

The art of medicine

The Anatomy of Melancholy revisited

Dr Samuel Johnson struggled to get out of bed in the morning. This was a symptom of what he called his “black dog”—the depression of which he wrote one of the most memorable of all descriptions in a letter to Hester Thrale in 1783: “When I rise my breakfast is solitary, the black dog waits to share it, from breakfast to dinner he continues barking...After dinner what remains but to count the clock, and hope for that sleep which I can scarce expect.” But, according to his devoted biographer James Boswell, there was one book that gave Johnson the will to get up early: “Burton’s *Anatomy of Melancholy*, he said, was the only book that ever took him out of bed two hours sooner than he wished to rise.” Johnson also gave Boswell, who himself suffered from severe bouts of depression, a valuable piece of advice from Burton: “The great direction which Burton has left to men disordered like you, is this, *Be not solitary; be not idle.*” He added that the advice should be modified to the effect that those of an idle disposition should not be solitary and those who are solitary should not be idle.

The “direction” that Johnson quoted came from the last page of Robert Burton’s compendium of psychiatric lore, first published in 1621 using the pseudonym Democritus Junior, and revised and expanded on many occasions before the author’s death in 1640. Its full title was *The Anatomy of Melancholy, What it is: With all the Kinds, Causes, Symptomes, Prognostickes, and Several Cures of it. In Three Partitions, with their several Sections, Members and Subsections, Philosophically, Medicinally, Historically, Opened and Cut Up.* As Vesalius had revolutionised the understanding of the body’s physical anatomy in his *De humani corporis fabrica* of 1543, so, two generations later, Burton, an Oxford don who spent almost his entire life in his study and his university’s great libraries, set out to anatomise the human mind.

At first glance, Burton would seem to be a misanthropist. The book opens with a long address to the reader in which Burton argues that we are all mad, all foolish, and all so “carried away with passion, discontent, lust, pleasures etc.” that we generally hate those virtues which we should love and love those vices that we should hate. But it soon becomes clear that he is being playful. He belongs to a tradition of irony that dates back, via Desiderius Erasmus’s *Praise of Folly*, to the satirical authors of ancient Rome and Greece, notably Lucian. At the end of his long introduction, Burton explains that he wants to distinguish between what we might call the symptoms of “everyday folly”—that is to say, the behaviour of those of us who are “metaphorically mad, lightly mad, or in disposition stupid, angry, drunken, silly, sottish, sullen, proud, vain-glorious, ridiculous, beastly, peevish, obstinate, impudent, extravagant, dry, doting, dull, desperate, harebrain, etc.” (which is to say, all humankind)—and those

who are suffering from the “disease” of “melancholy”. The “anatomy” in three “partitions” is devoted to a forensic analysis of the kinds of melancholy and possible cures for it.

In enumerating symptoms in the First Partition, Burton begins by following Hippocrates: the signs of melancholy are hollow eyes, “much trouble with wind and a griping in their bellies”, belching, “dejected looks”, tinnitus, vertigo, light-headedness, “little or no sleep”, “terrible and fearful dreams”. From other ancient authorities, he adds “continual fears, griefs and vexations”, headaches, and an inability to “go about any business”. All these, he calls the physical symptoms of melancholy. They map fairly well onto our modern understanding of depression. Burton then turns to mental symptoms. This time following Galen, he focuses above all on “fear and sorrow”: he enumerates numerous phobias, such as fear of walking alone, fear of small enclosed rooms, obsessive compulsive conditions such as not daring “to go over a bridge, come near a pool, rock, steep hill, lie in a chamber where cross-beams are”. Again, although he gathers together a range of behaviours that we would now separate out, his understanding of mental distress has a familiar feel.

The Second Partition is devoted to cures for melancholy. The starting point, Burton suggests, should be improved diet. He recommends “such meats as are easy of digestion”, “bread of pure wheat well-baked”, “water clear from the fountain”, “wine and drink not too strong”, together with plentiful fish, herbs, fruit, and root vegetables. No snacking, he adds, and not overmuch of any one dish. There then follows a long digression on the subject of air, in which Burton discourses on everything from the merits of building houses on higher ground with a good view, to the importance of opening and closing windows, to the recreational benefits of a landscape that is “rather hilly than plain, full of downs, a Cotswold country, as being most commodious for hawking, hunting, wood, waters, and all manner of pleasures”.

This leads into a chapter called “Exercise Rectified of Body and Mind”. Though there are dangers to the body in exercising to excess, Burton (perhaps surprisingly for a sedentary Oxford don) regards physical activity as crucial to mental health: exercise is “much conducing to this cure and to the general preservation of our health”. Sport is good for the body—country pursuits are ideal, he says, but every city has “its several gymnics and exercises”, while dancing and singing are also commended. And it is equally important to exercise the mind: Burton suggests playing chess, going to the theatre, museums, and art galleries, listening to the news, and above all reading everything you can lay your hands on, especially the classics. The next necessity for the rectification of the mind is friendship. And the best cure of all is humour. If you can find a friend who makes you laugh, mirth will purge melancholy.

