” in two senses. He is naturally interested in hearing about himself, and he is interested in benefiting from what the treatise may have to tell him. The ploy is an obvious one, but it is nonetheless successful, especially since it is followed by what promises to be a straightforward and (relatively) comfortable account of the historical Democritus, “what he was with an epitome of his life (16).”

But this interlude of factual reporting proves to be no less unsettling and strenuous than the paragraph preceding it, if only because we have as many Democrituses as we have sources for his life, and not all of them are compatible:

Democritus, as he is described by Hippocrates and Laertius, was a little wearish old man, very melancholy by nature, averse from company in his latter days, and much given to solitariness, a famous philosopher in his age, coevers with Socrates, wholly addicted to his studies at the last, and to a private life: writ many excellent works, a great divine, according to the divinity of those times, an expert physician, a politician, an excellent mathematician, as Diacosmus and the rest of his works do witness. He was much delighted with the studies of husbandry, saith Columella, and often I find him cited by Constantinus and others treating of that subject. He knew the natures, differences of all beasts, plants, fishes, birds; and, as some say, could understand the tunes and voices of them. In a word, he was omnifariam doctus, a general scholar, a great student; and to the intent he might better contemplate, I find it related by some, that he put out his eyes, and was in his old age voluntarily blind, yet saw more than all Greece besides, and writ of every subject, Nihil in toto opificio natura, de quo non scriptis [there was nothing in the whole range of nature about which he did not write]. A man of an excellent wit, profound conceit; and to attain knowledge the better in his younger years he travelled to Egypt and Athens, to confer with learned men, “admired of some, despised of others.” After a wandering life, he settled at Abdera, a town in Thrace, and was sent for thither to be their law-maker, recorder, or town clerk as some will; or as others, he was there bred and born. Howsoever it was, there he lived at last in a garden in the suburbs, wholly betaking himself to his studies and a private life, “saving that sometimes he would walk down to the haven, and laugh heartily at such variety of ridiculous objects, which there he saw.” Such a one was Democritus (16).

Hardly is the biography under way before the emphasis shifts from the subject to his chroniclers. It is Democritus “as he is described by Hippocrates and Laertius.” A little further on it is Democritus as described by Columella, and then by “some,” and finally by an undifferentiated and suspect “others.” As the authorities cited become less reliable, the reader finds it increasingly difficult to form a clear picture of Democritus. In effect, we are offered several Democrituses, a new one appearing each time the rhythmical cadence comes to a natural close, at “solitariness,” “private life,” “do witness,” and so on. And the account of each of these is problematical. We first meet Democritus the “famous philosopher” who is, somewhat incongruously “a little wearish old man.” We next hear of Democritus the “great divine,” but his greatness is hardly asserted before it is questioned by the trailing phrase, “according to the divinity of those times.” A third Democritus, the interpreter and master of nature, suffers a similar diminution when his reputation is ascribed to what “some [unidentified] say.” At this point Burton makes a gesture toward reconciling his sources through the agency of a generalization: “In a word, he was omnifariam doctus, a general scholar”; but when we are told, in support of this judgment, that “to the intent he might better contemplate . . . he put out his eyes,” the grotesqueness of the action reflects back on everything that has been said previously. Of course this story may be apocryphal; nothing more is claimed for it than that it is “related by some”; but by the same reasoning, the other, more positive reports, are equally suspect. Since the speaker gives no indication of which authorities he considers most reliable, the reader is left with the unresolved
contradictions and incongruities. In the end, even the pretense of accuracy and objectivity is abandoned. After a wandering life, Democritus settled at Abdera where he was “sent for to be their law-maker.” Or was it their “recorder”? Or perhaps their “town clerk as some will.” Or was he sent for at all, but merely returning to the place where he was “bred and born”? Clearly Burton’s “ors” are to be translated “it doesn’t matter which” and he tells us as much with his next word, “Howsoever it was. . . .” “Such a one was Democritus,” the paragraph concludes, as if it had redeemed the promise of its introduction, to “set down a brief character of this our Democritus, what he was”; but given the number of available Democrituses and the spectacular lack of verifiable information about any one of them, this is less a conclusion than a joke.

The joke, of course, is on the reader, who had been led to expect a straightforward biographical sketch, factual and sequential, in the course of which actions and events would be linked in a chain of cause and effect, and thereby placed in perspective. Instead, something very curious happens. The principle of organization is not the sequence of Democritus’s life, but the authorities who are responsible for its details; and since they come to us unauthorized, or, what is worse, indiscriminately authorized, the details they offer confuse rather than clarify. There is no perspective at all, merely a progressive softening of focus. The absence of a clear line of reportorial responsibility results in the blurring of all lines: the narrative line of Democritus’s life, the outline of his personality, and more generally, the hard lines of a universe where a man is either blind or not, and if he is, he is not spoken of as laughing heartily at the ridiculous objects which he saw.

At this point, the reader would be justified in putting the book aside on the grounds that its author is irresponsibly playful. The excursion into biography had been welcomed, in part because it seemed to offer relief from the unsettling changes in tone and attitude that mark the opening sentences; but that relief has proved illusory and we are no more sure of our ground than we were before. The speaker disarms us, however, by conceding the irrelevance of the digression—“But in the meantime, how doth this concern me (17)?”—before moving to repersuade us that he will, after all, speak seriously to the original question—“upon what reference do I usurp his habit?” This is a strategy Burton will employ repeatedly, and always with success. He declares a narrow intention and proceeds for a time to adhere to it; but sooner or later (more often sooner) the original impulse of the discourse is obscured and the reader becomes confused and disoriented. It is then that Burton recovers himself and, with apologies, again promises to keep to the announced plan, and the entire sequence begins anew. As a result, although the reader is continually off-balance, he is never quite ready to give up, since a clear line of direction seems always to be just around the corner. In this case, Burton does finally give a “reason of the name.” Because Democritus left “unperfect” his work on melancholy, he, Democritus Jr. will “Revive” and “prosecute” it (20). But this reason is no more authoritative than any of the others he has put forward (“to assume a little more liberty and freedom of speech”); it merely allows him to bring the discussion to a rhetorical close. “You have had a reason of the name,” he tells us, silently making the point that in the multiple contexts of the preceding paragraphs, we cannot be sure that it is the reason, or even that the reason exists.

In succeeding sections of the preface, Burton turns away from a justification of his nom de plume to a justification of the entire enterprise. His first line of defense has often been quoted, “I write of melancholy, by being busy to avoid melancholy,” and in support of it he cites the example of Tully (Cicero). Or does he? “Cardan professeth he wrote his book de Consolatione after his son’s death, to comfort himself; so did Tully write of the same subject with like intent after his daughter’s departure, if it be his at least, or some impostor’s put out in his name, which Lipsius probably suspects (21–22).” At first, the point of the sentence is the warrant Tully’s work lends to the present task; but then his authorship is questioned (“if it be his at least”) and that question becomes the new focus of attention. Almost immediately, a third focus is found in the testimony of Lipsius, who “probably” suspects an imposture. “Probably” bears two significances here, “perhaps” or “not surely,” and the more positive “with proof” or “on a probable” basis. The ambiguity works to make Lipsius’s evidence as inconclusive as the example of Tully, if such an example indeed exists.
What we have here is a regressive series of supports, no one of which is firm enough to support even itself. While this may be bad logic, it is excellent strategy, for it enables Burton to transfer the burden of proof from himself to Tully and Lipsius, and by implication, to the entire body of learned tradition. Supposedly, the business of the sentence is the validation of the speaker's credentials; but by the end of it the speaker has disappeared and it is his witnesses who are on trial.

This is a rather suble instance of a technique Burton employs more obviously as the preface unfolds. "I have only this of Macrobius to say for myself (24)," he declares a little further on, and although "I" and "myself" surround Macrobius, the assertion, when it comes, will be attributed to him, and he will be held to account for it. Later it is Erasmus who speaks for the speaker, and with the same result, "to say truth, with Erasmus (27)." Joan Webber has said that Burton's "I" assimilates his quotations. It is also true that the quotations assimilate Burton. As a result, he is able to escape responsibility for whatever is said, and, moreover, the reader is deprived of a point of reference from which whatever is said can be judged.

In these examples we see Burton retreating behind the statements of one or two of his predecessors. In time, the base of responsibility (or irresponsibility) is widened until it includes everyone. He will typically reply to an objection by turning it back on the objector. You will say that I am a thief (to borrow the name and work of another)? "'Tis most true," but, then, who is not? "A fault that every writer finds, as I do now, and yet faulty themselves, trium literarum homines, all thieves; they pilfer out of old writers to stuff up their new comments, scrape Ennius' dung-hills, and out of Democritus' pit, as I have done (23)." In this sentence, accuser and accused, victim and thief, change places with bewildering rapidity. All is in flux, no one stays fixed, least of all the "I" who stands syntactically with both the fault-finders and the faulty. Individuality and individual responsibility disappear along with the distinction between the speaker and his thieving brothers (including, one must assume, Democritus), and the reader is once again deprived of a point of reference. Even the idea of thievish

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8 Joan Webber, The Eloquent "I" (Madison, 1968), p. 84.
while, Burton pursues the strategy of inclusion and the reader continues to be kept off-balance. He is alternately invited to distinguish between himself and those whose "dotages" prove the general conclusion "For we are . . . all mad," and made to claim his share of their folly. "Mutato nomine, de te fabula narratur [change but the name, the tale applies to you]." At one moment he is called upon to judge and in the next placed in the dock and declared guilty. "Say at a word, are they fools? I refer it to you, though you be likewise fools and madmen yourselves, and I as mad to ask the question; for what said our comical Mercury? Justem ab injustis petere insipientia est. I'll stand to your censure yet, what think you (72)?" "I refer it to you," a perfectly ordinary sentence whose syntax reflects a world in which persons (I, you) are distinguishable from one another and from objects (it); but that world and those distinctions are dissolved before the paragraph ends. Referred, referrer, and referee are all discovered to be manifestations of a single essence ("foolishness"), separable only in the artificial and distorting structure of sentences and anatomies. In this context, Burton's final gesture—"I'll stand to your censure yet, what think you"—is as audacious as it is meaningless (censure implies differences in authority and wisdom) and yet it maintains just enough of a rhetorical pretense to allow us to go on.

We go on to find more of the same. Fabatus may hold that "seafaring men are all mad," but then "He was a madman that said it," and, lest we feel excluded, "thou peradventure as mad to read it (116)." Burton gives us complete leave to censure him, so long as we are ready to stand to the censure ourselves: "have I no faults? Yes more than thou hast, whatsoever thou art (119)." (In this example the reader is silently reduced to the status of a thing, a "what.") We are at once the observers and the observed, continually moving from the inside to the outside and back again, from being readers to being read, until the boundaries between these categories become as indeterminate as any other.

There are, of course, long stretches in the course of which the reader is addressed only indirectly, if at all; but this only makes Burton's sudden turnings outward that much more effective, and in the final paragraphs, he assaults us with a bewildering succe-

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\[8^6\] Anatomy of Melancholy, p. 46.  
\[9^6\] Ibid., p. 70.
sion of poses and reversals. At first there is a return to the defiance of the opening lines: “If any man take exceptions, let him turn the buckle of his girdle, I care not. I owe thee nothing (reader), I look for no favour at thy hands, I am independent, I fear not (122),” but immediately this posture gives way to one of total abjection: “No, I recant, I will not, I care, I fear, . . . I have spoken foolishly, rashly, unadvisedly, absurdly, I have anatomized mine own folly . . . I will make you amends in that which is to come; I promise you a more sober discourse in my following treatise (122).” Were the preface to end here, as it seems to, one might make the mistake of taking this final promise seriously; but there is a full revolution yet to come. Tiring of apologies, Burton explains “But what needs all this (123)?” and for perhaps the thousandth time, he disclaims all responsibility: “I’ll deny all (my last refuge), recant all, renounce all I have said, if any man except, and with as much facility excuse as he can accuse it (123).” If this is his last refuge, it leaves the reader with none at all, and certainly with no confidence in the “more sober discourse to follow.” What we are left with is a closing sentence, still another promise, and the accumulated ironies of more than one hundred pages: “but I presume of thy good favour and gracious acceptance (gentle reader). Out of an assured hope and confidence therof, I will begin (123).”

WHOM SHALL I EXCEPT?

The reader’s skepticism concerning “the treatise to follow” indicates more than a lack of confidence in the author. It is not simply that Democritus Jr. seems incapable of a sober discourse, but that sober discourse itself is an impossibility given the world the preface reflects and describes. The strategy of inclusion, which collapses speaker, reader, and a thousand or more “authorities” into a single category of unreliability, extends also to every aspect of what we usually think of as “objective reality.” If, as I have suggested, the base of irresponsibility is widened to include everyone, it also includes every thing, every structure, every institution, every profession, every nation, every concept. Burton says as much, again and again; his assertion of universal madness is un-

qualified; but the human mind is perfectly capable of assenting to generalities and then finding ways to slip out of them in its response to particulars. Burton makes use of this tendency by encouraging it, by allowing the reader to believe momentarily in the discreteness of entities (including himself) which are revealed, upon closer examination, to be infected with the general malady. There is, therefore, a “double motion” in the preface—one rational and distinguishing, in the direction of making sense of things, and the other irrational and inclusive, leading to the discovery everywhere of nonsense—and the first is prosecuted with just enough conviction and plausibility to make us forget the (literally) disillusioning implications of the second. It is, after all, entirely reasonable on Burton’s part to anticipate the objection that he is a divine meddling in physic, and entirely reasonable on our part to consider his response. That response unfolds in easy stages. First he argues that there are already more than enough treatises in divinity, “so many . . . pamphlets, expositions, sermons, that whole team of oxen cannot draw them (35)”; and, moreover, this “tempest of contention (35)” so absorbs us that, “Severinus the Dane complains,” we leave untouched “those chiefest treasures of nature . . . wherein the best medicines for all manner of diseases are to be found” (36).” And if he be thought unfit for the task, there are, as always, precedents. Physicians have forsaken their practices to write in divinity, and divines, Marsilius Ficinus for one, have taken themselves to physic. Indeed, there are many poor country vicars who “for want of other means, are driven to their shifts, to turn mountebanks, quacksalvers, empirics, and if our greedy patrons hold us to such hard conditions . . . they will make most of us . . . at last turn taskers, maltsters, costermongers, graziers . . . or worse (30).” For a moment the satiric impulse threatens to overwhelm the argument: if Burton looks to these examples for justification, he is not likely to win our confidence. He assures us, however, “I hope I shall commit no great error or indecorum (36),” and returning to the defense, he concludes with his strongest point: melancholy is the disease of both the body and soul “and who knows not what an agreement there is betwixt these two professions?”:
A good divine either is or ought to be a good physician, a spiritual physician at least, as our Saviour calls Himself, and was indeed (Matt. iv,23; Luke v,18; Luke vii,21). They differ but in object, the one of the body, the other of the soul, and use divers medicines to cure: one amends animam per corpus [the soul through the body], the other corpus per animam [the body through the soul] as our Regius Professor of Physic well informed us in a learned lecture of his not long since. One helps the vices and passions of the soul, anger, lust, desperation, pride, presumption, etc., by applying that spiritual physic; as the other uses proper remedies in bodily diseases. Now this being a common infirmity of body and soul, and such a one that hath as much need of a spiritual as a corporal cure, I could not find a fitter task to busy myself about, a more apposite theme, so necessary, so commodious, and generally concerning all sorts of men, that should so equally participate of both, and require a whole physician (37).

One can see from this how persuasive an apologist Burton could have been had it suited his purposes. He appeals to the empiricist bias toward "fruitful works" and, at the same time, manages to clothe himself in all the authority of the most powerful of Christian images, the divine physician. Reconciling these two strains of seventeenth-century thought is no mean feat, and Burton moves to consolidate his position by recapitulating the arguments which support it:

But this I hope shall suffice, when you have more fully considered of the matter of this my subject, rem substratum, melancholy, madness, and of the reasons following, which were my chief motives: the generality of the disease, the necessity of the cure, and the commodity or common good that will arise to all men by the knowledge of it, as shall at large appear in the ensuing preface. And I doubt not but that in the end you will say with me, that to anatomize this humour aright, through all the members of this our microcosmos, is as great a task as ... (38).

This is so firmly reasonable that we are likely to finish the sentence for him: "to anatomize this humour aright is as great and important a task as a man could set himself." And, in some sense, this is exactly what he does go on to say, but unfortunately his case for the "greatness" of the task is made so strongly that it argues as well for its impossibility:

to anatomize this humour aright ... is as great a task as to reconcile those chronological errors in the Assyrian monarchy, find out the quadrature of a circle, the creeks and sounds of the north-east or north-west passages, and all out as good a discovery as that hungry Spaniard's of Terra Australis Incognita, as great a trouble as to perfect the motion of Mars and Mercury, which so crucifies our astronomers, or to rectify the Gregorian calendar (38).

Even today one hears "you might as well try to square the circle," when a project is declared unfeasible; and as Burton proceeds to pile Pelion on Ossa, the implication is unmistakable: the anatomization of this humor is a grand piece of folly, he is a fool for proposing it and we are fools for reading it. The supposed justification of the undertaking—the generality of the disease—has suddenly become the strongest argument against it. The speaker, however, seems unaware of the double edge his comparisons carry and he continues as if the smooth surface of his narrative were undisturbed: "And as that great captain Zisca would have a drum made of his skin when he was dead, because he thought the very noise of it would put his enemies to flight, I doubt not but that these following lines, when they shall be recited, or hereafter read, will drive away melancholy (though I be gone) as much as Zisca's drum could terrify his foes (38)." This is ambiguous praise indeed since it depends wholly on one's estimate of the effectiveness of Zisca's drum, a point the prose carefully leaves in doubt. Zisca thought the noise of it would put his enemies to flight; he may have been wrong, and to the extent that he was, the comparative "as much as Zisca's drum" is deflating. But before the reader has time to react to these equivocations (Burton's prose never allows you to stop) his attention is diverted by a new and very personal issue:
Yet one caution let me give by the way to my present or future reader, who is actually melancholy, that he read not the symptoms or prognostics in this following tract, lest by applying that which he reads to himself, aggravating, appropriating things generally spoken to his own person (as melancholy men for the most part do), he trouble or hurt himself, and get in conclusion more harm than good. I advise them therefore warily to peruse that tract; *Lapidies loquitur* (so said Agrippa, *de occ. Phil.*), *et caveant lectores ne cerebrum iis excuitat* [he discourses stones, and the readers must beware lest he break their heads]. The rest I doubt not they may securely read, and to their benefit. But I am over-tedious, I proceed (38).

Joan Webber has written that Burton’s sentences function as multiple-choice questions. Here the choice is between two categories, those who are melancholy and those who are not, but the idea of a class of non-melancholics, for whom much of the book is intended, undermines the line of defense Burton has been pursuing and we have been following. If the only people who can read the *Anatomy* are those who don’t need it, how can it be medicinal, in either a physical or a spiritual sense? My question shows how easy it is to engage Burton at one level and walk into his traps at another. Every reader is “actually melancholy” (just as he is necessarily both future and present), for “we are all mad.” By offering the empty category, Burton makes certain that we will read the interdicted sections, if only to prove to ourselves that his warning was meant for others. The ruse is transparent, but it is enough to overcome our sense of the absurd when Burton announces, “But I am over-tedious, I proceed.”

This sequence, from the original rhetorical question “What have I to do with physic?” to the transitional, “I proceed” establishes a pattern that recurs so often that it is finally controlling: a declaration that distinctions between persons, times, professions, nations are invalid because all are mad, and melancholy is followed by a return to the supposedly discredited task of distinguishing, and the asking of the question “Whom shall I except?” The sequence is less remarkable than the fact that we negotiate it so often without finally balking at it, and we do not balk at it precisely because its renegotiation represents another opportunity to ask the question, which is, at least potentially, an opportunity to disassociate ourselves from the general indictment of a world gone mad. The mechanism that keeps shutting off avenues of escape also keeps opening them; the determined in-conclusiveness of the prose, its refusal to stop, protects us from the negative conclusion it is continually, but never finally, reaching.

Thus when Burton promises to “make a brief survey of the world,” we know, because he tells us, what that survey will uncover—melancholy; yet in the course of it, we will believe, if only momentarily, in persons, times, professions, nations that have escaped the general infection. Indeed the very assertion of universal madness is often made in such a way as to allow us to deny it in the act of reading it:

That men are so misaffected, melancholy, mad, giddy-headed, hear the testimony of Solomon (Eccles. ii, 12):

“And I turned to behold wisdom, madness and folly (40).”

Hearing the testimony of Solomon in this context means accrediting him as an authority, although, of course, if the thesis is accepted, Solomon himself must be among the misaffected, mad, melancholy, and giddy-headed. For the moment, however, Solomon is detached from his own observation simply because, in terms of the linear print experience, he stands in front of it. And he continues to occupy a privileged position in the reader’s mind even when the impossibility of such a position is immediately reaffirmed. “So that, take melancholy in what sense you will, properly or improperly, in disposition or habit, for pleasure or for pain, dotage, discontent, fear, sorrow, madness for part or all, truly or metaphorically, ’tis all one (40).” (Significantly, the distinctions that are here declared invalid—“’tis all one”—are the same distinctions that will form the basis of the divisions in the main body of the tract; and they will be no more real than here.) It takes Solomon himself to destroy the illusion of apartness created by the authority of his name: “Surely I am more foolish than any man.” The reputed wisest of men admits his

folly and the category “wiseman” (non-mad), which for a time seemed to contain at least one member, collapses.

In the next paragraph, however, it is reconstituted under cover of another general indictment: “So corrupt is our judgement, we esteem wise and honest men fools (41).” Logically, the all-inclusive “our” of the first half of this statement militates against the very existence of the wise and honest men who dominate the second half; but rhetorically the weight of the sentence falls on the assertion of corruption; the esteeming of wise men fools is merely brought in to support it. In short, we are tricked into worrying about the wrong proposition and allowing the truly provocative thesis—that there are wise and honest men—to slip by us unexamined. It is not long, however, before the newly reconstituted distinctions are again dissolved, this time by the prose itself:

"Tis an ordinary thing with us to account honest, devout, orthodox, divine, religious plain dealing men idiots, asses, that cannot or will not lie and dissemble, shift, flatter ... make good bargains, supplant, thrive ... (42)." Since the force of the verb phrase (“to account”) lessens as the sentence continues, the groups whose confusion Burton is supposedly lamenting become, in the experience of his prose, more and more confused. “Plain dealing men” “idiots, asses,” “tis all one.”

One would think that after this the hope of finding a wise and honest man would be abandoned, even by the most Diogenes-like of readers, but Burton revives it for a third time by turning to discuss a class of men who, by his own definitions, could not exist—philosophers, lovers of wisdom. At first it seems that these men will be brought in only to be added to the ever-growing list of fools. “Yea, even all these great philosophers the world hath ever had in admiration, whose works we do so much esteem ... (42).” Obviously this sentence will end by finding in these men and their works as much folly as can be found in everyone else. But the main verb never arrives and the sentence fails to develop as anticipated. In time the “Yea, even” construction is forgotten and the reader is left listening to a round of unqualified praises for the “wise men” of antiquity, “Socrates the wisest man of his time. ... Those seven wise men of Greece ... Aristotle ... wisdom itself in the abstract (42–43).” When the inevitable re-

versal does come—“myriads of men wiser in those days and yet all short of what they should be (43)” —it is, in a sense, too late, because we have already been lulled into accepting the credentials of these myriads at face value. The section on philosophers concludes, as every section concludes, with a new insistence on the old and familiar truth: “For we are ad unum omnes, all mad, semel insanivimus omnes, not once, but always ... say it of us all ... young and old, all doth (46).” But even this relentless statement contains a Burtonian loophole in the form of an unnecessary and suspect citation of authority: “all do the, as Lac-
tantius proves out of Seneca.” If one steps back from the prose, this turning to Lactantius and Seneca is absurd, since they are both necessarily implicated in the general accusation; but the sentence moves right on past this point, disallowing a rhetorical pause, and we leave it believing both in the madness and foolishness of all and in the sanity of Lactantius and Seneca, and perhaps, in some innermost recess of our minds, believing in ourselves.

Burton is so confident of his ability to control us that at one point he openly displays the mechanism by which we have been manipulated: “It is midsummer moon still, and the dog days last all the year long, they are all mad. Whom shall I then except (117)?” The question is absurd, and the answer to it has been given many times before: no one. It is given here again, and, what is more important, it is given not by implication but openly. And yet, within a few lines this very openness, so uncharacteristic of Burton’s usual procedure, becomes the means by which he once again tricks us into believing in something we know to be a fiction:

Whom shall I then except? Ulricus Huttenus’ Nemo; nam, Nemo omnibus horis sapiet, Nemo nascitur sine vitis, Crimi
nome Nemo caret, Nemo sorte sua vitis contentus, Nemo in amore sapiet, Nemo bonus, Nemo sapiens, Nemo est ex omni parti beatus [Nobody; for Nobody is sensible at all times; Nobody is born without fault; Nobody is free from blame; Nobody lives content with his own lot; Nobody is sane in love; Nobody is good, Nobody wise; Nobody is happy], etc., and therefore Nicholas Nemo, or Monsieur Nobody, shall go free (117).
Here the will-o’-the-wisp the reader has chased through so many pages and sections is identified as the nonperson he has always been; but, just as before he acquired a substance simply because we desired him to have one, in this passage he acquires a substance simply because he is named, and then named again. Of course, if there were an opportunity to reflect on the illusion the prose is creating, we might be able to disassociate ourselves from it; but as always, the pace of the Anatomy discourages reflection, and before we know it the reality of that illusion has become a presupposition of the words we are reading. “Whom shall I except in the second place?” Simply by taking this sentence in, we assent, if only for a moment, to what is assumed—that there is a “first place”—and thereby participate in the reification of a nobody into some body. If the reader is Burton’s subject, he is also his plaything.

YOU SHALL FIND THEM ALL ALIKE

Burton’s double game, his repeated playing of both ends (the impulse to anatomize and the impulse to assimilate) against the middle (you) has many consequences, some of which we have already noted: the speaker, in effect, disappears behind a screen of contradictory authorities and shifting scenery; the reader is deprived of a point of reference, either in the person of the author or in the material, and prevented from distancing himself from the follies of mankind; distinctions and classifications whose reality is usually assumed are called into question and finally denied. There are also future consequences in the sense that the reader’s experience in these pages predetermines his response to what is to follow. It is a strange preface indeed that makes an a priori mockery of the work it introduces, but that is precisely the effect of the patterns analyzed here, and the effect is reinforced when Burton directly attacks the procedures he will employ in the body of his formal Anatomy:

But make how many kinds you will, divide and subdivide, few men are free, or that do not impinge on some one kind or other . . . as he that examines his own and other men’s actions shall find (47).

We are of the same humours and inclinations as our predecessors were; you shall find us all alike (53).

To insist in every particular were one of Hercules’ labours, there’s so many ridiculous instances as motes in the sun (68).

Proceed now a partibus ad totum, or from the whole to the parts, and you shall find no other issue; the parts shall be sufficiently dilated in this following Preface. The whole must needs follow by a sorites or induction (78).

Begin then where you will, go backward or forward, choose out of the whole pack, wink and choose, you shall find them all alike, “never a barrel better herring (78).”

To insist in all particulars were an Herculean task (116). It would ask an expert Vesalius to anatomize every member (117).

Making kinds, dividing, subdividing, examining, insisting on particulars, proceeding a partibus ad totum or from the whole to the parts, beginning, choosing, anatomizing, these are the very activities to which Burton will call us for several hundreds of pages, yet here he clearly labels them exercises in futility. Not that this will prevent us from going on to the larger work, any more than the unceasing repetition of “Burton’s Law”—all are mad—prevents us from seeking its exceptions. In both contexts we are pulled forward by the strongest of motives—self-interest, the hope of finding an answer to the question “whom shall I except?” and of finding in the answer a place for ourselves. So strong and deeply rooted is this motive that Burton can dangle it as bait in any number of guises and rely on us to rise to it. At one point the bait takes the form of Christianity: “Yea, but you will infer, that is true of heathens, if they be conferred with Christians (I Cor. III, 19): ‘The wisdom of this world is foolishness with God’ (45).” Here is a distinction one can approve and live with: a heathenish subsection to the foolishness of the world, as opposed to a Christian alliance with the wisdom of God. But the opposition barely
survives its introduction, for “In some sense, Christians are Crassians, and if compared to that wisdom [God’s], no better than fools.” One avenue of escape closed, however, opens up the possibility of another. Christians may be fools in relation to the wisdom of God, but we need not always apply that stringent criterion. There are, after all, less rigorous standards of wisdom for the judging of secular activities. But the reader who takes this path finds that Burton has anticipated him: “But I do not so mean; even in our ordinary dealings we are no better than fools. ‘All our actions . . . upbraid us of folly,’ our whole course of life is but matter of laughter.” In short, the “wisdom of the world” is simply a phrase, rhetorically useful if the intention is to glorify God, but certainly not something one should believe in. To the extent that we would like to believe in it, it represents still another way of avoiding the truth about ourselves (“Our whole course of life is but matter of laughter”), a way this small sequence effectively bars.

The self-defensive mechanism of the human mind is infinitely resourceful, however; any port in a storm. If these times and this place are replete with folly, perhaps we can find refuge (and an exception) in former ages and far countries:

For where you shall see the people civil, obedient to God and princes, judicious, peacable and quiet, rich, fortunate, and flourish, to live in peace, in unity and concord, a country well tilled, many fair built and populous cities . . . that country is free from melancholy; as it was in Italy in the time of Augustus, now in China, now in many other flourishing kingdoms of Europe (79).

The reference to Italy is conveniently in the past, and the reference to China is to a country remote and mysterious. As for “many other flourishing kingdoms,” that raises more questions than it answers. Even so, Italy and China are names, these names are attached to existing geographical entities, and it would seem that a place “free from melancholy” is at least a possibility, albeit a rarity. But in the extended survey of kingdoms that follows, the effects of melancholy are discovered everywhere, in ancient Italy “when Catiline rebelled (83),” in China, which is even now “infested (96)” with wandering Tartars, and in every “flourishing” kingdom of Europe: Italy, where “luxury and riot” reign; Spain, in bondage to “superstition and jealousy”; Germany, debauched by drunkenness; the northern countries, intemperate and gluttonous (97). So pervasive are barbarism and folly that even America and Terra Australis Incognita must be purged of them, if possible. Of course, it is not, and a section that began by contrasting England to those other places and finding in them a hope that we, too, may be reformed, ends by declaring all such hopes “vain and absurd”:

These are vain, absurd, and ridiculous wishes not to be hoped: all must be as it is, Boccinus may cite commonwealths to come before Apollo, and seek to reform the world itself by commissioner, but there is no remedy (97).

“There is no remedy,” whether one seeks it in various professions (divinity, physic, philosophy) persons (Seneca, Democritus, Democritus Jr., the reader) or nations (England, France, China, ancient Italy). The reformation of the world is as impossible a task, it would seem, as the anatomization of melancholy or the finding of its cure. Burton’s universe and his grand scheme break down at precisely the same point, that is, at every point.

Thus when Burton declares, “Begin then where you will, . . . choose out of the whole pack . . . you shall find them all alike, ‘never a barrel better herring’” (78), he describes both his method and the reader’s experience. Every change of subject, every new topic, is another barrel, a container whose contents are, for the moment, unknown; and for that moment each barrel is the substance of a revived hope, the hope that when opened it will yield better herrings and that we will be among them. But as Democritus Jr. so often tells us, “you shall find them all alike”; and the finding of them all alike is, from the reader’s point of view, the action as well as the plot of the preface. So that, despite the tendency to digress and the absence of sustained discursive patterns, there is a rigorous logic to the movement of the prose, a logic of elimination—“there is no remedy,” “Whom shall I then except? . . . Nobody”—and of assimilation—“all the world is melancholy . . . every member of it.” Every paragraph, every section shuts off an-
other potential route of escape for the reader who resists the personal application of the general rule. One by one the areas of an artificially segmented universe lose their distinctness, until the complete triumph of madness is not an assertion, but an experienced fact.

The last area to be inundated, the last barrel to be opened, the last refuge for the resisting mind, is its own place. Having denied us comfort and hope in the world outside, Burton invites us to turn inward to the world of the imagination. Let states persist in their excesses and persons in their crimes, "I will yet to satisfy and please myself, make an Utopia of mine own, a New Atlantis, a poetical commonwealth of mine own, in which I will freely domineer, build cities, make laws, statutes, as I list myself. And why may I not (97)?" Even at this late stage, Burton continues to involve us in his double game. On the surface this new project is an admission of defeat ("Because . . . it [purging the world of melancholy] is a thing so difficult, impossible, and far beyond Hercules' labour"); the very name, "Utopia," implies impossibility and insubstantiality. Still, the notion has a kind of conceptual reality to which the reader can attach whatever wishful thoughts have survived the disillusioning experience of the preface. In other words, it represents another potential avenue of escape, if only into illusion; for although Utopia is (literally) nowhere, it is, simply as an idea, a container or enclosure within whose confines one can hope to be free of melancholy. And, as Burton exclaims, "Why not?" The answer, unfortunately, is that while one may freely domineer in a commonwealth, one's freedom does not extend to the banishing of human nature, and if human nature enters, all that the Utopia was designed to exclude enters with it.

Burton's Utopia begins well. The setting is paradisal, "ubi semper virens laurus . . . where is a perpetual spring (98)." Cities are built at the most convenient distances from each other. Rivers flow exactly where they are needed. Marketplaces, churches, recreation fields are dotted about in "opportune places (99)." The first discordant note is struck by the word "hospital": "Hospitals of all kinds, for children, orphans, old folks, sickmen, madmen, soldiers (99)." Madmen are exactly what we have entered Utopia to escape, and suddenly here they are at the tail end of a list that began innocently enough with children and orphans. A bit of the excluded world has seeped in, and more of it enters through the agency of the "not" clause which follows:

not built precario, or by gouty benefactors, who, when by fraud and rapine they have extorted all their lives, oppressed whole provinces, societies, etc., give something to pious uses, build a satisfactory almshouse, school, or bridge, etc., at their last end, or before perhaps, which is no otherwise than to steal a goose and stick down a feather, rob a thousand to relieve ten (99).

Ostensibly this is an account of the motives that will not obtain in Utopia, but the (verbal) act of banishing them gives them a substance they would not otherwise have had. At some point in this long syntactical unit the "not" ceases to be controlling, and we watch the gouty benefactors, rapacious oppressors, and pious robbers build their hospitals right here on Utopian territory, the printed page. When Burton continues, "and those hospitals so built and maintained," it is impossible to tell which hospitals he means; those he would have in Utopia or those whose origins have been the object of his attack. And, of course, that is exactly the point: the distinction, not only between the two kinds of hospitals but between the supposedly different worlds they serve, is incapable of being maintained, even as an imaginative exercise. In the pages that follow more and more of reality intrudes. There are still gestures in the direction of the Utopian ideal—"Few laws, but those severely kept, plainly put down, and in the mother tongue," "No parish to contain above a thousand auditors (102)"—but the real force of the prose comes from the sense of imminent engulfment that attends every reference, direct and indirect, to the excluded world.

If it were possible, I would have such priests as should imitate Christ, charitable lawyers should love their neighbors as themselves, temperate and modest physicians, poli-
Artifacts

Reader

the

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ticians contemn the world, philosophers should know themselves, noblemen live honestly, tradesmen leave lying and cozening, magistrates corruption, etc.; but this is impossible (102).

"If it were possible" is a qualification that belongs in the real world; in Utopia, possibility is bounded only by the wishes and imagination of the framer. But the imagination of this framer cannot free itself from the very thing it would avoid. At the beginning of this sentence the word "should" is future—hypothetical; but by the end it is exhortative and moral—noblemen ought to live honestly—and the hypothesis has been forgotten in the reality (they don't). When Burton concludes wearily, "I must get such as I may," he in effect admits defeat not only on the particulars—priests, politicians, lawyers—but on the Utopia itself. That admission is formalized a little later on by these distressingly familiar words: "for men are partial and passionate, merciless, covetous, corrupt, subject to love, hate, fear, favour, etc. (103)."

There is no hint in this statement of a particular application, no exception of the Utopian populace or of any other group. We are back at the same old stand, nothing has changed, and to all intents and purposes it is as if the idea of a Utopia had never been broached.

The decision to let go of the Utopian framework is, in a curious way, made independently of either the speaker or the reader. In the midst of a discussion of "defensive" wars (wars, too, will have their place in the "ideal" commonwealth) Burton exclaims, "Manum de Tabella, I have been over tedious in this subject (107)." What exactly is meant by "this subject" is not at all clear. Is it this particular aspect of Utopia, its response to military challenges? or is it the Utopia as a whole? The first words of the following paragraph only perpetuate the ambiguity—"From commonwealths and cities I will descend to families"—for this,
deep, then shallow; now muddy then clear; now broad, then narrow; doth my style flow (32).” And later, the river becomes a thread, but to the same effect: “You shall find a phantastical strain, a fustian, a bombast, a vainglorious humour, an affected style, etc., like a prominent thread in an uneven woven cloth, run parallel throughout (111).” The river-thread images are the perfect vehicles for the all-inclusiveness of Burton’s vision; they allow for a plurality of forms within a singleness of essence, recognizing the existence of local variations, but insisting on the final relevance of a larger perspective in the context of which those variations are less striking than the one prominent thread: “There is in all melancholy similitudo dissimilis, like men’s faces, a disagreeing likeness still; and as in a river we swim in the same place, though not in the same numerical water; as the same instrument affords several lessons, so the same disease yields diversity of symptoms (397).” This likeness of all men and of their productions operates in the present situation to dissolve the usual distinctions between author and reader, observer and observed. The mind of the narrator is itself an instance of what he is reporting, as are the minds of those to whom he reports. Wherever the melancholy mind turns, it will find melancholy and relate its findings to melancholics, in a diseased, mad, rambling irrational—that is, melancholy—style. What we have, then, is a total unity of unreliability, in the author, in his materials, in his readers, and in his structure, a total unreliability and a total subjectivity.

In the face of such a depressing unity, why is the Anatomy not a more uncomfortable experience than most readers report it to be? One answer to this question has already been given: every time a category is collapsed into the general malady, a new one pops up to take its place and to become, for a moment, a candidate for the status of “exception”; as long as the prose goes on (and it does go on), as long as the scene continually shifts, the supply of unopened barrels, and therefore of hope, is assured. At the same time (and this is the second answer to my question), the discovery everywhere of unreliability and subjectivity finally (and paradoxically) makes everything we come upon in the Anatomy perfectly reliable and objective; for in the absence of an independent center of authority, that is of an exception, the private and eccentric visions that fill the book become the norm and subjectivity becomes objectivity, for it is all there is; and by the same reasoning, if there is nothing but madness and melancholy, whatever mad and melancholy men say is necessarily true. When the assertion “all are mad” is proved by Lactantius out of Seneca (46), the absurdity of the pseudo-documentation is obvious: Seneca and Lactantius are no less mad than anyone else. And yet it is precisely this that validates their judgment (it takes one to know one) and makes of them reliable authorities. In these terms, the terms of the universe he both inhabits and creates, Burton’s antimethod is perfectly methodical, and when he pledges to “omit all impertinent digressions, to say no more of such as are improperly melancholy (120),” he is able to keep his promise by breaking it; for in a world ordered (or disordered) by digressiveness, every digression is in order.

As for those who are “improperly melancholy,” where melancholy is the standard, the concept of propriety is meaningless. Meaningless, too, are the concepts of authorship and attribution, for when all are infected with the same disease, all speak with the same, that is, one, voice. (This is reflected in the prose, in the gradual shift from full-verb phrases which specify agents, to infinitives whose subject is general, to tenseless, subjectless forms which suggest actions that are not produced but simply are.)

In short, total unreliability assures total anonymity, and makes perfect sense out of Burton’s most outrageous statement: “I writ this and published this . . . it is neminis nihil [nothing by nobody] (122).” In this upside-down sacramental universe, where a great (but perverse) spirit rolls through all things, “I” can be equal to nobody, that is everybody, because the distinction between persons is merely a distinction between momentarily and artificially discrete manifestations of a single essence (“’tis all mine, and none mine”). And thus Burton’s disclaimers of responsibility.

10 See, for example, Anatomy of Melancholy, p. 67: “To see a fond mother, like Aesop’s ape, hug her child to death, a witless witt at his wife’s honesty, and too perspicacious in all other affairs; one stambe at a straw, and leap over a block; rob Peter, and pay Paul; scrape unjust sums with one hand, purchase great manors by corruption, fraud and cozenage, and liberally to distribute to the poor with the other, give a remnant to pious uses, etc.; penny wise, pound foolish; blind men judge of colours; wise men silent, fools talk.”
sibility—not I, but Democritus, not he but "they"—carry a weight and truth far beyond their immediate rhetorical effect. It is not I, but the world, all, everybody, they, speaking, even when a particular name or a limiting pronoun happens to be attached to the utterance.11 "Whom shall I except?" Burton asks, and the answer is "Monsieur Nobody (117)," and because this answer is documented so fully, the answer to another question—who wrote this work?—is "Everybody," the world, all, they, you, including the reader who is, in some sense, the author of what he is reading. The book is finally the world speaking to a part of itself (the reader) through the medium of a part of itself (the speaker) about parts of itself (nations, professions, places, etc.). In this conflation of the categories in terms of which we usually analyze the literary experience—speaker, reader, subject, reality—all questions of perspective and method lose their urgency. Burton calls the preface a "confused lump," but in a way he is over-harsh, since confusion is its unifying principle. And therefore, when he ends by declaring "I will begin," the statement is at once ridiculous and perfectly acceptable; for, "Begin then where you will, go backward or forward, choose out of the whole pack, wink and choose, you shall find them all alike (78)."

THERE IS NO REMEDY

What happens in the body of the tract, not surprisingly, is merely a larger and more schematically obvious version of what happens in the preface. To put the matter simply, if paradoxically, the nonmethod is more methodized. In place of the rather random surfacing of a succession of organizing principles (professions, nations, the Utopia), the reader is confronted immediately with a huge predigested synopsis in the form of a Ramus-like branching diagram, complete with sections, subsections, and members of subsections. The effect is to renew the promise—so many times made and so many times breached—of a comprehensible and sane universe, where the relationships between things can be grasped and anatomized and where the regularity of cause and effect suggests at least the possibility of managing one's life. In this case the promise has all the solidity a concrete visualization can confer, and its force is sustained by Burton's more or less faithful adherence to the scheme of his synopsis. But within the framework of that ever-present and ever-insistent superstructure, the same old games are being played. At one point in Partition I, Section 3, Member 1, Subsection 2, Symptoms or signs in the Mind, we are told this about those melancholics who fear without cause: "Yet for all this, as Jaccinus notes, 'in all other things they are wise, staid, discreet, and do nothing unbecoming their dignity, person, or place, this foolish, ridiculous, and childish fear excepted' (388)." For a moment, this particular strain of melancholy seems no more debilitating than an occasional nervous tic, irritating perhaps and upsetting, but noticeable chiefly as an exception to a sane and normal pattern of behavior. But what Burton giveth, Burton usually taketh away; and in the second half of this same sentence, the area of sanity is narrowed to nothing: "which so much, so continuously tortures and crucifies their souls, like a barking dog that always bawls, but seldom bites, this fear ever molesteth, and, so long as melancholy lasteth, cannot be avoided (388–389)." The logic of this, as it finally unfolds, is: they are only mad when this fear possesses; this fear possesses them always ("ever molesteth"); therefore they are always mad. The sequence is obviously rhetorical, designed not to give information, but to mislead the reader into positing the existence of more order and regularity than the world actually affords.

The reader is similarly misled every time a section or subsection or member of a subsection ends and another begins, for every beginning is, at least ostensibly, a separating out (of one aspect of melancholy from all the others) and every separating out is an act of containment which implies that the subject at hand cannot only be anatomized, but controlled; but the limited focus supplied by the specifying title soon expands to the point where the silent claim of the superstructure to order and contain becomes untenable. This happens in innumerable ways, but most simply when symptoms, case histories, causes, and effects of supposedly discrete strains of melancholy are found to be interchangeable. In the discussion of "Extravagant humours," we read of these symptoms: "If he be told he hath a stinking breath, a great nose, that

11 On this point, see Webber, The Eloquent "I," pp. 82, 99.
he is sick, or inclined to such or such a disease, he believes it
eftsoons and peradventure by force of imagination will work it
out (393)." In other words, an extravagantly humorous man need
only hear of a disease or a defect or malady for it to become his;
but this also, it seems, is a characteristic of those who "fear with-
out cause": "some are afraid that they shall have every fearful
disease they see others have, hear of or read, and dare not there-
fore hear or read of any such subject, no not of melancholy itself,
lest by applying to themselves that which they hear or read, they
should aggregate and increase it (387)." Of course there is a cer-
tain logic to this cross-referencing. Fearing without cause is an
extravagant humor; and one who fears without cause is very
much like one who becomes melancholic upon suggestion; but
then, all humors are extravagant in the sense that they are devia-
tions from a norm (which, significantly, never appears) and all
those who are humorous are irregularly (causelessly) so. And this
is precisely what the reader learns as he makes his way through
the hundreds of pages that comprise the three partitions. Melan-
choly is so pervasive that it is the cause of all effects and the
effect of all causes, simultaneously symptom and disease, the
prominent thread that not only runs through the divisions and
subdivisions (barrels) of the superstructure, but finally undoes
them. That is, as examples, case histories, signs, etc. are dis-
covered to be the common property of every discretely partitioned
unit, the reality of those partitions and the discreteness of those
units becomes questionable. So powerful, finally, is the sense of
continuity between sections, that within a few paragraphs of the
opening sentence of any one of them, the reader forgets what par-
ticular aspect of melancholy is (supposedly) under discussion.
The machinery generated and sustained by the introductory syn-
opsis implies that a reading of the tract will sort everything out;
but in the experience of that reading, everything gets mixed up,
and as a result the synopsis becomes the ever-present symbol of
a promise—of order, sanity, the hope of making sense of things—
that is never redeemed.12

12 Critics have long argued about the relationship of the synopsis to the
material it does not quite contain. Some have tended to look for a psychological
explanation, while others, like James Roy King, have emphasized the problems of

It is a promise, however that Burton repeatedly renews (as
he did in the preface) even after he has himself admitted that
it could not possibly be kept. The subsection from which we have
been quarrying examples ends by declaring its own failure, and,
by extension, the inevitable failure of all other subsections:
The tower of Babel never yielded such confusion of tongues,
as the chaos of melancholy doth variety of symptoms.
There is in all melancholy similitudo dissimilis, like men's
faces, a disagreeing likeness still; and as in a river we
swim in the same place, though not in the same numerical
water; as the same instrument affords several lessons, so
the same disease yields diversity of symptoms (397).
The comparison to the Tower of Babel is not casual or random;
the traditional image of a grandly presumptuous structure built
composition: "Burton's elaborate outline indicates that he intended to compose
a carefully constructed, analytical book. That he did not prompts the suggestion
that he compiled his outline only after he had written a number of completely
independent sections... One might conclude from the presence of both outline
and digressions that Burton suffered from an almost comic inability to manage
the fundamental problems involved in writing a book... These digressions do
represent, I think, an early layer of material, too fascinating to be discarded, too
irrelevant, even after a hundred visions and revisions, to gain a place in the struc-
tural fabric of the finished book (Studies in Six 17th Century Writers, Athens, Ohio,
1965, pp. 86, 87–84)." Since this chapter was completed, however, two studies
which present views closer to my own have appeared. In "Robert Burton and
Rambler Method" (Renaissance Quarterly, Vol. XXIV, No. 2, Summer, 1971),
David Renaker suggests that "Burton... took a curious revenge on Rambus... Everything that Rambus had sought to banish—digressiveness, copiousness,
with the fusion of rhetoric with dialectic—ran riot over and through the meticulous
pattern of the 'method' (220)." And Bridget Gellert Lyons writes (in Voices of
is called into question by the extent to which it is overelaborated, by the con-
dictory and doubtless ideas that are brought to play on it, and the demonstra-
tion that is made throughout of the inadequacy of theory to the complications of
life (148)." But Professor Lyons and I appear to differ on an important point. Her
next sentence reads: "The most strikingly artistic feature of the Anatomy, how-
ever, is its conscious creation of unity out of diversity." I take the "however" to
mean that the Anatomy is unified despite the subversion of the schematic pattern,
whereas it seems to me that its upside-down unity is the product of that sub-
version. Some of the best writing on these questions is to be found in Ruth Fox's
unpublished dissertation (Ohio State, 1977), "The Tangled Chain: The Struc-
ture of Disorder in The Anatomy of Melancholy."
on the shakiest of foundations is exactly right for the present
work, and the reader’s experience of that work accords perfectly
with the experience of Burton’s swimmer, for whom everything re-
mains the same even as it changes. And yet Burton is so sure of us,
so confident that no matter how many times he tells the truth, we
will manage somehow to disbelieve it, that he follows this confes-
sion with still another promise of a “more sober discourse to fol-
low”: “Which howsoever they be diverse, intricate, and hard to be
confined, I will adventure yet in such a vast confusion and gen-
erality to bring them into some order; and so descend to particu-
lar[s] (397).” Descending to particulars is something the speaker
declares his intention of doing whenever the structure he has been
laboring to build collapses. It is a declaration we have every rea-
son to distrust, and yet reason has nothing to do, finally, with our
susceptibility to the lure it holds out: “to bring them into some order.”

There are as many instances of this pattern in the Anatomy as
there are divisions. With every new section, the hope of “bringing
them into some order” is revived, simply because the act of spe-
cifying is an act of delimiting; but the narrow and manageable
focus of the introductory sentences barely survives the first page
before it widens to include everything and everybody, revived
hope fades, and the reader is left simply with the fact—and no
cure. Joan Webber has remarked of Thomas Browne, he “always
... pulls the sting from pain.” 12 Burton always leaves it in,
even to the extent of withholding the one consolation we might
have expected him to offer, the consolation of Christian doctrine.
This is not to say that there are not everywhere in the Anatomy
references to Christ and to the Scriptures, but that in context these
references point away from the consolation of which they are usu-
ally the vehicle. In the midst of his indictment of the contempo-
rary world, Burton begins a sentence which would seem to attrib-
ute the deplorable state of things to the absence of specifically
Christian virtues: “No charity, love, friendship, fear of God, alli-
ance, affinity, consanguinity, Christianity ...”; but the sentence
finally asserts the inability of these virtues, whether they are pres-
ent or not, to effect any material change: “No charity, love, friend-


ship, fear of God, alliance, affinity, consanguinity, Christianity,
can contain them (64).” For the moment before we read “can con-
tain them,” Christianity represents our best hope in the face of
“knavery, flattery, ... villainy,” but then it is dismissed as one
more inefficacious remedy against an irresistible disease. In other
words, Christianity functions negatively, as a part of the docu-
mentation of the evil it would normally be expected to counter.
This continues to be true even when Burton turns explicitly to
Scripture; the texts he marshals build up an overwhelming case
against hope and for despair:

My second argument is grounded upon the like place of
Scripture, which though before mentioned in effect, yet for
some reasons is to be repeated ... “Fools” (saith David)
“by reason of their transgressions,” etc. (Ps. cvi, 17) ... So we read (Rom. ii)
“Tribulation and anguish on the soul
of every man that doeth evil”; but all do evil. And Isaiah
lxv, 14, “My servants shall sing for joy, and ye shall cry for
sorrow of heart, and vexation of mind.” “Tis ratified by the
common consent of all philosophers. “Dishonesty” (saith
Cardanub) ... (73–74).

Again the movement is away from any doctrinal implications and
toward a treatment of Scripture as a body of evidence that sup-
ports not a promise of relief, but a thesis of total and cosmic de-
pravity. So that, not only is the consoling power of Christianity
defused, but its sacred book loses the status of a special authority
and becomes subject to the ratification of empirical observation.
This consistent refusal to release the potential that is present
whenever the Scriptures are cited or even echoed has the curious
effect of increasing our awareness of that potential. That is, the
very fact that the scriptural references do not fulfill our normal
expectations in some sense reinforces those expectations. We wait
all the more self-consciously for that which has been self-con-
sciously withheld, and at one point in the preface, it seems that
our patience is about to be rewarded:

We had need of some general visitor in our age, that should
reform what is amiss; a just army of Rosy-cross men, for
they will amend all matters (they say), religion, policy, manners with arts, sciences, etc., another Attila, Tamerlane, another Hercules to strive with Acheolus, Augae stabulum purgare, to subdue tyrants . . . to expel thieves . . . and purge the world of monsters and Centaurs: or another Theban Crates to reform our manners, to compose quarrels and controversies, as in his time he did, and was therefore adored for a God in Athens. "As Hercules purged the world of monsters, and subdued them, so did he fight against envy, lust, anger, avarice, etc. and all those feral vices and monsters of the mind." It were to be wished we had some such visitor (96).

At first this peroration is ambiguous in precisely the manner we have come to expect. The sincerity of the speaker's "wish" is called into question when his parenthesis ("they say") calls into question the powers of the "Rosy-cross men," and one wonders whether a visit by Attila or Tamerlane would effect the kind of reformation "our age" requires. Hercules, however, is another matter. Generations of Christian allegorizers had found in his career their most fertile field, and it was not at all unusual to see Christ referred to as "our Hercules." As Hercules comes to dominate the passage, the emphasis shifts from social and political problems to the problem of the mind, that true Augean stable whose residue of original sin can be washed away only by the waters of baptism (Christ's blood): and when the "monsters" of the mind turn out to be four of the seven deadly sins, the reader feels that the identification of the desired visitor cannot be far behind.

It, of course, never arrives; even though Burton tantalizes us by making his most explicit reference to a Christ in a context which argues strongly for the necessity of his coming: "He might . . . cut off our tumultuous desires, inordinate lusts, root out atheism, impiety, heresy, schism, and superstition, which now so crucify the world (my emphasis)." It is after this, when the level of our expectation is perhaps higher than it has ever been before, that Burton draws back and reminds us of what we should have remembered all along:

These are vain, absurd, and ridiculous wishes not to be hoped: all must be as it is, Boccalinus may cite commonwealths to come before Apollo, and seek to reform the world itself by commissioners, but there is no remedy, it may not be redressed, desinet homines tum demum stultescere quando esse desinent, so long as they can wag their beards, they will play the knaves and fools . . . It is a thing so difficult, impossible, and far beyond Hercules' labours to perform (97).

There is no remedy. Except, perhaps, suicide, and Burton's treatment of that possibility is perfectly illustrative of both his method and his message, in the sense that there is one. The final movement of the last member (Prognostics of Melancholy) of Partition I begins with one of those self-cannibalizing sentences we encounter so often in The Anatomy of Melancholy: "Seldom this malady [Melancholy] procures death, except (which is the greatest most grievous calamity, and the misery of all miseries) they make away themselves, which is a frequent thing and familiar amongst them (431)." This pattern is by now so "frequent and familiar" that it constitutes a mannerism. In the brief space between "seldom" and "frequent," the exception becomes the rule, and this particular effect of melancholy, for a moment limited to a small group in special circumstances, is extended to everyone. There follows a series of quotations and examples, all of which support the resolution of those who find themselves in the grip of this disease to make away with themselves. "And in the midst of these squalid, ugly, and such irksome days, they seek at last, finding no comfort, no remedy in this wretched life, to be eased of all by death . . . 'after many tedious days, at last, either by drowning, hanging, or some fearful end, they precipitate or make away themselves; many lamentable examples are daily seen amongst us' (432)." The arguments are familiar but nonetheless persuasive, as anyone who has read the ninth canto of the first book of the Faerie Queene can testify ("Sleepe after toyle, port after stormie seas, Ease after warre, death after life does greatly please"); but for the Christian reader, there is the possibility that
the well-known doctrinal objections to suicide, and the accompanying consolation of the meaning for all of us of Christ's sacrifice, will be brought forward. And at least one sentence suggests that Burton is moving in just that direction:

'Tis a common calamity, a fatal end to this disease they are condemned to a violent death by a jury of physicians, furiously disposed, carried, headlong by their tyrannizing wills, enforced by miseries, and there remains no more to such persons, if that heavenly Physician, by His assisting grace and mercy alone, do not prevent (for no human persuasion or art can help), but to be their own butchers, and execute themselves (432).

The introduction of the Divine Physician at this point is simultaneously promising and troubling, promising because of the final consolation the reader may at least (and at last) hope to be given, troubling because it occurs in a parenthesis, and then in a parenthesis that treats the possibility rather negatively. "If that heavenly Physician . . . do not prevent . . . " Logically, in relation to the "if" clause, "do not prevent" should be read as a positive wish—may he prevent—but the force of the negative operates independently of the larger context—he will not prevent—especially since the sentence ends so badly. Even so, the mere suggestion (however hypothetical) of an imminent savior, in combination with occasional references to biblical figures, is enough to keep alive our anticipation of a consoling turn; that is, until the biblical perspective we have been waiting for is brought in to support the wrong position. In rapid succession, the speaker recalls the examples of Samson, Saul, Jonas, and Razis, all of whom are celebrated in the Church for killing themselves. Even Augustine and Jerome "vindicateth the same," and Ambrose "com­ mendeth Pelagia for so doing (436)." As a result, the conviction grows that the harshness of Burton's vision will not be mitigated and the consolation of orthodox Christianity will once again be withheld. And then, suddenly, when we least expect it and have ceased to hope for it, on the last page, in the final paragraph, it comes, in the middle of a sentence:

Calenus and his Indians hated of old to die a natural death: the Circumcellions and Donatists, loathing life, compelled others to make them away, with many such: but these are false and pagan positions, profane Stoical paradoxes, wicked examples; it boots not what heathen philosophers determine in this kind, they are impious, abominable, and upon a wrong ground. "No evil is to be done that good may come of it"; reclamat Christus, reclamat Scriptura [Christ and Scripture cry out against it], God and all good men are against it. He that stabs another can kill his body; but he that stabs himself kills his own soul. Male meretur, qui dat mendico quod edat; nam et illud quod dat, perit; et illi producit vitam ad miseriam: he that gives a beggar an alms (as that comical poet said) doth ill, because he doth but prolong his miseries. But Lactantius, lib. 6, cap. 7, de vero cultu, calls it a detestable opinion, and fully confutes it, lib. 3 de sap. cap. 18, and St. Austin, Ep. 52 ad Macedonium, cap. 61, de Dulcitium Tribunum; so doth Hierome to Marcella of Blaesilla's death, Non recipio tales animas, etc., he calls such men martyres stultae philosophiae [the victims of a stupid philosophy]; so doth Cyprian, de duplici martyrio: Si qui sic moriantur, aut infirmitas, aut ambitio, aut dementia cogit eos [those who so die are driven to it by illness or ambition or madness]; 'tis mere madness so to do, furor est ne moriare mori ['tis mad for fear of death to kill oneself] (438).

This has all the force and authority we could have wished, but Burton will not let us rest in it; there is always one more turn to his screw. "This only let me add," he begins mildly, and then, as has happened so many times before, the small qualification turns out to be so large that it becomes the entire argument:

This only let me add, that in some cases those hard censures of such as offer violence to their own persons, or in some desperate fit to others, which sometimes they do, by stabbing, slashing, etc., are to be mitigated, as in such as are mad, beside themselves for the time, or found to have been
long melancholy, and that in extremity; they know not what they do, deprived of reason, judgement, all, as a ship that is void of a pilot must needs impinge upon the next rock of sands, and suffer shipwreck (439).

Since the category “such as are mad” includes everyone, “some cases” becomes all cases and the Christian objections to making away with oneself seem less conclusive than they did only a moment ago. We end with a story which suggests that suicide is not only justified, but necessary:

P. Forestus hath a story of two melancholy brethren that made away themselves, and for so foul a fact were accordingly censured to be infamously buried, as in such cases they use, to terrify others, as it did the Milesian virgins of old; but upon farther examination of their misery and madness, the censure was revoked, and they were solemnly interred, as Saul was by David (439).

This incident is, in some ways, a small model of the volume it concludes. A judgment is made on the basis of an abstraction, which itself depends on a series of assumptions about the order and purpose of life; but upon further examination, that is, when the circumstances are laid open and anatomized, the case is seen to be less clear than had been thought and the assumptions become questionable.\(^{14}\) When Burton rounds off this little narrative by recalling the compassion David displayed for the suicide of Saul, he is (audaciously) close to citing Christ, the flower of the house of David, as one who would suspend the canon against self-slaughter; and in the next sentence he openly speculates as to whether man’s judgment may be harsher than God’s: “Thus of their goods and bodies we can dispose; but what shall become of their souls, God alone can tell; His mercy may come . . . betwixt the bridge and the brook, the knife and the throat.”

In the synopsis, the headings that rule this section read, “Whether it be lawful, in this case of melancholy, for a man to offer violence to himself,” and “How a melancholy or mad man, offering violence to himself, is to be censured”; but in the end, the criterion of lawfulness seems almost irrelevant; what really matters is every man’s confrontation with a world whose sickness and irrationality mirrors his own, and in that context, the only response is not the rule of law, but the fellow feeling of compassion. The whole question of suicide is finally taken away from the jurisdictions of law and religion and brought right back to where it always belonged, to you (“Thou thyself art the subject of my discourse”) “Quod cuiquam contigit, cuvis potest. Who knows how he may be tempted? It is his case, it may be thine.” Given the premises of Burton’s book and the evidence marshaled in it, it is thine, and mine, and everyone else’s, and therefore judgments are presumptuous, and hope a deception: “We ought not to be so rash and rigorous in our censures as some are; charity will judge and hope the best; God be merciful unto us all (439)! In the context of all that has gone before, those last words—“God be merciful unto us all”—are less a prayer than a cry of desperation. One does not hear in them any conviction that God will be merciful; rather, one hears a note that has been sounded before in the preface, at one of those many points at which this amazing treatise “concludes”:

To conclude, this being granted, that all the world is melancholy, or mad, dotes, and every member of it, I have ended my task, and sufficiently illustrated that which I took upon me to demonstrate at first. At this present I have no more to say. His sanam mentem Democritus, I can but wish myself and them a good physician, and all of us a better mind (120).

In other words, I can but wish us an impossibility. The only cure for the malady Burton anatomizes is a better mind, supposedly to be given us by a “good physician,” but a “good physician” who never appears in any efficacious form on this particular stage. A better mind is exactly what we do need, but that promise is one that Burton does not make, even as a rhetorical gesture. Instead, he resigns himself and us to a greater power, but a power in whom he himself has little faith, if the thrust of his own work is any evidence. Within the confines of the universe he so carefully (and yet confusedly) delineates, our universe for all intents and purposes, “there is no remedy.”

\(^{14}\) One might profitably compare this with Donne’s treatment in \textit{Bishopanatos}.\
This remains true even in the concluding subsection of the *Anatomy*, Partition III, Section 4, Member 2, Subsection 6, *Cure of Despair by Physic, Good Counsel, Comforts, etc.* (III, 408).

The remedies for despair are well known; those who are afflicted with this disease of the mind should follow the “special rules” of Culmannus: “First to acknowledge all help come from God. 2. That the cause of their present misery is sin. 3. To repent and be heartily sorry for their sins. 4. To pray earnestly to God they may be eased. 5. To expect and implore the prayers of the Church, and good men’s advice. 6. Physic. 7. To commend themselves to God and rely upon His mercy (III, 410).”

No sooner are these rules given, however, than their efficacy, in the present context, is questioned: “But forasmuch as most men in this malady are spiritually sick, void of reason almost, overborne by their miseries and too deep an apprehension of their sins, they cannot apply themselves to good counsel, pray, believe, repent.” The structure of the subsection follows this pattern, alternating words of consolation or “A comfortable speech of St. Austin (414)” with the imagined response of those who are actually suffering:

Yea, but thou urgest again, I have little comfort of this which is said, it concerns me not ... ‘tis to no purpose for me to repent, and to do worse then ever I did before (III, 412).

’Tis true indeed, and all-sufficient this, they do confess, if they could repent; but they are obdurate they have cauterized consciences, they are in a reprobate sense, they cannot think a good thought, they cannot hope for grace, pray, believe, repent, or be sorry for their sins (III, 414).

All this is true, thou repliest, but yet it concerns not thee, ‘tis verified in ordinary offenders, in common sins, but thine are of an higher strain. . . . Thou art worse than a pagan, infidel, Jew, or Turk. . . . Thou hast given thy soul to the devil (III, 416).

Yea, that’s the main matter, how shall I believe, or dis-
Artifacts (as he has so many times before) and exclaims: “Yea, but this meditation is that mars all, and mistaken makes many men far worse, misconceiving all they read or hear, to their own over-throw; the more they search and read Scriptures, or divine treatises, the more they puzzle themselves, as a bird in a net, the more they are entangled, and precipitated into this preposterous gulph (419).” “Think on God’s word,” says Donne, Herbert, Bunyan, Milton, “and be saved”; “think on God’s word,” says Burton, “and be mad.”

What is to be done, then, if the Word that was to be our cure is instead our affliction? Burton offers a succession of answers to this question. First he considers (and holds out as a bait) “that plausible doctrine of universal grace, which many Fathers, our late Lutherans and modern papists do still maintain that we have free will of ourselves, and that grace is common to all that will believe (421)”; but for all its plausibility and attractions (attractions that we are made to feel) this doctrine must at last be dismissed, because “we teach otherwise (423).” Next he turns to a number of popular remedies—“certain amulets, herbs, and precious stones (429),” “Fires to be made in rooms where spirits haunt (430),” “have the party affected wink (430),” “shoot a pistol at them (430)—but these are obviously what Burton in the end calls them, “counterfeit... , to no purpose, ... fopperies and fictions (431).” “Last of all” we hear the only advice that makes Burtonian sense:

Last of all: If the party affected shall certainly know this malady to have proceeded from too much fasting, meditation, precise life, contemplation of God’s judgements... . Let him read no more such tracts or subjects, hear no more such fearful tones, avoid such companies... . Only take this for a corollary and conclusion, as thou tenderest thine own welfare in this and all other melancholy, thy good health of body and mind, observe this short precept, give not way to solitariness and idleness. “Be not solitary, be not idle (III, 431-432).”

“Be not solitary, be not idle,” or, in other words, don’t think about it, keep your mind off it, keep your mind moving, be ye distracted. This is finally the “word” that replaces God’s word as the cure (if it be cure) of melancholy, and it returns us to the beginning of this section where God and his word are specified as the very causes of melancholy:

Before I can come to treat of these several errors and obliquities, their cause, symptoms, affections, etc., I must say something necessarily of the object of this love, God Himself, what this love is, how it allureth, whence it proceeds, and (which is the cause of all our miseries) how we mistake, wander and swerve from it (III, 313).

Religious melancholy is a species of love melancholy (311), and in this sentence it is treated as a perversion of a laudable impulse. It is only the “mistakes” in this kind that cause all our misery. What follows will be something less than a surprise to anyone who has come this far in the Anatomy. The healthy norm from which the disease is a deviation never appears, while the examples of those who “wander and swerve from it” increase and multiply. For every reference to the practitioners of a “true religion” where “the true God is truly worshipped (III, 320),” there are ten pages documenting the ubiquity of idolatry and superstition:

Now for the extent, as I say, the world itself is the subject of it... . all times have been misaffected, past, present, “There is not one that doth good, no not one, from the prophet to the priest,” etc. (III, 321).

In all ages what a small portion hath the true Church ever been!... . The patriarchs and their families, the Israelites, a handful in respect, Christ and his apostles, and not all of them, neither. Into what straits hath it been compelling, a little flock! how hath superstition on the other side dilated herself, error, ignorance, barbarism, folly, madness... . Philosopher, dynasts, monarchs, all were involved and overshadowed in this mist, in more than Cimmerian darkness (III, 322).

A fifth part of the world, and hardly that, now professeth Christ, but so inlarded and interlaced with several su-
perstitions, that there is scarce a sound part to be found (III, 323).

What religion is, and of what parts it doth consist, every catechism will tell you, what symptoms it hath, and what effects it produceth: but for their superstitions, no tongue can tell them, no pen express, they are so many (III, 347).

We have myriads of examples in this kind . . . and therefore not without good cause, intolerablem perturbationem, Seneca calls it, as well he might, an intolerable perturbation, that causeth such dire events, folly, madness, sickness, despair, death of body and soul, and hell itself (III, 375).

In the course of this long section with its “myriads of examples,” the “properly” religious man becomes a will-o’-the-wisp; like the “sane” and “wise” man who never appears in the preface (or like the “true friend” in Bacon’s essay), he is a chimerical member of an empty category. The catechism may imply his reality, but in the reality of Burton’s pages, taken from life, he is nowhere to be found.

In time, the familiar question obtrudes itself—what is the remedy?—and the answer is given and dismissed in the same sentence: “To purge the world of idolatry and superstition will require some monster-taming Hercules, a divine Aesculapius, or Christ Himself to come in his own person, to reign a thousand years on earth before the end as the millenaries will have Him (III, 375).” The unfolding clauses carry us in successive and graduated stages from promise to promise; from the suggestiveness of Hercules, to the charged metaphor of the Divine Physician, to the apparent imminence of Christ’s second coming; but scarcely is this ultimate promise proffered before it is taken away, and returned, discredited, to the “millenaries” who are foolish (mad) enough to believe in it. This is the opening sentence of a subsection entitled Cure of Religious Melancholy, and the blasting of its facile hopes (and therefore of the hopes of the section it introduces) hearkens back to the preface and an earlier call for a Hercules who “should reform what is amiss (I, 96).” De-

mocritus’s conclusion there is the conclusion urged on us here: “These are vain, absurd, ridiculous wishes not to be hoped . . . there is no remedy, it may not be redressed . . . it is a thing so difficult, and far beyond Hercules’ labours to perform (I, 97).” Hercules will not appear to clean our Augean stables. Christ will not come to reign a thousand years. We are alone, with only ourselves to rely on, and those selves mad and melancholy. If there were a remedy, a cure, it would have to be nothing less than the fulfillment of the wish the speaker expresses when we first meet him, and again when he prepares to exit from our stage:

I have no more to say. His sanam mentem Democritus, I can only wish myself and them a good physician, and all of us a better mind (I, 120).

What shall we wish them, but sanam mentem and a good physician (III, 324).

The good physician has been invoked and implored, but there is little evidence that he has heard. And a better mind is a gift beyond Burton’s power to confer. In its place he can only offer an experience that enables us, for a time, to follow the advice he tenders in the closing paragraph—“Be not solitary, be not idle.” As Miss Webber has observed, Burton “never leaves the reader alone (100).” Nor does he leave us idle. He pushes us, prods us, leads us on, trips us up, laughs at us, laughs with us, makes us laugh at him. He keeps us busy. “I write of melancholy, by being busy to avoid melancholy (I, 20).” By busily reading of melancholy we may avoid it too. If Burton cannot give us a better mind, he can perhaps give us a mind not too much involved with its own pain. The Anatomy of Melancholy, in all of its distracting confusion, is finally something of a mercy, and it is the only mercy to be found within its confines.

A better mind is exactly what Herbert, Milton, Donne, Bacon, Bunyan, Plato, and Augustine labor to give us through the experience of their prose and poetry, for they are good physicians. I have included Burton in this volume partly because he has so much in common with these men and is, at the same time, so markedly different. Like Bacon, Burton is concerned with the dis-
parity between a prescriptive moralism and the intractable reality of everyday life, and to some extent his *Anatomy*, as much as Bacon's *Essays*, impresses upon us the unavailability of easy answers. Like Herbert, he simultaneously weaves himself into the sense and disappears finally into the fabric he has woven; when he declares that this is a book written by nobody, we believe him, for very much the same reasons we believe Herbert when he signs someone else's name to his poems. Like Donne, he promises to explain and clarify, but his explanations are circular and his clarifications confusing; and his categories are no firmer than the distinctions Donne fails to maintain between joy and fear, up and down, I and God. Like both Bunyan and Milton, he unbuilds the superstructure of his great work until finally it stands for a failure to effect a declared intention; the apparatus of the *Anatomy* is finally no more controlling and determining than the book and chapter divisions of *The Reason of Church Government* or the spatial continuum of *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Like all of these, Burton is continually calling attention to what his art is not doing; and what his art is not doing is making sense of things. That is, like Herbert, Milton, Bunyan, Bacon, and Donne, Burton does not divide the universe into discrete and manageable entities whose configurations and values correspond to our human idea of the way things should be, although he often promises, as do the others, to do just that.

In addition to these shared concerns and motives, Burton and his seventeenth-century brethren have recourse to a common pool of stylistic and rhetorical devices, the disappointment of deliberately primed expectations, the conspicuous breakdown of discursive forms—sentences, paragraphs, chapters, whole structures—syntactical ambiguities that subvert an argument even as it is made, the pursuing of lines of argument to tautological conclusions, and so on. And yet for all of these similarities, the experience of Burton's prose is not at all like the experiences we have described in the earlier chapters of this study. The difference is to be located in something that is missing in Burton, something so crucial that its absence transforms the meaning and even the value of all that he shares with the others. In the prose of Bunyan, Donne, Bacon, and Milton, and in the poetry of Herbert, the determining of discursive forms and the related evaluation of rational thought is but one half of a movement which is completed only when the availability of something better is affirmed. That affirmation is withheld in the *Anatomy*, and as a result the negativity of the work's rhetorical thrust is never redeemed. It is as if the movement of Donne's *Devotions* did not include the reconciling prayer, and reader and protagonist alike were trapped in the cycle of meditation and expostulation; or as if the cyclic pattern traced out by Christian's errors in *The Pilgrim's Progress* did not continually intersect with a pattern of heavenly intervention; or as if the emptiness of ratiocinative content in *The Reason of Church Government* were not more than balanced by the force of Milton's declared faith; or as if the conviction of personal weakness in Herbert's poetry were not transformed into strength by his realization that "all things are more ours for their being his"; or as if Bacon did not conduct his debunking experiments within a framework that suggested least the possibility of finding replacements for the moral abstractions his method rejected. In short, while the *Anatomy* more overtly than the other works we have examined undermines the reader's ability to make judgments and determine value, the only consolation it offers is the unhelpful assertion that we are all in the same boat. The experience of Burton's prose may involve the absorption of our personal weaknesses into

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dermining of discursive forms and the related evaluation of rational thought is but one half of a movement which is completed only when the availability of something better is affirmed. That affirmation is withheld in the *Anatomy*, and as a result the negativity of the work's rhetorical thrust is never redeemed. It is as if the movement of Donne's *Devotions* did not include the reconciling prayer, and reader and protagonist alike were trapped in the cycle of meditation and expostulation; or as if the cyclic pattern traced out by Christian's errors in *The Pilgrim's Progress* did not continually intersect with a pattern of heavenly intervention; or as if the emptiness of ratiocinative content in *The Reason of Church Government* were not more than balanced by the force of Milton's declared faith; or as if the conviction of personal weakness in Herbert's poetry were not transformed into strength by his realization that "all things are more ours for their being his"; or as if Bacon did not conduct his debunking experiments within a framework that suggested least the possibility of finding replacements for the moral abstractions his method rejected. In short, while the *Anatomy* more overtly than the other works we have examined undermines the reader's ability to make judgments and determine value, the only consolation it offers is the unhelpful assertion that we are all in the same boat. The experience of Burton's prose may involve the absorption of our personal weaknesses into

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This is precisely the point of the *Consolatory Digression* in Part II, where the reader is advised to "comfort thyself with other men's misfortunes (II, 131)." To the wretch who complains of his situation, Burton replies that the case of others is just as bad or even worse. Are you poor? And do you believe that wealth would make you happy? "Many rich men . . . that lie on down beds, with delicacies pampered every day, in their well furnished houses, live at less heart's ease, with more anguish, more bodily pain, and through their impertinence more bitter hours, than many a poor prisoner or galley slave (II, 171)." Note that the prisoner or galley slave is not told that he suffers no pain or experiences no anguish, but that those who seem better off than he is are not. As always, Burton's arguments level downward, putting everyone on an equally miserable footing, and as a result, happiness becomes, like non-melancholic, an empty category, an illusion. Indeed, adversity is finally preferred to prosperity, because it offers less scope to immoderate folly and precludes disappointment. The preference, however, is for the lesser of two evils—"both had . . . the one miserably happy, the other happily miserable (II, 172)"—and Burton's conclusion is the same here as elsewhere: "There is no remedy . . . kings and princes, wise, grave, prudent, holy good men, divine, all are . . . served alike (II, 201)."
thing larger, but that something larger is merely a cosmic version of what has supposedly been transcended.

I have emphasized this difference within similarity because I wish to counter an impression the methodology of this study may have unavoidably conveyed, the impression that there is a fixed relationship between the presence of certain rhetorical and stylistic devices and either intention or meaning. What the Anatomy shows is that the same descriptively observable techniques, in the service of different visions, may mean differently, and that only the analysis in time of the total reading experience will prevent the drawing of premature and facile conclusions.

Sir Thomas Browne's Religio Medici is a case in point, one even more interesting than the Anatomy because it shares nearly everything with the works from which it must finally be differentiated.

VII

The Bad Physician: The Case of Sir Thomas Browne

I AM AVERSE FROM NOTHING

The Religio Medici is the most consistent and overt celebration of the vision whose literary effects we have been examining. Browne's commitment to the devaluing of rational thought and the subsequent exaltation of knowledge through faith is evident on every page, and nowhere so felicitously as in this most famous of passages:

I love to lose myself in a mystery, to pursue my reason to an O altitudo! 'Tis my solitary recreation to pose my apprehension with those involved aenigmas and riddles of the Trinity, with Incarnation and Resurrection. I can answer all the objections of Satan and my rebellious reason with that odde resolution I learned of Tertullian, Certum est, quia impossibile est (I, 9).

This will almost serve as a program for what happens to the reader in the Religio; his reason is exercised (and teased) to the point where its insufficiency becomes self-evident, and ratiocination gives way to faith professing assertion; and in the process, of course, the machinery of reason—linguistic, logical, rhetorical—becomes the vehicle of its own abandonment: