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Author(s): PHILIP L. SOHM

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Dürer's *Melencolia I*: The Limits of Knowledge

PHILIP L. SOHM

From the scant written evidence surviving from the early sixteenth-century about Dürer's *Melencolia I* (fig. 1), it is known that the artist distributed this renowned engraving together with *St. Jerome in his Study* (fig. 2) and that the learned discussed one engraving in association with the other.¹ Whether Dürer designed the two engravings dated 1514 as pendants remains moot, but their later association in the artist's and public's minds should be recognized as more significant than coincidental. When they are considered together, the *Melencolia I* and *St. Jerome* contrast the transcendent tranquility of sacred learning with the joyless frustrations of secular knowledge.² The spiritual comforts of St. Jerome's theological pursuits are vividly expressed by his ordered, luminous study and serve as a poignant foil to the frustrations of Melancholy's rationalistic cogitations, embodied by the disarray of objects scattered around her damp, crepuscular abode. In Panofsky's estimation, this contrast is "too perfect to be accidental. While St. Jerome is comfortably installed at his writing desk, the winged Melancholia sits in a crouching position . . . on a low slab of stone by an unfinished building."³ An antithesis of sacred and secular learning was indeed foremost in Dürer's mind but not necessarily in the sense surmised by Panofsky. Rather, it can be established that Dürer intended to juxtapose the two polarities of intellectual endeavor within the single image of *Melencolia I*.

Whereas the iconography of *St. Jerome* is readily accessible, the unprecedented complexity of *Melencolia I* has generated a comparable morass of interpretations. It has been analyzed alchemically, astrologically, and psychoanalytically;⁴ it has been understood as an illustration of saturnine, Neoplatonic melancholy, as a tribute to the scientist Johann Müller, as a Christian paradox, and as an exhorta-

¹ On his trip to the Netherlands in 1520, Dürer distributed the two engravings to at least eight individuals: Hans Rupprich, ed., *Dürer: Schriftlicher Nachlass* (Berlin, 1956), 1: 156. In 1515, Anton Tucher sold three pairs (1: 295). See also the letter from Johann Cochlaeus to Pirckheimer, Apr. 5, 1520 (1: 265). *Melencolia I* measures 24.0 x 18.7 cm (9⁷/₁₆ x 7³/₈ in); R. Horace Gallatin Collection, National Gallery of Art, B-15,223.

² For a most eloquent description of Melancholy's depression, see H. Wölfflin, "Zur Interpretation von Dürers Melancholie," *Jahrbuch für Kunstwissenschaft*, 1 (1923): 175-181. The bibliography on the engraving is too extensive to list here, much less to review; all contributions prior to 1971 are included in M. Mende, *Dürer-Bibliographie* (Wiesbaden, 1971), 246-251, with the exception of a lengthy, but unconvincing, alchemical interpretation by Calvesi ("A noir. Melencolia I," *Storia dell'Arte*, 1 [1969]: 37-96). For literature appearing during the Dürer year of 1971, see W. Stechow, "Recent Dürer Studies," *Art Bulletin*, 56 (1974): 259-270. The most important article published recently is by K. Hoffman, "Dürers 'Melencolia'," *Kunst als Bedeutungsträger. Gedenkschrift für Günter Bandmann*, ed. W. Busch, R. Haussherr and E. Trier (Berlin, 1978), 251-277.

³ Erwin Panofsky, *The Life and Art of Albrecht Dürer* (Princeton, 1943), 1: 156.

⁴ G. F. Hartlaub, "Arcana Artis," *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte*, 6 (1937): 302-314; J. Read, "Dürer's Melencolia: an alchemical interpretation," *Burlington Magazine*, 87 (1945): 283-284; Calvesi, "A noir," 37-96. A. Warburg, "Heidnisch-Antike Weissagung in Wort und Bild zu Luthers Zeiten" in *Gesammelte Schriften* (Leipzig-Berlin, 1932), 526-



Fig. 1. Albrecht Dürer, Melencolia I, 1514. Engraving. National Gallery of Art, Washington, R. Horace Gallatin Collection

14 SOHM



Fig. 2. Albrecht Dürer, St. Jerome in his Study, 1514. Engraving, National Gallery of Art, Washington, R. Horace Gallatin Collection

SOHM 15

531. A. Winterstein, "Dürers 'Melancholie I' im Lichte der Psychoanalyse," *Imago*, 15 (1929): 145-199; R. Wankmüller-Freyh, "Zu Dürers Kupferstich 'Melencolia'," *Confinia psychiatrica*, 3 (1960): 158-169.

⁵ As Neoplatonic melancholy: K. Giehlow, "Dürers Stich 'Melencolia I' und der Maximilianische Humanistenkreis," *Mitteilungen der Gesellschaft für Vervielfältigende Kunst*, 26 (1903): 29-41; 27 (1904): 6-18, 57-78. As tribute to Müller: K. H. de Haas, *Albrecht Dürer's engraving Melencolia I, a symbolic memorial to the scientist Johann Müller* (Rotterdam, 1951). As paradox: P. Reuterswärd, "Sinn und Nebensinn bei Dürer, Randbemerkungen zur 'Melencolia I'" in *Gestalt und Wirklichkeit. Festgabe für Ferdinand Weinhandl*, ed. R. Müller and J. Fischl (Berlin, 1967), 411-436. And as exhortation: Hoffmann, "Melencolia," 251-277.

⁶ E. Panofsky and F. Saxl, *Dürers Kupferstich "Melencolia I"; Eine Quellen- und typengeschichtliche Untersuchung* (Leipzig and Berlin, 1923); E. Panofsky, *Dürer*, 1: 154-171; and R. Klibansky, E. Panofsky and F. Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy* (London, 1964). The general acceptance of Panofsky's ideas is clearly expressed by the publications for and during the Dürer year of 1971; for example, *Albrecht Dürers Umwelt, Festschrift zum 500 Geburtstag*, Nürnberger Forschungen, 15 (Nuremberg, 1971), 154-155; C. Talbot, G. Ravenel and J. Levenson, *Dürer in America. His Graphic Work* (Washington, 1971), 145-146; P. Parshall, "Albrecht Dürer's *St. Jerome in His Study*: A Philological Reference," *Art Bulletin*, 53 (1971): 303-305; and R. F. Timken-Zinkann, *Ein Mensch Namens Dürer, Des Künstlers Leben, Ideen, Umwelt* (Berlin, 1972), 107-118.

⁷ The numeral I has also been understood as the imperative "ire" (A. Giesecke, "Eine Dürer-Inschrift und ihre richtige Lesung [zu Dürers 'Melancholie'-Stich]," *Gutenberg-Jahrbuch*, 30 [1955]: 306-314), as the "fons et origo numerorum" or even the mystical unity of God (P. K. Schuster, "Melencolia I, Studien zu Dürers Melancholiekupferstich und seinem Humanismus," *Das Münster*, 27 [1974]: 409-411) and as the shriek of the bat (Reuterswärd, "Melencolia," 414).

⁸ Klibansky et al., *Saturn*, 356-357.

⁹ For the most cogent refutations of Agrippa as Dürer's source, see K. Rossmann, "Wert und Grenze der Wissenschaft. Zur Symbolik von Dürers Kupferstich 'Melencolia'" in *Offener Horizont. Festschrift für Karl Jaspers* (Munich, 1953), 126-146; and Hoffmann, "Melencolia," 251-252.

tion against the fear of a second flood, to mention only a few of the many theories.⁵

Undoubtedly the most widely accepted and most plausible interpretation is that of Panofsky, who concluded that Dürer incorporated, through the medium of Saturn, the imagery of geometry—the governing principle of art—with the Neoplatonic conception of melancholy as divine inspiration and thereby created a geometer's or artist's Melancholy.⁶ Under the influence of Saturn, the potent star of all melancholics, the melancholic imagination could be led to remarkable achievements in the arts. The tools and instruments represent the Saturnine abilities of the melancholic in pure geometry and its applications in art and architecture. The dog, subject to depression and madness, and the bat, because of its nocturnal habits, refer to the melancholic temperament. The magic square on the wall and the wreath of lovage worn by Melancholy are talismans used to attract the healing influence of Jupiter to offset the excess of Saturn. "The keys mean power, the purse means wealth," wrote Dürer, probably referring to his belief that power (or mastery) and wealth are the rewards of the artist who uses geometry.

To assimilate the diverse ideas of Saturn, geometry, and melancholy, Dürer, Panofsky argues, turned to the German philosopher Cornelius Agrippa von Nettesheim and specifically to his *De Occulta Philosophia*, which Panofsky assumes Dürer knew in manuscript form prior to its publication in 1531. Based on Marsilio Ficino's transformation of melancholy from its medieval definition as despondent acedia into a Neoplatonic afflatus, Agrippa envisioned three types of melancholy, each associated with man's three faculties of perception. *Melancholia imaginativa*, inspired by Saturn, is cognitively limited to the physical world and hence inspires the practitioners of geometry such as astronomers, architects, and artists. Panofsky concludes that *melancholia imaginativa*, as the lowest of the three mental faculties, was identified by Dürer with the roman numeral I.⁷

Yet one feels an uneasy ambivalence about the inspirational power attributed by Agrippa and Panofsky to Dürer's image of a sullen, passive Melancholy. Agrippa characterized the melancholic state as a "frenzy": "this *humor melancholicus* 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"; and, as a result, they become "so outstanding by their genius that they seemed gods rather than men."⁸ If the melancholic mind, as defined by Agrippa, is elevated above all other mortal thought and approaches the divine when it is inspired by *furor divinus*, surely Dürer's Melancholy, despite her attributes, does not seem psychologically akin to Agrippa's melancholic genius. The apparent variance of Agrippa's description of melancholy with Dürer's image does not mean that Agrippa could not have been Dürer's source, as some scholars have suggested.⁹ Rather, it can be established through new evidence that Dürer's Melancholy had indeed experienced a condition similar to Agrippa's melancholic afflatus. If the engraving is read as a temporal sequence, as Dürer intended, with an implied past and a depicted present, then it can be shown that Melancholy had experienced a state of inspiration analagous in profundity to Jerome's and

identical in type to Agrippa's description, but antithetical to the gloomy prospect and spiritual malaise found in the engraving.

THE INSPIRED ACTIVITY OF MELANCHOLY can be demonstrated by a simple, apparently unnoticed, observation: the distance between the points of the compass held by Melancholy is precisely equal to the radius of the sphere at her feet and to one-third of the rainbow's radius measured from the inner edge. While it may be objected that one of the ends of the compass is hidden behind Melancholy's gown thereby rendering any measurement impossible, it nevertheless seems probable that Dürer intended us to make the measurement from the compass points as he depicted them in the engraving. In two preparatory drawings for the engraving (figs. 3 and 4), Dürer devised a similar equation in which the measure indicated by one of the compasses is equal to the length of the base (line 2-3) of the polyhedron and to line 5-6. At first glance, it is tempting to dismiss the identical lengths as coincidental; after all, why would Dürer transfer the measure of the compass on one drawing to the polyhedron on another? While it may have been an accidental correspondence, the probability of this is reduced when one realizes that the base line of the polyhedron is one of the most significant in its construction: it designates one of the planes which truncates the rhomboid, thereby transforming it into the irregular, perplexing object seen in the engraving.¹⁰ Since the presumed correspondence between compass and polyhedron in the drawings was transposed in the engraving to the symbolically crucial compass and sphere, one must wonder whether the repetition of such a precise mathematical conformity can really be mere coincidence.

But could Dürer have expected his public to associate the compass with the radius of the sphere and to reconstruct Melancholy's measurement? If this association would appear recondite, then the frequent depictions of God as the divine geometer (figs. 5 and 6) and of astronomers who measure a sphere with compass should be recalled.¹¹ Since God created the universe "by measure, number and weight," he was occasionally represented with compass and spheres.¹² The earliest tradition of God as geometer was inspired by the Book of Wisdom and represents him enumerating with the fingers of one hand while holding compass and balances with the other. Unlike the miniatures of the Wisdom type, which neither emphasize the compass over the balance nor represent God using them, another group of miniatures, mostly French, does show God measuring a celestial sphere with compass. The frontispiece to a Bible Moralisé (fig. 5), which may be dated to about 1240, seems to be the earliest, and possible archetype, for this group of illuminations. God, set within a decorative quatrolobe, holds the sphere of the cosmos while placing the two points of his compass at the center and circumference. The particular choice of center and circumference, duplicated later by Dürer's Melancholy, is repeated not only in the antecedents to this manuscript but also in illuminations from the early fifteenth-century of the *Historia Scholastica* such as that by Guyart des Moulins (fig. 6).

Such examples suggest that the act of measurement, and by implication its reconstruction, was an accepted fragment of the contem-

¹⁰ For the geometrical formulation of the polyhedron, see O. Zedlitz, "Nochmals: Der 'Kristall' auf Dürers Stich 'Melencolia I,'" *Forschungen und Fortschritte*, 33 (1959): 154-156; and Klibansky et al., *Saturn*, 400-403.

¹¹ For astronomers, see Hans Brosamer in *Astronomicum Caesareum* (Ingolstadt, 1540), an anonymous woodcut in A. Niphus, *De liberatione a metu futuri dituvii* (Venice, 1523) and illus. in G. Hellmann, *Beiträge zur Geschichte der Meteorologie* (Berlin, 1914), 83; the title page of *Messahala de scientia motus orbis* (Nuremberg, 1504) by an artist from Dürer's circle (illus. in F. W. Hollstein, *German Engravings Etchings and Woodcuts* [Amsterdam, 1960], 7: 257); and Cornelius Massys' woodcut of *Saturn* as astronomer, which is derived from Dürer's *Melencolia* (illus. in Hollstein, *Dutch and Flemish Etchings Engravings and Woodcuts* [Amsterdam, 1955], 2: 198).

¹² Klibansky et al., *Saturn*, 338f.; J. B. Friedman, "The Architect's Compass in Creation Miniatures of the Later Middle Ages," *Traditio*, 30 (1974): 419-429.

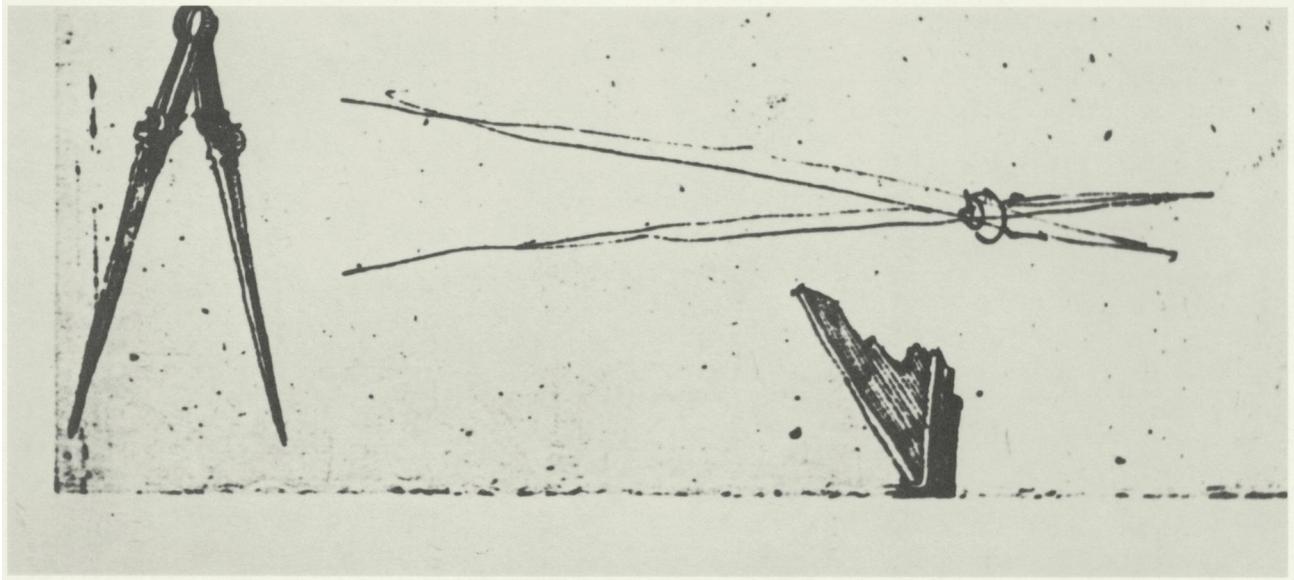


Fig. 3. Albrecht Dürer, *Compasses (detail)*, c. 1514. Pen and ink. Sächsische Landesbibliothek, Dresden. The dimensions of the full drawing are 20.0 x 26.0 cm (7⁷/₈ x 10¹/₄ in)

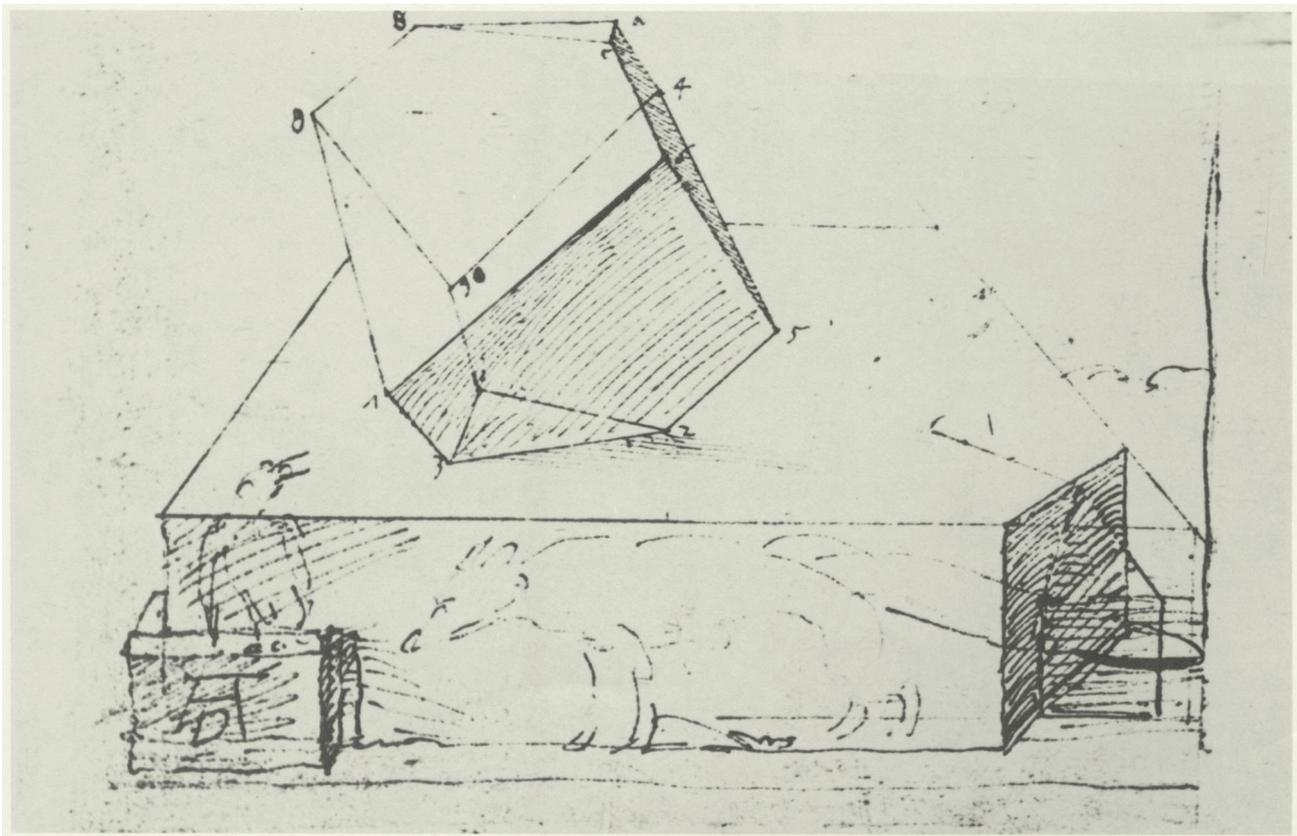


Fig. 4. Albrecht Dürer, *Polyhedron (detail)*, c. 1514. Pen and ink. Sächsische Landesbibliothek, Dresden. The dimensions of the full drawing are 20.2 x 19.3 cm (7¹⁵/₁₆ x 7⁵/₈ in)

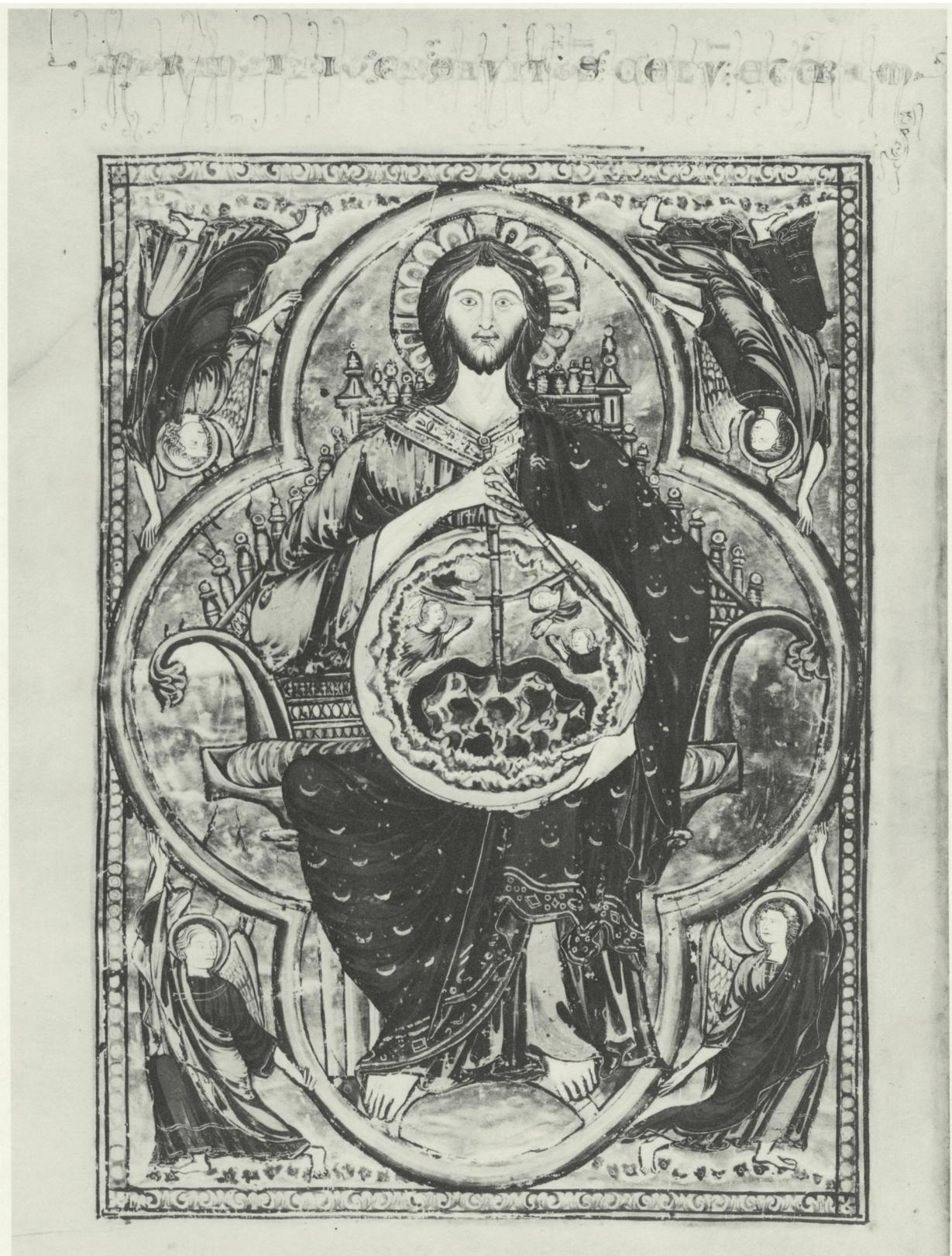


Fig. 5. God the Father with Sphere and Compass, c. 1240. From the Bible Moralisé. Bodleian Library, Oxford, 270b, fol. 1



Fig. 6. God the Father with Sphere and Compass, early 15th c. From *Guyart des Moulins*, *Historia Scholastica*. *British Library*, London, 15.D.iii, fol. 3v



Fig. 7. Hans Beham, *Melencolia*, 1539. Engraving. National Gallery of Art, Washington, Rosenwald Collection

porary visual memory. Hence Dürer might well have intended his learned audience to reconstruct the prior act of Melancholy in gauging the radius of the sphere, and in fact, at least one of Dürer's colleagues did just that. Hans Beham's engraving of *Melancholy* (fig. 7) dated 1539, which is clearly derived from Dürer, depicts a winged woman resting her compass on top of a sphere whose radius equals the distance between the points of the compass.¹³

The simple, mathematical unity of the compass, sphere, and rainbow in *Melencolia I* has significant implications, but, to arrive at them, the meaning of the sphere and rainbow must first be understood. The sphere is one of the most malleable symbols, and for this reason it is the bane of iconographers.¹⁴ In *Melencolia I* it has been interpreted as a symbol of the earth, of instability or *fortuna*, and of pure geometry.¹⁵ The rainbow has been interpreted as the upper-

¹³ Later, Cesare Ripa (*Iconologia* [Rome, 1603], 308) represented Mathematics as a winged woman holding a celestial sphere in one hand and compass in the other. Again the radius of the sphere is indicated by the compass.

¹⁴ O. Brendel, "Symbolik der Kugel," *Mitteilungen des deutschen archäologischen Instituts, Rom* (Abteilung, li, 1936), 51: 1-95.

¹⁵ As symbol of earth, see J. Kappel, "Die Sinndeutung in Dürers *Melencolia*," *Christliche Kunst*, 24 (1927-1928): 211-212; as fortune, see F. Nagel, *Der Kristall auf Dürers Melancholie* (Nuremberg, 1922), 12; Schuster, "Melencolia," 409; Reuterswärd, "Melencolia," 416. For a broader discussion of the sphere as a vanity symbol, see L. Möller, "Die Kugel als Vanitassymbol," *Jahrbuch der Hamburger Kunstsammlungen*, 2



Fig. 8. Albrecht Dürer, Man of Sorrows Seated, 1511. Woodcut. The Brooklyn Museum, New York, Gift of Mrs. Howard M. Morse

(1952): 161ff.; and Franz Bächtiger, *Vanitas-Schicksalsdeutung in der deutschen Renaissance-graphik*, Inaugural Dissertation (Munich, 1970), 72-88. For the bell as a symbol of transience, see Giehlow, "Melancholia," 65. As symbol of geometry, see Klibansky et al., *Saturn*, 328.

¹⁶ For the rainbow as heavenly sphere, see R. W. Horst, "Dürers 'Melencolia I'. Beitrag zum Melancholeia-Problem," *Wandlungen Christlicher Kunst im Mittelalter* (Forschungen zur Kunstgeschichte und Christlichen Archäologie), 2 (1953): 426-427. As divine assurance, see Hoffmann, "Melencolia," 258-259; and as an indication of prognostic powers, see Klibansky et al., *Saturn*, 360.

¹⁷ S. Rösch, "Der Regenbogen in der Malerei," *Studium Generale*, 13 (1960): 422-423; Craig Harbison, *The Last Judgment in Sixteenth-Century Northern Europe* (New York, 1976).

¹⁸ J. P. Migne, *Patrologiae Latina*, 76: 867-868: "Sed si ipsi quam praediximus visioni arcus inten-

most, heavenly sphere within the Neoplatonic system, as a divine assurance after the Flood, and as an indication of the melancholic's prognostic powers.¹⁶ However, when it is recognized that the sphere and rainbow are proportionally related and should be interpreted together rather than separately, a different context is established: that of the Last Judgment. The rainbow and sphere maintain the hieratic order and meaning of Christ's throne and footstool in most scenes of the Last Judgment.¹⁷ The interpretation of the rainbow as a symbol of the celestial order is also implied by its Latin designation *arcus caelestis* and is stated by Gregory in his eighth Homilia.¹⁸ The sphere would then assume its conventional meaning as a symbol of the earth.

The reference to the Last Judgment is echoed by the scales on the wall in *Melencolia I*, and its meaning is amplified by the tools on the ground and the objects on the wall. While the tools scattered on the ground have usually been thought to define the realm of Melancholy's gift, Reuterswärd has perceived a coexisting substratum of sym-



Fig. 9. Albrecht Dürer, *The Mass of St. Gregory*, 1511. Woodcut. National Gallery of Art, Washington, Rosenwald Collection

dimus, quomodo arcus significet spiritum videmus” (“But if we turn our attention to the vision itself of the rainbow, which we related before, we see how the rainbow signifies the spirit”).

¹⁹ Reuterswärd, “Melencolia,” 411-436.

²⁰ H. von Einem (“Notes on Dürer’s ‘Melencolia I,’” *Print Review*, 5 [1976]: 35-39) associates the pose of Melancholy with Dürer’s Job in the Heller Altarpiece and the titlepage woodcut of the Small Passion thereby imputing a Christian content to the engraving. J. A. Endres (“Albrecht Dürer und Nikolaus von Kusa. Deutung der Dürerschen ‘Melancholie,’” *Die Christliche Kunst*, 9 [1912-1913]: 110-120) in one of the few other interpretations of Melencolia as a Christian allegory suggests that the magic square in adding up to thirty-four could refer both to the age of Christ during the Passion and to Cusa’s thirty-fourth sphere.

²¹ R. Allers, “Microcosmos from Anaximandros to Paracelsus,” *Traditio*, 2 (1944): 319-408; L. Spitzer, “Classical and Christian Ideas of World Harmony,” *Traditio*, 2 (1944): 409-464; Dietrich Mahnke, *Unendliche Sphäre und Allmittelpunkt* (Stuttgart, 1966); and Heinz Meyer, *Die Zahlenallegorese im Mittelalter* (Munich, 1975), 67ff. Dürer could have become acquainted with these ideas from a variety of sources, possibly from Bovillus (*Liber de Sapiente* [Augsburg, 1510], chap. 30) or Luca Pacioli (*De Divina Proportione* [Venice, 1509], pt. 1, chaps. 1-6).

²² Otto von Simson, *The Gothic Cathedral* (London, 1956), 21ff.; Hermann Graf, *Bibliographie zum Problem der Proportionen. Literatur über Proportionen, Mass und Zahl in Architektur, Bildender Kunst und Natur* (Speyer, 1958).

bolism.¹⁹ His point of departure was the observation that a skull may be dimly discerned on the main facet of the polyhedron. Whether one can accept this image as a skull is of less importance than his suggestion that the objects surrounding Melancholy may be interpreted in similar terms. While Panofsky considered the hourglass and bell as symbols of the measure of time, Reuterswärd noted that they could also be allusions to the passage of time and therefore to death. The comet may refer to the melancholic’s forecasting ability, but at the same time it can serve as a symbol of death. The sphere as a symbol of the earth could be identified with the image of earth frequently depicted as Fortuna’s unstable base. The nails, saw, hammer, and ladder refer not just to death and fortune in general but specifically to Christ’s Passion. The pose of Melancholy herself alludes to Christ as the Man of Sorrows: indeed these images could almost have been transferred anagrammatically from Dürer’s woodcut of that subject and the Mass of St. Gregory (figs. 8, 9).²⁰

Although the interpretations of the tools and instruments as symbols of the realm of *melancholia imaginativa* and of the Passion and *vanitas* would seem to be mutually exclusive, it can be shown that Dürer planned disparate ideas to coincide within a single object. But before Panofsky’s and Reuterswärd’s ideas can be reconciled and elaborated on, the significance of the sphere-rainbow relationship must be returned to.

If the sphere and rainbow do allude to the Last Judgment and consequently to the earth and prismatic arch of Heaven, then the proportional relationship between them probably refers to Pythagoras’ renowned theory that earth and Heaven, or microcosm and macrocosm, are related by number.²¹ Indeed the implication of celestial and terrestrial harmony is even contained within the meaning of a rainbow, since it served as God’s sign of covenant to Noah after the Flood (Genesis 9:12-15). Certainly the one to three ratio of sphere to rainbow is a gross simplification of Pythagorean ideas; nevertheless, it could serve as a lucid symbol for the greater mathematical order of the universe. If this can be accepted, then several conclusions may be drawn.

In measuring the earth, and by extension the Heavens, Melancholy has demonstrated her knowledge of geometry and thus confirms her Saturnine gifts, as Panofsky postulated. Presumably, Melancholy obtained the measure of the world to apply it to her architectural project, thereby incorporating the same principles used by God when he created the universe “by measure, number and weight.” According to Pythagoras, each celestial sphere emits a different tone according to its velocity, and these tones are harmonically, that is proportionally, related to the whole. For this reason musical proportion was thought to be the essential organizational principle of the universe and could be translated into architecture, as Melancholy presumably intended to do, to create a terrestrial model of Heaven.²² Indeed Melancholy’s lofty aspirations are confirmed by the fact that the act of measuring the sphere recalls popular images of God as the divine geometer or architect of the cosmos.

The decision to represent God measuring a sphere with compass was suggested by the metaphorical conception of him as the architect of the universe creating order from chaos, by means of number.

During the Renaissance, the metaphor of God as artificer was inverted so that the artist or architect could also be considered divine. This inversion of a medieval formula, so typical of the age of humanism, was understood and propounded by Dürer, who thought the equation of the artist with God perfectly natural since both ordered form by means of geometry.²³ It was probably for this reason that Dürer chose to recall the medieval illuminations of God as geometer with his Melancholy. Thus, in this respect, Melancholy may be seen as the imitator of God and hence a perfect illustration of Agrippa's *furor divinus*.

Yet, despite her apparently successful grasp of the universal harmony, Melancholy is represented as inactive and dejected, and not as elated and prepared to pursue her remarkable achievement. The reasons for her dejection may be found in a recurrent theme in Western thought, certainly known to Dürer—the futility of scientific pursuit. As I have indicated in the introduction, scholars have generally recognized that the complex iconography of *Melencolia I* revolves around the peculiar gifts of the melancholic, gifts which inevitably preclude him from participating in the fulfillment of divine wisdom.²⁴ In a passage recognized by Panofsky to be a significant part of Melencolia's heritage, the thirteenth-century philosopher Henricus de Gandavo defined the two types of thinkers.²⁵ According to Henricus, some men are able to handle metaphysical concepts, and hence become theologians, while others are limited to perceptible reality and quantifiable existence and hence are ideally suited to become scientists. These people cannot transcend the concrete quantities of time and space and, in the words of Henricus, "therefore such men are melancholy, and become excellent mathematicians but very bad metaphysicians, for they cannot extend their thoughts beyond location and space."

In the search for Dürer's sources, one important text has been neglected—Sebastian Brant's *Ship of Fools*. Brant's compilation of medieval morality, which ridicules in pithy verse the foibles of most earthly pursuits, grew out of a well-established anti-rationalist tradition which was initially defined by Sextus Empiricus. This tradition survived through the Middle Ages, despite the challenges of Abelard and Aquinas, to lucidly articulated during the fifteenth-century by Nicholas of Cusa.²⁶ Wisdom, or knowledge of God, for Cusa was infinite and thus "unutterable in any words, unintelligible to any intellect, unmeasurable by any measure, . . . unproportionable by any proportion."²⁷ In short, divine wisdom could not be approached through reason or the senses; in fact, reason could divert one's attention to the false, and because of this, Cusa propounded his most famous paradox, that of learned ignorance. The humble and ignorant, for Cusa, are able to appreciate the mystical infinity of divine wisdom because they are not blinkered by the strictures of worldly knowledge. The ideas of Cusa, and the tradition on which he modeled his thoughts, found fertile ground in the mind of Martin Luther: "Those therefore who are wise in and concerning visible things . . . understand nothing and are wise in nothing, that is, they are neither intelligent nor wise, but foolish and blind. And though they may think themselves wise men, yet they have become fools, for they are wise, not in the wisdom of secret, hidden things, but of that

²³ One year before his *Melencolia*, Dürer wrote: "This great art of painting has been held in high esteem by the mighty kings many hundred years ago. They made the outstanding artists rich and treated them with distinction because they felt that the great masters had an equality with God, as it is written. For, a good painter is inwardly full of figures, and if it were possible for him to live on forever he would always have to pour forth something new from the inner ideas of which Plato writes." Panofsky, *Dürer*, 280.

²⁴ Panofsky relates it to Dürer's later disillusionment with geometry as a means to perfect beauty (Panofsky, *Dürers Kunsttheorie*, [Berlin, 1915], 127f.; Panofsky, *Dürer*, 171). He cites such passages from the artist's notes as "With regard to geometry, one can prove that certain things are true, but certain things one must leave to the opinion and judgment of men." Whether Dürer felt a comparable doubt concerning geometry in the earlier years of *Melencolia* cannot be accepted without questioning his sincerity in composing his treatise, the *Uebersetzung der Messung mit dem Zirckel und Richtscheit*, which was prepared during these years, but published in 1525. His sentiment concerning the role of geometry in art is expressed in a note which probably does not date later than 1513: "ist keine, dy der mass mer vnd in manigfeltiger weg vnd gestalt notturfittig ist als dy kunst der malerey, dy nit alain begert des geometrei vnd arithmetica, vrsprung aller mass, sunder vil mer der ander kunst des betrugs des gesicht, catoptrica, geodesia, chorographia"; see Rupprich, *Nachlass*, 2: 127.

²⁵ Panofsky, *Dürer*, 168.

²⁶ The scepticism of Cusa, which also derives from the mystics Eckhart, Lull and the Brethren of the Common Life, may be traced back to Pseudo-Dionysius and the school of Chartres and ultimately to such Pauline passages as: "For wisdom of this world is foolishness to God" (I Corinthians 3:19); see E. Rice, "Nicholas of Cusa's Idea of Wisdom," *Traditio*, 13 (1957): 345-368; and Anton Lübke, *Nikolaus von Kues, Kirchenfürst zwischen Mittelalter und Neuzeit* (Munich, 1968), 276-292.

²⁷ Cusa, *De sapientia ignorata*, 9-10; see also E. Grant, "Nicole Oresme and the Commensurability or Incommensurability of the Celestial Motions," *Archive for History of Exact Sciences*, 1 (1961): 420-458.



Fig. 10. Sebastian Brant, *Narrenschiff* (Basel, 1494), chap. 66

²⁸ Luther, *Werke* (Weimar, 1938), 56: 237. The Pauline Epistles certainly inspired Luther on this theme, but Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples might also have been influential; see P. Imbart de la Tour, *Les Origines de la Réforme* (Paris, 1903-1935), 2: 566-568.

²⁹ For a general review of their ideas, see Richard Popkin, *The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Descartes* (Assen, 1960), 17-25; Charles Nauert, *Agrippa and the Crisis of Renaissance Thought* (Urbana, Ill., 1965), 148-152; Charles Schmitt, *Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola (1469-1533) and his Critique of Aristotle* (The Hague, 1967), 49-51, 75-81; and Faustino Perisauli, *De Triumpho Stultitiae*, ed. G. Fabbri with intro. by A. Viviani (Florence, 1963).

³⁰ Within the context of the deception of the senses, it might be significant that at least two physicians of

which can be found in a human way.”²⁸ The shattering doubts raised by Luther concerning the role of the Church were paralleled by a general intellectual unrest, not only in such religious leaders but also by such secular thinkers as Giovanni Francesco Pico della Mirandola, the nephew of the renowned Giovanni Pico, Agrippa von Nettesheim, and Faustino Perisauli.²⁹ Whereas Cusa and Luther limited their scepticism of reason to theology, with occasional excursions into other fields of learning by way of comparison, the emergent neo-Pyrrhonists questioned the validity of all human knowledge since it must be based on the deceptive senses. This position, derived from Sextus’ *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, undermined the assumptions of the sciences not simply as a means for understanding eternal, divine truths but also within its own limited context of quantifiable phenomena.³⁰

As a pure science and one of the liberal arts, geometry and its applications in astronomy and geography became an inclusive image of scientific vanity. Augustine devoted two chapters of his *Confessions* (Book 5:3-4) to the astronomer's misplaced faith in measurement. Erasmus, in his parade of pompous fools, included scientists and astronomers, remarking: "They announce that they alone are wise, and that the rest of men are only passing shadows. Their folly is a pleasant one. They frame countless worlds, and measure the sun, moon, stars, and spheres as with thumb and line."³¹ Agrippa introduced his treatise *De incertitudine et vanitate omnium scientiarum et artium liber*, published in 1530, with a critique of reason and its limited applicability. He continued by dismissing mathematics and geometry, as well as such dependent disciplines as astronomy, geography, and even painting, as being utterly vain and ultimately harmful. In a passage recalling that by Henricus de Gandavo, Agrippa wrote: "and therefore, while they (the geometricians) go about still adding something which their Masters left Imperfect, they run themselves into such an extremity of Madness, which all the Hellebore in the world is not able to Purge away."³² Pico and Perisauli denounce geometry and astronomy in similar terms, and several sixteenth-century German woodcuts translated this theme into images.³³ While it might appear unlikely that Dürer shared these ideas, at least in view of various depreciatory comments about the sceptics,³⁴ it should be remembered that his thoughts might have taken a more pessimistic turn with the death of his mother in 1514, an experience which profoundly affected the artist and possibly influenced his conception of the contemporary *Melencolia*.³⁵

Sebastian Brant's *Ship of Fools*, published in 1494, stands in the early phase of the anti-intellectual, Pyrrhonist revival and seems to have served as an important source for Dürer's *Melencolia I*.³⁶ Brant assembled a compendium of vain attempts at mundane pleasures, fame, riches, and knowledge to serve as a satiric foil for his primary theme—the blindness of mankind to its ultimate fate.³⁷ The sixty-sixth chapter, "Of Experience of All Lands," deals with the vanity of mundane knowledge, specifically the measurement of the earth and heavens as a sterile means to understand the universe. The introductory verse provides the theme of the chapter: "Who measures heaven, earth, and sea,/ Thus seeking lore or gaiety,/ Let him beware a fool to be."³⁸ The opening lines of the chapter restate the theme in more complete form:

I do not deem him very wise
 Who energetically tries
 To probe all cities, every land,
 And takes compass well in hand
 That thereby he may well decide
 How broad the earth, how long and wide,
 How deep and large the seas expand,
 What holds th'extremest sphere of land.³⁹

The woodcut which introduces this chapter represents a fool using a compass to measure the earth, which is surrounded by the heavens (fig. 10). The fool has placed one point of the compass in the center of the earth and waits to move the other arm while he listens to the admonitions of a wise fool, who indicates the nature of his advice by

the sixteenth century, Leonard Fuchs and Ianus Matthaeus Durastantes, observed that the condition of melancholy could result in unreliable sensory perception; see L. Fuchs, *De curandi ratione* (Lyons, 1548), bk. 1, chaps. 29-34; and L. Thorndike, *History of Magic* (New York, 1941), 6: 517-519.

³¹ Erasmus, *In Praise of Folly*, trans. L. Dean (Chicago, 1946), 94-95.

³² Agrippa, *The Vanity of Arts and Sciences* (London, 1684), chap. 22; Agrippa, *De incertitudine et vanitate omnium scientiarum et artium liber* (1530; Antwerp, 1643), chap. 22: "Ea tamen est eorum ambitio, ut priorum traditionibus nunquam acquiescant, sed in talibus amplius aliquid quam magistri eorum invenire putantes, seipsos in tantam insaniam agunt quam universae terrae elleborum non sufficiat expurgare ab ipsa Geometria ultra hoc"

³³ G. F. Pico della Mirandola, *Examen vanitatis doctrinae gentium et veritatis Christianae, disciplinae* (Mirandola, 1520), chap. 16; Perisauli, *Triumpho Stultitiae*, chap. 10 "Geometra Delirus" and chap. 11 "Astronomia Mera Insania." Matthias Gerung, in his woodcut the *Melancholic*, depicts a geographer measuring a terrestrial sphere with compass and indicates the work as sterile with the inscription: "Las Iecr Gheta I. FNDI, Hat 1z Baczen ver-split" (illus. in G. F. Hartlaub, *Giorgiones Geheimnis* [Munich, 1925], pl. 27). In a slightly later woodcut, of about 1548, Heinrich Vogtherr the Elder shows an astronomer posed melancholically with head on hand and identifies the source of his lethargy thus: "Azarchel hat dweltzung der Zatl/ Beschriben gmachet offenbar/ Die rechnung ist im gsyn erfande/ Der zircel dlingen ouch verwandt" (illus. in M. Geisberg, *The German Single-Leaf Woodcut, 1500-1550* [New York, 1974], 4: 1385). The astronomer in Breughel's drawing and engraving of *Temperance* seems to be indulging in an intemperate activity as are those around him; see C. de Tolnay, *Die Zeichnungen Pieter Bruegels* (Munich, 1925), 27 f., 63f.; and I. Zupnick, "Bruegel's *Virtues* as the Epitomy of Folly" in *L'Umanesimo e "la Follia"* (Rome, 1971), 91-106. In particular, the precarious position of the astronomer measuring the heavens, in comparison to the more stable grounding of the geographer, possibly alludes to the vanity of that discipline.

³⁴ "Aber vnser blöd gemüt kan zw solcher vollkommenheit aller künstn, warheit vnd weisheit nit kumen. Doch sind wir nit gar awgeschlossen van aller weisheit. Wöll wir durch lernung unser vernunft scherpfen vnd vns dorin vben, so mügen wir woll etlich warheit durch recht weg suchen, lernen, erlangen, erkennen vnd dort zw dumen. Wir wissen, daz jr vill mencherlëy kunst erfahren vn jr warheit angetzeight haben, das vns zw gut kumt. Dorum ist es billich, das sich der mensch nit versawn vnd zw bekwermer tzeit etwas leren, dortzw er sich am aller geschicktesten find. Etlich menschen mügen van allerlëy künsten lernen, aber daz ist nit einem jtlichen geben. Doch ist kein vernunftig mensch so grob, er mag etwan ein ding lernen, dortzw jn sein gemüt am höchsten tregt"; see Rupprich, *Nachlass*, 2: 112. See also H. Schrade, "Die religiösen Grundlagen von Dürers Schriften zur Kunst," *Zeitschrift für dt. Bildung*, 10 (1934): 22-29; and G. Weise, *Dürer*



Fig. 11. Attributed to the Master of 1515, Allegory of Astronomy. Engraving. The Albertina, Vienna

und die Ideale der Humanisten, Tübinger Forschungen zur Kunstgeschichte 6 (Tübingen, 1953), 8-16, 28-33.

³⁵ Rupprich, *Nachlass*, 1: 37; R. Wustmann, "Als Dürers Mutter starb," *Kunstchronik*, 14 (1902-1903): 425-430. See also W. Waetzoldt, *Dürer und seine Zeit* (Vienna, 1935), 239; and Donald Kuspit, "Dürer and the Northern Critics, 1502-1572," Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1971, 235-276.

³⁶ That Dürer was familiar with the *Ship of Fools* cannot be doubted since he designed many of its woodcuts while he was in Basel, probably from mid-1492 until the fall of 1493; see F. Winkler, *Dürer und die Illustrationen zum Narrenschiff* (Berlin, 1951); and H. Lüdecke, *Albrecht Dürers Wanderjahre* (Dresden, 1959). Although Dürer was not responsible for the woodcut of Chapter 66, he certainly must have known it. M. Lemmer (*Die Holzschnitte zu Sebastian Brants Narrenschiff* [Leipzig, 1964], 149) attributes the woodcut to the "Gnad-her-Meister" whose style he characterizes as movement and expressive, often to an excess of bestial terror rendered without subtlety. Brant's influence on the iconography of Dürer's work, in particular the *Dream of the Doctor*, has been discussed

pointing to the text above. The act of measuring the world corresponds closely to the earlier activity of Dürer's Melancholy.

Brant, relying on the sceptical tradition, elucidates the folly implicit in this attempt and characteristically infuses into it a medieval morality. By measuring the universe, the fool has attempted to transcend his natural limits: "Why should we humans seek to be/More than we are in verity?"⁴⁰ Inspired Melancholy, who has measured the earth like Brant's fool, tried to be "more than we are in verity"; in other words, she aspired to imitate God as the divine geometer. And in the process of hoping to understand God through geometry, and even become like God, Melancholy, like Brant's geographer, entered a realm which she could not understand, and therefore she neglected those matters which have eternal importance. Brant, in the sixty-sixth chapter, wrote of his fool:

The master Pliny once did say
That vain it is in every way
To measure out the world's expanse
And then to cast a further glance
Beyond the earth, beyond the sea;
In this all men err grievously,
Into these problems each would delve,

Yet can he understand himself? . . .
 We never know what gain it brings
 To study many lofty things,
 No one his hour of dying knows,
 Which like a shadow comes and goes.⁴¹

These might well be the thoughts of Melancholy as she casts “a further glance beyond the earth, beyond the sea.” By vainly seeking to understand the world by means of geometry, she does not recognize her own mortality, a theme also stressed by Augustine and later by Agrippa and others.⁴² Thus Brant’s text confirms Reuterswärd’s hypothesis that Dürer included the themes of vanity and mortality in his engraving.⁴³

Melencolia I has usually been interpreted as a timeless emblem filled with static symbols,⁴⁴ but with the discovery of Melancholy’s act of measuring the sphere, a past and present can be unequivocally defined. The abandoned tools, the unfinished building, and, most importantly, the compass bearing the measure of the sphere indicate a past state of activity, one which has already been identified with Agrippa’s *furor melancholicus*. If the flights of the comet and the bat as well as the appearance of the rainbow are considered as natural phenomena rather than just timeless symbols, then they represent a restricted span of time, specifically the present moment. The sequence of time implicitly contained in the engraving suggests a dramatic narrative which focuses on the transformation of Melancholy’s mood from inspired melancholy to the inactive and dejected state depicted in the engraving. Since the specific moment in time in which the transformation of Melancholy’s awareness occurs is defined by the principal temporal phenomena—the comet, the rainbow, and the flying bat—they acquire a greater importance than generally assumed. Indeed the significance of Melancholy’s depression is conveyed primarily by means of the temporal imagery.

The comet, as a traditional symbol of death and impending misfortune, can be understood as a *memento mori* and, in the context of *Melencolia I*, as a reminder of scientific vanity. In an engraving attributed to the Master of 1515, a winged woman is interrupted from measuring an astrolabe by a man who points to a comet in the sky (fig. 11). Similarly, in an unattributed Venetian drawing of the early sixteenth century, a man distracts the attention of an astronomer by pointing to a luminary apparition, possibly a comet (fig. 12).⁴⁵ While the precise meaning of these graphic works cannot be adequately defined, it does seem clear that a contrast between earthly pursuits and the awareness of a higher order was intended. Also, the similarity to Brant’s woodcut should not be neglected. Brant contrasts a measuring fool with a wise fool who indicates the futility of the former’s labor by pointing to the words “Who measures heaven, earth, and sea, . . . Let him beware a fool to be.” The full verse presumably follows. Furthermore, the contrast between the two fools corresponds to the contrasting states of awareness of Melancholy identified with her past and present. This does not imply that Dürer’s Melancholy was intended to be interpreted on the same level as Brant’s fool or the Italian astronomers. Rather, by conflating the two figures representing conflicting modes of knowledge, Dürer internalized the conflict thereby transforming Brant’s geometer from

by Panofsky (*Dürer*, 71-72); see also Hoffmann, “Melencolia,” 258, 262f.

³⁷ Ulrich Gaier, *Satire. Studien zu Neidhart, Wittenwiler, Brant und zur satirischen Schreibart* (Tübingen, 1967), 215-328, esp. 227f.; and Joël Lefebvre, *Les Fols et la Folie. Etude sur les genres du comique et la création littéraire en Allemagne pendant la Renaissance* (Paris, 1968).

³⁸ S. Brant, *The Ship of Fools*, trans. E. Zeydel (New York, 1944), 220. “Wer vsz misszt hymel, erd, vnd mer! . . . Der lvg, das er dem narren wer”; see S. Brant, *Narrenschiff*, ed. F. Zarncke (Leipzig, 1854), 65.

³⁹ Brant, *Fools*, 220-221. Zeydel used the word *circle* to translate *zyrckel*; I have changed it to *compass* which is more accurate in this context. Brant, *Narrenschiff*, 65:

Ich halt den ouch nit jtel wisz
 Der all syn synn leidt, vnd syn flisz
 Wie er erkund all stett, vnd landt
 Vnd nymbt den zyrckel jn die handt
 Das er dar durch berichtet werd
 Wie breit, wie lang, wie witt die erd
 Wie dieff, vnd verr sich zieh das mer
 Vnd was enthalt den letsten spor.

For the vanity of learning and mundane knowledge, see also chaps. 1, 27, 48.

⁴⁰ Brant, *Fools*, 224. “Was nott wont doch eym menschen by/ Das er such grössers dann er sy”; see Brant, *Narrenschiff*, 66.

⁴¹ Brant, *Fools*, 222, 224; and *Narrenschiff*, 66:

Plinius der meyster seitt
 Das es sy eyn vnsynneikeit
 Wellen die grösz der welt verston
 Vnd vsser der, by wilen gon
 Vnd rächen bisz hynder das mer
 Dar jnn menschlich vernunft jrirt ser
 Das sy solchem noch rächen allzyt
 Vnd kan sich selb vsz rächen nitt, . . .
 Vnd weiszt nit was jm nutz entspring
 Wann er erfart schon hohe ding
 Vnd nit die zyt syns todes kennt
 Die wie eyn schätt von hynnan rennt.

⁴² Augustine wrote that astronomers may be able to calculate when the sun will be eclipsed, but the false assurance of such knowledge can be grave: such men “by an impious pride, withdraw from Thee and forsake thy light. They foretell an eclipse of the sun before it happens, but they do not see their own eclipse which is even now occurring”; see *Confessions*, bk. 5, chap. 3 (trans. A. Outler [Philadelphia, 1955], 97). Agrippa relies on the same passage in Pliny (*Historia Naturalis*, 2: i, 3) to arrive at a conclusion similar to Brant’s; see Agrippa, *De Vanitate*, chap. 27.

⁴³ On vanity imagery in the engraving, see also M. Steck, “Theoretische Beiträge zu Albrecht Dürers Kupferstich ‘Melencolia I’ von 1514,” *Forschungen und Fortschritte*, 32 (1958): 251; and Schuster, “Melencolia,” 409-411.

⁴⁴ For the one exception, see Hoffmann, “Melencolia,” 252f.

⁴⁵ Illus. in H. Tietze and E. Tietze-Conrat, *The Drawings of the Venetian Painters in the 15th and 16th Centuries* (New York, 1944), 134, A575; B. J. Meijer, “Early Drawings by Titian: some attribu-



Fig. 12. Venetian school, *Two Astronomers*, early 16th c. Pen and ink. Städelsches Kunstinstitut, Frankfurt

tions," *Arte Veneta*, 28 (1974): 88; D. Rosand and M. Muraro, *Titian and the Venetian Woodcut* (Washington, D.C., 1976), 201.

⁴⁶ Brant, *Narrenschiff*, 87-88:

Der furet vff eym strowen dach
Der vff der welt rum, setzt syn sach
Vnd all ding dut, vff zyttlich ere
Dem würt zu letst nüt anders me
Dan das syn won, jnn hatt betrogen
So er buwt vff eyn rägenbogen
We wölbet vff eyn dannyn sul
Dem würt ee zyt, syn anschlag ful.

For earlier expressions of this idea, see *Freidank*, ed. W. Grimm (Göttingen, 1860), 153:

Swer gote dienet âne wanc,
deist aller wisheit anevanc.
swer umbe dise kurse zit
die ewigen fröude gît,
der hât sich selbe gar betrogen
und zimbert uf den regenbogen;
swenne der regenboge zergât,
son weiz er wâ sîn hûs stât.

See also *Meister Altswert*, *Bibliothek des Literarischen Vereins*, 21, ed. A. Keller and W. Holland (Stuttgart, 1850), 161.

⁴⁷ The contributions of Aristotle and Albertus Magnus were summarized in the Renaissance by Gaetan

an embodiment of man's ceaseless folly into a compelling statement on the tragic limitations of man's mind.

While the comet serves primarily as a *memento mori*, the meaning of the rainbow is more complex. It both confirms Melancholy's geometric achievement of measuring the heavens and, simultaneously, acts as a reminder of her futile pursuit. Following an earlier literary tradition, Sebastian Brant used the rainbow as a metaphor of the vanity of men who are concerned only with the material world and earthly fame.⁴⁶ The rainbow was a particularly apt symbol to play this dual role of alluding to Melancholy's illusory success because, ever since Aristotle, the rainbow was recognized as nothing more than the reflection of the sun on a cloud, that is, an illusion itself.⁴⁷ Thus the rainbow, as an allusion to the celestial order, is nothing more than an illusion and reveals to Melancholy that her aspirations were built like a castle in the air.

The seemingly contradictory duality of the rainbow as a symbol accords perfectly with the earliest analysis of the engraving's symbolism, published in 1541 by Joachim Camerarius, Dürer's friend and director of the Protestant *Gymnasium* in Nuremberg. According to Camerarius, the ladder in *Melencolia I* symbolized both the aspiration toward heavenly or absolute truth, but at the same time the futility of that quest:

Next to her are seen the instruments of the arts, books, rulers, compasses, standards, even certain iron and wood works. But in order to indicate that nothing is usually comprehended by such talents and how these things are repeatedly reduced to absurdity, he raises up stairs before her into the clouds.⁴⁸

The bat confirms Dürer's intention to include the theme of vanity within an iconographically ambivalent context. With "Melencolia I" emblazoned on its wings, the bat may be seen as one of the saturnine "daemons" which descend and provide inspiration,⁴⁹ an interpretation supported by the placement of the title on the wings suggesting the transitory nature of melancholic inspiration, or "winged inspiration." Yet the bat can also be understood as an embodiment of evil, indicated both by its demonic morphology and by its emblematic sources. The inscription on a late-fifteenth-century representation of *Frau Welt* identifies the bat with the sin of pride,⁵⁰ which is certainly applicable to Dürer's conception of the "geometer's melancholy" because, as Augustine, Cusa, Brant, and others recognized, the geometer's despair arose from his *proud* assumption that he could grasp the cosmos mathematically.⁵¹ Horapollon specified the bat as a symbol of an unhealthy moral or mental condition causing incontinence.⁵² Although the first edition of Horapollon was printed only in 1517, Dürer certainly was familiar with it before that date since he helped illustrate Pirckheimer's edition, presented to Emperor Maximilian in 1514.⁵³ Later literature also relied on the image of the bat's blind flight at night and specified the cause of the bat's morbidity. Alciati interpreted the bat as a symbol of folly in general, but more specifically as philosophical blindness which explores the universe by inappropriate means.⁵⁴ Camerarius cited the bat as a symbol of vain explorations and aspirations.⁵⁵ Although Alciati's and Camerarius' emblem books appeared after Dürer had finished his engraving, their ideas correspond so closely to the context of *Melencolia* that it may be conjectured that the artist was aware of an earlier, unrecorded tradition similar in content. The notions of sterile investigations and the intellectual myopia of godless pursuits are precisely those which are repeatedly stressed by Brant in Chapter 66. Dürer's bat is Brant's purblind fool metamorphosed.

This conclusion does not predicate that the alternate interpretation of the bat as the vehicle for saturnine inspiration should be dismissed as invalid. Like the rainbow and ladder, the bat embodied a meaningful iconographic duality. Indeed, most of the engraving's imagery is characterized by this apparent inconsistency.⁵⁶ On one level, the tools and instruments indicate the peculiar gifts of Melancholy, while on a secondary level the same objects are charged with religious significance.

If the engraving is interpreted as a temporal sequence, as I have suggested, then the two levels of meaning correspond to the past and present conditions of Melancholy. Within the realm of her geometrically inspired endeavors, the tools and instruments held no meaning for Melancholy beyond their prescribed, utilitarian function. Plunged into the "dense gloom" of reason,⁵⁷ Melancholy did not recognize the clues to God's presence which surrounded her, but with the appearance of the rainbow and comet, a higher sphere is revealed to her and her world is transformed.⁵⁸ The celestial light unveils the

de Thiene, *Meteorologicorum* (Venice, 1491); but see also: Gregor Reisch, *Margarita Philosophica* (Freiburg, 1503), bk. 9, chap. 22; Themo, *In quator libros meteororum*, ed. G. Lokert (Paris, 1518), 177-204. Although the existence of lunar rainbows were denied by Pliny (*Historie of the World* [London, 1601], 28, II, LX), they were accepted as reality during the Renaissance: Aristotle, *Meteorologica*, ed. G. da Thiene (Venice, 1522), 372.

⁴⁸ Joachim Camerarius, *Elementa rhetoricae* (Basel, 1541), 138-139; quoted in Rupprich, *Nachlass*, 1: 319: "Ut autem indicaret, nihil non talibus ab ingeniis comprehendi solere, et quam eadem saepenumero in absurda defferrentur, ante illam scalas in nubes eduxit, per quarum gradus quadratum saxum veluti ascensionem moliri fecit." I am indebted to Robert Newman for his help with this passage. It was quoted by Wrampelmeyer (*Unge-druckte Schriften Philipp Melanchthons*, Beilage zum Jahresberichte des Kgl. Gymnasiums zu Clausthal [1911], 8, n. 62) and by Klibansky et al. (*Saturn*, 320, n. 121) as by Melanchthon.

⁴⁹ Horst, "Melencolia I," 417-419; Klibansky et al., *Saturn*, 320-323.

⁵⁰ Hoffmann, "Melencolia," 252: "Sertum pavonis, alas vespertilionis mundus habet stultus prebet calicem babilonis Corde lupi sordet ut draco sibi mordet."

⁵¹ Augustine, *Confessions*, bk. 5, chap. 3; Cusa, *De Visione Dei*, 9: 103; Brant, *Narrenschiff*; Adriano Castellesi, *De vera philosophia* (Cologne, 1540), 3: chaps. 12-13, fols. 16r-K5v. As a confirmation of Melancholy's pride, Dürer might have intended the dog (W. Hempel, *Übermuot Diu Alte . . . Der Superbia-Gedanke* [Bonn, 1970], 205) and the tower (Hoffmann, "Melencolia," 262-264) as symbols of pride.

⁵² Hori Apollinis Niliaci *Hieroglyphica hoc est de sacri Aegyptiorum literis Libelli duo de Graeco i Latinum sermo nem a Philippo Phasianino Bononiensi nunc primum translati* (1517), fol. 30r (bk. 2, chap. 51); cited by Klibansky et al., *Saturn*, 323.

⁵³ K. Giehlow, "Die Hieroglyphenkunde des Humanismus in der Allegorie der Renaissance," *Jahrbuch des Kunsthistorischen Sammlungen des Allerhöchsten Kaiserhauses*, 32 (1915): 170f.

⁵⁴ Andrea Alciati, *Emblemata* (Rovilium, 1551), 69-70:

Vespertilio
Assumpsisse suum volucris ex Meneide nomen,
Socraticum auctores Choerephoonta ferunt.
Fusca viro facies, & stridens vocula, tali
Hunc hominem potuit commaculare nota.

* * * * *
Vespere quae tantum volitat, quae lumine lusca est,
Quae cum alas gestet, caetera muris habet:
Adres diversae trahitur mala nomina primvm
Signat: quae latitant, iudiciumque timent.
Inde & philosophos, qui dum caelestia quaerunt,
Caligant oculis, falsaque sola vident.
Tandem & versutos, cum clam sectentur vtrumque,
Acquirunt neutra qui sibi parte fidem.

Cited by Rossmann, "Wert und Grenze," 136ff; and Günter Bandmann, *Melancholie und Musik* (Cologne, 1960), 88. For a similar passage, see E. Schön's woodcut of *Clean and Unclean Animals*, c.1534, in which the bat is described:

“Die Fledermaus fleugt bey der nacht
Also der gotlosz wirdt geacht
Der sein werck haimlich tückisch thut
Wann sie seind unreht und nit gut.”
(illus. in Geisberg, *Woodcut*, 1: 1139.)

⁵⁵J. Camerarius, *Symbolorum et Emblematum* (1596), n. 89; cited by Bandmann, *Melancholie*, 88.

⁵⁶The concept of *coincidorum oppositorum* was popular in philosophy and literature, but its application in the arts has been generally discounted. Recently, S. Adams (“The Anterotica of Petrus Haedus: A Fifteenth-century Model for the Interpretation of Symbolic Images,” *Renaissance and Reformation*, 14 [1978]: 111-126) has elucidated a late-fifteenth-century text which establishes the possibility of coinciding but divergent meanings within a single picture.

⁵⁷J. Colet, *Enarratio in Epistolam S. Pauli ad Romanos*, ed. and trans. J. J. Lupton (London, 1873), 163. The metaphor was so extensively used during the sixteenth century that even a summary would require a lengthy article. It is interesting to note that the image of the twilight world of reason was particularly popular with Luther; see for example Luther, *Werke* (Weimer, 1883), 1: 36 (Sermon on the feast day of St. Stephan, 1515) and 148; 10 (1910): pt. 1, p. 181f. (Christmas sermon of 1522); 56 (1938): 355.

⁵⁸J. P. Migne, *Patrologiae Latina*, 76: 868. St. Gregory described the effects of the rainbow as intended “to recall the hearts of believers”: “Qui arcus in nabe est in die pluviae, quia in dominica incarnatione, et in effusione praedicationis ostenditur, ut ad veniam corda credentium, e Domino parcente, revocentur.”

true nature of the saturnine bat, which flies in fear of the light, and simultaneously the light discloses the means of salvation through Christ. Thus the duality of the engraving’s symbols can be seen as an eloquent symbol itself, expressive of Melancholy’s profound Christian revelation. By planning disparate ideas within each object, Dürer has created a *coincidentia oppositorum* which conveys the transfigured vision of an enlightened Melancholy.

AUTHOR’S NOTE

The astute criticism of Professors Egon Verheyen, Konrad Hoffman, and Craig Harbison has clarified many of my ideas concerning Dürer’s famous *Vexierbild*.