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CONTRIBUTI

DÜRER'S SPLEEN AND ST. JEROME SKULL: IDENTIFYING *MELENCOLIA II*

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In his monograph on Albrecht Dürer Campbell Dodgson writes: "The literature on *Melancholia* is more extensive than that on any other engraving by Dürer: that statement would probably remain true if the last two words were omitted"[1]. If such was the case in 1926, one can easily imagine the sheer amount of literature produced on the subject in the 90 years following this statement: there is enough to occupy a couple of lifetimes. Unfortunately, a great deal of those articles are of dubious academic merit. In fact, the aberrant interpretations of this engraving would warrant a study of their own: they reflect the changes in critical fashions, dominant cultural interests, and collective phobias and fixations.

In spite of the copious scholarship, however, two essays in particular played a crucial role in advancing our understanding of this mysterious engraving: Karl Giehlow's interpretation of *Melencolia I*[2]; and the monograph by Klibansky, Panofsky and Saxl entitled *Saturn and Melancholy*[3]. I'd like to think of this contribution as a footnote to that monumental work of erudition (*Saturn and Melancholy*), an interesting and not entirely unnecessary one, I hope.

[1] Campbell Dodgson, **Albrecht Dürer,** London: Medici Society, 1926, p. 94.
[2] Carl Giehlow, "Dürer Stich *Melancholia I* und der maximilianische Humanistenkreis", **Die graphischen Künste** no. 26 and 27, **Mitteilungen der Gesellschaft für vervielfältigende Künste** (1903): 29-41 (1903); 6-18 and 57-78 (1904).
[3] Raymond Klibansky, Erwin Panofsky, and Fritz Saxl, **Saturn and Melancholy: Studies in the History of Natural Philosophy Religion and Art**, London: Nelson, 1964.

As the title suggests, I will be dealing with numerals, or, better yet, I will try to explain on the one hand why the famous *Melencolia* has been numbered by Dürer as the first, while, on the other hand, I will attempt to answer the question of whether there is a *Melencolia II* and, perhaps, even a *Melencolia III*, or, in other words, the possible existence of a series of *Melencolia* works by Dürer that might have escaped scholarly investigation.

Answering the first question will be easy. *Saturn and Melancholy* has provided an excellent explanation, which I will summarize briefly. As for the second issue, I will draw from Panofsky's research to propose a possible solution. Finally, addressing the third question, regarding a hypothetical *Melencolia III*, will require a considerable amount of hybris on my part, given the fact that I will use the maestro's analysis in a way that he might have not originally intended.

But let us get started with the first question: why is *Melencolia* numbered as the first? We shall begin with Ficino's studies on the subject of melancholy, and more precisely, with his *De vita triplici* (1489)[4]. This fundamental text provides an explanation of why outstanding individuals are prone to melancholy and subject to the planetary influence of Saturn. Chapter V of Book I is, in fact, entitled "Cur melancholici ingeniosi sint, et quales melancholici sint eiusmodi, quales contra" (20-21), that is "why melancholics are geniuses, and which melancholics are like that, and which are not". It is, indeed, a rethinking of melancholy as the prevalent humor in the *crasis* of men of genius[5]. Ficino reaches his conclusions through a reevaluation of the pseudo-Aristotelian Problem XXX and the concept of "furor", taken from the Platonic tradition. Here is a direct quotation from his *De vita*:

> Quod quidem confirmatur in libro Problematum Aristoteles. Omnes enim inquit viros in quavis facultate praestantes melancholicos existisse. Qua in re Platonicum illud quod in libro De scientia scribitur, confirmavit, ingeniosos videlicet plurimum concitatos furiososque esse solere[6]. (22)

[4] In preparation of this article, I have consulted the following edition of Ficino's book: Marsilio Ficino, **De vita**, ed. A. Biondi and G. Pisani (Pordenone: Edizioni Biblioteca dell'Immagine, 1991); whenever quoting it in English, the translation is mine, unless otherwise noted.

[5] The *crasis* is the "temperament", the combination of humors that is particular to each human being, and which varies from person to person.

[6] Ficino, **De vita**, *op. cit.*, p. 23. "Aristotle confirmed this in his book **Problemata**. He argues that all the men that distinguished themselves in a given field were melancholics. Thus he confirms Plato's opinion, which he wrote in his book **De scientia**, where he says that men of genius are often 'furious' and easily excited".

It is here, in this precise passage, that the connection between melancholia and furor is put forth for the first time in Western tradition in such explicit and unequivocal terms. And here is how Panofsky summarizes this ideological shift:

> Only the humanism of the Italian Renaissance was able to recognize in Saturn and in the melancholic this polarity, which was, indeed, implicit from the beginning, but which only 'Aristotle's' brilliant intuition, and St. Augustine's eyes, sharpened by hatred, had really seen. And the Italian humanists not only recognized this polarity: they valued it, because they saw in it the main feature of the newly discovered "genius". There was therefore a double renaissance: firstly, of the Neoplatonic notion of Saturn, according to which the highest planet embodied, and also bestowed, the noblest faculties of the soul, reason and speculation; and secondly, of the 'Aristotelian' doctrine of melancholy, according to which all great men were melancholics (whence it followed logically that not to be melancholy was sign of insignificance)[7]. (247)

A whole section of the monograph is used by Panofsky to prove the novelty of this synthesis of the pseudo-Aristotle's ideas and the Neoplatonic notion of "furor", as well as to show how it was first formulated and clarified by Marsilio Ficino, who also prescribes that the "sacerdos musarum" take certain precautions in ordering his daily life so as to counteract the negative effects of the excessive production of black bile, caused by his profession as well as his natural *crasis*.

Returning to Dürer and his engraving, the next logical question one might ask would be: did he have access to Ficino's writings? This is a rather delicate issue, complicated by the fact that even if German intellectuals had direct knowledge of *De vita* right after its publication in Florence, its most revolutionary message might have been utterly incomprehensible to them. Here is how Panofsky puts it:

[7] Klibansky, Panofsky, and Saxl, cit., p. 247. A few pages later (261), as he is further explaining Ficino's concept of "melancholia generosa," Panofsky adds: "Ficino is convinced that not only are the children of Saturn qualified for intellectual work but that, vice versa, intellectual work reacts on men and places them under the dominion of Saturn, creating a sort of selective affinity between them […]. It turns out that all 'studiosi' are predestined to melancholy and subject to Saturn; if not by their horoscope, then by their activity".

> But even the humanists themselves were held too fast in the grip of traditional humoralism and astrology for the new doctrine to become established without opposition. Even in Italy, where the rehabilitation of Saturn and melancholy really originated, […] the ideal still persisted that Saturn was a purely inauspicious planet and could engender great talent only if, like a poison, correctly tempered with other planets[8]. (277-78)

It seems, therefore, unlikely that Dürer had direct access to Ficino's writings. Most importantly, there are iconographic clues revealing some key philosophical differences between Ficino's melancholia and the winged figure portrayed in the engraving. In fact, Dürer surrounds his *Melencolia* with all the objects, tools, and attributes that belong to the visual arts; and yet:

> As we read in the third book of *De vita triplici*, the "imagination" tends towards Mars or the sun, the "ratio" towards Jupiter, and the "mens contemplatrix", which knows intuitively and transcends discursive reasoning, tends towards Saturn. The sublime and sinister nimbus which Ficino weaves about the head of the Saturnine melancholic does not, therefore, have anything to do with "imaginative" men; the latter, whose predominant faculty is merely a vessel to receive solar or Martial influences, do not, in his view, belong to the "melancholy" spirits, to those capable of inspiration; into the illustrious company of the Saturnine he does not admit a being whose thoughts move merely within the sphere of the visible, mensurable and ponderable forms; and

[8] Klibansky, Panofsky, and Saxl, cit., pp. 277-78. In a note that immediately precedes the passage quoted, Panofsky quickly reconstructs the penetration of **De vita** in Germany: "Cf. W. Kahl, **Neue Jahrbücher für das klassische Altertum, Heschichte un deutsche Literatur un für Pädagogie**, Vol. IX (1906), p. 490, and Giehlow (1903), p. 54 (which contains the information that the young Willibald Pirckheimer had to procure a copy of the **De vita triplici** in Padua for his father), and, more recently, H. Rupprich, **Willibald Pirckheimer un die Reise Dürers nach Italien**, Vienna 1930, pp. 15 sqq. The first, very faulty, translation (by Adelphus Muelich) appeared in Hieronymus Braunscheig's **Liber de arte distillandi simplicial et composite, Das Nüw Buch der rechten Kunst zu distillieren**, fols. CXXXXI sqq., Strasbourg 1505, and contains only the first two books, as do the later reprints. As for the third (fol. CLXXIV): 'Und das dritte buch sagt von dem leben von himel herab als von hymelischen Dingen zu vberkommen. Das gar hoch zu verston, ist hie vss gelon'".

> he would have questioned the right of such a being to be called "Melencolia"[9]. (347)

That is to say that Ficino didn't make a distinction between different levels of melancholia. In his view, only the higher part of the soul, the most refined one, was subject to the influences of Saturn, and subsequently should be regarded as responsible for that particular kind of melancholy, the *melancolia generosa*, which affects men of genius. So, if Durer didn't have direct access to Ficino's ideas, and Ficino didn't write about different kinds of *melancolia generosa*, whom should we turn to in order to identify a philosophical source for Durer's engraving? The man we are looking for is Cornelius Agrippa of Nettesheim, intellectual, physician, magus, author of *De occulta philosophia*, who worked as a link between the circles of humanists in northern Italy and those in Germany. We know that Dürer had access to Agrippa's work. Here is how Panofsky reconstructs the whereabouts of *De occulta philosophia*:

> Admittedly, on Agrippa's own authority, the printed edition of *Occulta philosophia* which appeared in 1531 contained considerably more than the original version completed in 1510, so that it appeared uncertain whether the relevant parts were not later additions: in which case it would be impossible to regard them as sources for Dürer's engraving. But the original version of *Occulta philosophia*, believed lost, did survive, as Hans Meier has proved, in the very manuscript which Agrippa sent to his friend Trithemius[10] in Wurzburg in the spring of 1510. We are thus on firm ground; and in this original version the two chapters on the 'furor melancholicus' approach the view of life implicit in Dürer's engraving more nearly than any other writing known to us; it was circulated more or less secretly in many manuscript copies; and it was certainly available in Pirckheimer's[11] circle through Trithemius,

[9] Klibansky, Panofsky, and Saxl, cit., p. 347.

[10] The same Trithemius (1 February 1462 - 13 December 1516) that wrote the **Steganographia** (c. 1499), the father of modern cryptography. Abbot, humanist, magus.

[11] Willibald Pirckheimer (December 5, 1470, Eichstätt, Bavaria - December 22, 1530) was a German humanist, close friend of Dürer. It is believed that most of the display of erudition found in Dürer's paintings comes from the conversations that the painter had with Pirkheimer. He was a prominent citizen in Nuremberg, were the painter lived; both are buried in the cemetery of Johannis-kirche in Nuremberg.

> and can now lay claim to being the main source of *Melancolia I*[12]. (351)

We have further indirect proof of the connection between Dürer's circle of intellectuals (including Agrippa) and the humanists of northern Italy. The magic square reproduced in the top right corner of the engraving is the same Jupiter square we find in Luca Pacioli's *De viribus quantitatis*[13]:

> Onde ali pianeti tutti separatamente acada uno hanno trovato numeri per via de figure quadrate e esserli a propiati secondo diverse spetie de numeri quali per ogni verso pressi fanno sempre la medesima summa cioè per lati pel traverso et per diametro tanto respondano commo sonno questi qui sequenti aducti: […] Et similmente a Giove hanno dicata la figura de 4 casi per facia con numeri situati ch' per ogni verso ut suopra fanno 34. Cioè 16.3.2.13 elassequente 5.10.11.8 el 3° 9. etc como vedi in margine[14].

Agrippa of Nettesheim's *De occulta philosophia* contains planetary squares too (slightly different), but only in the printed edition. They were

[12] Klibansky, Panofsky, and Saxl, cit., p. 351.

[13] Fra Luca Bartolomeo de Pacioli (1446/7, Sansepolcro – 1517) mathematician and Franciscan friar. Published a treatise on mathematics, bookkeeping, and accounting entitled **Summa de arithmetica, geometria, proportioni et proportionalita** (first edition, Venice 1494). **De viribus quantitatis** (never printed, written between 1496 and 1508) is divided into three sections: mathematical problems, puzzles and tricks, and a collection of proverbs and verses. He also wrote a treatise on the game of chess (**De ludo scachorum**, c. 1500).

[14] The manuscript (Bologna, Biblioteca Universitaria Cod. 250, fols 118v-119r) is available online at this address: http://www.uriland.it/matematica/DeViribus/Presentazione.html , accessed on Jan. 17, 2017. Here is an English translation: "Thus to each separate planet they have dedicated one square, matching them with the appropriate numbers in such a way that, taken from any direction, that is according to each side, forward and backwards, and diagonally, they always yield the same sum, in a way similar to the examples given here: […] In a similar fashion, they have dedicated to Jupiter the square with four numbers on each side, chosen in such a way that, if added, the result is always 34. That is, 16.3.2.13, the next is 5.10.11.8 and the third 9.etc, as it can be seen here in the margins." It is worth mentioning that, in spite of this last indication, there are no squares represented in the margins of the manuscript.

lacking in the manuscript version[15], the one Dürer had access to, and therefore he must have gotten them from somewhere else, possibly from Pacioli's manuscript: thus, he must have been in frequent contact with the humanist circles of northern Italy[16].

It is interesting to note that, while other humanists tended to attribute talismanic virtues to these magic squares, Pacioli saw them as simple pastimes. He writes: "Le quali figure in questo nostro compendio ho voluto inserire acio con epse ale volte possi formar qualche legiadro solazo …"[17],

[15] In this regard, Panofsky notes: "Agrippa of Nettesheim's works contained the planetary squares only on the printed edition (II, 22); they were lacking in the original version", *op. cit.*, p. 327.

[16] Undoubtedly, this is a merely circumstantial piece of evidence, for, as Marco Bertozzi notes in his exquisitely erudite article ("Mesula Jovis: Considerazioni sulle fonti filosofiche della *Melencholia I* di Albrecht Dürer", **I castelli di Yale** 2 (1997), pp.19-44), Dürer could have had access to a number of other sources that preceded Pacioli's treatise and must have been known to the circle of Pirckheimer and Trithemius (see Bertozzi, *op. cit.*, p. 28, and the long note at the end of the article, devoted to magic squares, pp. 37-44): "Tuttavia, ci troviamo di fronte ad una specie di circolo vizioso, poiché la prova dell'avvenuto incontro tra Albrecht Dürer e Luca Pacioli si basa sul fatto che entrambi si sono serviti di un quadrato planetario con la medesima disposizione numerica. Questa coincidenza non dimostra che i due illustri personaggi si siano necessariamente conosciuti, ma che semmai abbiano avuto accesso alle medesime fonti. Infatti, è possibile accertare l'esistenza di un certo numero di manoscritti, versioni latine di trattati arabi sui sette quadrati magici, che, all'epoca, avevano avuto una qualche diffusione" (28). If Bertozzi is right in recommending caution on this account, I do not agree with his general interpretation of the engraving, based on the observations by Pingree (David Pingree, "A New Look at *Melencolia I*" **Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes** 43 (1980), pp. 257-258) who postulated that: "Three linked states of being are represented in the print: the celestial occupies the upper third […] the terrestrial is depicted in the center left […] and an intermediate state appears in the center right and lower third" (257). Finally, I have also some perplexities regarding his characterization of the relationship that ties together the magic square, the scales, and the planet/comet portrayed in the upper portion of the sheet. Bertozzi revives Warburg's interpretation (see Aby Warburg, "Heidnisch-antike Weissagung in Wort und Bild zu Luthers Zeiten", in **Gesammelte Schriften**, Liepzig, 1932, p. 529); I find Panofsky's counter-argument more persuasive (see Klibansky, Panofsky, and Saxl, cit., p. 327, note 148).

[17] Klibansky, Panofsky, and Saxl, cit., p. 327, note 147.

which roughly translates to: "I am adding these illustrations here so that the reader will sometimes find solace in playing with them".

Returning to our topic, let us see how *De occulta philosophia* can help us understand *Melancolia I*. When talking about the "furor melancolicus" (the kind of frenzy that men of genius are prone to, inspiring them to achieve great things) Agrippa writes:

> As physical cause of this frenzy, the philosophers give the "humor malincholicus" […]. Now this, when it takes fire and glows, generates the frenzy which leads us to wisdom and revelation, especially when it is combined with a heavenly influence, above all with that of Saturn. […] Moreover, this "humor malincolicus" has such power that they say it attracts certain daemons into our bodies, through whose presence and activity men fall into ecstasies and pronounce many wonderful things. […] this occurs in three different forms, corresponding to the threefold capacity of our soul, namely the imaginative, the rational, and the mental. For when set free by the 'humor malincholicus', the soul is fully concentrated in the imagination, and it immediately becomes an habitation for the lower spirits, from whom it often receives wonderful instruction in the manual arts; thus we see a quite unskilled man suddenly become a painter or an architect, or a quite outstanding master in another art of the same kind; […] But when the soul is fully concentrated in the reason, it becomes the home of the middle spirits; thereby it attains knowledge and cognition of natural and human things; thus we see a man suddenly become a [natural] philosopher, a physician or a [political] orator; […] But when the soul soars completely to the intellect ('mens'), it becomes the home of the higher spirits, from whom it learns the secrets of divine matters, as, for instance, the law of God, the angelic hierarchy, and that which pertains the knowledge of eternal things and the soul's salvation […][18]. (355-56)

While Ficino admitted the existence of only one kind of *furor melancolicus* (the cause of that *melancholia generosa* he was rehabilitating as a sign of the man of genius) which affected the higher functions of the soul, and was therefore exclusive to men of letters, Agrippa allowed for the existence of a melancholic frenzy that affected also the practitioners of mechanical arts (such as painters and architects). As Panofsky writes:

[18] Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa, **De occulta philosophia**, III, 31, fols. 104r sqq., quoted in Klibansky, Panofsky, and Saxl, cit., p. 355-56.

> The notion of melancholy and of Saturnine genius was no longer restricted to the 'homines literati', but was expanded to include – in three ascending grades – the geniuses of action and of artistic vision, so that no less than the great politician or religious genius, the 'subtle' architect or painter was now reckoned among the 'vates' and 'Saturnines'. (359)[19]

It is easy to see why this new formulation of theories regarding the furor melancholicus appealed to Dürer. But let us have a look at the following table[20] in order to clarify the point Panofsky just made:

Level	**Instruments**	**Psychological Habitat**	**Realm of Creative Achievement**
I	Lower Spirits	Imaginatio	Mechanical arts, especially architecture, painting, ecc.
II	Middle Spirits	*Ratio*	Knowledge of natural and human things, especially natural science, medicine, politics, ecc.
III	Higher Spirits	*Mens*	Knowledge of divine secrets, especially cognition of divine law, angelology and theology

The first kind of melancholy is an affection of the lower spirits, which reside in the "imaginatio", and inspire activities in the mechanical arts. The

[19] Klibansky, Panofsky, and Saxl, cit., p. 359.
[20] This is a simplified version of the table in Klibansky, Panofsky, and Saxl, cit., p. 359.

second kind of melancholy is an affection of the middle spirits, which reside in the "ratio", and inspire activities in the natural sciences, medicine, and politics. Finally, the third kind of melancholy is an affection of the higher spirits, which reside in the "mens", and inspire knowledge of divine secrets, salvation of the soul, and theology in general.

To better clarify what we mean by "the place where a given spirit resides", that is the "psychological habitat", we should keep in mind that the soul, according to medieval and early modern physicians, was a physiological component of the human body, and consequently had a specific location within the body. These are the seats of the soul, so to speak. The brain, according to these theories, is divided into three different ventricles, where each of these different spirits are located[21].

Returning to Dürer's engraving, it is now perfectly clear why it is numbered as the first one, why the instruments and tools of all the mechanical arts are scattered around the winged figure, and, finally, why she is holding her forehead[22]. It is indeed a precise representation of the melancholy which affects the *imaginatio* according to Agrippa's theory. Thus, we have answered the first question asked at the beginning of this article; let us move on to the second one: is there a *Melancolia II*?

[21] A famous illustration can be found in the 1490 edition of Albertus Magnus' **Philosophia pauperum, sive philosophia naturalis**, fol. 59v, available online at this address: http://www.astronomicalimages.group.cam.ac.uk/database/detailed/File1256.jpg , accessed on Jan. 17, 2017.

[22] In another occasion, when Dürer portrayed himself as suffering of melancholia, he uses the same pose. See *the Self-portrait of about 1491* (Erlangen, Universitätsbibliotheck, drawing L. 429 (997), available at this address: http://www.wga.hu/html_m/d/durer/2/11/1/02selfba.html , accessed Jan. 17, 2017); you can notice the difference with later portrayals of melancholy: here Dürer still thinks of it as a kind of sickness. In a later drawing, *Self-portrait with the yellow spot* (or *Self-portrait for consultation of a doctor*, Bremen, Kunsthalle, L.130 (1000), p. 171, available at this address: https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC535996/, accessed Jan. 17, 2017), the demeanor, the posture and the detail of the yellow spot point to a new appreciation for the melancholic "condition". In describing it Panofsky notes: "The drawing was obviously made for the purpose of consulting an out-of-town physician, for the inscription means: 'Where the yellow spot is, to which I point with my finger, there it hurts'. The spot is in the region of the spleen, which is important in view of the supposed connection between this organ and melancholy". See Erwin Panofsky, **Albrecht Dürer**, Vol. II, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1943, p. 103.

Dürer didn't explicitly continue the series he seemed to have started with this first engraving. However, we can safely assume that those ideas that guided him in its composition were still at work when he moved on to new projects. In fact, Panofsky shows how the composition of the painting of the Four apostles (John, Mark, Peter and Paul) incorporates these ideas in its characterization of the four saints, presented as champions of the four main humoral *crasis*[23]. But we will talk more in detail about this painting in a moment.

Even though at a first glance it would seem that Dürer did not continue the series he started, we can nevertheless postulate what a *Melancolia II* should look like by applying Agrippa's theories: such a work would portray a character who suffers an affection of the brain's second ventricle, the *ratio*, and who is versed in natural philosophy or politics, or else is a man of letters. Does such a painting exist?

Let us consider the portrait of St. Jerome completed in 1521, and now held by the Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga, in Lisbon[24], and let us begin with its peculiar composition. The skull, which can be seen on the table, is a constant in the saint's iconography: it is believed to be a *memento mori*, and in fact these pictures are often accompanied by the inscription "Homo bulla" ("man is nothing but a bubble"); the repentant patriarch, meditating on the fleeting nature of life and all human preoccupations, was generally intended to serve as an example for any good Christian to emulate. However, in this case, the peculiar placement of the skull, and the fact that the saint is pointing at it while, at the same time, pointing at his own head, in the same area, are quite unique in the documented iconography (later paintings showing that same composition are likely inspired by Dürer's)[25]: therefore an explanation that goes beyond the *memento mori* is required.

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[23] Panofsky discusses this painting and its relations to *Melencolia I* in Klibansky, Panofsky, and Saxl, cit., pp. 366-73.

[24] A reproduction of this painting is available on the Museum's website, at this address: http://www.museudearteantiga.pt/collections/european-painting/st-jerome , accessed on Jan. 17, 2017.

[25] Here is how Panofsky frames the issue in his **The Life and Art of Albrecht Dürer**, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 1955, p. 150: "It is, however, very doubtful whether the Massys scheme of composition, as exemplified, for instance, by the *Baker and his Wife* in the Louvre, had ever been applied to the theme of St. Jerome before Dürer's appearance in Antwerp. None of the Dutch or Flemish representations of St. Jerome in half-length antedate Dürer's picture in Lisbon, and most of them are demonstrably influenced by it". Panofsky continues offering a long list of imitators and concludes the paragraph by writing: "In the workshop of Joos van Cleve more

If we keep in mind the anatomical drawings portraying the brain and its ventricles (such as the one in Alberto Magnus' 1490 edition of the *Philosophia pauperum*), we will notice how the area to which St. Jerome is pointing is the seat of the *ratio*, the second ventricle of the brain. The deliberate pose, combined with the insistence on pointing at that precise area, not only once, but twice in the same picture, would already authorize us, I believe, to include this painting in the series of *Melancolias*. But there are two other para-textual clues that further sustain such an inclusion.

First, we must consider that the engraving St. Jerome in his study[26] is contemporary to *Melancolia I*, and, along with *The Knight, Death and the Devil*, is believed by many critics[27] to be part of a triptych. This proves, at the very least, that Dürer was working on *Melancolia I* and *St. Jerome in his study* at the same time, and thus that, in his mind, the two subject matters are intimately connected.

Second, before the 1514 engraving, and before the Lisbon painting, Dürer had portrayed the father of the church once more, in an oil painting entitled *St. Jerome in the Wilderness*. This work is not signed, and its dating is not certain, but, in all likelihood, it must have been completed between 1494-97[28].

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or less elaborate imitations of Dürer's painting, some of them rather literal except for the accessories, were turned out wholesale, and the continued influence of this tradition, transmitted by masters as Jan van Hemessen (formely Vienna, Strache Collection) can still be felt in the seventeenth century".

[26] A reproduction is available on the Met's website, at this address: http://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/336229 , accessed on Jan. 17, 2017.

[27] For example, we need look no further than Panofky himself, who, in his already quoted **The Life and Art of Albrecht Dürer** (p. 151), writes: "These three 'Master Engravings', though approximately equal in format, have no appreciable compositional relationship with one another and can thus hardly be considered 'companion pieces' in any technical sense. Yet form a spiritual unity in that they symbolize three ways of life which correspond, as Friedrich Lippman pointed out, to the scholastic classifications of the virtues as moral, theological and intellectual. *The Knight, Death and Devil* typifies the life of the Christian in the practical world of decision and action; the *St. Jerome* the life of the Saint in the spiritual world of sacred contemplation; and the *Melencolia I* the life of the secular genius in the rational and imaginative worlds of science and art" (151).

[28] For one of the first analysis of this painting (which has been re-discovered in the second half of the Twentieth Century in the collection of Sir Edmund Bacon, at Raveningham Hall, Norwich, England), as well as a convincing

On its *verso*, it shows a rather curious image that can only be explained, I think, if we consider the painting's relation to *Melancolia I*. Here is how David Carritt, who had a significant role in the re-discovering this masterpiece, describes it:

> Unless some document relating to the Raveningham picture comes to light, it will scarcely be possible to demonstrate a specific connexion between *recto* and *verso*. The freedom with which the *verso* is painted indicates that unlike many painted *versi* it was not intended to be seen in conjunction with the *recto*. But unlike the painting of *Lot and his Daughters*, which was apparently painted somewhat earlier than the Kress Madonna, the painting on the *verso* of the St. Jerome must surely be contemporary with it. If, as I believe, it depicts an actual phenomenon observed by Dürer and jotted down while the impression of it was still fresh in his mind, it would have been natural for him to use water-colour (as in the famous drawing of 1512 depicting a dream), and not a carefully prepared panel, unless he had actual cause to associate *recto* with *verso*. I have already touched on the chiliastic significance of the St. Jerome theme. In light of this, it can surely be no coincidence that Dürer should have coupled a St. Jerome with the representation of some strange celestial body – one of the most respected of the 'signs' traditionally believed to portend the ultimate 'time of troubles'. What precisely Dürer had seen we shall never know: judging by its fiery tail, it seems to have been a meteor or a shooting star[29]. (366)

As Carritt himself notes, it is unlikely that anyone would use a "carefully prepared panel" to portray something "while the impression was still fresh in his mind", therefore the connection between *verso* and *recto* must be due to more than mere chance. In addition, if we compare the *verso* of this painting to *Melancolia I*, we will notice a striking similarity between the two atmospheric phenomena. Going back to Carritt's essay:

> Such an explanation will appear more plausible if one compares the Raveningham 'explosion' with the very similar phenomenon which Dürer drew in the background of his *Melencolia*. Although, in this later instance, the phenomenon itself is shorn of its surrounding clouds, the conformation of the rays themselves, and their curious asymmetrical

discussion of the issue of its dating, see David Carritt, "Dürer's 'St. Jerome in the Wilderness'", **The Burlington Magazine** 99 (1957), pp. 363-67.

[29] David Carritt, cit., p. 366.

> nucleus resemble those of the Raveningham sketch so closely that we may legitimately regard both as projections of one of Dürer's most intimate private images. Panofsky has written at length, and with great penetration, on the significance of the astrological phenomena in the *Melancolia*. The context is, of course, a very different one, and his conclusions are drawn from a wealth of allegorical symbols which have no bearing on the St Jerome. Yet the fact that Dürer chose to represent a similar, and exceedingly unusual, phenomenon on both occasions shows that he considered it equally appropriate to both[30]. (366)

It appears that Carritt is trying as best he can to keep St. Jerome and *Melencolia* separate, and yet every bit of his argument brings them together. It seems to me that we have now established a strong connection between *Melancolia I* and the subject matter of the various *St. Jeromes* Dürer painted, both before and after the completion of the famous engraving. Furthermore, we showed how the particular pose of the saint suggests an affection of the second ventricle of the brain, the "ratio". Even Panofsky, in his *Life and Art of Albrecht Dürer*, seems to be going in this same direction, but doesn't quite make the final step to connect all the dots:

> From the point of view of iconography and content, then, the Lisbon picture […] has its logical place in Dürer's development. Only the author of *Melencolia I* and the *Self-Portrait of 1491*[31] could have interpreted the peaceful scholar and ardent penitent as a sort of Christian Saturn with all his implications of gloom and transience[32]. (213)

The evidence in favor of an identification of *Melencolia II* with the Lisbon's *St. Jerome* seems to be mounting, and yet if we return to the tentative description we had sketched earlier on, having drawn from Agrippa's theories, we will recall that the character chosen to illustrate this type of melancholy should have been a natural philosopher, a physician, or a man of letters. Why St. Jerome, then, who is a saint, a theologian and someone who is certainly familiar with matters divine? Shouldn't he have been used as an example for *Melencolia III*, which involves "Knowledge of divine secrets, especially cognition of divine law, angelology and theology?"

I believe that a possible answer to this apparent contradiction can be found in the politics of Dürer's time. Jerome has been chosen by Dürer not for his

[30] David Carritt, cit., p. 366.
[31] See above, note 22.
[32] Panofsky, **The Life and Art of Albrecht Dürer**, *op. cit.*, p. 213.

theological positions (which, as we will later see, hold a great importance too) but rather for his translation of the Bible. He is the person who made the word of God accessible to his contemporaries: in every sense, a Martin Luther *in figura*. But there is also a strong connection between St. Jerome and Erasmus of Rotterdam, who considered the patriarch the theologian closest to his heart[33].

In 1521, when the Lisbon *Jerome* was completed, Erasmus had not yet expressed his opinion on the controversy regarding free will (and therefore had not chosen sides in the battle between the Reformation and the Catholic Church); his *De libero arbitrio* was published only in 1524. Thus, we can speculate that Dürer, along with many other European intellectuals, saw Erasmus as the person who could have prevented the schism.

Furthermore, St. Jerome was appreciated as a scholar because he could read Hebrew, Greek and Latin, and this is how Dürer portrays him in the woodcut of 1492[34], (more or less around the same years he was working on his *St. Jerome in the Wilderness*); we see him seated in his cell, with the lion curled up at his feet, the usual monastic implements in the background, and three books that lay open and allow the viewer to distinguish the languages in which they are written: Latin, Greek, and Hebrew. Dürer made a similar choice in portraying Erasmus: in the 1526 engraving he shows him in his study, the inscription in the back is in Greek and Latin, while the book opened in the foreground is written in Hebrew[35].

In order to emphasize the importance of St. Jerome (and therefore of Erasmus and Martin Luther, of whom St. Jerome is a fiigura) in regards to the political issues of the time, Dürer (this is my suggestion) portrayed the saint as a champion, a genius, a melancholic of the second kind, as the man who could have helped mediate the political tensions between the Roman Catholic and Protestant Churches.

In this respect, David Carritt, in the article we already quoted, writes:

> Dürer […] regarded St Jerome as the Church Father whose anti-Ciceronian, anti-rhetorical polemics held greatest promise of a

[33] On the relationship between Erasmus and Jerome see Hilmar Pabel, **Herculean Labours: Erasmus and the Editing of St. Jerome's Letters in the Renaissance** (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2008), especially Chapters II-IV.

[34] A good reproduction of this woodcut is available at this address: https://www.wikiart.org/en/albrecht-durer/st-jerome-1492, last accessed on Jan. 17, 2017.

[35] A reproduction is available at this address: http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/19.73.120/, last accessed on Jan. 17, 2017.

> peaceable reform within the Church. Although Erasmus had not yet expressed his preference for St Jerome's over St Augustine's theology, a particular interest in the saint was already felt in reformist circles; and those aspects of his teaching which struck them as most significant must have been impressed on the young Dürer when he was engaged in designing the frontispiece for the 1492 (Basle) edition of the *Epistolae beati Hieronymi*[36]. (365)

One last question still remains: what about a *Melancolia III*? Let us consider the *Four Apostles* (1526), as a possible candidate. Even at a cursory glance, it is apparent how Dürer used the theory of the four temperaments to characterize the four holy men. They differ from each other, in almost every way possible: in age, complexion, posture and expression. According to Panofsky:

> The reserved John, a fine example of youthful sobriety, is a nobly-built young man some twenty-five years of age, in whose blooming complexion red and white are mingled. Mark, who is showing his teeth and rolling his eyes, is a man of about forty, whose bloodless hue carries almost greenish overtones. Paul, with his earnest and menacing yet calm regard, is fifty-five or sixty years of age, and the color of his clear-cut features – he is the leanest of the four – despite a few reddish tinges, can only be described as dark brown. Finally, the somewhat apathetic Peter is an old man of at least seventy, whose weary and relatively fleshy face is yellowish, and in general decidedly pale[37]. (369)

Based on this description we can easily assign a specific temperament to each apostle: John would be sanguine, Mark choleric, Paul melancholic, and Peter phlegmatic. But what meaning should we give to this characterization of the apostles? Panofsky writes:

> The four apostles, as we see them today, express a creed, and […] the polemical side of this creed is directed against the fanatics and Anabaptists, in whose minds 'Christian freedom' seemed to have degenerated into unlimited sectarianism. This rebuttal of fanaticism, however, […] is based […] on an acceptance of the Reformation. Dürer explains that he is against Hans Denck and the 'three godless painters'; and for that very reason he need not explain that he is in favor of Luther. Hence he had been certain since 1525 that of the four

[36] David Carritt, cit., p. 365.
[37] Klibansky, Panofsky, and Saxl, cit., p. 369.

> men bearing witness of him, two must occupy a dominant position: Paul, in whose doctrine of justification by faith the whole structure of Protestant doctrine was based, and John, Christ's beloved disciple, who was also Luther's 'beloved evangelist'[38]. (371-72)

Thus, even though Panofsky seems reluctant to make this last step, (and here lies the hybris I accused myself of at the very beginning) we could say that the *Melancolia III* is, in fact, this particular portrait of St. Paul. Dürer found no better way to celebrate the tutelary genius of Protestantism than by portraying him as a melancholic. In this way he linked together the ideas of the new faith, and those of the new art, expressed in the notion of "melancolia generosa"[39]. Beginning in 1514, with his engraving *Melencolia I*, and then in 1521, with his *St. Jerome*, and finally in 1526 with the *Four Apostles*, Dürer kept returning to Agrippa's ideas on the effects of Saturn on the melancholic *crasis* of men of genius, using them to shape his portraits and building, at least implicitly, a series of *Melencolia* pictures. Perhaps, we will never know whether he really intended these paintings we analyzed here as an actual continuation of the series he started with *Melancolia I*. However, I believe I managed to demonstrate how the appreciation of these last two pictures can greatly benefit from the comparison with *Melancolia I*, and how by inscribing them in that series, the chain of signification they offer to the viewer is greatly enhanced.

The very same ideas that allowed Dürer to produce an aesthetic manifesto of astonishing beauty such as *Melancolia I*, later became, for the same artist, a way of looking at the world, a tool that could be used in characterizing the figures of his paintings. From expression of an aesthetic standpoint to compositional motif, these ideas have accompanied him throughout his artistic production. The potential for a few individuals to influence the evolution of ideas has never been as apparent as in the case of Ficino's manipulation of the concept of melancholy, and Dürer's application to the realm of visual arts.

In piecing together my path through these masterpieces, I sometimes took a leap of faith, drawing a connection between works produced at different times; and yet, any attempt at interpreting a picture and going beyond the surface of the representation, investigating the ideas and the historical processes at work underneath, is fraught with risks. This is especially true in the case of *Melencolia I*; however, I would argue, it is part of this engraving's fascination: resisting its lure would be a much graver sin than giving in to it.

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[38] Klibansky, Panofsky, and Saxl, cit., pp. 371-72.

[39] As noted above, this painting is from 1526, and thus two years after the publication of Erasmus' **De libero arbitrio**, and therefore at the height of the Western schism. This, too, is a political statement in the form of a painting.

Panofky's interpretation, on which my own so heavily relies, has often been accused of postulating an excessive degree of coherence in Dürer's works and his system of ideas. Particularly popular (and certainty valid) are the objections raised by Benjamin. Here is how Howard Caygill summarizes them:

> Although Benjamin's interpretation of "Melancholia I" pays overt homage to the work of Giehlow, Warburg, Panofsky, and Saxl, it is hard to imagine a more resolute inversion of their aims, methods, and results. In *The Origin of the German Tragic Drama* allegory, far from reconciling and sublimating opposed forces, instead presents their irreconcilability. For Benjamin, only "symbolic" art offers the possibility for reconciliation, and this under specific conditions. Consequently, for him the Dürer engraving does not represent a moment of transfiguration – of myth into knowledge and knowledge into art – but instead a moment of tension and potential collapse. Allegory does not offer therapeutic consolation, but the spectacle of ruin and even, in an ironic reference to the Warburg School's fascination with the history of medicine, the *facies hippocratica* of the sign of death[40]. (87)

And this is just an example (an illustrious and particular edifying one) of how this engraving can generate such different and diametrically opposed interpretations. In fact, it is not by chance that this picture has served as a testing ground for generations of critics, so much so that Michael Hatt and Charlotte Klonk, in their competent monograph, *Art History: A Critical Introduction to Its Methods*, use it as a case study to help elucidate the inescapable limits and contradictions inherent in any interpretation, and, at the same time, the moral necessity to continue the direct engagement with primary sources. I would like to close by quoting them:

> In an article on the collector Edward Fuchs, Benjamin states that any collection assembled from a specific viewpoint, even if its validity has passed, is preferable to mere hoarding or fact-gathering. If we extend this dictum to art history, we might say of Panofsky's art history that, although we can recognize its basis in a particular point of view that we might not share, it makes certain aspects salient and in so doing gives us a perspective we might not have otherwise had. Its coherence forces us to test our own viewpoint against it, and so it brings out

[40] Howard Caygill, Walter Benjamin's concept of cultural history," in **The Cambridge Companion to Walter Benjamin**, ed. David Ferris (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 87.

> ambiguities in our assumptions and leads us to reconstruct our position. It is in this sense that Panofsky has been for twentieth-century art history what Hegel was for the art historian of the nineteenth[41]. (118)

In sharing Hatt and Klonk's admiration for Panofsky, and keeping in mind their warnings against excessively rigid interpretative categories, I can only hope that this contribution has retained a spark of the fire lit by the maestro, and that served as its inspiration.

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[41] Michael Hatt and Charlotte Klonk, **Art History: A Critical Introduction to Its Methods**, New York: Manchester University Press, 2006, p. 118.