

Perfection's Therapy
An Essay on Albrecht Dürer's
Melencolia I

Mitchell B. Merback

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Figure I.1. Hans Schwarz, portrait medallion of Albrecht Dürer, 1519–20, bronze, 5.6 cm dia. (Hannover, Kestner-Museum).

Introduction

It may be difficult . . . for many of us, to abandon the belief that there is an instinct toward perfection at work in human beings, which has brought them to their present high level of intellectual achievement and ethical sublimation and which may be expected to watch over their development into supermen. I have no faith, however, in the existence of any such internal instinct and I cannot see how this benevolent illusion is to be preserved. . . . What appears in a minority of human individuals as an untiring impulsion towards perfection can easily be understood as a result of the instinctual repression upon which is based all that is most precious in human civilization.

—Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*

“Just as Miserable as Ever”

Imagine an exclusive television interview with one of the luminaries of the European Renaissance—a Petrarch, a Pico della Mirandola, an Alberti, an Erasmus, or the subject of this book, Albrecht Dürer of Nuremberg (figure I.1)—and consider asking him how it felt to wake up on the threshold of modernity, to be alive amidst such a great flowering of civilization, to emerge into light after such a long dark. What was it like to participate in the revival of classical thought, literature, science, and the fine arts, you might ask, to free the project of human perfectibility from its theological burdens, to exalt human dignity, and bring it to its realization? How glorious was it to experience every day reason’s brilliant ascendance, the mastery of *geometria*, *eruditio*, and *eloquentia*, and the arts based upon them? Now that the spell of primitive superstition had been broken, the tyrannous fear of demons and pagan gods overcome, and a rational knowledge of the world embraced, what great happiness had settled upon humanity? If you, starry-eyed as I would be to share in such great company,

were to inquire, simply, “What was it like to *experience* all this?” it’s a fair bet each man would reply as the proverbial Zen monk did after the news spread that he, a relative novice, had become enlightened. “Is it true?” the other novices reportedly asked, gathering around. “It is true,” he told them, radiating serenity in the eyes of witnesses. “And how does it feel to be enlightened?” they all inquired. “I’ll tell you,” the monk replied, “just as miserable as ever.”¹

Now this amusing little Zen kōan, so rich with paradox, conveys an unmistakably Buddhist attitude toward human perfectibility, the nature of wisdom, the cosmic necessity of suffering (*dukkha*), and the close interrelationship of the three. At the same time, it’s not hard to find parallels between the tale’s resigned awareness of the divided, earthbound reality we all endure and a distinctly European-Christian style of misery whose first flourishing was the Renaissance. Generalizations about collective mentalities and psychological dispositions in history are inherently fraught and risky, the interpretation of emotions and cultural “moods” all the more so, and though our leading lights of the Renaissance would have been familiar with the metaphors of rebirth and revival, darkness and light, with which we still celebrate their modernity, it would be unfair to expect them to picture their own age as a closed historical whole or to portray their own suffering in crisp contours and accurate colors.

Nevertheless, Renaissance misery does have a peculiar character we can identify, and doing so is the crucial first step, I submit, toward a fresh understanding of one of the most talked-about pictures in the European canon, a portrait of creative endeavor poised between inspired breakthrough and demoralizing breakdown: Albrecht Dürer’s shimmering allegory of 1514, the engraving called *Melencolia I* (see figure 1.1). Referring to the print’s technical perfection, one of its earliest commentators, the Florentine biographer and artist Giorgio Vasari (1511–74), called it a work that puts the whole world in awe—*che feciono stupire il mondo*—and more than four hundred years of ardent acclaim and zealous interpretation has only etched that judgment deeper.² The awesomeness of that achievement, however, stems from a certain kind of misery the work is also at pains to diagnose and symbolize—a misery itself borne of the pursuit of perfection.

Every age has its evils and miseries, its peculiar forms of fear, despair, and loss, its syndromes and psychic disturbances, its dark

moods. Likewise, every age has its compensations and consolations in times of crisis—its methods for coping and its forms of escape, remedies for the ailing body and therapies for the suffering soul. Where do we look to get a handle on *Renaissance* misery? What, if anything, makes it exceptional? Over the past several decades, social historians, literary historians, and art historians have filled in many details in our inherited picture of the extravagant misfortunes that befell Europe in the period stretching from the time of the Black Death (mid-fourteenth century) to the Wars of Religion (early sixteenth to mid-seventeenth centuries)—roughly coincident with what we call the Renaissance—and that picture is bleak indeed.³ Warfare became more frequent and wars themselves more destructive, exposing both rural and urban populations to untold ravages and insecurities. A heightened state of conflict and public alarm settled on a Europe whose boundaries were steadily contracting after the failure of the Crusades, especially in the decades framed by the fall of Constantinople in 1453 and the siege of Vienna in 1529, when the Ottoman Turks menaced Christendom directly at Europe's eastern door. Peasant insurgents were on the move across the breadth of imperial South Germany, upending both temporal and spiritual governance and, under the sway of radical theologians, obliterating the distinctions between them. Unprecedented ecological breakdowns revealed the fragility of the human environment and the human body. Along with recurrences of pestilence and ancient diseases such as leprosy, "modern" ones such as syphilis appeared on the scene, stoking fears and challenging established medical opinion (figure I.2).⁴ Most terrifying of all were the celestial portents of doom—comets and apparitions and prognostications of a "second flood," which reached a skittish public through the medium of print. Divine judgment was imminent, and total apocalyptic destruction seemed close at hand (figure I.3).⁵ For what wrath was not deserved by a world so mired in sin and depravity, so overtaken by folly and ignorance, so forgetful of wisdom, so reprobate in the eyes of God? In the eyes of church reformers, the religion of the common folk had degenerated into a hysterical pursuit of the holy. Start-up pilgrimage cults appeared to authorities as false, materialistic rites that exposed God to ridicule and revealed the idolater lurking in the heart of every Christian. Everywhere the ceaseless labor of the Devil and his minions could be felt: in the insults and blasphemies hurled upon Christianity by



Figure 1.2. Albrecht Dürer (attrib.), *Syphillitic Man*, hand-colored woodcut broadsheet, with didactic poem by Dirk van Ulsen, 1496, 2nd ed. (Ausburg: Johann Froschauer, 1496–97) (Berlin, Staatliche Museen, Kupferstichkabinett) (photo: bpk Bildagentur/Jörg P. Anders/Art Resource, NY).



Figure 1.3. Albrecht Dürer, *Four Horsemen*, woodcut from the *Apocalypse* series, ca. 1496–98, 45.7 x 31.5 cm (Washington, D.C., National Gallery of Art, Ferdinand Lamot Belin Fund and William Nelson Cromwell Fund).

heretics, by the depredation of “bloodthirsty” Jews and legions of sorcerers and witches—a pervasive domestic terrorism against which no one could defend.

To historians of the era, this is a familiar litany of woes—yet woe-fully comparable to the disasters and disarrays of any other preatomic age. What takes us aback in surveying the landscape of Renaissance misery, with its blending of objective plights and inner syndromes, worldly tribulations and religious sorrows, is the striking contrast it forms with the era’s vigorous idealism: the dignity of man as created in the image and likeness of God; the intellectual liberation from scholasticism and—in much of Northern Europe—from the Roman Church as well; and the sustained belief in the human potential “to refashion [the] mind and will in accord with the noblest intellectual and moral values set forth in classical moral philosophy in harmony with the Christian doctrine of redemption.”⁶ In recognizing the radical disjunction between image and reality in the appraisal of the Renaissance, we are not unlike the very people who lived it; our own sense of contradiction has its counterpart, if not its mirror image, in the era’s self-perception. Thinkers of the age truly felt the rub: aspiration toward dignity, order, eloquence, and virtue would always take place in a world overrun by perversity, indolence, error, and sin. Contemplation of this irony, the perpetual frustration of achievement, became one occasion for a uniquely European “philosophical” melancholy. The resulting complex forms an important backdrop for understanding Dürer’s great engraving.

Melancholia, so closely related in the western tradition to *acedia*, or “spiritual sloth,” and *tristia*, or “spiritual sadness,” may be perfection’s antithesis or its constant companion—centuries of philosophical, literary, medical, and psychological investigation have not provided a clear answer. For all the efforts to trace its genealogy backward from the *ennui* and *Weltschmerz* of Romanticism, or from the Kantian sublime, or from the revelatory “boredom” of the existentialists,⁷ we still await a basic cultural history of frustrated exertion in the pursuit of perfection: technical perfection, moral perfection, aesthetic perfection.⁸ One suspects such a history could explain a lot. Trying too hard, whether in the service of some ideal or simply as neurotic behavior, lies behind humankind’s greatest achievements and its bitterest disappointments. In his *Pensées*, Blaise Pascal (1623–62) writes:

Men have a hidden instinct that prompts them to seek diversion and occupation from without, stemming from resentment at their unceasing misery. And they have another secret instinct remaining from the grandeur of the primary nature which makes them aware that happiness resides only in tranquility. And from those two contrary instincts is formed a confused plan hidden from sight at the bottom of their soul that leads them to reach for tranquility through agitation and always to imagine that the satisfaction they lack will come to them if, by surmounting certain obstacles they face, they can thus open the doors to peace and tranquility.⁹

And then there's the toll on health. Freud was probably right to doubt the instinctual basis for a compulsion toward perfection; if anything, it tends to be more trouble than it's worth for the ego, not to mention the body. Overtax the system, doctors since antiquity have been warning their patients, and disequilibrium sets in; push too hard, and you have total breakdown. For all the demands he made on his students, Dürer, himself an incurable aesthetic and technical perfectionist, was likewise at pains to alert the next generation to the pitfalls of overexertion. In his advice manual for the education of artists, *Ein Speis der Malerknaben* (Nourishment for young painters, ca. 1512–13), an unfinished treatise that survives only as a draft in the British Museum, he explains that during one's training, there is always the temptation to go beyond one's limits. But if the apprentice "exerts himself too much" (*zw fill v̄bte*) he might "fall under the hand of melancholy" (*do fan jm d̄y Melecoley v̄ber hant mocht nemen*).¹⁰

Unless we count the letters boldly displayed upon the wings of *Melencolia's* nocturnal messenger (see figure I.9), this passage, remarkably, is the only place in Dürer's surviving writings where he invoked the term "melancholy" (*Melecoley*). Should it surprise us that Dürer had trouble following his own advice? Whatever doubts he might have entertained about the possibility of perfection, it was the artist's obligation to strive for it. "Because we cannot altogether attain unto perfection, shall we therefore wholly cease from our learning?" Dürer the preceptor asks in his *Vier Bücher von menschlicher Proportionen* (Four books on human proportions); naturally, for him, the answer was foregone (he calls such doubts "fit for cattle").¹¹ Alongside the many virtues—excellence of character, physical beauty, preternatural skill with pen and brush, piety, morality—

celebrated by the painter's first biographer, Joachim Camerarius (1500–74), there was but one fault to ascribe to his famous friend. It was “his excessive industry, which often made unfair demands on him.”¹²

Misery wrought by perfection was never merely a physical exhaustion, of course, and artists were hardly its most privileged victims. Those Renaissance thinkers who most vigorously advanced the cause of ethical education, spiritual self-knowledge, the dignity of humanity, and the rule of reason felt the “sickness of the soul” most acutely. It was the poet, philosopher, and humanist scholar Francesco Petrarca (1304–74) (figure I.4) who, more than any other, recast anew the problems raised by a ceaseless striving toward happiness in the face of adversity. When Petrarch's alter ego in the dialogue known as *De secreto conflictu curarum mearum* (On the Private Conflict of my Thoughts, better known as the *Secretum*) complains to his mentor, the philosopher Augustinus, about the failure of his meditations to help him overcome his sorrows or to cope with the blows delivered by Fortune, the febleness of all his efforts are suddenly laid bare. Until the storm of the passions is calmed, Augustinus warns, until “that plague of phantasms which shatter and wreck your thoughts”¹³ is dispersed, the ego will remain bound to the world, with tears and suffering its only companions. Submitting the passions to rational control is the archproject of the moral perfectibilist, according to John Passmore in his great book on the subject.¹⁴ Afflicted by the insight that any and all successes in reaching for this mode of well-being—the “natural end” of *eudaimonia* toward which all humans strive, according to Aristotle—are destined to be provisional and immediately qualified, if not doomed to failure, Petrarch took up the project nonetheless.

In the deeply personal “inner discord” of his own mind that Petrarch tracked and examined, he also recognized humankind's historical plight. The march toward universal truth, the common project of prophets and saints, philosophers and poets, ancient and modern, had always been riddled with frustrations, setbacks, reversals, and wrong turns. Despite their brilliance and eloquence, the Roman authors Petrarch admired most—Virgil, Cicero, Seneca—had been ill-fated to live amidst pervasive error and gloom, unilluminated by the advent of Christ. “But they failed to arrive at the destination they sought,” the real Augustine (not Petrarch's Augustinus) once said of



Figure 1.4. Portrait of Petrarch in his studio, from Francesco Petrarca, *De viris illustribus*, ca. 1400 (Darmstadt, Hessische Landes- und Hochschulbibliothek, Hs. 101, fol. 1v).

the pagan poets (*City of God*, bk. 18) in a passage quoted by Petrarch, who shared the Church Father's conception of "history as a chronicle of human perversity that would perpetually frustrate the humanist aspirant."¹⁵

An earlier generation of historians dubbed Petrarch "the first modern man," both for the novel form of autonomous individuality he seemed to embody and for the bold line he drew between "ancient" and "modern" history. That gesture designated the long cultural epoch between the fall of Rome and Petrarch's own time as one of darkness (*tenebrae*) and rupture with the intellectual achievements of the past—a time of oblivion and loss, despite the Christian recognition that a "new light" had dawned in the era under grace.¹⁶ More recent historians and literary critics have made the laureate an avatar of the postmodern self. "In Petrarch's poetry," writes Giuseppe Mazzotta, "time's ruptured dimensions (past, fleeting present, and expectation of future) are internalized within the self, and they are even identified as the constitutive, broken pieces of oneself."¹⁷ Likewise for Gur Zak, Petrarch's poetic and philosophical program represents a sustained effort to "cope with the experience of fragmentation" and to recover the self, not as a "given presence" in the Romantic sense of authentic individualism, but as "a [virtuous] state of mind from which we are exiled."¹⁸ Human excellence was deeply alienated from itself in his own age, Petrarch felt, a notion encapsulated in his famous complaint—recounted after his coronation as poet laureate, in a letter to the friar Giovanni Colonna in 1341—that contemporary Romans knew nothing about Rome or Roman virtue.¹⁹

So the pleasure of touching the optima of human experience, Petrarch sensed, is always accompanied by a painful apprehension of all that remains unachieved. Pain shadows pleasure in the very notion of perfection, which is always, to borrow from Frank Ankersmit, "the measure of its own success and of its own failure at one and the same time."²⁰ Though the prospects for perfection were "infinitesimally close" for the Renaissance humanist, they remained permanently out of reach, subject to a cruel fortune that no man could ever hope to master. Hope attaches itself to the future, as Petrarch wrote toward the end of the *Africa*, but should produce no illusions about the present. "My fate is to live amid varied and confusing storms. But . . . [this] sleep of forgetfulness will not last

forever. When the darkness has been dispersed, our descendants can come again in the former pure radiance.”²¹ Far more than the sorrows wrought by fortune itself, frustrated achievement in the present became, for the Renaissance humanist, a distinctive source of misery.

Remedies for Life

Now when Petrarch set about addressing the sorrows brought on by fortune, consoling himself and friends in the face of such ignorant and violent times, and providing for the miserable soul’s remedy, he did not envision a cure so much as a down-to-earth regimen for ethical and spiritual training, a regimen grounded in reading and, for him, writing. Such a rhetorical therapy, aimed at restoring the soul to health through the prudent exercise of reason, was the goal of his great collection of 254 Latin dialogues, *De remediis utriusque fortunae* (On the Remedy of Two Kinds of Fortune), a work that earned lasting success as a popular “self-help book” into and beyond the Renaissance.²² Building upon the vast tradition of medieval *speculum* literature as well as the wisdom of ancient Stoicism, *De remediis* was practical philosophy. Addressed to the tribulations of the inner man, its dialogues are not simply moral lessons, but exercises designed to mobilize the higher powers of the soul. Rhetoric had to be allied to philosophy in the care of the soul (*animi cura*), Petrarch understood, since their common aim was the cultivation of virtue and, through virtue, the correction of life and conduct (*vitam et mores*).²³ In transferring eloquence from the realm of moral philosophy and civic duty to the inward “care of the soul,” Petrarch was largely following the lead of Seneca in his moral letters, where style and persuasion were meant to be transformative, awakening the listener’s thoughts to the pursuit of virtue.²⁴ This effort was of a piece with Petrarch’s effort to revive the ancient epistolary genre of *consolatio*, the consolation in times of grief and loss, and to innovate a philosophical therapy of the word, a tradition rooted in Socratic dialogue, Aristotelian rhetoric, and the Stoic training for life.

Petrarch’s new mode of rhetorical healing announced in the *Secretum* and *De remediis* and the philosophy of life it advances will return as a key reference point later in this book, where I use it to take the measure of Dürer’s therapeutic project.²⁵ Here we pause just long enough to register another of its key premises, that is, the

Aristotelian psychology it adopts for its model of a virtuous subjectivity. In the Hellenistic and Roman schools, all of which acknowledged a massive debt to Aristotle, philosophical training mobilized the higher powers of the mind—reason, will, and memory—in a way that would lead to the acquisition of *virtus*. Those powers allow the mind to combat effectively and eventually to overcome the pull of the lower, irrational faculties, or “passions,” which bring the soul discord and confusion if left unchecked. For Petrarch, these irrational passions include not only fear and sorrow, our predictable emotional responses to misfortune (and not coincidentally, the key emotions targeted by tragedy, according to Aristotle in the *Poetics*), but also hope and joy, which are just as tightly bound to the experience of fortune. Only with a proper conversion to reason, a stoical inner training that would, in Pierre Hadot’s words, culminate in a complete “metamorphosis of [the] personality,”²⁶ could the storm of the passions be calmed; only in this way could the swings of fortune, good and ill, be withstood. This was the Senecan ideal for self-care and the practice of wisdom, and it was one Petrarch recommended and sought to emulate. “I . . . request . . . O illustrious sir,” the poet writes to a friend in one of his *Familiar Letters*, drawing on the classic Stoic precept of a “conversion to self” (*conversio ad se*), “that you subject your mind to your reason, or, to express it differently, you to yourself.”²⁷ Inner virtue and intellectual discipline can be sustained only when reason reigns, when the passions are properly subdued, and when the way is cleared for the proper functioning of the higher faculties. For the scholar, the poet, and the artist—creative individuals prone to that particular disturbance of mind, body, and soul called melancholia—the stakes of “returning to oneself” were therefore even higher. Only from a state of equilibrium and calm could imagination and invention proceed; only in this way, according to eudaimonistic ethics, can humans flourish in the exercise of their natural abilities.

The revival of ancient Stoicism was such a powerful tendency in Renaissance thought that no less an authority than William Bouwsma could christen it, alongside Augustinianism, as one of the “two faces of Renaissance humanism.”²⁸ Italian authors such as Petrarch and, following him, Northerners such as Sebastian Brant and Erasmus of Rotterdam (1466–1536) (figure I.5),²⁹ promoted the neo-Stoic view that reason, and the rational application of rules of the mind, would

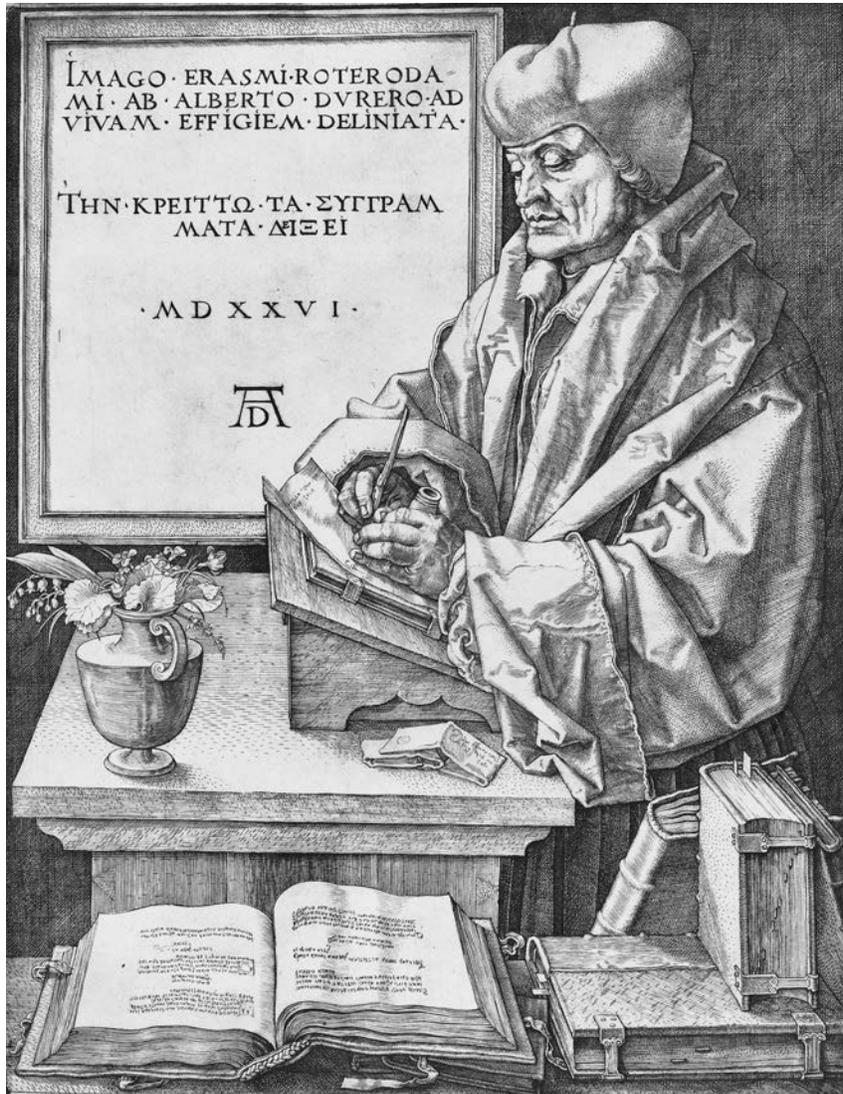


Figure 1.5. Albrecht Dürer, *Erasmus of Rotterdam*, dated 1526, engraving, 25 x 18 cm, (Washington, D.C., National Gallery of Art, Rosenwald Collection).



Figure 1.6. Urs Graf, *The Christian Soldier between Virtue and Sin*, woodcut for Desiderius Erasmus, *Enchiridion, oder Handbüchleins eins christlichen und ritterlichen Lebens...* (Basel: Adam Petri, 1520), fol. xvi (photo: courtesy of Bibliothek Rotterdam, Erasmiana 2H22).

guide the soul toward perfection. Calming the passions had to be the first step. As a practical craft and therapy, philosophy meant forging rhetorical weapons to battle down the turbulent spirits that leave the mind vulnerable to attack. Only in this way can desires of the heart, among them the love of Christ and neighbor, find their proper order. Erasmus says as much in the conclusion to his widely read *Enchiridion milites Christiani* (Manual of a Christian Knight) (figure I.6), where he clarifies his purpose in writing about Christian virtue as a kind of inner training:

This only was my desire . . . to show a certain manner and craft of a new kind of war, how one might arm oneself against the evils of the old life burgeoning forth again and springing afresh. Therefore, as we have done in one or two things [here in this treatise] so must you do . . . in everything, one by one: but most of all in the things wherein you perceive yourself to be stirred or instigated . . . whether it be through [the] vice of nature, custom, or evil upbringing. . . [Against] these things some certain decrees must be written in the tablets of your mind, and they must be renewed now and then, lest they should fail or be forgotten through disuse, as against the vices of backbiting, filthy speaking, envy, guile, and other [such vices]: these are the only enemies of Christ's soldiers, against whose assault the mind must be armed long beforehand with prayer, with noble sayings of wise men, with the doctrine of Holy Scripture, with [the] example of devout and holy men, and specially [that] of Christ.³⁰

It has been said that Erasmus spent the rest of his career as a reformer elaborating the principles set down in the *Enchiridion*. Vigilance in the face of ill-fortune, constant struggle against the forces of darkness, determination in the love of God and the practice of wisdom—these were the keys to fortifying and sustaining the Christian life. It was not hard for Dürer's greatest biographer and commentator, Erwin Panofsky (1892–1968), to detect a strong allegiance to Erasmian Christian philosophy in the earliest of the three so-called master engravings (*Meisterstiche*), the ominous *Knight, Death, and the Devil*, completed in 1513 (figure I.7).³¹ Whereas Panofsky saw the luminous serenity of *St. Jerome in His Study* (see figure 2.1), completed in the same year as *Melencolia I*, as an allegory of the *vita contemplativa*, the steely determination of Dürer's famous knight, forging through the wasteland and heedless of the journey's dangers, seemed to embody the *vita activa*, outlined for all Christians by Erasmus in his little book of wisdom.



Figure 1.7. Albrecht Dürer, *Knight, Death, and the Devil*, 1513, engraving on laid paper, 24.8 x 19 cm sheet (trimmed to plate mark) (Washington, D.C., National Gallery of Art. Gift of W. G. Russell Allen).

Melencolia I and the Therapeutic Image

Debate over whether the three *Meisterstiche*, Dürer's greatest achievements in the graphic arts, constitute a thematic program, an "iconographic trio" in which one informs the other(s), has been a constant feature in modern Dürer scholarship. For all the proposals and counterproposals, agreements and disagreements, few who have approached the problem, Panofsky included, have failed to appreciate the special difficulty of integrating *Melencolia* into any overarching allegorical scheme. *Saint Jerome* and *Knight, Death, and the Devil* more readily meet the requirement of being complementary opposites, respective expressions of Christian contemplativism and activism, as we just noted. Then again, it is not hard to see how *Melencolia* and *Saint Jerome* may team up to capture the polarities of creative thought: the gloomy disorientation that comes when secular learning reaches its limits, on the one hand, the radiant transcendence associated with divine wisdom, on the other.³² None of the efforts to describe a programmatic unity among all three engravings, however, have yet proved persuasive. Nevertheless, the importance of the *Meisterstiche* as a group in Dürer's graphic oeuvre, and the signal moment their creation marks in his career, can hardly be overlooked.

Peter Parshall, one of Dürer's keenest observers, has recently drawn the *Meisterstiche* back into a coherent unity around Dürer's effort to come to terms with the vexing artistic and epistemological problem of imagination—its relation to mimesis, invention, verism, and certainty, and the dangers inherent in allowing it to wander beyond its proper bounds. These concerns play out in the different ways Dürer harnessed the descriptive technology of his medium to each of the three engravings' distinct themes. Whereas *Knight, Death, and the Devil*, in Parshall's words, "exploits the capacity of engraving to evoke hard and soft surfaces and to illustrate (as well as to exemplify) boundaries that cannot be transgressed," the *Saint Jerome* "captures the elusive, indeed unpicturable qualities of atmosphere, light, and temperature, allying these conditions with the ineffable movements of the mind."³³ Only *Melencolia*, a twilit scene whose luminary values seem to participate in both modes of pictorial description, without realizing either one of them fully, refuses accommodation to the conditions under which visual knowledge compels conviction about its sources; in other words, only in *Melencolia* does Dürer's representational practice seem to be less than

up front about its motives. As we will see more fully in Chapter 2, structurally and optically, the engraving departs from the safe harbor of ordered perception and ventures into the dangerous depths of obscurity, confusion, and chaos—offering an experience of aesthetic and symbolic perplexity unknown elsewhere in Dürer's oeuvre. In Parshall's reading, the calculated sense of clutter yields "a space of mental and material disorientation, a circumstance in which hard facts resist assimilation and the possibility of spiritual transcendence is left profoundly in doubt."³⁴ This forces us to ask what kind of aesthetic value perplexity might be—what it might mean, in other words, for confusion and disorientation to be counted among the picture's resources and motives. We will consider the implications of this question more fully in the pages ahead.

Meanwhile, other features of the *Melencolia* distance it from nearly everything else in the artist's oeuvre, for instance, the presence of two light sources rather than one and, related to this, Dürer's conspicuously uncustomary use of direct lighting from the lower right side of the picture.³⁵ With its nocturnal messenger fluttering across the open sky, displaying the words "MELENCOLIA I" on outstretched wings (figure I.8), the image is also unique among the *Meisterstiche* in proclaiming its theme from within the pictured world—in fact, it is one of only two single-sheet graphic images to which Dürer ever affixed a title, the other being the large-format "Ercules" woodcut of ca. 1496 (see figure E.2). Further features that set *Melencolia* apart from the norms and conventions of Dürer's art, as well as from contemporary printmaking in general, will be encountered in the chapters that follow.

If Dürer's theoretical writings and artistic practice between 1512 and 1516—a period that in several respects marked the pinnacle of his career—are indeed characterized by a "suspicion" of imagination, as Parshall argues, and a strong reluctance to venture beyond the bounds of "plausible representation," the gambit he took in making a quasi-hallucinatory image such as *Melencolia* is all the more striking. The total atmosphere, with its weird airlessness and incantatory power, its surreal assemblage of unlike things, seems to evoke the kind of delusions to which physicians and churchmen thought morbid melancholics acutely susceptible. Luther called black bile, the humor responsible for melancholia, "the devil's bath" (*balneum diaboli*) for the way it poisoned the blood and lay the mind open to demonic interference, sinful fantasy, and carnal agitation.³⁶ Yet as we will see,

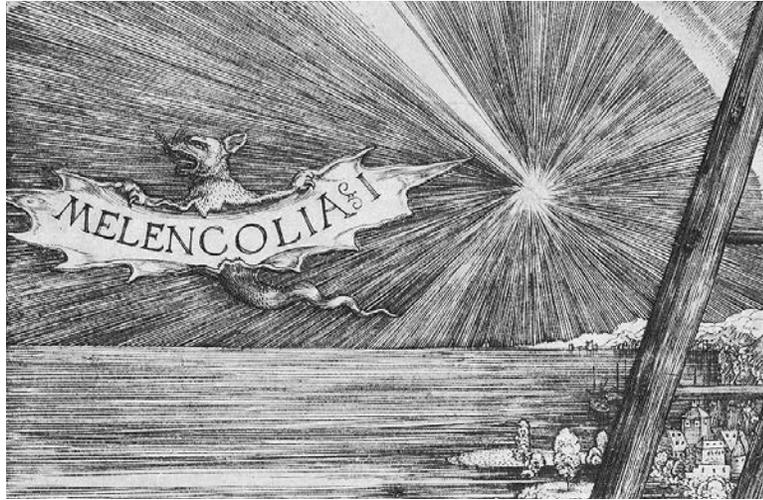


Figure 1.8. Detail from Dürer, *Melencolia I*: bat with title on wings. (See figure 1.1 below.)

no single reading of the depressed mood of the scene—that it portrays Saturn’s baleful influence, or diagnoses an unstable *duskrasia* in the organic systems of the body, or simulates a semidelusive state—satisfies; no single “explanation” knits together all the engraving’s signs and symbols into a unified field of meaning. Chapter 1 considers the perpetual irresolution of efforts to discover something like a “Dürer Code” that would unlock this and other mysteries of the engraving.

Melencolia has been called the “image of images” for the enormous fascination it has exerted over its five hundred year history and for the heavy-duty knowledge production it continues to inspire among professional and amateur scholars, philosophers, humanists, scientists and mystics, code breakers and grail hunters of every stripe, and not least of all artists.³⁷ Barring the appearance of Dürer’s ghost near the Tiergärtnertor, an unforeseen discovery in the Nuremberg archives or the Great Pyramids, to bring forth completely new information about *Melencolia* seems impossible today. However, this immanent crisis of interpretation is not without its own opportunities. Unlike previous projects of interpretation, we will not be bringing the engraving into relation with a particular text or testing alternative readings for competitive plausibility in order to deduce

Dürer's allegorical intentions. Throughout the book, I will be pursuing a different course, and this begins with the insistence that the "deep suspicion of the mind's operations" that Parshall convincingly attributes to Dürer's inventive processes and that may in fact constitute a central theme of the engraving should not be mistaken for, or transferred to, the *receptive* processes that his best work, the *Melencolia* perhaps above all, enables.

Those processes are by definition open-ended, and we will treat them as such. Although no text survives to document or prove Dürer's intentions to make the engraving function in a particular way, we will see in the first two chapters that the picture's visual order is marked by certain kind of aesthetic imperfection, a calculated retreat from harmony and order, a refusal of system, a structural incompleteness that gives the beholder's experience room for free play and growth. We will also see that this structural instability offers itself, in a sense, as the perfect visual counterpart to the "contradictoriness" of the engraving's symbolic program. On Hume's authority, Passmore has remarked that "some degree of aesthetic imperfection may be necessary if a thing is adequately to perform the task for which it was designed."³⁸ According to the theory put forward in this book, Dürer's print is singularly equipped to perform a particular task: to stimulate a certain kind of receptive process in the beholder. That process I will describe as therapeutic in nature—therapeutic in the Petrarchan sense, as a union of rhetoric and philosophy in the pursuit of virtue, and also in the "medical" sense, as a stimulant and balm for rebalancing the mind. Understood in these terms, *Melencolia's* challenge to the beholder, we will see, takes on the quality of a cognitive exercise aimed at restoring and fostering health.

How Dürer leads us from the diagnosis of melancholia to its remediation will not be immediately obvious to longtime admirers of the engraving. In order to reach a clearer understanding of this therapy of the image, we will first have to show how the pictorial and allegorical programs Dürer deployed for *Melencolia* extended his understanding of the printed picture's capacity to serve as a focus for speculative thinking. This will be our work in Chapter 2: to show that it is by virtue of the engraving's perplexing visual structure and the artist's ingenious simulation of the delusive state associated with melancholia that the print could serve as a kind of a training ground

for the natural human activity it mobilizes—speculation—and to which it offers free rein for the sake of rebalancing the mind. This activity is at once cognitive and emotional, spiritual and ethical, and is informed at its roots by ancient Stoicism’s “attention to oneself” (προσοχή, *prosochē*), a “return to oneself” that counters the mind’s vulnerability to fortune, its susceptibility to flux.

Those concerned with the care of souls in Dürer’s time—poets and philosophers, physicians and pastors—understood the human person as a psychosomatic unity, and took health or illness to be a function of the “complexion” of substances and qualities encompassed by the individual. Dürer’s attitudes in this regard seem to match those of the humanist elite with whom he was in close communication (Chapter 4), but may perhaps best be compared with those of Ulrich Pinder (d. 1519) from Nördlingen, who served Dürer’s erstwhile patron, Duke Friedrich the Wise (1463–1525), as court physician before arriving in Nuremberg in 1493, where he soon came to be regarded as the city’s *Achiatrus*, its chief medical doctor.³⁹ Alongside his medical practice, Pinder wrote and self-published several books of spiritual edification with titles such as *Beschlossen gart des rosenkrantz marie* (Enclosed garden of the rosary of the Virgin Mary) and *Speculum passionis* (Mirror of the Passion), several of them copiously illustrated with woodcuts by leading Nuremberg artists. For Pinder the Christian doctor, healing practices aimed at the body and the soul were necessarily imbricated, reflecting a belief that naturalistic medical remedies could affect the soul and, conversely, that spiritual medicine would benefit the body. Only by bridging them could the conditions necessary for ascending to a higher knowledge of God and eternal truths be met.⁴⁰ Dürer surely knew Pinder around the time he was at work on the *Melencolia*—whether personally or through common acquaintances such as Konrad Celtis is unclear—and would have shared his psychosomatic understanding of health and illness, as well as his belief in the need for multipronged therapeutic regimens. As we will see in Chapter 4, contemporary medical thought held melancholia to be a uniquely “contradictory” psychosomatic syndrome, one requiring a combination of therapies: pharmacological, psychological, philosophical, and, depending on the writer, magical as well.

Behind the very conception of *Melencolia*, I will argue, lies an imperative to mobilize precisely those mental faculties debilitated

by an overheating of bile in the system—the most worrisome of the many clinical manifestations of the disease then known. Overcoming the pernicious “beclouding” effects of saturnine gloom, restoring the mind’s equilibrium, and, with it, the health of the body, above all required moderate exercise, mental and physical. In providing such exercise, the print stands as a special and possibly unique remedy for a special malaise—Renaissance misery—and we will consider several kinds of evidence to show that Dürer, together with the intellectual aspirations he had for the print, conceived it as such.

To bring this possibility into historical focus, however, we must ask what our modern category, the therapeutic image, could have possibly meant to Dürer and his (mostly learned) sixteenth-century audience. Does such a notion deserve any kind of place in art history’s lexicon of functional genres and image types? Chapter 3 takes up this problem in some detail, but here’s a preview of what I think. In both its Greek origin and its Latin adaptation, the word “therapy” (θεραπεία, *therapeia*) encompasses notions of treatment, care, healing, and “attention.” (The word *therapōn* [θεράπων] denotes an attendant.) Even a thumbnail etymology such as this reveals how vast a domain we will encounter when considering the therapeutic in the intertwined histories of healing and material making. European visual culture before the industrial era knew several long-standing therapies of the image. Art history has been aware of them, even if it has been unready to categorize them as such: the devotional image, which offered both emotional training and a kind of visual-sacramental therapy; the votive image, which functioned as a relay for securing the health of the body and the health of the soul through heavenly intercession and aid; the cult image, with its range of votive functions and an inherent, quasi-magical power of protection and cure; and the meditative image, the focal point for spiritual exercises of many kinds.

Within this rough taxonomy, I am proposing that we make room for a new conception of the *allegorical-speculative* image. This entails seeing the kind of cognitive-spiritual exercise that such an image makes possible not as a “stepping stone” to metaphysical truths beyond the sensible world, but as a practical and ethical therapy in this world, a remedy in the Petrarchan sense. Philosophy and rhetoric become allied in real time in the exercise of the mind, helping to move the soul of the spectator out of confusion and distress into

clarification and health. This psychological movement toward well-being that the print's visual rhetoric encourages, the self-aware cognitive activity that it demands, spans the modern divide between psychological and somatic experience and is captured in a word with an equally complex pedigree: catharsis (κάθαρσις, *katharsis*).

In a daring conceit, Dürer has presented to the suffering soul a vital means for its restoration, a diagnosis it is the beholder's task to transform into medicine. That task, that labor, begins with an intensification of symptoms—brought on, we will see, by a certain structural disorder, an “impure harmony” offered to the beholder as a possible pathway, or itinerary (*ductus*), through the image.⁴¹ What the engraving offers, I will argue, is not only an erudite portrayal of the peculiar misery that grips creative people, melancholia, but also an instrument for remedying it.

Each of the four chapters in the first part of this volume will furnish an essential building block for this argument. If I am successful in persuading the reader that a therapeutic impulse figures large in Dürer's conception of the print, we will not only have expanded our sense of what early modern works of art were empowered to do. We will also come to appreciate how the Christian-humanist artist could step into and transform a very “Petrarchan” role. Just as the poet, using eloquence and style as a means of awakening the rational soul to virtue, could claim the mantle of the *medicus animorum*, the physician of souls, so could the painter using the expressive means at his disposal. In the Renaissance rhetoric, poetry, painting, and medicine were each counted as an “art” (τέχνη, *technē*) with its own distinctive capacity for pleasing, persuading, and moving the subject. Rivalries and analogies between these arts formed an essential resource for educated humanists when evaluating the moral and aesthetic compatibility between the subject being addressed and the “style of speaking”—as a rhetorician such as Philip Melanchthon would put it—chosen for the address.⁴²

Among the suffering subjects Dürer's medicinal art addressed was himself. Always prone to overwork; afflicted later in life with a “strange sickness” that sapped his energies; disturbed by dreams and premonitions; tested by the deaths of family members and friends; and acutely aware of his own mortality, Dürer's own miseries are well documented in word and image. So, too, are his varied auto-therapeutic responses to crisis and the slow advance of infirmity

(Chapter 5). More than any other work he produced, *Melencolia* may represent the culmination of the syndrome that caused Dürer, incapable as he was of following his own warnings about overexertion, the greatest of his own secular sorrows: the crisis of perfection. But this crisis, as is already clear, was hardly unique to him; it was, rather, a shared predicament. The sodality of creative men who considered Dürer the “Apelles of our age” (that is, the modern counterpart to the renowned ancient Greek painter) and whom Dürer called friends—an extended circle comprising scholars and poets, lawyers and scientists, churchmen and educators—stood in the same need of relief and restoration. So did the man who became Dürer’s greatest patron during the middle third of his career, the German emperor and royal melancholic, Maximilian I (Epilogue). And so did his fellow Christians within and beyond the walls of his native Nuremberg. Addressing himself to the quality of their minds in the face of misery and misfortune, the artist presented himself as a healer trained by the experience of affliction. Behind the religious works examined in Chapter 6 is an ethos of care and a collaborative cultivation of virtue that recalls Petrarch’s words to his friend Donato Albanzani in 1368, upon the death of his son: “so I succor and comfort you, dear friend, in what time there is, and to the best of my ability, and I comfort myself since we share everything: hopes, fears, joys, and grief. And so, as I have said, I combine our wounds in order to prepare the salves.”⁴³ Like Petrarch, Dürer lived at the mercy of opposing forces, never achieving that “balance between the requirements of ancient humanism and of medieval religiosity,” as Ernst Cassirer put it—never overcoming that “schism within his mind, that sickness of the soul.”⁴⁴ Yet both men recognized, each in his own way, that the new art toward which they aimed their practice, and on which they staked their fame, would be born under the same sign as ancient philosophy and wisdom in both their pagan and Christian varieties: the injunction to care for the self, and to use one’s gifts to call others to the same virtue.⁴⁵