

Saturn's body: melancholy and method in the *Anatomy of Melancholy*

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ABSTRACT

The Method is possibly the most important question in the Renaissance arts, literature and philosophy. The 'way' of knowledge, 'how' something can be understood, written, painted or even drawn, appears side by side with a concept of subjectivity founded in mathematics and geometry (Cartesian subject and method), or, on the other hand, what it holds to be the reverse of that which was agreed to be called, since that time, the very science itself, the scope of the 'occult sciences,' that seems to be held up by the melancholic subjectivity which comes up in the Renaissance as a result of its decentralization, faced with the heliocentric hypothesis that can be interpreted as God's abandonment, leading to the assertion of the Self in Descartes' and Montaigne's philosophies. The question of melancholy is exhaustively considered by Robert Burton in his *Anatomy of Melancholy*, by a 'melancholic method.' If it is possible in contemporary philosophies to understand the method as a deviation, instead of as a straight path achieved through a determinate and bounded reason – the 'modern reason' – we get, in Burton, the method as an attempt to show, to explain, to overcome or avoid that deviation. *Anatomy of Melancholy* is a dissection of what can be called Saturn's body, as the body can be considered the devoured moment of modern subjectivity in favor of Reasoning.

"However, in our body the most forgotten
of foreign countries is our own body..."
Walter Benjamin. Franz Kafka

Who is not brain sick?
Robert Burton

1. INTRODUCTION

The hypothesis here proposed for investigation is based on the idea that the history of subjectivity goes through the history of melancholy, which, we know from the history of philosophical ideas, begins with Democritus of Abdera and finds an important place in Aristoteles, in his famous Problem XXX,1; the primigenic notion of subjectivity which appeared for

philosophical thinking, clearly, only in Descartes and, before him, in Montaigne, could be, already in these thinkers of Antiquity, in the former as a true example or testimony of melancholic affection, and in the latter, outlined in the idea of a 'man of exception.' One could question the place of subjectivity in the history of philosophy from the soul/body binomial (a dualism which will from now on be present in the history of ideas), which appears initiated both from the history of metaphysics and the history of science and its division. The history of melancholy, from a viewpoint initiated by the history of traditional medicine that will flow into modern psychiatry and psychoanalysis, is also present as the history of subjectivity, and must be investigated in its relationship with the hidden side of science: the question would be to understand who would be the subject of this non-Cartesian world, with very unclear and indistinct ideas. Melancholy and the subjectivity that is characteristic of it, appear in the negative, in the conditions of this division of sciences, and are essential to philosophy and to the condition of the subject of knowledge and will go through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The back seam of a tracing of philosophical history in relation to melancholy could be understood from the idea of Saturnal time, the time of devouring; Chronos swallowing his children, would be the legitimate god of the twentieth century. He would also be the god of philosophers devouring their children, or, more precisely, the bodies of their children; to speak based on a metaphorization: he swallows matter, sensuality, the somatic, empirical and bodily aspects. His time would be the time of death. In terms of history of philosophy, a growing death of the body, its disappearance from the scene, or the attempt to eliminate it from the picture of relevant themes. In other words, human history would itself be melancholy, as a scenery of loss, devouring, death, forgetting.

If, in the history of thought, there is a bias that conceives of knowledge as scientific, and a subjectivity that gives it sustenance, there is, however, the possibility of evaluating the shadows of such a conception, that could well configure what I will call "melancholic philosophies." If it is not possible to characterize the whole philosophical field as melancholic (under pains of committing an arbitrary totalization), it is, however, possible to perceive in Robert Burton the definition of the limits of this melancholic thought (as said previously, present in later thinkers), decisively influencing modernity and situating it in opposition to Cartesian influence. The question would be to render the melancholic influence visible in the modern tradition and discover why it is hidden, forgotten. Faced with the birth of modernity, a world of sadness and death, of misery and shadow, Burton offers his book. The Burtonian metaphor of the book/body will make it possible to present, under the sign of the book, a redemption for the world, the whole of life in its darkness and sadness, and under the register of the body it will also give

signs of a conception of what is human from its somatic instant. In fact, that the book be body, that is our question. In what sense may books (or written documents) be redeemers (of the body and the soul, of the subject as such), is the general background question that organizes these statements.

Considering the *Anatomy of Melancholy*, two possibilities of reading and interpretation become feasible: on the one hand the book could be read in a more mathematical way, its parts could be further dissected, in an act of dissection of the dissection of melancholy, in which we would arrive at its weights and measures, at tissues and their folds, at connections between the organs. We would treat the book as a cadaver. On the other hand, this book-body has a writer and a reader. Behind and before it a subject. Could we ask what it would be to know a body as a subject, however, and not as an object. Or, in other words, even in having it as an object, understanding it as an instant of opening, as a possibility, and not simply as something manipulable. One really should try to discover whether this book presents as a live body or as a cadaver. The road to be followed, the method, therefore, would well be to try to walk for a while in the steps of Burton, and continue to reconstitute the history of melancholy in the modernity that comes after it. In this case, it becomes mandatory to understand his melancholy method. But what inspires this method? What are its characteristics?

Therefore, it is a matter of dissecting Saturn's body, the body devoured in the history of modern subjectivity to ensure the place of rational subjectivity. The subject of the body is the subject of melancholy submitted to a shadow, just as the history of melancholy is the history of the soul lost from its body, from a body that has lost its Self. The place of emptiness, of a subjectivity in the dark. One should understand its reconstruction, and what it means, through a book.

Burton takes up the body/writing analogy present in the sixteenth century (*The Anatomy of Melancholy* is a book that was first published in 1621 (1624, 1628, 1632, 1638 and 1651, reprinted in 1660 and 1676, and then only in 1800), dedicated to George Berkeley and prefaced by the pseudonym of Democritus Junior who first wrote to his book and then to the Reader. Two questions open from this perspective. To think of this book as a body implies attention to the history of the problem that would represent its material instant. The many quotations, especially in the preface of Democritus Junior, testify to this attempt to show a corporeality that runs through time, as though an idea took on a body in the figures of its investigators. The fact that Burton collects them in a book takes us to the fact of the collection and withdrawal of the remnants of the past.

This body must not be arranged, organized without taking into account its natural chaos. If life as such is what he wants to describe in this book, it must be a dissection of the whole world, all of it melancholic, all of

it misfortune and pain, about which we can laugh and for which we can cry, which we can face directly or in face of which blindness may be preferable. If what one wants to know is the world, it is because this world could well be a book: the book is the world.¹ Instead of a library, what we have is a book-more-than-library, sufficient, paradigmatic, a book that intends to say the truth about the essential question which can elucidate the world: melancholy is already the name of the world and its anatomy is a lucid description. This means to say that it will be the measure of all things, the magnification glass and the filter, the weft and the warp. But in what sense or to what point is this metaphor valid? For this we have to understand what melancholy means, what its concept and meaning is in Burton's text.

2. MELANCHOLY, METHOD, LAUGHTER

A book as anatomy, as dissection of a body, but also as its construction. The process of its construction is both description and dissection, which defines its method. In Descartes, whose method we take here as opposite and comparative, this dissection appears to be much more hiding the body, whereas in Burton it would be its revelation. Event though in Descartes the body also is revealed by a negative, in Burton this revelation will be the sign of an established order. If Plato, Plotinus and the Renaissance Neoplatonism are able to speak of a soul of the world, Burton will place the question in the body, and this defines a specific outreach in relation to this materialist history denied in the history of thought. The place of each of the terms in the soul/body equation will provide the span of the division of sciences at the beginning of modernity. In science proper, the soul or the spirit are able to dissect the body, while taking it as an object, something dead, a cadaver. The so-called occult sciences – and this name is not given gratuitously – will continue to be the experience with the body from the standpoint of a difficult separation of the soul, even considering the immortality of the soul or of its crazy cosmic trip, or the vision of ghosts and doubles, even considering the possibility of the immortality of the soul and the mortality of the body, the magic conception of the occult sciences will treat the body as something that is not separated from the soul since it suffers its magic influence (to cure its wounds it is not necessary to tear them out but simply the touch them or pray over them, or apply potions made out of natural elements). What is at stake is a conception of nature rejected by science and by the official church, and

¹ As observed by Curtius (1996:399) the English epigrammatist, John Owen (1563-1622), elegantly inverted the topos of the book of the world, calling his book of the world according to the following enunciation: "this book is the world, in which men are the verses and, as in the Universe (as he said to Hoskino), "thou shalt find here few good ones."

that will remain as a leftover to the occult sciences, or to any opponent of the church which can be configured in the devil and the knowledge that he may symbolize.

From such a perspective, the idea of a writing as the configuration of a body (not only as exposure of the spirit) may bear a relationship to this conception of the magic of curing: that the writing which is metaphorically configured in a body can be a cure of the body in its wounds, in its historical ruins (when faced with a crazed reality. Laughing, in Burton, may be medicine, but writing about laughing appears to be the panacea for someone who is taken by the insatiable desire to write. To write can be to laugh. Laughter is the form of avoiding horror, of overcoming it, just as writing. And Burton's text is an exercise in humor, but also in melancholy. Different from satire and witticisms, humor would reach comicity, due to the sentiments of the sublime and the ridiculous that is suggested to him by the "excessively realistic painting of human nature whence he takes his strength" (Lambote 2000:115). Burton, who has to thematize himself, he himself the object of his laughter, but who finds repugnant the laugh that another ("malicious and lazy reader," Burton, *Anatomy*:105) could turn on him.

If Burton apologizes for his mania of making jokes, for his witticisms, it is not to eliminate them, but because they are inevitable. At this point he would be ironic in apologizing for something that he will continue to do, by choice or impotence. His choice of the laughter of Democritus is accompanied also by the choice of his blindness. Not seeing, however, could appear as not-being-seen, not being seen may be the denial of the extreme wish of being seen. Not seeing or not being seen, appears as a solution next to laughing. As heir and follower of Democritus, Burton, however, continues to see. In what sense does he imitate the gesture of Democritus, in this tragicomedy of his (Burton, *Anatomy*:973)?

Writing is giving a body to something, but it is also to recall the body, to give a place to the interference of what is somatic over the thoughts. Laughing is the sublimation of this humor that understands life from the original truth of emptying the self, which filled by rationality will sustain modern science and philosophy. The belief in reason, the belief in the superior condition of man over animal, is what can still be the object of laughter. The objective of method is one more reaction. The dissecatio of Democritus provokes laughter, but would not also provoke a comparison that would touch on human misery. As he tells it, Democritus dissects animals when he is visited by Hippocrates to learn how their organs function and, thus, try to understand the functioning of melancholy in human beings. Democritus Junior imitates him (Burton, *Anatomy*:15). The human and animal bodies lead to the same place. We humans and Abderites (every

reader is an Abderite who may not understand Democritus and treat him as a madman) are certainly animals.

It is also necessary to face the hypothesis that this is because the melancholic subject is constituted based on his humors, the functioning of his body and not his spirit.

The sadness of melancholy reverberates from the body, the command of his intellectual state depends on his spleen and his liver much more than on any other organ closer to the spirit. Descartes did not avoid the place of what is corporeal, but favored the maintenance of his repression and the appearance of the "I think," the fact that only thinking confirms the existence of the subject, that the Self can only count on the Self as a guarantee of existence, defines the position of Descartes in the countercurrent of melancholy: what could have been lost to the melancholy is all that is left for Descartes. He is saved.

3. THE WRITER, THE READER AND EMPTINESS

The construction of the Cartesian subject depends on the method, also the construction of the Burtonian subject. If the former flows into the scientific-mathematic subject, the other flows into the melancholic subject. If we can characterize a method as scientific and Cartesian from the exposure to the famous four rules, how can we characterize a method as melancholic? What would a melancholic method be? It is not simply a question of establishing a science of melancholy, or a scientific method that is able to dissect melancholy, but of knowing what is the difference between the scientific dissection proposed by Descartes and the melancholic dissection proposed by Burton. If the method is the subject in both, however, the question about the limits and definitions of this subjectivity remains unanswered. But, what is the Cartesian subject and what is the Burtonian subject, the mathematical and the melancholic one? What are their differences and similitudes? If Democritus dissects his animals to understand human melancholy, he is associating the human and animal bodies, and accepting that a disease of the soul has its seat in the body (and therefore we find here something different from the Aristotelian *zoon lógikon*, the separation between soul and body, is not taken over and taking over the body is to take up the animal instant of the human being). The difference between melancholic and scientific method must be in the relationship with the body. And, therefore in the way one understands the separation between soul and body. At the level of a text, this separation appears as a disjunction between content and form. In the history of philosophy as a denial of what the body of the text may represent,

rhetoric mainly, we could say, in its epideictic mode,² the one that would guard the expression and that appears to be Burton's style (*genus*).

The Burtonian achievement as a written achievement and of writing itself as such, cannot occur distant from an analysis of style, as is well developed by Angus Gowland, from an analysis, therefore, of the rhetoric, of which Burton's text is full.³

But the essential topic based on which the understanding of the book/body construction is presented in Burton is the appearance of the figure of emptiness, which, in an exemplary manner, represents melancholy. This appearance of emptiness occurs through the negative way of filling, such is the character of collected writings, the exhaustive and fatiguing and almost enervating gathering of information, of names and quotations that constitute the book from its preface to the end. At first sight it is a rather encyclopedic text, a list, a specialized index. It is as though Robert Burton had nothing to say. He does not hide, rather he opens this condition wide up, saying of himself that he is a thief (Burton, *Anatomy*:18), or a dwarf on the shoulders of a giant (Burton, *Anatomy*:20), like so many writers. That right in the modern period, he conceives knowledge as an acknowledgement of the authority of the ancients, reaffirming a medieval principle, places on the scene not only the backward vision of a scholastic thinker, lost in his time, but the situation of a subject that presents himself (and this characteristic makes him moder), as an empty subject, for which nothing is left except the

² The epideictic style, in Aristotle, provides the mode of the demonstrative discourse (*Rhetoric*, 1358 b.5. See bilingual critical edition of the Centro de Estudios Constitucionales, Madrid, 1990), oriented towards a common listener (See G. Reale. *História da Filosofia antiga*. Op.cit. Vol II:478). In Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1996:53-55), one speaks of a "lonely orator who, frequently, did not even appear to the public, but who contented himself with making his written composition circulate, presented a discourse which nobody opposed, about issues that did not seem doubtful and of which one saw no practical consequence." This style ends up taking over the function of a spectacle. After Aristotle, the style due to his specific character was treated as the study of grammar and abandoned by philosophy and by the Roman rectorors who did not consider it important for practical eloquence. The character of ornamentation was the protagonist of this abandonment. If in Aristotle, the deliberative style serves to advise what is useful and the judiciary claims what is fair, while the epideictic must occupy itself with what is beautiful and ugly, in order to praise or criticize, we are looking at the recognition of the values that each of these discourses must proclaim. Absent the judgment of value and the intensity of adhesion, the theoreticians of discourse mix the idea of what is beautiful and good, the object of the discourse, with the idea of the esthetic value of the discourse itself. It is thus that the epideictic style will attach itself more to literature than to argumentation. This style was misunderstood, and was removed from philosophy and considered minor in the art of persuading.

³ Adorno is one of the few twentieth century philosophers to mention the importance of rhetoric in philosophy and its repression. To him rhetoric will be the place for expression, certainly he refers to the epideictic style.

history that he himself did not constitute. His emptiness is eternally confirmed, he can only seek to fill it out in the books.

Burton is, thus, the reader, an exhaustive reader of all books available. He writes for a reader, however, certain that he will be read, in the hope of being recognized. But he is also the reader himself, the archetypal reader who gives himself the work of performing the compilation. Is he writing for another or also for himself? This sending, this addressing, is an important instant of all writing.

Burton is the writer, but the writer is Democritus Junior, a character through which he introduces himself and behind whom he hides. This condition of personae is important. Burton begins his preface to the book (Democritus Junior to the Reader) speaking about him and almost apologizing for introducing such an ancient personage, and in such an insolent manner in the scene of the vision of a world that he is to present (Burton, *Anatomy*:11). At no time in the preface does he say that he is Robert Burton, but he states that Democritus Junior is a mask. Despite this parentage, he says that he is a free subject and that he can choose what he wants to say. In the first edition the book had a conclusion (The Conclusion of the Author to the Reader), most of which was reproduced later in the Democritan preface, in which he himself questions the change that occurred in the preface written in the name of Democritus, as his disciple and follower, for an epilogue in his own name. The element of process and construction of a new perspective becomes evident: Burton understood that first he should hide himself, but for many reasons he changed his initial intention and decided, in that final moment, to introduce himself, to sign his writing with his own name. More incisively than Michel de Montaigne, he asks the reader to lay his eyes on him, the writer (Burton, *Anatomy*: 973). His appearance through the text seems inevitable to him, therefore he says that style makes the man. According to him, he knows that he had opened himself up in his Treatise, and that he will know how to hear the criticisms of good men. As in the preface, there is a slight one of retraction in this postface, which serves rather the intention of presenting him as a more real subject, than of making good errors or flaws in his writing. But if he is his own writing, then this retraction of his writing is the retraction of himself. If he begs forgiveness in this apologetic appendix (Burton, *Anatomy*: 974), it is because he acknowledges that he has erred at some point, but he still quotes himself and hides behind the quotations. In other words, the method of compilation and reference to authority are not errors in his eyes. There is no problem in that he knows very little about issues of medicine, that his errors are many, but he wants to shoulder them all (Burton, *Anatomy*: 976). Moral error, the lack of clarity about his intentions, is what weighs most.

The method is this compilation, dissection is the historical compilation. As though opening up the body of history is to pick up its shards. The method itself is to collect them, with the intention of filling out emptiness. From the “Partition” to the “Section”, to the “Member”, to the “Subsection”, the book is deployed in an endless, tireless number of references. The place of memory, its construction depends on this anguishing strategy. In the book there is no structure of a beginning, middle and end that one could guarantee, it is as though the book could continue. Burton prepares a constellation. Despite the clear division of the book into three parts (the first one focuses on the causes, the symptoms, the types of melancholy, the second deals with its causes, the third deals with the melancholy of love, delivering itself largely to a presentation of religious melancholy) the book may sound confused and anti-methodical, and reveals the form in which Burton himself understands his act of writing “like a river”⁴ – let us recall his “incurable itch to write” (Burton, *Anatomy*: 17) – which, according to him, “runs precipitously and fast, and, sometimes, monotonously and slowly, now straight, now sinuous, now deep, now shallow, now muddy, now clear, now broad, now narrow, my style flows, now more serious, now soft, now more elaborate, now more careless. Comical, satirical, as the present subject requires, or as I feel at that moment” (Burton, *Anatomy*: 975). The advice he will give the reader is to do the same, as a common traveler, who reads according to his possibilities and intentions, his taste.

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⁴ Gowland (1998:1-48) shows the origin of the metaphor of the river that appeared in Quintilian. The summary of the article says the following: “In writing *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, Robert Burton was working within the system of classical rhetoric as revived in the Renaissance, specifically the epideictic genus. A juxtaposition of the topics, arguments, and tripartite form employed by Burton with the treatment of epideictic in Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*, as well as with aspects of the Roman and Hellenistic rhetorical traditions, shows how Burton has playfully adapted Renaissance conceptions of epideictic rhetoric for encyclopedic, satirical and self-expressive purposes. The function of rhetoric in the *Anatomy* is both to ‘dissect’ the corpus of knowledge about melancholy and to ‘show forth’ the author’s own melancholic condition.”

'Nothing but papers, my lord'

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