Encyclopedism in *Anatomy of Melancholy*

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Summary: *This paper considers the implications of Burton's "encyclopedism" defined here as the condition of a work where writing is a form of therapy compelled by disease. The notion of encyclopedism suggests the ways in which the encyclopedia serves as a compendious alter-ego to Burton's book. Reading *Anatomy* in the context of an encyclopedic tradition transformed by Burton's insistence that his writing is a "foolish labor" intended to ward off melancholy reminds us how fully he reimagines the Renaissance aesthetic of scholarly exhaustion. In this regard, Burtonian anatomy may be said to offer an alternative, playful and subversive, to the encyclopedic claims of Baconian instauration.*

I

This essay reconsiders the encyclopedism that is the most profound feature of *Anatomy of Melancholy*. As used here, encyclopedism suggests not only the vast display of learning that constitutes *Anatomy* but also the condition of a work driven by therapeutic need: "I write of Melancholy," Burton tells us, "by being busie to avoid Melancholy."¹ In his endless implication of psychic and scholarly demands, I shall argue, Burton conceives his book as self-ministering labor that belies the still common view of his conservatism:

There are many ways in which Burton's *Anatomy* feels as if it should have been written in the sixteenth rather than seventeenth century, if not earlier. It is the last example of the popular Renaissance anatomy genre and it recalls in form and structure the older idea of a correspondence between the book and the world.²

If *Anatomy* has seemed to many critics bound to a fading ideal of the universal book, its encyclopedism will be read here as a profound transformation of that ideal, where the traditional methods and goals of the encyclopedia — scholarly citation and taxonomy, cultural conservation and transmission — are reimagined according to the dictates of an elusive disease that manifests itself for Burton in an acute awareness of the contingency of self and writing and of the disparity between book and world.

A focus on Burton's encyclopedism addresses two abiding issues in the criticism of *Anatomy*. First, it offers an alternative to anatomy as arch-paradigm for Burton's book.³ As potent as the metaphors of anatomy are for Burton, the encyclopedia is a more effective model for the "vast *Chaos* and confusion of Bookes" (I, 11) that informs his labor. Rethinking Burton's encyclopedism also allows us to refine the vague, often ambivalent, use of the encyclopedia as a compendious alter-ego to his *Anatomy*:

Though there is much in Burton's book that is encyclopedic, he does not attempt the classical circumscription of all knowledge; instead of beating the bounds of the parish of human understanding, he begins like Vesalius from the outside and proceeds on an inward voyage of discovery which, as I hope to show, is in both the literal and spiritual sense a revelation.⁴

If Rosalie Colie describes *Anatomy* in the comprehensive terms it demands, she also resists its encyclopedic scope; for Colie, it is the "inward voyage of discovery" that describes Burton's work as opposed to the "circumscription of all knowledge" that defines the encyclopedia. While Colie offers to extract a psychic core from the scholarly excesses of the text, others have argued persuasively for the centrality of its scholarship. In the introduction to the recent Oxford edition, J. B. Bamborough reaffirms the knowledge Colie and others strive to transfigure:

The *Anatomy of Melancholy* has been described in many ways by critics, and no doubt so large and various a work will continue to have different significance to different readers. Whatever else it may be, however, there is no doubt that it is a massive work of learning, or that its author was quintessentially a scholar . . . Burton appears, as a true scholar, to have decided to exhaust the topic, to include all its ramifications and to cite every authority — to produce the "last word." In this he was following the example of other great European scholars, encyclopedists, and systematisers such [as] Gesner, the Scaligers, Bauhin, Agricola, and Trithemius; the desire to produce the all-inclusive systematic work was endemic in the Renaissance (I, xiii; xxv).

Taken together, Colie and Bamborough epitomize the ways in which the material and metaphysical pressures of *Anatomy* often converge around an

idea of the encyclopedia as a model of epic scholarship to be transcended or affirmed as a standard for Burton's work. Yet, as we shall see, Burton confounds these alternatives in an engagement of the encyclopedic legacy where claims of disease and scholarship merge and the encyclopedia becomes, not a model simply accepted or undone, but a vital source for the sanative labor of his book.

Given the complexity of the works to be considered here my argument will be limited in scope. It begins with a brief excursus on the encyclopedia that focuses on the medieval compendia that are the true forebears of Burton's book and, in particular, on the *Speculum maior* of Vincent of Beauvais, greatest of the medieval encyclopedists. Though cited more than once by Burton, *Speculum* serves here not as a simple source text but to illustrate the normative practices of encyclopedic writing that Burton will assume, and transform, in his *Anatomy*. Vincent offers his work as a self-conscious culmination of encyclopedic tradition and so enables us to see how fully Burton reimagines that tradition and how closely he remains bound to it.

II

In many ways, the deepest roots of *Anatomy* lie less in Vesalius than in the medieval *summae* where the classical encyclopedia merged with a theological vision of the book as a representational totality:

The *summae* and encyclopedias may "contain" mythological material, but the Book itself is a sign of the mythologizing preoccupation with oneness, totality, and the presence of meaning as absolute. Nowhere is this preoccupation clearer than in the massive classification, indexing, and subdivision of medieval encyclopedias That the totality they attempted would eventually suggest a "house," a "city," or the "body of man" was ineluctable in imaginative writers like Augustine, who said that Eve was made from Adam so that the entire human race would be descended from the body of one man, or Hugh of St. Victor who referred to the completeness and unity of Sacred Scripture as the *domus Dei*.⁵

The medieval reimagination of the encyclopedia — epitomized by the metaphorical figuration of the *summa* from which Burton's revision of anatomy, and Vesalian anatomy itself, descend⁶ — was radical in many respects, but remained bound to the goals of cultural transmission that inspired the first encyclopedists. Fritz Saxl describes the origins of the early encyclopedia in the assimilation of Greek learning by the Roman scholars Varro and Pliny in works that were at once acts of hegemony and recognitions of precedent cultural authority. The encyclopedia abided as vital social

currency into the Middle Ages and Saxl cites *Etymologiae*, the seventh-century encyclopedia by Isidore of Seville, as a typical gesture of mediation between Rome and its invaders:

Only a generation after the conversion of the Visigoths the Archbishop himself called their king, Sisebutus, a great scholar "*scientia litterarum magna ex parte imbutus*," and a poem on the eclipses of the sun and the moon has been attributed to him. To this same King Sisebutus, Isidorus seems to have sent parts of his encyclopedia. History has proved that Rome's conquest of the Visigoths was final; with it a new period of spiritual collaboration between the old Roman and the new German peoples began. Like Varro at the end of the Roman Republic, Isidorus set out to give to coming generations the sum of the old civilization in a *magnum opus*.⁷

The works of Varro and Isidore, neatly bound by Saxl as emblems of Roman civilization in its rise to power and decline, embody the encyclopedist's commitment to cultural continuity and dependence on prior authority and nowhere were these commitments more spectacularly elaborated than in the work of Vincent of Beauvais, thirteenth-century Dominican and author of *Speculum maius*. From the pinnacle of the medieval encyclopedic tradition, Vincent recollects the vital conventions of the form and brings to the task of encyclopedic writing a literary self-consciousness that, at a distance, will inform Burton's own meditation on authorial status and the pressures imposed by the textual tradition.⁸

More than any other classical or medieval encyclopedia, *Speculum maius* fulfills Colie's idea of encyclopedic "circumscription." It consists of three sections: *Speculum naturale* is the greatest natural history of the age; *Speculum doctrinale* is a manual of scholastic knowledge including treatments of philosophy, mathematics, education, mechanical and household arts, and a guide to princes; and *Speculum historiale* is a providential account of human history that focuses on the rise and fall of great powers. Despite its scope, *Speculum* is a remarkably coherent work where topics are elaborated in a rich internal dialogue between the author and his myriad sources. So, in a typical instance, when Vincent considers the nature of Adam in *Speculum naturale*, he cites Isidore's *Etymologiae* and employs its distinctive methodology:

As it was written so the Lord made the human body in the land of Damascus from the mud of the earth, whence Adam is interpreted as "red earth" or "earthy." That body was immortal, not by nature, but by benefit of grace. For his immortality had to be sustained by eating of the tree of life. And so he might remain immortal if he did not sin, for he would be sustained by the tree; and die if he should sin, because he would be deprived of it, as has been done. So Isidore in *Etymologies* XI: the body (*corpus*) is called "corrupt"

by virtue of that which perishes: because it is mortal, decays, and at any time may die. It is called the “flesh” (*caro*) because it is created (*creando*). And the semen of the male — whence the bodies of animals and men are conceived — is called “*crementum*”; thus parents are truly called “creators.”⁹

In a subtle choreography of precedence, meaning, and authority, the works of Isidore and Vincent define their relationship around the Biblical account of Adam’s creation, converging in the complex *corpus* of Adam, created of earth but by the grace of God made immortal (*immortale non de conditione naturae, sed beneficio gratiae*). Yet, as melancholy will prove to be for Burton, Adam is an ambivalent object of study for Vincent, his name disclosing only one aspect of a dual nature that resists an essentially corporeal etymology. As nature is transcended by grace, so Adam transcends his “earthy” etymon; and even etymology itself, which seems to promise an essential insight into nature via *verbum*, can only take the form of a citational exercise.

In such passages, Vincent exemplifies an encyclopedic discourse based on transmission, citation, and textual analysis. Yet he is also aware how these practices obscure his authorial role and, in the prologue to *Speculum*, argues for the innovation of his work — while conceding his secondary role:

Moreover, no one may accuse me in this book of being novel or verbose, for the work itself is both old and new, brief and prolix: old, surely, in its authority and matter; yet truly new in the compilation and organization of its parts. Brief because so much is said so concisely, but long because of the huge scope of its materials. So, out of the smallest flowers of this multitude, I have gathered and recorded a few things in these particular volumes and have built this work into something of universal value (and perhaps its very bulk may serve, for the most part, to allow comparison: for example, from among the philosophers, Aristotle on animals, Avicenna on medicine, Pliny’s Natural History; or, from among the Jews, Josephus; or, from among us, Augustine’s City of God, his commentaries on the Psalms and the Gospel of John, and also the Moralia of St. Gregory, or others of this kind). So no one should complain or cavil; while I may have accumulated all this material, not a third or fourth part, indeed not a tenth or twentieth part, of the figures offered here, have been fully comprehended in these writings.¹⁰

Though Vincent hardly describes a “*Chaos and confusion of Bookes*” — neatly ordering his sources by class: pagan, Jewish, Christian — his text is a paradox worthy of Burton, at once old and new, brief and expansive. He claims originality in ordering his materials, but cannot comprehend the sources (*in scriptis continentur*) that inform his work. So *Speculum* is, in Vincent’s witty phrase, an *opus universale contextum*: a vast edifice of texts that offers a Pisgah-sight of the full range of human knowledge and where

true authority lies in knowing the limits of the universal book. In a prologue that prepares the way for the apologetic gymnastics of Burton's "Democritus Junior," Vincent restates the compromised terms of authority, originality, and comprehension that would govern encyclopedic writing into the Renaissance and beyond.

If Vincent admits the limits of his enterprise — though he is well aware that it exceeds all of its predecessors in ambition — Burton assumes the encyclopedic legacy with a similar consciousness of its limits; but for Burton, it is melancholy, rather than textual plethora, that compels a reimagination of the ancient goals of cultural transmission and the privileged place of prior authority in his study:

And from these Melancholy Dispositions, no man living is free, no *Stoicke*, none so wise, none so happy, none so patient, so generous, so godly, so divine, that can vindicate himselfe, so well composed, but more or lesse some time or other, he feeles the smart of it. Melancholy in this sence is the Character of Mortalitie. *Man that is borne of a woman, is of short continuance, and full of trouble. Zeno, Cato, Socrates* himselfe, whom *Ælian* so highly commends for a moderate temper, that *nothing could disturbe him, but going out, and coming in, still Socrates kept the same serenity of countenance, what misery so ever befell him*, (if we may beleieve *Plato* his Disciple) was much tormented with it (I, 136).

Where Vincent orders his sources by class and kind as a self-conscious emblem of encyclopedic design, Burton parodies encyclopedic practice by amassing a list of melancholics that reduces the classical legacy to a common affliction, summing ancient civilization in its characteristic disease. As Socrates and Zeno become fellow sufferers, the imperative of cultural conservation is undone by a need to construct a mirror of the melancholy soul. In a real sense, it is authority that is disabled here and disease that is transmitted in the form of a learned tradition.

Melancholy subversions of encyclopedic custom mark Burton's work from the outset. Early in the first partition of *Anatomy*, after brief discourses on "Diseases in General" and "Diseases of the Mind," Burton begins the study of melancholy proper with a subsection entitled "Definition of Melancholy, Name, Difference." There he etymologizes melancholy in an analysis that echoes the encyclopedists of Greece and Rome and their medieval descendants:

I may now freely proceede to treat of my intended subject, to most mens capacity, and after many ambages, perspicuously define what this *Melancholy* is, shew his *Name*, and *Differences*. The Name is imposed from the matter, and Disease denominated from the

materiall cause: as *Bruel* observes, *Μελανχολια*, *quasi* *Μελαινα χολη*, from black Choler. And whether it be a cause or an effect, a Disease, or Symptome, let *Donatus Altomarus*, and *Salvianus* decide, I will not contende about it. It hath severall Descriptions, Notations, Definitions, *Fracastorius* in his second booke of intellect, calls those *Melancholy*, whom abundance of that same depraved humour of blacke Choler hath so misaffected, that they become mad thence, and dote in most things, or in all, belonging to election, will, or other manifest operations of the Understanding (I, 162).

Burton displays a scholar's familiarity with etymological method, distinguishing the "Descriptions, Notations, Definitions" of melancholy, and showing how the "name is imposed from the matter."¹¹ Yet his etymology is daunted by an inscrutable affliction that can describe "cause or an effect, a Disease, or Symptome." Burton will not "contende" the matter itself, but allow his sources to speak and in the flurry of citations that follows the irony of his disengagement becomes clear:

The common sort define it to bee *a kinde of dotage without a feaver, having for his ordinary companions, feare, and sadnesse, without any apparent occasion*. So doth *Laurentius cap. 4. Piso, lib. 1. cap. 43. Donatus Altomarus, cap. 7. art. medic. Jacchinus in com. in lib. 9. Rhasis ad Almansor. cap. 15. Valesius exerc. 17. Fuchsius institute. 3. sec. 1. cap. 11. &c.* Which common definition, howsoever approved by most, *Hercules de Saxonia* will not allow of, nor *David Crusius, Theat. morb. Herm. lib. 2. cap. 6.* he holds it insufficient: *as rather shewing what it is not, than what it is: as omitting the specificall difference, the phantasie and Braine: but I descend to particulars* (I, 162–63).

Subverted by a disease that confuses both students and sufferer — "*rather shewing what it is not, than what it is*" — sources destabilize a study set uneasily in the divide between melancholy and the normative methods of encyclopedic study. Etymology is one such method, sanctioned by long tradition; yet as these passages suggest (and as Vincent's use of Isidore made clear) etymology is sustained by citation — or *compilatio*, master trope of the encyclopedist¹² — and in *Anatomy* citation is bound up with the nature of melancholy.

III

Near the beginning of his prologue, Burton offers one of many energetic, and seemingly conventional, defenses of citation:

For my part I am one of the number, *nos numerus sumus*, I doe not denie it, I have only this of *Macrobius* to say for my selfe, *Omne meum, nihil meum*, 'tis all mine and none mine. As a good hous-wife out of divers fleeces weaves one peece of Cloath, a Bee gathers Wax and Hony out of many Flowers, and makes a new bundle of all,

Floriferis ut apes in saltibus omnia libant,

I have laboriously collected this *Cento* out of divers Writers, and that *sine injuriâ*, I have wronged no Authors, but given every man his owne, which *Hierom* so much commends in *Nepotian*, he stole not whole Verses, Pages, Tracts, as some do now adaies, concealing their Authors names, but still said this was *Cyprians*, that *Lactantius*, that *Hilerius*, so said *Minutius Felix*, so *Victorinus*, thus far *Arnobius*: I cite & quote mine Authors, (which howsoever some illiterate scribblers accompt pedanticall, as a cloake of ignorance, and opposite to their affected fine stile, I must & will use) *sumpsi, non surripui*, and what *Varro Lib. 6. de re rust.* speakes of Bees, *minimè maleficae nullius opus vellicantes faciunt deterius*, I can say of my selfe, whom have I injured? The matter is theirs most part, and yet mine, *apparet unde sumptum sit* (which *Seneca* approves) *aliud tamen quàm unde sumptum sit apparet* (I, 11).

Like Vincent, who uses the image of flower-gathering to describe his textual depredations, Burton recalls Lucretius's honey-bee to mitigate his massive "*Cento*."¹³ But as he employs the standard defense of the encyclopedist — "the matter is theirs most part, and yet mine" — citation is reimagined as a mode of psychic subjection that echoes the incursions of melancholy, compounding scholarly duty and psychic oppression: "I am one of the number . . . I have wronged no Authors . . . I can say of my selfe, whom have I injured?" In a familiar crisis of authority and identity, writing is conceived as a succession of slavish imitations and outright thefts:

I make them pay tribute, to set out this my *Maceronicon*, the method onely is myne owne, I must usurpe that of *Wecker è Terentio, nihil dictum quod non dictum priùs, methodus sola artificem ostendit*, we can say nothing but what hath beene said, the composition and method is ours onely, and shewes a Schollar. . . . Our Poets steale from *Homer*, he spewes, saith *Ælian*, they licke it up. Divines use *Austins* words *verbatim* still, and our Storie-dressers doe as much; hee that comes last is commonly best (I, 11).

To write is to repeat; even a proprietary claim to "composition and method" takes the form of citation.

Yet Burton is not content merely to ironize his compiler's role and in the creation of his persona, "Democritus Junior" — adapted from *Praise of Folly* where Erasmus assumes the role of Democritus — he transforms scholarly deference into a radical form of identification where the claims of disease and authority merge:

Hippocrates relates at large in his Epistle to *Damagetus*, wherein he doth expresse, how comming to visite him one day, he found *Democritus* in his garden at *Abdera*, in the Suburbs, under a shady Bowre, with a booke on his Knees, busie at his study, sometimes writing, sometime walking. The subject of his booke was Melancholy and madnesse,

about him lay the carcasses of many severall beasts, newly by him cut up and anatomized, not that he did contemne Gods creatures, as he told *Hippocrates*, but to finde out the seat of this *atra bilis* or Melancholy, whence it proceeds, and how it was engendered in mens bodies, to the intent he might better cure it in himselfe, by his writings and observations, teach others how to prevent & avoid it . . . *Democritus Junior* is therefore bold to imitate, & because he left it unperfect, & it is now lost, *quasi succenturiator Democritii*, to revive againe, prosecute and finish in this Treatise (I, 5–6).

In Democritus — whose work survives almost entirely in the citations of others — Burton finds a text-less authority, as it were, a nominal space where his writing may be inserted and an identity assumed. In a beautifully apt term, he calls himself “*succenturiator*” (literally “sub-centurion”) a proxy who in the absence of a superior assumes authority. In taking the name of Democritus, Burton claims “more liberty and freedome of speech” (I, 5), but his gesture is also a sublime recognition of the mantric power of precedence in scholarly study. The collective authorship epitomized in each citation is distilled here to a single source and conceived as a psychic transaction that entails loss of identity. Yet in the play of persona, a role created as well as imposed, the loss is by no means complete: to write *quasi succenturiator* is to act as self and other, supplant as well as be supplanted. In the course of this exchange, however, melancholy itself — “seat of this *atra bilis*” — remains resistant. If disease binds Democritus and Burton as victims and scholars, it also implicates *Anatomy* in the futility of writing melancholy. Like the name of Democritus, the treatise threatens to become mere iteration, the potential aporetic fate of every citation, echoing an “unperfect” attempt to discover the source of disease. While Burton recasts physical dissection as textual anatomy, substituting authorities for carcasses, the danger of failing to write a work that heals author and reader — to heal *by* writing — remains.

As Burton conceives *Anatomy* in the shadow of Democritus’s unwritten work, and as his more substantial authorities are exposed in their contradictions, the therapeutic process of writing itself, realized in the idiom of “Democritus Junior,” becomes the true matter of his study:

I must for that cause doe my busines my selfe, And was therefore enforced, as a Beare doth her whelps, to bring forth this confused lumpe, I had not time to licke it into forme, as shee doth her yong ones, but even so to publish it, as it was first written *quicquid in buccam venit*, in an extemporean stile, as I doe commonly all other exercises, *effudi quicquid dictavit Genius meus*, out of a confused company of notes, and writ with as small deliberation as I doe ordinarily speake, without all affectation of big words, fustian phrases, jingling termes, tropes, strong lines, that like *Acesta*’s arrowes cought fire as

they flew; straines of wit, brave heats, elogies, hyperbolicall exornations, elegancies, &c. which many so much affect (I, 17).

In a few words, Burton sums up the Renaissance wars of style: “tropes” and “strong lines” versus language “writ with as small deliberation as I doe ordinarily speake.” Though bound to a catalogue of sources, his work will be mediated by a spontaneous prose: “I neglect phrases, and labour wholly to inform my reader’s understanding, not to please his ear; ’tis not my study or intent to compose neatly, which an orator requires, but to express myself readily and plainly as it happens” (I, 18). The force of this negligence lies not in any seeming naturalness — a claim as conventional, Burton knows, as the artifice he mocks — but in its subtle subversion of scholarly order. By claiming to compose *ex tempore*, Burton sets his present act of writing against the collective voice of prior authority. In the welter of citations, style becomes an exclusive preserve: a sign of his *immediate* presence in the archive.¹⁴ Offered as a mode of self-expression, Burton’s prose becomes the affective medium of his melancholy in *Anatomy*, operating in counterpoint to the discursive analysis of disease drawn from the textual tradition. This personal style is marked, in turn, by the profusion of roles Burton adopts in an authorial display that mimics the traditional multivocality of the encyclopedia:

If I have overshot my selfe in this which hath beene hitherto said, or that it is, which I am sure some will object, too phantasticall, *too light and Comickall for a divine, too Satyricall, for one of my profession*, I will presume to answere with *Erasmus*, in like case, ’tis not I, but *Democritus, Democritus dixit*: you must consider what it is to speake in ones owne or anothers person, an assumed habit and name; a difference betwixt him that affects or acts a Princes, a Philosophers, a Magistrates, a Fooles part, and him that is so indeed; and what liberty those old Satyrists have had, it is a *Cento* collected from others, not I, but they that say it (I, 110).

Near the end of the prologue, proliferating sources become a proliferation of competing identities including Burton’s several guises: melancholic, divine, utopianist, scholar. In roles fitfully assumed and surrendered, as citation slips into personation and source into self (“’tis not I, but *Democritus, Democritus dixit*”) Burton reimagines encyclopedic protocol as a species of affliction where, like the copious signs of melancholy, citation entangles the author in shifting self-constructions, “betwixt him that affects or acts . . . and him that is so indeed.”

IV

If the force of Burton's citations lies in their rich confusion of learned study and psychic subjection, his encyclopedism takes its most potent form in his reimagination of the labor of his book:

And I doubt not but that in the end you wil say with me, that to anatomize this humour aright, through all the Members of this our *Microcosmus*, is as great a taske, as to reconcile those Chronologicall errors in the Assyrian monarchie, finde out the *Quadrature* of a Circle, the Creekes and Sounds of the North-East, or North-West passages, & all out as good a discoverie, as that hungry *Spaniards* of *Terra Australis Incognita*, as great trouble as to perfect the Motion of *Mars* and *Mercury*, which so crucifies our Astronomers, or to rectifie the *Gregorian* Kalendar (I, 23).

These quixotic quests — neatly arranged in arithmetical, geographical, and astronomical pairs — map physical and conceptual space, converging at a point where known phenomena lapse into projection, postulation, and desire. So the author hoping “to anatomize this humour aright” charts the interstices of body, mind, and soul, at the juncture of physical and psychic states, perception and belief. The play between microcosm and macrocosm is nicely decorous, then, but also wittily ironic. A search “through all the Members of this our *Microcosmus*,” punning on “members” as parts of body and as sections of text and linking their little worlds, echoes old metaphors for the universal book, but *Anatomy* is figured here, not as the *speculum mundi* or *domus Dei* of the medieval encyclopedist, but as *terra incognita: summa* of a disease that resists summation and, like the *Terra Australis*, even in discovery remains unknown.¹⁵

This characteristic resistance is most subtly elaborated as a condition of the book in the analysis of “Symptomes, or Signes” (I, 381) that brings the first partition of *Anatomy* to a close:

Who can sufficiently speake of these symptomes, or prescribe rules to comprehend them? as *Eccho* to the painter in *Ausonius*, *vane quid affectas*, &c. foolish fellow what wilt? if you must needs paint me paint a voice, & *similem si vis pingere, pingere sonum*; if you will describe melancholy, describe a phantasticall conceipt, a corrupt imagination, vaine thoughts and different, which who can doe? The foure and twenty letters make no more variety of words in divers languages, then melancholy conceipts produce diversity of symptomes in severall persons. They are irregular, obscure, various, so infinite, *Proteus* himselfe is not so divers, you may as well make the *Moone* a new coat, as a true character of a melancholy man; as soone finde the motion of a bird in the aire, as the heart of man, a melancholy man (I, 407).

The symptoms of melancholy, “irregular, obscure, various, so infinite,” are figured as an endlessly generated language of disease that defies circumscription: “Who can sufficiently speake of these symptomes, or prescribe rules to comprehend them?” As they multiply, disease and symptoms merge, dissolving into myriad “concepts” that transform each victim into the author of his own inscrutable affliction. Thus symptomatology becomes a sly derangement of the encyclopedia — an ever-expanding, collectively composed archive of “signes” where authority is subsumed by a private language of symptom and comprehension undone by an infinite discourse of disease. The symptomatic subversion of the universal book throws into sharp relief the unstable terms of the relation between melancholy and scholarly study and, in so doing, recalls the vision of authorial labor impelled by disease offered by Burton in his prologue:

I was fatally driven upon this Rocke of Melancholy, and carryed away by this by-streame, which as a Rillet, is deducted from the maine Channell of my studies, in which I have pleased and busied myself at idle houres, as a subject most necessary and commodious. Not that I preferre it before Divinity, which I doe acknowledge to be the Queene of Professions, and to which all the rest are as Handmaids, but that in Divinity I saw no such great neede (I, 20).

As Burton locates his work outside the proper sphere of Divinity, he describes his writing as a labor pursued “at idle houres” and driven by internal pressures. Though tied to a tradition that conceives the book as an idealized totality, *Anatomy* is offered here, not as a *speculum naturae*, but as the fruit of idleness and private compulsion.

The implications of this compulsion for Burton’s idea of the book are clarified in a digression on the “Miseries of Scholars,” where he reflects on the patronage system and the difficulties of learned labor:

They are more beholden to Schollers, than Schollers to them; but they undervalue themselves, and so by those great men are kept downe. Let them have that *Encyclopaedian*, all the learning in the world, they must keepe it to themselves, *live in base esteeme, and starve, except they will submit*, as *Budaeus* well hath it, *so many good parts, so many ensignes of Arts, vertues, bee slavishly obnoxious to some illiterate potentate, and live under his insolent worship, or honour, like Parasites, Qui tanquam mures alienum panem comedunt* (I, 310).

The vast learning of the “*Encyclopaedian*” is produced within a social system that sets its value and the scholar who will not submit to a patron must “*live in base esteeme.*” It is a service Burton abhors — “the fountaine

of these miseries proceeds from these griping Patrons" (I, 314) — and, having tasted of it briefly, abandons for the refuge of *Anatomy*:

Yet by some overweening and wellwishing friends, the like speeches have beene used to me, but I replied still with *Alexander* that I had enough, and more peradventure than I deserved; and with *Libanius Sophista* that rather chose (when honours and offices by the Emperour were offered unto him) to be *talis Sophista, quam talis Magistratus*, I had as lief be still *Democritus Junior*, and *privus privatus, si mihi jam daretur optio, quam talis fortasse Doctor, talis Dominus* (I, 315).

The bond between scholar and patron offers a traditional model of learned labor that operates in sharp distinction from the work of *Anatomy*. As Burton recites the stock roles of the patronage system — starving scholars, potentates, and parasites — he inhabits a world where servitude is differently defined: a private economy of books and disease that compels his vast expenditure of scholarship. In this self-conscious negotiation between public and private being, Burton offers a view of authorial labor anticipated in a passage already cited in part:

I write of Melancholy, by being busie to avoid Melancholy. There is no greater cause of Melancholy then idlenesse, *no better cure than businesse*, as *Rhasis* holds: and howbeit, *stultus labor est ineptiarum*, to be busied in toyes is no small purpose, yet heare that divine *Seneca*, better *aliud agere quam nihil*, better doe no end then nothing. I writ therefore, & busied myself in this playing labor, *otiosâque diligentia ut vitarem torporem feriandi* with *Vectius* in *Macrobius*, *atque otium in utile verterem negotium* (I, 6–7):

As Burton compounds *otium* and *neg/otium*, “idlenesse” and “businesse,” he describes his book as labor driven by a disease that preys upon the idle: “I writ therefore, & busied myself.”¹⁶ In this distinctively Burtonian *cogito*, Burton offers an alternative reading of his *Anatomy* as an encyclopedic reserve. The vast scholarship, that is by turns deconstructed and reaffirmed in the modern criticism of *Anatomy*, is, in Burton’s slyly ironic words, “*stultus labor*,” essential and superficial: playful work and purposeful distraction that become a means of controlling melancholy. So Burton perplexes the progress of his disease by doing anything, he says, rather than nothing: “*aliud agere quam nihil*.” The Senecan tag gently deflates a book that is, after all, merely something to do, to avoid lapsing into apathy (*ut vitarem torporem*) that breeds melancholy. Though bound to the monumental tradition of the encyclopedia, Burton offers a decidedly diminished idea of the book as endless diversion reimagining the aesthetic of exhaustion that informs Renaissance scholarship. In place of the emblematic archive of the traditional encyclopedia, *Anatomy* supplies a vast psychic inventory

amassed as therapy that subjects the ancient claims of the universal book to the present demands of authorial melancholy. Thus *Anatomy* is, paradoxically, a *personal* encyclopedia conceived as an essentially sanative labor compelled by inner need; and in this vision of scholarly work, the imperatives of encyclopedic writing are transfigured.

V

At the end of her reading of *Anatomy*, Rosalie Colie considers Burton's own conclusion:

The book does not quite end, and yet it does end, realistically speaking, as any intimate discourse ends, in the expectation of continued life and continued discourse. Spiritually speaking, too, the book has come to its end, which is the assertion of belief in the life to come, in both the rest of mortal life and a life in heaven; it ends in an assertion of trust, amidst a dangerous and mutable world, in the flexible, tolerant, comprehensive grace of God.¹⁷

Her words on Burton's faith are indisputable, yet we may observe that he also closes with a call to action, rather than submission, enjoining his readers to persist in their labors and end their isolation:

Onely take this for a corollary and conclusion, as thou tenderest thine owne welfare in this, and all other melancholy, thy good health of body and minde, observe this short precept, give not way to solitarinesse and idlenesse. *Be not solitary, be not idle.*

SPERATE MISERI,
CAVETE FAELICES.

Vis à dubio liberari, vis quod incertum est evadere? Age paenitentiam dum sanus est, sic agens, dico tibi quod securus es, quod paenitentiam egisti eo tempore quod peccare potuisti. Austin. [Do you want to be free from doubt? avoid uncertainty? Repent while you are sane, for in so doing I declare that you are safe, because you have spent repenting time in which you might have sinned.]

Fittingly, Burton's final words are divided between author and authority, English and Latin, strategies for survival in this world and happiness in the next. If Burton defers to Augustine in fulfillment of traditional encyclopedic practice, he also offers a subtle elaboration of the therapeutic labor that marks his *Anatomy*. For labor is compounded here of healing activity that dispells idleness and act of repentance that precludes sin. So Augustine's admonition — *age paenitentiam* — sustains, even as it transfigures, Burton's own: *Be not idle.*

If this closing citation reveals the subtlety of Burton's imagination of authorial work and textual authority, of encyclopedic custom and psychic

need, his imagination is enabled by disease. In the elusiveness of melancholy — ubiquitous yet indeterminate — he finds a means of subverting a prevailing faith in orderly phenomena, control of textual tradition, and the empirical gaze, exposing encyclopedic authority to the contingencies of a singularly elusive pandemic. In this view, Burton's true foil may be Bacon, the other great encyclopedic theorist of the English tradition, and his *Anatomy* a potent response to an intellectual regime increasingly dominated by Bacon's thought. Burtonian anatomy and Baconian instauration might well be read as subtly entwined encyclopedic gestures and Burton's vision of the universal book as a reformation, at once radical and reactionary, of Bacon's own. Can it be suggested that their vastly different reputations — Bacon the proto-modernist and Burton the idiosyncratic relic — need to be revised? that melancholy might serve, as much as Bacon's discourse of knowledge and power, as a foundation for imagining modernity?

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Notes

1. Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, vol. 1, ed. Thomas C. Faulkner, Nicolas K. Kiessling, and Rhonda L. Blair (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), p. 6. All references to *Anatomy* will be taken from this edition cited by volume and page in text.
2. Mark Breitenburg, *Anxious Masculinity in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 43. This view of Burton is not unanimous; Jonathan Sawday argues, refreshingly, that "far from being an intellectual aberration ... *Anatomy* is absolutely of its age" in *The Body Emblazoned: Dissection and the Human Body in Renaissance Culture* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 3.
3. Lawrence Babb notes the similarities between *Anatomy* and the encyclopedia only to dismiss them: "the *Anatomy* resembles the *compendia* merely in its comprehensiveness and in the formality of its general organization. Like the encyclopedists, Burton is one of the transmitters ... but the *Anatomy* obviously does not follow the encyclopedic pattern," *Sanity in Bedlam: A Study of Robert Burton's Anatomy of Melancholy* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1959), p. 11. What seem merely superficial similarities to Babb — comprehension, transmission, formality — will be read here as radical affinities binding Burton to the encyclopedic tradition. For other views on the link between *Anatomy* and the *compendium* tradition, see Paul Jordan-Smith, *Bibliographia Burtoniana* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1931) and Bridget Gellert Lyons, *Voices of Melancholy: Studies in Literary Treatments of Melancholy in Renaissance England* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1971), esp. pp. 1–16, 141–48. On the various forms of literary anatomy in this period, see Devon L. Hodges, *Renaissance Fictions of Anatomy* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1985), pp. 1–20 and on the abundance of metaphorical uses of anatomy in this period, see Sawday, pp. 1–15.

4. *Paradoxia Epidemica: The Renaissance Tradition of Paradox* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), p. 432.
5. Jesse M. Gellrich, *The Idea of the Book in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), pp. 41–2.
6. The extent of the medieval reimagination of the ancient encyclopedia may be gleaned from the remarkable variety of its forms in this period: from allegories like *The Marriage of Mercury and Philology* by Martianus Capella to the almost Ramistic experiments in structure found in the *Didascalicon* of Hugh of St. Victor. (Burton, it may be noted, uses both works.) See David Knowles, *The Evolution of Medieval Thought* (New York: Vintage, 1962), pp. 73f., and Michael J. Haren, *Medieval Thought: The Western Intellectual Tradition from Antiquity to the Thirteenth Century* (London: Macmillan, 1985), pp. 111–14.
7. Fritz Saxl, *Lectures*, vol. 1 (London: Warburg Institute, University of London Press, 1957), p. 228. For an acute analysis of the literary and mythological problems of the medieval encyclopedia, see Martin Irvine, *The Making of Textual Culture: "Grammatica" and Literary Theory, 350–1100* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994). It is worth recalling that Saxl's own situation — expatriate German scholar lecturing in England during the Second World War — was implicated in the cultural negotiations he describes here. When Saxl speaks of "spiritual collaboration between the old Roman and the new German peoples" he, like Isidore, reasserts the ties that bind Europe in spite of war.
8. Useful discussions of Vincent may be found in Émile Mâle, *Religious Art in France in the Thirteenth Century*, trans. Dora Nussey (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1913), pp. 23–7; Erwin Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939), pp. 22f.; and Gellrich, pp. 41–3.
9. *Formavit ergo, sicut scriptum est, Dominus hominem in agro Damasceno de limo terrae, quantum ad corpus, unde et Adam interpretatur terra rubea sive terrenus. Erat corpus illud immortale, non de conditione naturae, sed beneficio gratiae. Nam eius immortalitas erat sustentanda per esum ligni vitae. Erat itaque potens non mori si non peccaret, quia de ligno vitae sustentaretur, et potens mori si peccaret, quia ligno vitae privaretur, sicut et factum est. Isidorus in Liber Etymologiarum, 11. Corpus dictum est eo quod corruptum perit, solubile enim atque mortale est, et aliquando solvendum. Caro autem a creando est appellata. Crementum enim semen est masculi, unde animalium et hominum corpora concipiuntur, hi ne et parentes creatores vocantur. Vincentius Bellovacensis, *Quadruplex sive Speculum maior*, vol. 1 (Graz, 1964), Bk 28, Cap. II, 1994. The passage Vincent cites from Isidore may be found in Isidori, *Etymologiarum sive originum*, vol. 2, ed. W. M. Lindsay (Oxonii: E typographeo clarendoniano, 1911), Liber XI, part i, lines 1–14. On the abiding importance of etymology in the encyclopedic tradition from the classical to the medieval period, see Irvine, pp. 209–43, and R. Howard Bloch, *Etymologies and Genealogies: A Literary Anthropology of the French Middle Ages* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), pp. 45f.*
10. *Porro ne quis in hoc opere, vel de novitate, vel de nimia prolixitate me aestimet arguendum, quoniam hoc ipsum opus novum quidem est simul et antiquum, breve quoque pariter et prolixum. Antiquum certes auctoritate et materia. Novum vero partium compilatione, et earum aggregatione. Breve quoque; propter multorum dictorum in breve perstrictionem.*

Longum nihilominus propter immensam materiae multitudinem. Denique; si pauca ex ipsis minimis particularibus voluminibus ex quorum flosculis, hoc ipsum opus universale contextum est precio compararem, aut scribi facerem (quorum tamen magnitudo forsitan huic operi, vel maiori parti per aequiparantiam respondere posset; Verbi gratia ex philosophis, Aristotilem de animalibus Avicennam de medicina, Plinium, de historia naturali, vel ex Iudaeis Iosephum, ex nostris autem Augustinum de civitate Dei, vel super Psalterium, vel super Ioannem, Moralia quoque beati Gregorii, vel aliquem huiusmodi) nullus esset fortassis, quia gueret, nemoque reprehenderet; et tamen cum haberem haec omnia, ne dicam tertiam, vel quartam, immo nec saltem decimam, aut vicesimam partem eorum vrilium quae in hoc opere continentur in scriptis possiderem, aut tenerem. Quadruplex sive Speculum maior, vol. 1, Cap. IV, pp. 3–4.

11. On the etymological distinctions used here by Burton see Irvine, pp. 222–224. By suggesting that melancholy has multiple “notations” — the contemporary term for etymology taken from Cicero’s *Topica* (VIII, 35–37) — Burton reminds his reader that even the common derivation of melancholy can be disputed.
12. On *compilatio*, see Irvine, pp. 344–64, and Neil Hathaway, “*Compilatio*: From Plagiarizing to Compiling,” *Viator*, 20 (1989), pp. 19–44.
13. On traditional metaphors for literary compilation, see Irvine, pp. 241–43, and Hathaway, pp. 21, 42f. While Vincent employs a generalized image of *compilatio*, Burton, typically, finds his honey-bee in Lucretius.
14. Set within his subversive meditation on disease and authority, Burton’s conventional idealization of writing as a mirror of mind in action is more rhetorical strategy than tenet of linguistic faith, that resists reduction to a simple essentialism. Burton exemplifies the ways in which the terms of stylistic debate could be used for a variety of literary purposes; if we read that debate as one form of early modern literary theory, Burton is among its canniest proponents.
15. *Terra Australis* — long a focus of myth and rumor — is a particularly appropriate analogy here. Burton’s “hungry Spaniard” refers to Ferdinando De Quiros, Portuguese pilot for a Spanish expedition sent out from Peru by Philip III in 1605 to search for a southern continent. De Quiros mistook an island in New Hebrides for Australia, naming it *La Austrialia del Espiritu Santo*, but a mutiny prevented further exploration. (The expedition’s captain, Luis Vaez de Torres, may have glimpsed the Australian coast after being abandoned by the mutineers.) Returning to South America, De Quiros petitioned the Spanish king to refit another expedition, but died shortly after securing approval. On geographical imagery in *Anatomy*, see E. Patricia Vicari, *The View from Minerva’s Tower: Learning and Imagination in the Anatomy of Melancholy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989), pp. 31–42, 197–204; and Anne S. Chapple, “Robert Burton’s Geography of Melancholy,” *SEL*, 33 (1993), 99–130.
16. Burton’s play on *otium* may be subtler still. The evocation of an ancient ideal that came to define Roman class ambition intimates Burton’s own social status as a “Student in the most flourishing Colledge of *Europe*” (I, 3) and the complex relation to leisure and labor that resulted from this status. The scholarship that enables his learned puns is born of work appropriate to his station, but also work pursued for personal purposes in idle hours — a

kind of play. A discussion of idleness in *Anatomy* would help to place it in a cultural history of ease from *otium* to early modern concepts of class, labor, and leisure.

17. Colie, p. 460.