An Uncanny Melancholia: The Frame, the Gaze, and the Representation of Melancholia in Albrecht Dürer’s Engraving Melencolia I

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Abstract
Albrecht Dürer’s engraving Melencolia I gives its viewers a rare glimpse into the Medieval and Renaissance “view” (psychological and aesthetic) of melancholia. Nevertheless the frame, which literally draws a line between the “real world” and the engraving, is unable to hold firm due to the uncanny, penetrating gaze of Melencolia, the winged female melancholic figure. Hers are not the downcast eyes formerly attributed to the melancholic or child of Saturn; she gazes outward beyond the frame, staring into that unknowable outer space. This paper argues that Dürer’s Melencolia I offers more than a medical, psychological or philosophical “moral” (by characterizing the melancholic as a sick or insane person, or a person worn down by thinking about geometry and architecture). Rather, it presents a melancholic Faustian figure with an age-old craving for forbidden or “uncanny” knowledge. Thus the primary focus here is on the uncanny nature of melancholia in Dürer’s Melencolia I; also explored will be the question of “the melancholy Other” and “the ecstasy of the signs of melancholia.”

Keywords
Albrecht Dürer, Melencolia I, the uncanny, melancholia, gaze, representation

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Fig. 1
Melencolia I (1514)
by Albrecht Dürer
Engraving (241 X 192 mm)
Introduction

What then is this fascination which now operates through the images of madness? First, man finds in these fantastic figures one of the secrets and one of vocations of his nature... At the opposite pole to this nature of shadows, madness fascinates because it is knowledge. It is knowledge, first, because all these absurd figures are in reality elements of a difficult, hermetic, esoteric learning. —Michel Foucault,

_Madness and Civilization_

Like his *Apocalypse* (1498) and *St. Jerome in his Study* (1514), Albrecht Dürer’s engraving *Melencolia I* (1514) (Fig. 1) has been universally deemed a great work. Haunting the imagination of Western “man,” it belongs to those works of art that have exerted a profound influence on the imagination of posterity. As Erwin Panofsky remarks in his authoritative study, *The Life and Art of Albrecht Dürer*,

The influence of Dürer’s *Melencolia I*—the first representation in which the concept of melancholy was transplanted from the plane of scientific and pseudo-scientific folklore to the level of art—extended all over the European continent and lasted for more than three centuries. (170)

In their classic study of melancholia and Dürer’s *Melencolia I, Saturn and Melancholy: Studies in the History of Natural Philosophy*, Klibansky, Panofsky,

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2 In Chapter One (“Stultifera Navis”) of *Madness and Civilization*, Michel Foucault poses the question of how “madness” is defined and offers his observations (21).
3 In *The Gendering of Melancholia: Feminism, Psychoanalysis, and the Symbolism of Loss in Renaissance Literature*, Juliana Schiesari explores the gendering of melancholia in Renaissance writing by showing “how male fantasy is implicated within the rise of melancholia as a specific cultural as well as pathological phenomenon” (12) and arguing that the “grievous” suffering of the melancholic artist is a gendered one, an eroticized nostalgia that recuperates loss in the name of an imaginary unity and that also gives to the melancholic man (the _homo melancholicus_) a privileged position within literary, philosophical, and artistic canons. This implicitly empowered display of loss and disempowerment converts the personal sorrow of some men into the cultural prestige of inspired artistry and genius. (11-12)
and Saxl also emphasize the engraving’s pioneering status in the pictorial tradition of melancholia:

nearly all portraits of melancholy in the strict sense, as well as many pictures on similar themes, right down to the middle of the nineteenth century, owe a debt to the model set by Dürer, either direct, through conscious imitation, or by virtue of the unconscious pressure that is called “tradition.” (374-75)\(^4\)

In the meantime, Melencolia I, as David Hotchkiss Price observes, “has remained to this day, despite the mountainous heap of scholarship, exceptionally enigmatic. Thus, it provokes speculation” (83).\(^5\) Having called the work “the picture of pictures (Das Bild der Bilder)” (qtd. in Bartrum 188), Peter-Klaus Schuster even has to write a two-volume Melencolia I: Dürers Denkbild in order to survey and engage with all of the pre-existing literature on the work.

This particular work allows its viewers to visualize a psychosomatic state called “melancholia” as something contained within the frame of a work of art, and thereby enables us to catch a glimpse of the theories and aesthetics of melancholia at work during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Nevertheless this frame, which literally draws a line between the “real world” and the virtuality of a (nearly two-dimensional) engraving, is unable to “hold” because of the uncanny and penetrating gaze of Melencolia, the winged female melancholic in the engraving.\(^6\) Hers are not the downcast eyes formerly attributed to the melancholic or the child of Saturn; her gaze is directed towards a space outside of the frame and she stares into the realm of the unknown. As Klibansky, Panofsky, and Saxl write in Saturn and Melancholy, “Her gaze owes its uncanny expressiveness not only to the upward look, the unfocussed eyes typical of hard thinking, but also, above all, to the fact that the whites of her eyes, particularly prominent in such a gaze, shine forth from a dark face” (319).

\(^4\) For their rich ideas, and their perceptive insights into and analyses of Melencolia I, I am deeply indebted to Klibansky, Panofsky, and Saxl’s authoritative Saturn and Melancholy: Studies in the History of Natural Philosophy, and to Erwin Panofsky’s The Life and Art of Albrecht Dürer.

\(^5\) In Albrecht Dürer and His Legacy: The Graphic Work of a Renaissance Artist, Giulia Bartrum also considers Dürer’s Melencolia I “the most written-about image in the history of art” (188). In a similar fashion, Francis Russell, in The World of Dürer 1471-1528, thinks that the work “has had more interpreters and interpretations than almost any other work in the history of German art” (11).

\(^6\) Hereafter, the winged woman in Dürer’s Melencolia I will be called by the name “Melencolia” as indicated in the title of the engraving.
Unlike Sebastian Brant’s *Das Narrenschiff (The Ship of Fools)* in 1494, in which the image of a ship becomes a standard means for separating the “insane” outsider from the world of the “sane” observer, *Melencolia I* shows us that the world of the insane cannot always be contained or confined. The disease called melancholia will always fill and even break beyond the frame, for this too is the uncanny and unyielding gaze of Melencolia, through which the world of the insane or the unknown may be interrogated.

In this paper, I argue that Dürer’s *Melencolia I* offers us more than a medical portrait of the melancholic as a sick or insane person, and more than a trivial representation of objects related to geometry and carpentry (compass, ladder, sphere, hammer, nails, ruler, moulding plane, etc.), whose purpose is to show a melancholic worn down by hard thinking about the *ars geometrica*. Rather, it presents a melancholic Faustian figure with the old craving for forbidden knowledge. That is, I will show that the engraving in the first place demonstrates the radical alterity or otherness of this psychosomatic state through its use of icons, images, symbolic motifs, indeed of “art” in general. This paper, then, is primarily concerned not with the engraving’s representation of melancholia *per se* but with an exploration of the uncanniness of this represented melancholia.

Although in *Melencolia I* Dürer works within the tradition of Medieval and Renaissance humoral pathology (“melancholia” means “black bile”) and astrological speculations he is able to shape a new aesthetics, one which evokes a

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7 In 1494, humanist Sebastian Brant published *Das Narrenschiff* or *The Ship of Fools*, a long, moralistic poem written in the German language. In *Das Narrenschiff*, Brant describes 110 assorted follies and vices, each undertaken by a different fool, devoting chapters to such offenses as Arrogance toward God, Marrying for Money, and Noise in Church. Some of the chapters are united by the common theme of a ship which will bear the assembled fools to Narragonia, the island of fools. Brant’s message was enhanced by a set of stunning woodcuts, most of them believed to have been carved by a young Albrecht Dürer during his short stay in Basel in 1494. In *Madness and Civilization*, Michel Foucault gives us a telling and poetic account of the image of “the Ship of Fools”:

Water and navigation certainly play this role. Confined on the ship, from which there is no escape, the madman is delivered to the river with its thousand arms, the sea with its thousand roads, to that great uncertainty external to everything. He is a prisoner in the midst of what is freest, the openest of routes: bound fast at the infinite crossroads. He is the passenger *par excellence*: that is the prisoner of the passage. (11)

8 As Mrs. Charles Heaton, Dürer’s first biographer in English, writes, it has usually been thought that Dürer meant this print [*Melencolia I*] to typify the insufficiency of human knowledge to attain heavenly wisdom, or to penetrate the secrets of nature. The old craving for the forbidden fruit is strong in her breast. (206)
melancholy aura in the minds of observers by playing upon certain expectations concerning disease and its iconology. In this engraving the winged lady Melencolia rests her head on her left hand in a pensive gesture, holding a compass in her right hand. While her purse rests at the edge of her skirt, a bunch of keys hangs from the belt at her waist. She is surrounded by a Putto (cherub) sitting astride an upturned millstone, a bat holding up the title “Melencolia I” against the background of rainbow and comet, a sleeping dog, a sphere, a giant polyhedron, a ladder, and scattered woodworking tools for architectural measuring and building (a melting pot, a saw, a molding plane, a hammer, a ruler, an awl, nails, a pair of pincers, etc.). On the wall of the building hang a bell, an hourglass, scales, and a magic square of 16 numerals (with each line adding up to 34). The visual environment in which Melencolia is portrayed is unlike that of other works by Dürer himself; it is in itself the expression of an attempt to re-fashion or re-present melancholia. The resulting image of this “mood” or “state of mind” is therefore the sum of all the images used to describe Melencolia and her world. It is certainly not the “real” or “symptomatic” melancholia what Melencolia I shows us but melancholia metaphorized, theorized, and aestheticized.

Agreeing with Mitchell’s position that knowledge is a social product, I will first tease out the theories (or ideologies) of melancholia and its aesthetics (or modes of representation) in Dürer’s Melencolia I, in order to give the engraving a firm grounding in theoretical and pictorial tradition. I will then explore the notion of an “uncanny melancholia” along with that of “the melancholy Other” and “the ecstasy of the signs of melancholia.” Dürer’s Melencolia I achieves its uncanniness, in fact, not only by the precisely rendered arrangement of the allegorical objects of melancholia and the aesthetic manifestation of the concept of a pathological state, but also by the (“alchemical”) transmutation of idea-laden images—which were taken from manifold traditions of thought, in particular that of the ars geometrica and the Aristotelian-Ficinian theory of melancholy—into something strange and uncanny. For by organizing these idea-laden images in a new way and within the framework of “art,” Dürer presents to us a “diseased reality” not merely as a mode of representation but as an ecstasy of images and signs, producing surplus meanings which have not yet been fully grasped and continued to resist any authoritative interpretation.

9 In his Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology, W. J. T. Mitchell asserts that he is “not arguing for some facile relativism that abandons ‘standards of truth’ or the possibility of valid knowledge” (38). Rather, he supports “a hard, rigorous relativism that regards knowledge as a social product, a matter of dialogue between different versions of the world, including different languages, ideologies, and modes of representation” (38).
Theories of Melancholia

For the Renaissance the potency of the notion of melancholy has been partly explained as the result of a blending of two traditions: the Hippocratic view, according to which melancholy is an unpleasant disease caused by the overabundance or deterioration of a humor, and the (pseudo-) Aristotelian tradition of *Problems*, according to which melancholy is a necessary condition of genius. Particularly in Ficino and Agrippa of Nettesheim, whose interpretations became the most influential statements of this blend, ideas of melancholic genius are in turn supported by the Platonic notion of the poet working in divine rapture.10

Winfried Schleiner, *Melancholy, Genius, and Utopia in the Renaissance*

Originally a Latin translation of a Greek word meaning black bile or *atra bilis*, melancholia was the object of medical study long before it became the subject of works of art. In the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance, the illness melancholia was still viewed as the result of an imbalance of the humors and black bile was identified as that mythical fluid (“humor”) which dominated the melancholic.11 As Foucault writes in *Madness and Civilization*, “For a long time—until the beginning of the seventeenth century—the discussion of melancholia remained fixed within the tradition of the four humors and their essential qualities” (119). However, Dürer, when representing melancholia in the Renaissance, was not only influenced by the older Hippocratic theories of the humors; he also took the new and emerging theories of melancholia into consideration. All these theories shared a common concern: the close connection between melancholia and genius. In *Melancholy, Genius, and Utopia in the Renaissance*, Winfried Schleiner traces the history of melancholia and gives us a detailed account of the relationship between melancholia and genius in the Renaissance, as seen in the above-quoted passage.

10 Winfried Schleiner, in his *Melancholy, Genius, and Utopia in the Renaissance*, gives us a perceptive account of the notion of melancholia in the Renaissance (335).

11 Dürer studied and illustrated the widespread theory of the “four humors” in several of his works. For example, in *Adam and Eve* (1504), the animals in the Garden of Eden symbolize the four temperaments: the bull is phlegmatic, the stag melancholic, the rabbit sanguine, and the cat, ready to pounce on the mouse, is choleric.
It is clear that Dürer, when creating *Melencolia I* in 1514, was under the sway of different strands of thought. He was influenced not only by Greek philosophers like Plato and Aristotle but also by such contemporaries as Marsilio Ficino and Agrippa of Nettesheim. The ideas of these thinkers cross-fertilized each other and reinforced the notions of “divine melancholia” and “melancholic genius.” While Plato’s influence was mainly based on his concept of divine madness, which characterized a genius as someone inspired by a greater-than-human spirit, Aristotle believed that melancholia was a condition of “greatness” and thought great poets, statesmen, and philosophers were all melancholics. When Ficino came on the scene, he deftly fused the thinking of Plato and Aristotle. Interested in “divinely-given” virtues, Ficino is often considered a Renaissance Platonist or a neo-Platonist humanist, one who had translated all of Plato’s dialogues by 1468. Ficino’s *Three Books on Life*, the first Renaissance work to reinforce the link between melancholia and genius, has exerted a reverberating influence on all later writing on melancholia. The famous question—“Why is it that all men who have become outstanding in philosophy, statesmanship, poetry or the arts are melancholic, and some to such an extent that they are infected by the disease arising from black bile, as the story of Heracles among the heroes tells?” (155)—from *Problems XXX, 1*, attributed to Aristotle, is echoed in Ficino’s book.

Thus espousing both Plato’s and Aristotle’s ideas, Ficino’s “divine melancholia,” a notion utterly foreign to the Middle Ages, was exalted and crowned with the halo of the sublime, and thus placed in opposition to mere earthly “sickness” and “insanity.” “In the main,” wrote Ficino,

three kinds of causes make learned people melancholics. The first is celestial, the second natural, and the third human. . . . This Aristotle confirns in his book of *Problems*, saying that all those who are renowned in whatever faculty you please have been melancholics. In

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12 Aristotle’s *Problems XXX.1* has long been recognized as the most important source text for the linkage between melancholy and genius as well as between melancholy and aesthetic creation. The black bile, whose excess was deemed responsible for the melancholic temperament, was understood by Aristotle as an unfortunate malady that invariably affected “all” great men (poets, statesmen, and philosophers): “Why is it that all men who have become outstanding in philosophy, statesmanship, poetry or the arts are melancholic, and some to such an extent that they are infected by the disease arising from black bile, as the story of Heracles among the heroes tells?” (155). Among other great men mentioned by Aristotle were Ajax, Bellerophon, Empedocles, Plato, and Socrates.

13 As Günter Grass points out, “Ficino stuck to Aristotle, probably the first thinker to recognize and justify melancholy as a source of outstanding artistic and scientific achievement” (65).
this he has confirmed that Platonic notion expressed in the book *De Scientia*, that most intelligent people are prone to excitability and madness. (89, 91)

Going beyond Plato and Aristotle, Ficino then reframed the entire “problem” by adding “the accepted astrological link between Saturn and the contemplative and intellectual life, to advance the idea of genius as the compensating virtue of states of melancholy” (Radden 88). 14 Under the influence of Ficino, the notion of melancholia became multivalent and multifaceted in connotation. It further empowered and privileged the melancholic elite, whereas for the common people it was still an undesirable physical, mental and/or emotional disease, weighted down by an excess of black bile.

What Ficino incorporated and refashioned in effect laid the groundwork and set the stage for Dürer’s *Melencolia I*. In *The Art of Albrecht Dürer*, Heinrich Wölfflin suggests that *Melencolia I* “is based on the writings of Marsilio Ficino, who said that all men who excel in the arts are melancholics” (247). Klibansky, Panofsky, and Saxl also hold that “[t]he foundation out of which Dürer’s idea arose was of course laid by Ficino’s doctrine” (345). Günter Grass in his essay, “On Stasis in Progress: Variations on Albrecht Dürer’s Engraving *Melencolia I*,” further informs us of the occasion on which Dürer was introduced to Ficino’s work: “And so it was with Dürer, who, in the course of his travels in Italy, was made acquainted by his friend Prickheimer with Ficino’s principal work, *De vita triplica*, a book about Saturnian man” (65). In addition, German physician and occultist Agrippa of Nettesheim’s *De occulta philosophia*, written around 1510, has long been recognized as one of the most important source texts for the idea of a link between melancholia and genius. This book “was circulating within German humanist circles a few years before the date of the engraving [*Melencolia I*]” (Panofsky 168-69). Agrippa of Nettesheim’s impact on *Melencolia I* will be discussed in detail later.

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14 Ficino developed melancholia’s link to astrology, especially to the planet Saturn: Therefore black bile continually incites the soul both to collect itself together into one and to dwell on itself and to contemplate itself. And being analogous to the world’s center, it forces the investigation to the center of individual subjects, and it carries one to the contemplation of whatever is highest, since, indeed, it is most congruent with Saturn, the highest of planets. Contemplation itself, in its turn by a continual recollection and compression, as it were, brings on a nature similar to black bile. (90)
In *Melencolia I*, then, Dürer is expressing the Renaissance humanist belief that the highest form of intellectual and/or aesthetic activity is found in the melancholic temperament. His Lady Melencolia has thus become the embodiment of the “Hippocratic-Platonic-Aristotelian-Agrippaian-Ficinian melancholia” and as such the personification of his own personal melancholia. Dürer often thought that he was himself a man of melancholy temperament, one under the sway of Saturn. When feeling ill, he also believed that he suffered from an uncontrolled surfeit of black bile in his body. As Panofsky perceptively notes,

it has always been felt that Dürer’s engraving has an eminently personal connotation. It has been suggested that its somber mood might reflect Dürer’s sorrow at the death of his mother who had passed away on May 17, 1514. . . . In fact the *Melencolia I* reflects the whole of Dürer’s personality rather than a single experience, however moving. (171)

In *Melencolia I* we witness what is in effect a chimera of the theory of melancholia. The prototypical Hippocratic theory of humorous melancholia (“humor melancholicus”), coupled with the Platonic theory of divine melancholia or madness (“furor melancholicus”), and the Aristotelian theory of genial melancholia, was crowned with the Ficinian theory of Saturnian melancholia. Therefore melancholy was portrayed by Dürer as a true genius troubled by extreme melancholia. It should not surprise us, after all, that important critics like Klibansky, Panofsky, and Saxl have called Melencolia a genius: “[T]he notion of a ‘Melencolia’ in whose nature the intellectual distinction of a liberal art was combined with a human soul’s capacity for suffering could only take the form of a winged genius” (318). Several pages later they ask: “Is not Melencolia herself the presiding genius of art?” (341). In *Melencolia I*, then, an artistic crisis of a highly intellectual nature is exquisitely revealed by the very image of Lady Melencolia, a woman who is troubled by both the inertness of (her) physical/pathological existence and the ceaseless energetic probing of her human soul/nature—perhaps by the confusing, disorienting opposition of these two states.

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15 Panofsky in *The Life and Art of Albrecht Dürer* also suggests that *Melencolia I* shows “the life of the secular genius in the rational and imaginative worlds of science and art” (151). Five pages later he ties Melencolia to genius again: “The state of mind of this unhappy genius is reflected by her paraphernalia whose bewildering disorder offers, again, an eloquent contrast to the neat and efficient arrangement of St. Jerome’s belongings” (156).
The Aesthetics of Melancholia

Dürer’s *Melencolia I* is considered one of the greatest artistic portrayals of melancholia. It occupies a pivotal position in the so-called “great era of melancholia,” which ranges, in the words of Schiesari,

from the fifteen-century philosophy of Marsilio Ficino, through the etchings of Dürer and the poetry of Tasso, culminating in the seventeenth century with the tragic character of Hamlet and the publication in 1621 of Robert Burton’s monumental and encyclopedic *Anatomy of Melancholy*. (2)

But Dürer’s success in presenting the idea of melancholia aesthetically required more than an encompassing knowledge of pre-existing theories of melancholia; it also required judgment and taste, the ability to appreciate and synthesize different pictorial and aesthetic traditions. Being a melancholic himself, Dürer understood that melancholia, which often turned emotional forces against one another (or turned emotion against itself), needed an aesthetic basis or ground in which the melancholic might express himself. Embedded in and essential to Dürer’s *Melencolia I* are therefore also the many pictorial and aesthetic traditions that Dürer employed during the course of his creation; these traditions form the frame of reference for Dürer’s aesthetic representation of his melancholy mood, as they incorporate the aesthetic perceptions and representations of disease, imagination, thinking, feeling, imagining, memory, and madness of his time. As Walter Benjamin argues in *Illuminations*, “The uniqueness of a work of art is inseparable from its being embedded in the fabric of tradition” (223).

For example, Dürer’s *Melencolia I* echoes the image of the pensive thinker depicted in the poem *Ich saz uf eime steine* (*I sat down on a stone*) by the medieval German poet Walther von der Vogelweide (1170-1230): the engraving also captures the idea of melancholia by using the classical pose of a pensive figure to typify a
“popular” illness. This allegorical image of a pensive Melencolia fused at least five pictorial traditions: that of a saint’s mourning of Christ’s crucifixion and death, that of the philosophical or religious contemplation of a pensive thinker, that of the demonically “possessed,” that of science and geometry,\(^\text{16}\) and that of the “diseased” melancholic. Besides the religious mourning-motif, the pictorial representations of melancholia prior to Dürer’s image “had chiefly been found in treatises on medicine, where it was discussed as a disease, and in broad-sheet and almanacs, where it was considered to be the most undesirable of the four ‘temperaments’ to affect human nature” (Bartrum 188). In the Renaissance, an increasing emphasis on the individual, which accompanied the secular, proto-scientific concern with “human nature,” contributed to the increasing number of portrayals of the melancholic in art and literature. Aesthetically speaking, the representation of melancholia in *Melencolia I* pointed toward the need of Renaissance society to fashion, identify, and even glorify the melancholic. As Panofsky points out,

> This humanistic glorification of melancholy entailed, and even implied, another phenomenon: the humanistic ennoblement of the planet Saturn. . . . It is this new and most humanistic conception of the melancholy and ‘Saturnine’ genius that found expression in Dürer’s engraving. (166, 167)

In *Melencolia I*, circumscribing the image of the winged Melencolia and filling every corner of the picture are objects (images) of geometry. Are these images of geometrical objects meant as “symptomatic” expressions of melancholia? (That is, inasmuch as being “too immersed” in geometry can induce melancholia.) Or is the melancholia represented in Dürer’s *Melencolia I* a “geometrical melancholia” or “melancholia artificialis”? (Inasmuch as melancholia is transcendent intellectual-divine or Platonic malady.) Clearly the images are geometrical in both of these senses. According to Klibansky, Panofsky, and Saxl, “Geometry was the science *par excellence* for Dürer, as for his age” (339), and “When Dürer

\(^{16}\) “In Dürer’s engraving,” argues Panofsky, the whole conception of melancholy is thus shifted to a plane wholly beyond the compass of his predecessors. Instead of a sluggish housewife we have a superior being—superior, not only by virtue of her wings but also by virtue of her intelligence and imagination—surrounded by the tools and symbols of creative endeavor and scientific research. And here we perceive a second and more delicate thread of tradition which went into the fabric of Dürer’s composition. (160)
fused the portrait of an ‘ars geometrica’ with that of a ‘homo melancholicus’—an act equal to the merging of two different worlds of thought and feeling—he endowed the one with a soul, the other with a mind” (317). It was especially through the connection with Saturn that melancholia was linked to geometry and its arts. As Panofsky notes, “Saturn, as god of the earth, was associated with work in stone and wood” (167). He further tells us:

One or two of those fifteenth century manuscripts add the explanation: “Saturn the planet sends us the spirits that teach us geometry”; and in a Calendar published in Nuremberg exactly one year after the *Melencolia I* we read the phrase: “Saturns . . . bezaichet aus den Künsten die Geometrei” (“Of the arts, Saturn denotes geometry.”) (168)

Panofsky explains the association between melancholia and geometry with meticulous proofs and arguments:

Melancholics, then, are gifted for geometry . . . because they think in terms of concrete mental images and not of abstract philosophical concepts; conversely, people gifted for geometry are bound to be melancholy because the consciousness of a sphere beyond their reach makes them suffer from a feeling of spiritual confinement and insufficiency. (168)

In Dürer’s *Melencolia I*, in the very temple of architecture and geometry “Veiled Melencolia” has “her sovran shrine.” Indeed in the engraving it is not just the posture of the pensive Melencolia that portrays an iconic melancholia but also the “objects” of geometry and architecture that capture the aura of melancholia. Also linked with geometry are subjects like meteorology, astronomy, alchemy, and

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17 Günter Grass also endorses Klibansky, Panofsky, and Saxl’s observation: “humanist Melencolia was at the same time Geometria” (63).
18 Here I parody the lines in John Keats’ *Ode on Melancholy*: “Ay, in the very temple of Delight / Veil’d Melancholy has her sovran shrine” (21-22). For Keats, melancholia is everywhere, lurking under the façade of Delight and Beauty. Keats was influenced by Robert Burton’s *Anatomy of Melancholy* and deemed melancholia a necessary evil, at once a curse and a blessing, a feeling and an experience, to be endured and indulged at the same time.
all the technical arts.\textsuperscript{19} Though we may detect an inherent tension between the \textit{ars geometrica} and melancholia, between a new (proto-high-tech) science geared to conquer the world and the anxiety of the souls living in a world of uncertainty, we may also sense that Dürer’s engraving is the result of an exquisite synthesis of certain allegorical images of melancholia, geometry, and the arts. Through this synthesis Dürer’s \textit{Melencolia I} achieves at once the intellectualization of melancholia and the humanization of geometry (Panofsky 162): hence Melencolia becomes the focal figure of an uncanny ambivalence. Of all the precursory works, \textit{Typus Geometriae}—a woodcut from Gregor Reisch’s \textit{Margarita Philosophica}, 1504 (Fig. 2 in Appendix)—is identified by Klibansky, Panofsky, and Saxl as the one which most clearly anticipates Dürer’s engraving. It already includes almost all the major symbols, images, and features we can find in Dürer’s \textit{Melencolia I}. Here, according to Klibansky,

Geometria, once again a real personification, sits at a table full of planimetric and stereometric figures, her hands busied with compasses and a sphere . . . and in an intellectual sense the activities shown here are “subordinated” to “Geometria” . . . . On the ground floor of the house under construction . . . the ceiling is being vaulted; hammer, ruler and moulding plane are lying on the ground . . . . (312-13)\textsuperscript{20}

In \textit{Melencolia I}, to depict “melancholy” Dürer deliberately took up the polarity of feeling and intellect, irrationality and geometry, the emotional and of the

\textsuperscript{19} As Panofsky suggests, “Not only meteorology and astronomy . . . but also all the technical arts are thus interpreted as applications of geometry; and to this Dürer’s conception conforms” (161).

\textsuperscript{20} Panofsky, in his \textit{The Life and Art of Albrecht Dürer}, also draws a comparison and discusses the link between \textit{Typus Geometriae} and \textit{Melencolia I} in great detail: \textit{[Typus Geometriae]} synthesizes, so to speak, the type of the Liberal Arts with that of the Technical, for it is intended to show that almost all the crafts and many branches of “natural philosophy” depend on geometrical operations. Geometry, depicted as a richly attired lady, is engaged in measuring a sphere with her compass. She sits at a table on which are drafting instruments, an inkpot and models of stereo-metrical bodies . . . and to this Dürer’s conception conforms. . . . In fact, the whole array of implements in the engraving can be summed up under the heading \textit{[Typus Geometriae]}, the book, the inkpot and the compass standing for pure geometry; the magic square, the hourglass with the bell, and the pair of scales for measurement in space and time . . . ; the technical instruments for applied geometry; and the truncated rhomboid for descriptive geometry, particularly stereography and perspective. (161)
scientific, and then used this paradox to represent the figure of Melencolia, who herself is simultaneously “falling” (under the power of black bile) and “rising” (as an inquiring spirit). Epitomizing existing paradigms of melancholia aesthetically, however, Dürer’s Melencolia catches the paradoxical condition of an intellectually and spiritually probing human soul trapped in a “diseased” body, in the inert pathological condition of human suffering. Yet now I want to pursue further the “spiritual” side of this Melencolia, whose uncanny gaze reveals how a “homo melancholicus” is capable of a willful exertion of (her or his) personal will upon forces of the unknown that have escaped both divine and human schemes.

The Uncanny Gaze

But hail thou Goddess sage and holy,
Hail divinest Melancholy,
Whose saintly visage is too bright
To hit the sense of human sight,
And therefore to our weaker view
O’erlaid with black, staid wisdom’s hue.

Of all the literary works on melancholia, John Milton’s *Il Penseroso* (1632) best captures the uncanny spirit of Dürer’s *Melencolia I*. In *Il Penseroso*, meaning a brooding person or melancholy personality, Milton celebrates not just the pensive melancholic but also “divine Melancholy” herself, the personification of Aristotelian melancholia, who is saintly and can assist the poet in attaining the highest artistic achievement. Resembling the image of Kristeva’s “black sun” which is at once dark and radiant,21 the “bright visage” of Dürer’s Melencolia is overlaid with “black hues”: again, as in Milton’s poem, it may be the “gap” between what human’s dream of (the divine-human) and their actual earthly-human state (or more

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21 In *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, Kristeva calls up the unsettling image of the “black sun” (“soleil noir”) from Gérard de Nerval’s sonnet, “El Desdichado” (1853) to manifest the melancholy state which is at once dark and radiant. The importance of Kristeva’s reading of Nerval’s “El Desdichado” cannot be emphasized enough because, as Juliana Schiesari notes, it “is underscored by her taking the title of her book from the final words of the poem’s first quatrain: ‘the black sun of melancholy’ [*le soleil noir de la mélancholie*]” (86). In *Black Sun*, Kristeva’s question—“Where does the black sun come from” (*BS* 3)—inquires about the origins of melancholia and ushers in the image of “black sun” as the prototype of those dynamic encounters where darkness and brightness crisscross and transform into one another, where feelings and meanings coalesce in paradoxical profundity, where subdued melancholia and glaring words join to form poetic language, where matricide and suicide struggle to end the unbearable “lightness” of black bile.
simply, perhaps, the mind-body gap). Yet the surrounding darkness sets off the brightness of Melenolia’s white eyes in the engraving: hence we are struck by her unnerving, uncanny gaze, which is above all what sets Dürer’s melancholic apart from other mad images.

Melenolia’s sullen and shadowy face in fact reminds us of the role of “the face” in the thinking of Emmanuel Levinas. Already in *Time and the Other* (1947) Levinas mentioned “the encounter with a face which at once gives and conceals the other” (78-79). He later discussed at length the notion of “the face” in *Totality and Infinity* (1961). As Levinas writes, “the face of the Other at each moment destroys and overflows the plastic image it leaves me . . .” (50-51). Likewise, when we encounter the face of Melencolia, we encounter the face of the melancholy Other as the unknown part of ourselves, that which is so close we cannot “see” it, which overflows and is irreducible to perception and representation. By allowing his Melencolia to appear with shaded face and “an almost ghostly stare” (Klibansky et al. 290), Dürer has invested the traditional image of melancholia with a ghostly sense of self-displacement or self-difference. Deviating from the norm of melancholic figures with their eyes cast down, Melencolia’s uncanny gaze shines forth from her darkened face, directed upward at something or at nothing, out of the frame, emitting something uncompromising, emanating something ghostly, unknown, unfamiliar, uncanny or unhomely. This gaze, by manifesting alterity, exceeds the totality of meaning. It means something but what it means is not a message or signified that precedes it. It is accessible only as enigma rather than as fixed meaning.

In his seminal article “The Uncanny” (“Das Unheimlich”), Sigmund Freud “feels impelled to investigate the subject of aesthetics” and his particular “province”—the subject of “the uncanny”—“proves to be a remote one” which “has been often neglected in the specialist literature of aesthetics” (*SE* 17: 219). Concerned with “the theory of the qualities of feeling” (*SE* 17: 219), the uncanny, for Freud, lies outside the domain of psychoanalysis and has been largely neglected in the field of aesthetics. Freud first offers a tentative definition of the term: “It is undoubtedly related to what is frightening—to what arouses dread and horror; equally certainly, too, the word is not always used in a clearly definable sense, so that it tends to coincide with what excites fear in general” (*SE* 17: 219). Then his etymological research shows that the notion “uncanny” (*unheimlich*) always bears double meaning: it is at once *heimlich*, the “at-home,” familiar, friendly, intimate

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22 The French word for face is *visage*, which is etymologically related to vision.
and comfortable, and unheimlich, “not-at-home,” unfamiliar, alien, unknown, and uncomfortable.

Martin Heidegger also speaks of the “uncanniness” (Unheimlichkeit) or double-nature of our being-in-the-world. For Heidegger, human being is a Dasein (Here-being) and a being-in-the-world as “being-toward-death”; as such it is “ecstatic” or “ek-static” (standing-outside-of-itself in time) and in this way also uncanny, unhomely, not-at-home. Thus in Being and Time Heidegger says that “in anxiety one feels ‘uncanny’ . . . That kind of Being-in-the-world which is tranquilized and familiar . . . is a mode of Dasein’s uncanniness, not the reverse . . . [T]he not-at-home must be conceived as the more primordial phenomenon” (233-34). And in his essay “The Origin of the Work of Art,” Heidegger also remarks that “At bottom, the ordinary is not ordinary; it is extra-ordinary, uncanny” (54). To appropriate Heidegger’s words for our purpose, we may say that in melancholia one feels ek-static, outside-of-oneself, and in this sense “uncanny.” Hence Melencolia’s uncanny gaze is directed at a peculiar double or dopplegänger of the ordinary, or perhaps (following Heidegger’s reversal or inversion) of the not-ordinary, of the familiar (unfamiliar). The gaze, in penetrating beyond the frame of the engraving and thus beyond the merely-human world, the knowable human world, also penetrates back inside of it, of her, of ourselves to seek out there our own strangeness, our otherness-to-ourselves, the unhomely at the heart of our house and home.

With this uncanny gaze, in other words, the center or focal point of the engraving is re-oriented outside of the frame. Thus melancholia, the dis-ease and central motif of the engraving, is dis-oriented, having its seat elsewhere, at once within the frame and outside it. Melencolia’s uncanny gaze exemplifies the condition of melancholia as an “open wound” and a schizophrenic existence, one that is unable to “see clearly what it is that has been lost,” that suffers from the tension between the unconscious and the conscious or between innenwelt and umwelt (inner and outer world), and so is ambiguously locked in a polarized discord between the ego and a love-object that it seeks to dominate. The uncanny gaze,

23 Freud, in “Mourning and Melancholia” (1917), explains the phenomenon of melancholia: “The complex of melancholia behaves like an open wound, drawing to itself cathetic energies—which in the transference neuroses have been called ‘anticathexes’—from all directions, and emptying the ego until it is totally impoverished” (SE 14: 253).
24 In “Mourning and Melancholia,” Freud comments on the melancholic: “One cannot see clearly what it is that has been lost” (SE 14: 245).
25 Freud in “Mourning and Melancholia” makes a comparison between the effects of mourning and melancholia. For him, the cause of mourning is always external, resulting from the loss of a
being a symptom of the melancholic’s self-doubt, is a stasis in ek-stasis, a physical image which points to something metaphysical. Melencolia’s uncanny gaze points to a “remote province” (in Freud’s words) within/without the unity of the engraving, and creates a rupture which dis-places melancholia itself: here the unknown enters into the work as that which cannot be directly represented, as the essentially melancholy condition of our being. This gaze is ambiguous, ambivalent; it signals that the melancholic is a visionary though sunk in depression, prophetic though confined within her/his own limits.

While eerily reminding us of something déjá-vu, the presence of Melencolia is “the déjá-là of death.”26 Melencolia’s uncanny gaze, staring at the unknown, is a gesture that confronts death face-to-face and thus becomes death’s “vanquished presence” (Foucault 16), disturbing any straightforward sense of what is inside and what is outside, what is presence and what is absence, what is life and what is death. Estranging all frames, borders, and representations, what is shown in Melencolia’s gaze is very far from the representation of a purely melancholy temper. It is rather the endless meditation of an intellect—the restless curiosity of a scientist, the deep pondering of a philosopher. Entering the experience of liminality, it directs itself toward the threshold which opens onto an expanded and indeterminate zone, perhaps awaiting inspiration and perhaps initiation.27

The uncanny gaze of Melencolia is a “detail” of the picture that attracts and affects us. This detail is not merely a code which carries an emblematic significance and needs to be decoded. Rather, this detail, as Roland Barthes claims in Camera...
Lucida, is the “punctum,” an element able to break or punctuate the “studium” or average affect derived from photographs. Barthes writes:

Very often the Punctum is a “detail,” i.e., a partial object (43). A detail overwhelms the entirety of my reading; it is an intense mutation of my interest, a fulguration. By the mark of something, the photograph is no longer “anything whatever.” This something has triggered me, has provoked a tiny shock, a satori, the passage of a void. (49)

Most importantly, Barthes wants to explore the Photograph “not as a question (a theme) but as a wound: I see, I feel, hence I notice, I observe, and I think” (21). In Camera Lucida Barthes wants to reduce his Photograph to the power of “affect” (20-21). This term “punctum” (penetrating point, thrust, focus) is equally applicable, I argue, to Dürer’s Melencolia I. For this Melancholia is most subversive, most “punctual” not when it frightens, repels or even stigmatizes, but when it is pensive, when it thinks and gazes.

Rendering the whole engraving strange and uncanny by “punctuating” it with a kind of inverted focus, then, Melencolia’s gaze transforms the melancholy reality by disturbing it, making it vacillate between reason and madness, science and art, male and female. Rather than serving as a mirror image of the male melancholic and reflecting precisely what the male gaze intends (us) to see, the uncanny gaze signifies a radical doubling, a potential for subverting the code of masculinity which is built into the structure and frame of representation itself. Challenging the view that the female is the passive and powerless object being gazed at, the uncanny gaze of Melencolia is assertive, bold, and irreducible. It is not associated above all with the perception of, the encounter with the Other, the melancholy Other.

28 For Barthes, the punctum is the element which is able to wound, prick, pierce, punctuate like an arrow (26-27); “for punctum is also: sting, speak, cut, little hole—and also a cast of the dice” (27). “The studium is that very wide field of unconcerned desire,” explains Barthes, of various interest, of inconsequential taste; I like/I don’t like. The studium is of the order of liking, not of loving; it mobilizes a half desire, a demi-volition; it is the same sort of vague, slippery, irresponsible interest one takes in the people, the entertainments, the books, the clothes one finds “all right.” (27)

29 Barthes’s text goes like this: “Photography is subversive not when it frightens, repels, or even stigmatizes, but when it is pensive, when it thinks” (38).

30 Feminists like Juliana Schiesari often question and critique the rationale for employing a female image like Melencolia to represent melancholia: Is Melencolia a gendered icon of melancholia? Is this because the female image is more apt to express extreme emotional states?
The Melancholy Other

All the world is mad, that it is melancholy, dotes. . . . For indeed who is not a fool, melancholy, mad? . . . who is not brain-sick? Folly, melancholy, madness, are but one disease, delirium is a common name to all . . . all fools are mad, though some madder than others. And who is not a fool, who is free from melancholy? Who is not touched more or less in habit or disposition?  
— Robert Burton, The Anatomy of Melancholy

On viewing Melencolia I we are fascinated, perhaps even drawn, attracted, lured by the pensive look of Melencolia. At this particular moment we are caught by our melancholy Other or double in the hall of mirrors. As if looking at our own reflection.double/alter-ego or encountering the melancholy Other between two facing mirrors, we experience a “mise-en-abîme” and sink into our own “hard thinking.” Overwhelmed by our melancholic mirror-image, we are literally thrown into the abyss, experiencing a state of vertigo, and haunted by our doppelgängers, our ghostly doubles. Opening up the possibilities for self-reflexivity, Melencolia’s mirror-gaze celebrates the encounter with the Other, the melancholy Other.double. Freud once remarked on the motif of the double in his article “The Uncanny,” in reviewing Otto Rank’s interpretation of demonology and the double. Freud explains here that the double is always connected “with reflections in mirrors, with shadows, with guarding spirits, with the belief in the soul and with the fear of death” (SE 17: 235).

More than a work of art which stands as witness to a period of transition from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance, then, and mirrors the spirit of humanism whose effects are still at work today, Melencolia I has meaning for us today because it captures that “modern” spiritual agony which is also the universal one. Dis-tempered, dejected, disoriented, inactive, foreign, strange, feminine, and other,

Or because melancholia is a feminine noun? Or because the disease itself is a feminine other to the intellectual male scholar? It seems to me that, rather than strengthening the stereotypical idea that the female is especially prone to the influence of emotional states, the image of Melencolia is unique and singular in its own way, not only manifesting the radical doubling and otherness of the feminized melancholic but also subverting the bias that the feminine Other is “diseased.”

31 See Robert Burton’s Anatomy of Melancholy (I: 39). At the end of “Democritus to the Reader,” Burton uses similar expressions: “To conclude . . . all the world is melancholy, or mad, dotes, and every member of it . . . ” (I: 120).
Melencolia typifies and personifies Kristeva’s “stranger to ourselves” and “teaches us how to detect foreignness in ourselves” (Kristeva 191). Her image is therefore markedly different from that of Dürer’s saintly scholar in *St. Jerome in His Study* (1514) (see Fig. 3 in Appendix), absorbed in his theological work, his face and body filled with a sense of contemplation, of spiritual self-communing and orderly thought. Opposed to the ideal of the *vita contemplativa* as represented by St. Jerome and also to the *vita activa* portrayed in Dürer’s *Knight, Death and Devil* (1513) (see Fig. 4 in Appendix), *Melencolia I* calls forth “a life in competition with God” and posits “the tragic unrest of human creation” rather than upholding “a life in service of God” in *St. Jerome* or submitting to “the peaceful bliss of divine wisdom” in *Knight, Death and Devil* (Panofsky 156).32

Perhaps in *Melencolia I* Dürer seems to portray whatever it is viewers want to see, to the point that commentary on the engraving rapidly becomes a reflection of the commentator’s own melancholy desire. In this sense too the work is no longer a superficial representation, medical-diagnostic sign or even icon of melancholia, but an exploration of the inner recesses of the human psyche. Confined no longer to medical, pictorial, religious, or philosophical frames of reference, it exists as the melancholy Other in/to the observer’s subjective self-definition outside the frame.

### The Ecstasy of the Signs of Melancholia

Perhaps we have no right to assume that practically every detail in the *Melencolia I* has a special “meaning.”33

—Erwin Panofsky, *The Life and Art of Albrecht Dürer*

The image-making of melancholia usually employs signs, objects, symbols as a means of representing the workings of the black bile or the (even if invisible) imbalanced psychic state. In *Melencolia I* we can see a variety of image-symbols and objects, all in disarray. We cannot help but ask the following questions: Why did employ or deploy this arrangement and composition in *Melencolia I*? What has he achieved in portraying melancholia in this fashion? Is the engraving an allegorical drama of melancholia? Is an investigation of the semiotic implications of

32 According to Panoñsky, the three engravings mentioned here—*Knight, Death and Devil* (1513), *St. Jerome in His Study* (1514), and *Melencolia I* (1514)—are the three works known as Dürer’s “Meisterstiche [masterworks]” (151).

33 In *The Life and Art of Albrecht Dürer*, after conducting a thorough study of *Melencolia I*, Erwin Panofsky makes this statement (163).
Melencolia I helpful to our de-coding what Dürer has coded in the engraving? On the one hand, these signs, objects, and image-symbols are exactly what can demonstrate the artist’s mastery of graphic details (the bat, the shadow, the drooping head, the clenched fist, the sleeping dog, the woman’s wings, etc.), that is, his genuine creativity. On the other hand they provoke an interpretive event, something unprecedented and multifaceted. First, we may wonder why Melencolia is a winged figure. Her wings, after all, distinguish her from all other images of melancholia. Do they imply that the melancholic is more divine than human, or closer to the angel or genius than to ordinary mankind? Art critics also have different interpretations of the “I” in the title Melencolia I. “If the ‘I’ is a word,” as Price suggests, “it would mean ‘go away’” (292). In Saturn and Melancholia, Klibansky et al. give us a more simple interpretation. According to them it was Agrippa of Nettesheim who, in De occulta philosophia, converted the hierarchy of the three faculties—imaginatio, ratio, and mens—into a hierarchy of melancholy illumination. Thus Dürer’s Melencolia I, portraying the “melancholia imaginative,” depicts the first stage “in an ascent via Melencolia II (‘melancholia rationalis’) to Melencolia III (‘melancholia mentalis’)” (350).

With regard to the images of Melencolia and Putto, the mature and intellectual Melencolia, for Panofsky, epitomizes “theoretical insight” (“Kunst”) which “thinks but cannot act,” while the innocent and ignorant Putto typifies “practical skill” (“Braunch”) which “acts but cannot think.” As such they form a strong contrast and demonstrate the opposition between theory and practice: the conflict between the two eventually results in the mood of melancholia (164). Graphic details such as keys and purse mean wealth (Panofsky 164); the sleeping dog and the bat bearing the title of the work, “Melencolia I,” with open wings are “traditionally associated with melancholy” (Panofsky 162). The motif of the hourglass, which ties Melencolia I to two other masterpieces, Knight, Death and the Devil and St. Jerome in His Study, hints at the concept of death and raises the issue of Christian salvation (Price 85, 292). The twilight, for Klibansky et al., rather than signifying a state of limbo, “denotes the uncanny twilight of a mind, which can neither cast its thoughts...”

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34 Putto is the figure of an infant boy, often naked and having wings, found especially in European art of the Renaissance.

35 Panofsky illustrates his observation by referring to Dürer’s view of artistic creation: Now this consummate mastery results, according to Dürer—and to other thinkers of the Renaissance—from a perfect coordination of two accomplishments: theoretical insight, particularly a thorough command of geometry (“Kunst” in the original sense of “knowledge”), and practical skill (“Braunch”). These two must be together, for the one without the other is of no avail. (164)
away into the darkness nor ‘bring them to the light’” (320). The magic square, “a Jovian device used to counteract the unfavorable influence of Saturn” (Klibansky et al. 327), depends on the magical power of numbers to express its compelling enigma, its weirdness, and ambivalence. Take the last line of numbers (4-15-14-1) of the magic square for example: other than communicating the year of creation its (1514), “the remaining numbers, 4 and 1,” Morphvs has suggested, “stand for the gemetric values of D and A, his monogram” (2). The process of de-coding commenced above could go on for pages, as Klibanksy et al. have demonstrated in *Saturn and Melancholy* (275-504); but of course it would be impossible to exhaust all the meaning-possibilities of all the image-symbols.

It is true that, in addition to the theories and aesthetics of melancholia, scholarly research from the past to the present has contributed greatly to our understanding of *Melencolia I*, and yet the engraving remains enigmatic to many, “for its author would appear to have left an insufficient number clues for us to interpret his unusual subject matter” (Doorly 1). There are simply no quiet areas in the work; every corner, every quarter-inch of space is crammed with meanings. In a word, Dürer’s *Melencolia I* achieves its “polysemy” not only by the precisely-rendered arrangement of symbolic objects and by the transmutation of these objects into idea-laden images taken from manifold traditions of thought, in particular astrology, alchemy, and geometry,36 but also by organizing these objects/images in a new way within the framework of “art.” Thus one might say that Dürer, in *Melencolia I*, has presented us with a “diseased reality” not merely as a mode of representation, but as a site upon which different discourses, perhaps opposed forces of meaning clash for priority of signifying power. These discourses or forces include the historical/religious/medical, the ideological (as in class/gender/race struggles), and the traditionally aesthetic-pictorial. *Melencolia I* could then be seen as the site where a single ecstatic even t of meaning takes place (though perhaps only the one to which the viewer gives priority) rather than where pre-established meanings are communicated. Such a view fits the possibility that not every detail here has a meaning that in this way the picture is radically open-ended. Panofsky

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36 According to Panofsky, almost all the motifs in *Melencolia I* can be identified and explained by referring back to the two traditions of melancholy and geometry. He writes:

Thus almost all the motifs employed in Dürer’s engraving can be accounted for by well-established and representational traditions pertaining to “melancholy” on the one hand, and to “geometry” on the other. But Dürer, while fully aware of their emblematic significance, also invested them with an expressive, or psychological, meaning. (162)
suggests that “we have no right to assume that practically every detail in the Melencolia I has a special ‘meaning’” (163).

On such a reading we could also say that the various details-motifs in Melencolia I are roused from their static state of signification and invested by Dürer with a dynamically signifying movement, perhaps that of a melancholy ek-stasis/ecstasy. With the ek-stasis/ecstasy of images/signs, the meaning or the truth-value of melancholia is77 metaphorized and metonymized, and an infinite number of significations and interpretations of melancholia comes into play. This then would be the moment when Melencolia I undergoes its transformation into words, language, discourse—the poststructuralist play of signification. Instead of taking melancholia as an effect of black bile or sign of genius, this “playful” view would be open to the possibilities of interpretation and signification, thus abandoning the need for a “melancholy” search after final truths or unified meanings. The viewer could then enter endlessly into the free-play of these “melancholy signifiers which are no longer melancholy,” generating a plethora of potential meanings. Again, the free play of the viewer’s interpretive “roles” or “games” would parallel the free-play of signifiers themselves, behind or beyond which there could be not transcendent signified (Derrida) or final, absolute meaning. Here we may also think of play, not only as in “playing an interpretive game” but even as in “playing a melancholic.” Yet whereas at first we may assume that “to play a melancholic” presupposes that one could also play other, non-melancholic (less or perhaps more “serious”?) roles, the possibility also arises that it is precisely the “melancholic” role in its widest sense—that of the ek-stasis or “standing outside itself” of our angst-ridden human existence, our human condition, reflected in the inward/outward gaze of Lady Melancholia—that will always be finally, inevitably played, for this is the role that has been (always already) “pre-figured” for us.

Conclusion: The Melancholy Sublime

Melencolia I is inextricably bound up with the art of the Renaissance and the history of melancholia. Perhaps we could also move forward to the late 18th century and try to relate it to Kant’s aesthetics in his third critique. If Kant’s sublime, in both its mathematical (infinity) and dynamic (awe and terror) senses, transcends the

77 From Aristotle, Ficino, Burton, and Freud to Kristeva, all these theorists of melancholia have attributed a truth-value to melancholia and insisted that melancholia is a necessary evil, desired and instituted by Western metaphysics in order to induce in the melancholic a keener sense of the truth.
rational limits of his “beauty,” then inasmuch as Melancholy’s gaze moves outside (thus also inside) the frame, rather than merely gazing at the beauty of the aesthetic frame or surface itself, perhaps this Melancholy of Dürer’s engraving may also be the “melancholy sublime.” The Kantian sublime, after all, also corresponds to the failure of our imagination to comprehend the “absolutely great.” In contrast to “the beautiful” which “charms,” the melancholy sublime “moves” the melancholy emotions (gemüt) (SE 23: 128) and arouses the “negative pleasure” within us.

Yet in analyzing the iconographic language of melancholia I find myself so drawn to, so caught up in, so haunted by the uncanny gaze of Lady Melancholy—even though she is, while looking outside the frame, not exactly looking at me—that I begin to feel I am haunted by a kind of “anxiety of influence” and a maddening (mantic, manic) “logic of the supplement.” For in allowing us to encounter the (her, our) melancholy Other, Melencolia I becomes an uncanny space which may endlessly fascinate us. It is difficult for us to know whether to fix our gaze inside the frame or outside of it. More than perhaps any other work by Dürer it is known for its “ghostly effect,” and (like the Mona Lisa) is continuously being revisited but always with a difference. With its uncanny gaze, the uncanny Melencolia I invites what Shoshana Felman has referred to as a “re-interpreting effect”: it is continually open to being re-interpreted but re-interpreted always in strangely different ways. As Felman puts it: “The scene of the critical debate is thus a repetition of the scene dramatized in the text. The critical interpretation, in other words, not only elucidates the text but reproduces it dramatically, unwittingly participates in it” (101).

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38 Central to the account of the sublime, argues Kant, is the way in which it seems to “appear in its form to be contrapurposive for our power of judgment, unsuitable for our faculty of presentation, and as it were doing violence to our imagination, but is nevertheless judged all the more sublime for that” (§ 23: 129).

39 The “absolutely great” can be referred to in terms of either measure (mathematical sublime) or power (dynamic sublime).

40 As Kant explains, “the satisfaction in the sublime does not so much contain positive pleasure as it does admiration or respect, i.e., it deserves to be called negative pleasure” (§ 23: 129).

41 With its uncanny gaze, the uncanny Melencolia I invites what Shoshana Felman has referred to as a “re-interpreting effect”: it is continually open to being re-interpreted always in strangely different ways. As Felman puts it: “The scene of the critical debate is thus a repetition of the scene dramatized in the text. The critical interpretation, in other words, not only elucidates the text but reproduces it dramatically, unwittingly participates in it” (101).

42 As Freud explains in his article “The Uncanny”: “As we have seen some languages in use today can only render the German expression ‘an unheimlich house’ by ‘a haunted house’” (SE 17: 241).
Appendix

Fig. 2
Typus Geometriae (1504)
by Gregor Reisch
A Woodcut from Margarita Philosophica
Fig. 3

*St. Jerome in His Study* (1514)
by Albrecht Dürer
Engraving (249 X 192 mm)
Fig. 4
*The Knight, Death and the Devil* (1513)
by Albrecht Dürer
Engraving (246 X 190 mm)
Works Cited


About the Author


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