

**"WHAT IS A SHIP BUT A PRISON?" A Meditation on**

**LIMITS, Other-Imposed and Self-Imposed ----- Elliott #1811**

Burton (Robert that is, not Richard) has been dead these nigh 3 1/2 centuries, and who any longer bothers with his classic ANATOMY OF MELANCHOLY? I'll tell you who. Anybody who, happening upon the leisure to do so, decides to end the irritation of remaining ignorant though seeing, decade after decade, references to it. Fact is, scratching that itch explains most of my post-school encounters with classics....This thinksheet is not a bookreview but an elucidation of the book's feeling-tone.

1. In 1621, the ANATOMY's publication date, "melancholy" covered most of what today we'd call psychiatric disturbance, especially the depressions. But the book is more than the first classic in psychiatry (with sort-of predecessors in Augustine, and before him Cicero, and after him Boethius and Wm. James). It's also full of delicious digressions that amount to a treasure trove for writing an intellectual history of 17th-c. Europe and Britain. It's as messy as my thinksheets, to make an immodest reference....RB got his BD in 1614 and stayed in that Oxford college, managing the library for the rest of his life, d. at 63--but also vicar and rector in several churches. Writing the ANATOMY was OT, his way of self-cure for his depression (at least in part caused by too much library and too little woman: never married). (No comparison with thinksheets here --unless, if I didn't write them, I'd get depressed; that's possible.) He couldn't get his publisher to let him write it in Latin; the publisher was right, and RB made a fortune on it: it was on the best-seller list for a couple of centuries! (What! you never heard of it?)

2. The preface is amazing. Our society is a ship of fools, and the best way to fight "melancholy" in the populace is to restructure society into humane institutions! You get the social gospel before you even get to chapter one! "All the world is melancholy or mad." Equally radical medically: He broadened "melancholy" (from the narrow notion that mental illness is caused by an excess of one of the four "humours," or fluids, that together determine personality) to include, beyond morbidity, all "mental" dysfunctionality and emotional inappropriateness. His "anatomy" (=analysis) of "melancholy," he explains, is in preparation for social reform: the analysis is a tool necessary to attain and sustain reform. Three parts: (1) causes, (2) cures, (3) love melancholy and religious melancholy. Sir Wm. Osler said the title should be THE ANATOMY OF MAN. A vast pudding of wisdom and witty entertainment, defying the limits "proper," then and now, to "a book." Reminds me, in contents, of Jon. Edwards on the emotions (for RB, too, covers them all--and greatly influenced Milton, esp. in "L'Allegro" and "Il Penseroso").

3. My favorite passage is at the end (V.2908, LIBRARY OF THE WORLD'S BEST LITERATURE): I'm not trying "to upbraid any miserable man" or deride him, for "I rather pity" him. My aim has been "the better to discern, to apply remedies," and "to show that the best and soundest of us all is in great danger; how much we ought to fear our own fickle estates, remember our miseries and vanities, examine and humiliate ourselves, seek to God, and call to him for mercy," God not needing to "look for any rods to scourge" us, "since we carry them in our bowels"; for "our souls are in a miserable captivity, if the light of grace and heavenly truth doth not shine continually upon us; and by our discretion to moderate ourselves, to be more circumspect and wary in the midst of these dangers."

4. The tone is Exodus/Resurrection, deliverance from the unnecessary limits "melancholy" pins us into. "What is a ship but a prison?" if you want to, and can't, get off? Otherwise, a self-imposed limit.