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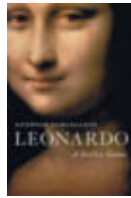
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# What good would climbing do?

Therapy, melancholy and Albrecht Dürer

GABRIEL JOSIPOVICI

Mitchell B. Merback

PERFECTION'S THERAPY  
An essay on Albrecht Dürer's Melencolia I  
357pp. Zone. \$32.95.  
978 1 942130 00 0

"My sometime friend Belacqua", one of Samuel Beckett's early stories begins, "enlivened the last phase of his solipsism . . . with the belief that the best thing he had to do was to move constantly from place to place. He did not know how this conclusion had been gained, but that it was not thanks to his preferring one place to another he felt sure." Belacqua Shua, the Dublin layabout who is the protagonist of these stories, is a thinly veiled version of the young Beckett himself. The story goes that when, one mid-day in Paris in the 1930s, Peggy Guggenheim and friends called on Beckett to go picnicking as they had planned they found him still in bed. "Get up!" they shouted. "We've got to get moving!" To which the budding writer answered: "Why?" and, turning over in bed, went back to sleep.

Beckett's alter ego in these stories is named after a character in Dante. In Canto 4 of the *Purgatorio* Dante and Virgil come across a strange figure:

We drew near; and there were persons in the shade behind the rock, in postures people take for negligence. And one of them, who seemed weary, was sitting embracing his knees, holding his face down low between them. "O my sweet lord," said I, "look at that fellow; he appears more negligent than if Laziness were his sister." Then he turned to us and gave us his attention, shifting his face up a bit along his thigh, and said, "Now you go up, you are so vigorous."

At this moment Dante recognizes him as an old acquaintance. Delighted that Belacqua is here and not in Hell, he asks him why he is sitting there like that: "Are you waiting for a guide, or have your old habits claimed you once again?"

And he, "O brother, what good would climbing do? For the angel of God sitting on the threshold would not let me go on to the torments. First it is necessary for the heavens to turn around me outside here as long as they did in my life, since I delayed my good sighs until the end, unless prayer help me first, which must rise from the heart that lives in grace . . ."

The law of Dante's universe decrees that those who never repented spend the remainder of time locked in their respective circles of Hell, but that those who, even if only at the last moment, cast themselves on God's mercy, will be consigned to the mountain of Purgatory, whose lower slopes are hard to climb but which gets easier as one ascends. Belacqua is an infernal figure in his inability and unwillingness to move, and yet, as he explains, he will slowly and in due time, helped on perhaps by the prayers of others, reach the desired goal.

There is no such hope for his Dublin counterpart. His vision is not of the universe turning in time to God's laws, which we might choose to



"Melencolia I" by Albrecht Dürer, 1514

ignore or subvert but which we know exist, but of a meaningless and timeless present in which one thing is as good as another, and so there is no reason to try to do anything. A century before Beckett, Kierkegaard had given him a modern voice in his first book, *Either/Or*: "How terrible tedium is . . . I lie stretched out, inactive, the only thing I see is emptiness, the only thing I move about in is emptiness . . . I do not even suffer pain . . . If you marry you will regret it; if you do not marry you will regret it . . . Hang yourself, you will regret it; do not hang yourself you will regret it . . ."

What both Kierkegaard's young man and Beckett's Belacqua suffer from is not *acedia* (sloth), one of seven precisely differentiated deadly sins, but melancholy, what Baudelaire called *Spleen*, which knows no boundaries and for which there seems to be no remedy. In this world there is no such a thing as an upward trajectory away from one's condition and towards redemption, and the idea of someone praying for you and this making a difference is nothing but a bad joke.

Many who have thought about this have felt that its first and perhaps greatest depiction is to be found in Albrecht Dürer's engraving from 1514 mysteriously entitled "Melencolia I". Adrian Leverkühn, Thomas Mann's latter-day Faustus, is one such. The bargain he makes with the Devil is that in exchange for his soul he desires not infinite riches or power or women,

but for a few precious years to be rid of his apathy and cynicism and given belief in the value of making music. Long before he strikes his bargain, still a theology student in Halle, he sticks on the wall above the piano in his rented room something he has picked up in a junk shop, a reproduction of

a so-called magic square, such as appears also in Dürer's *Melencolia*, along with the hour-glass, the sphere, the scale, the polyhedron, and other symbols. Here as there the figure was divided into sixteen Arabic numbered fields, in such a way that number one was in the right-hand corner, sixteen in the upper left, and the magic, or oddity, simply consisted in the fact that the sum of these numerals, however you added them, straight down, crosswise, or diagonally, always came to thirty-four.

The uncanniness is what fascinates the classically minded narrator Zeitblom, but for Adrian it clearly also suggests the uncanny nature of music itself.

Dürer's contemporaries recognized the importance of the engraving, and many artists tried out their own versions of *Melencolia*, the most famous being Cranach's. German art historians throughout the twentieth century puzzled over its meaning and significance. Erwin Panofsky, in his great book on Dürer (1943), made clear the importance of Italian Neoplatonism for the Humanist circles in which Dürer moved and used Ficino's theories of divine

madness allied to genius to decode the engraving. This was developed into a book-length study, still one of the masterpieces of the Warburg school: *Saturn and Melancholy* by Panofsky and his colleagues Raymond Klibansky and Fritz Saxl, which appeared in English in 1964. What all these scholars share, argues Mitchell Merback in *Perfection's Therapy*, his erudite new study of Dürer's engraving, "is a commitment to reading Dürer's picture as a unified statement, a symbol in the sense articulated by Panofsky's mentor, the neo-Kantian philosopher, Ernst Cassirer (1874–1945)". He explains what he means by this:

Each assumes that the engraving's accumulated object-signs all point beyond themselves, to something mysteriously "contained" by the work, as if gestating there, awaiting the hermeneutical act that will liberate it and bring it into the light of day. Once successful, such an act will show the whole work to be a synthesis of these revealed meanings.

More recently, though, scholars, foremost among them Joseph Koerner, have taken to arguing that "instead of mediating a meaning, 'Melencolia' seems designed to generate multiple and contradictory readings" (as Koerner puts it), that "the impossibility of ever arranging the parts into a cohesive and meaningful whole, should be understood as a deliberate effort by Dürer to convey the feeling of melancholic distress, to simulate the disorientation that attends a particular state of mind".

Merback's sympathies lie with this more recent trend but he wishes to take this insight in a new direction. The engraving, he argues, seeks not only to disorientate viewers, but, having done so, to redirect them along a new path that will restore them to health. But first he explores, with great subtlety, the way in which the picture is fashioned to repel any attempt at a unified vision. He begins, as indeed does Panofsky, by comparing and contrasting "Melencolia I" with another engraving made by Dürer in 1514 and clearly designed as some sort of companion piece, "St Jerome in his Study".

Employing an orthodox method of geometrical perspective here, Dürer creates a lucid architectural space "in which the location of every object is logically subordinated to the whole, where everything finds its natural place of repose, like the interior of the great philologist's mind". By contrast, "Melencolia" frustrates our eye and mind at every turn. To begin with it lacks a predominant vertical, horizontal, or diagonal line, and appears to have no visual centre. There are, moreover, two light sources, one top left, in the area of the threatening bat with outstretched wings on which the title of the picture is displayed, and one, quite atypically for Dürer, at lower right. Thus light is not evenly distributed, yet every object seems to be touched by a strange flickering glow. Yet this is not to say that "Melencolia" is simply chaotic or unstructured. On the contrary, we sense that there are complex sets of relationships at play here, that the polyhedron somehow relates to the sphere beneath it, the bell to the hourglass next to it, the huge left arm of the seated female figure to the little putto, and so on; but, as with the magic square, there is something uncanny about the whole, something not quite right, if only we could put our finger on it.

Merback alerts us to the oddity of the ladder that, on close inspection, reveals itself to be more like one of Richard Gregory's impossible objects (my analogy) than anything anyone could climb; to how the polyhedron, apparently

so solid, "seems weirdly possessed of an inner torque, a kinetic potential that makes its planar components seem to rotate away from the central axis", and how "this instability lends the form an uncanny 'agency' in steering the eye's activity around the composition". He brings out the complex mathematical echoes set up by the magic square (scholars have even argued that it holds the key to the construction of the polyhedron), and points out that Dürer in fact dates his work twice – once, in his usual fashion, above his monogram, though here half hidden in the shadows beneath the bench on which the figure sits, and again in the middle two numbers of the bottom row of the magic square: 1514.

All this merely reinforces our immediate sense, on seeing the picture of chaos and confusion (the tools of Melencolia's trade scattered on the floor, the sense of too many things piled together on the right and bottom left of the picture) allied to stasis (in Melencolia's posture, her wide-open eyes gazing not outward but somehow into herself, the compasses inactive in her hand, the emaciated dog at her feet, asleep but hardly relaxed, and over it all the wide open expanse of sea and the sky with its weird light, the baleful rainbow and the eerie bat heralding its melancholy message to the world). The Warburg argument that this is an image of Neoplatonic genius (which according to Ficino and others tends to be allied to melancholy) seems more and more wide of the mark the longer one looks.

But Merback has only been laying the groundwork for his own view. "According to the theory put forward in this book", he says early on,

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.

This is a Humanist version of Dante's expressed position that his *Paradiso* is designed to lead people from a state of confusion to one of grace, so Merback has no difficulty in finding texts and images, from classical antiquity through the Middle Ages to the Renaissance, to back his argument. The trouble is that everything he says and all the examples he gives, from antiquity, from the Middle Ages, and from Dürer's own extensive oeuvre, merely serves to highlight the fact that "Melencolia I" simply does not fit the mould into which he is trying to place it. When he writes that "Vigilant attention to the self, the tempering of the creaturely passions by reason, the inclining of the will toward humility, the cultivation of virtue – to the Renaissance humanist, these were long term imperatives for the conduct of life", he is plainly right, but what has this to do with "Melencolia I"? And when he tries to link his thesis specifically to the engraving, he entirely fails to persuade. He notes the engraving's strange oscillation between "overheated frenzy" and "frozen torpor", but then goes on:

Warning the beholder about this dangerous borderline is not, however, the engraving's only answer to this crisis. Laying out the grounds for the mind's resistance and suggesting possible itineraries, it also offers a kind of consolation, as

well as a way clear of the predicament. Poised between extremes, but ready to move in the right direction, Melencolia's narrative "situation" invites and instigates a tempered response in the beholder, a moderate and modulated speculation with the power not only to model, but to restore the mind's creative functioning.

It is as if, fired by his thesis about the work's therapeutic power, Merback has forgotten everything he had previously said about it. He could be describing a different picture. He might of course persuade us if he were to show us what it was in the engraving that we had read so wrongly, but he doesn't do that. Instead he bombards us with information about medieval and Humanist therapeutic practices and theories, but there is nothing there that makes me feel that this bears any relation to our particular image.

To take just one example. It is well known that certain works of art were literally seen as aids to healing. Merback points to Rogier van der Weyden's "Last Judgement", commissioned in 1443 for the hospice in Beaune by the Burgundian Chancellor, Nicolas Rolin, and his wife; the Isenheim Altarpiece, by Matthias Grünewald and Nikolaus Hagenauer, created in the same years as Dürer's engraving for the monastery of St Anthony near Colmar; and the high altarpiece in the hospital church of the Holy Spirit in Laatsch, South Tyrol, by Jörg Lederer and Jörg Mack. If we look at any one of these in detail, Merback's attempt to draw "Melencolia I" into their orbit seems utterly perverse. In Colmar, at the Monastery of St Anthony, those suffering from ergotism, a disease caused, we now know, by contaminated rye but which, in early modern Europe, was known as St Anthony's fire, were looked after in a great chamber at the far end of which was displayed Grünewald's huge polyptych whose central image is a vast and terrible depiction of Christ on the cross, covered in boils precisely like those afflicting sufferers from ergotism. It is easy to understand how it was felt that gazing on the sufferings of this Christ would give a sense of hope and solidarity to the victims of the horrific disease.

Merback implies that "Melencolia I" performed a similar role for those suffering from melancholy, but it is enough to suggest the parallel to see its absurdity. This is a small image, made to be looked at by a single person at a time; Grünewald's polyptych, with its suffering Christ flanked by the Virgin Mary and John on the one side and John the Baptist with the Lamb of God on the other, and with its adjoining panels of St Anthony's desert nightmares

and the Resurrection, implies a history of the world in which the figures depicted and the figures gazing at *what* is depicted form part of a whole. In Dürer's image we are in a timeless present which corresponds to no spot on earth, and to identify with the brooding central figure would seem more likely to entrap one in one's melancholy than to relieve it.

The source of the problem is that Merback consistently identifies melancholy as Dürer depicts her with *acedia*, one sin in a very precise series in a precise cosmology. But if you believe, as I do, that there is something radically new and radically different about Dürer's *Melencolia*, that she belongs not to the ordered world of Dante but to the new world whose outlines will be explored by Kierkegaard, Baudelaire, Mann and many others, then the entire premiss of Merback's argument collapses. From this type of melancholy there is no obvious release; once it has you in its grip it colours your entire world, and the suggestion that there is a way out of it seems insufferably smug and self-confident. But, a defender of Merback might reply, all your examples belong 300 years after Dürer, who was still very much a man of the Renaissance. Mann may use the Dürer image in connection with his latter-day Faustus, but the key here is that he is a latter-day Faustus. My response would be: What about *Hamlet*? Are we to identify Hamlet's melancholy as a curable disease for which the tradition, both Christian and Humanist, suggested clear remedies (Merback is very persuasive on this), or as an incurable condition brought about by a general crisis in authority, which in Hamlet's case means less than absolute faith in his father's ghost and its injunction to avenge him? My sense is that the answer has to be the latter, and that is why *Hamlet* still speaks to us so powerfully today.

But, it might be retorted, *Hamlet* was written a century after Dürer engraved his image, and in a very different environment. That is true, of course, but it seems to me that both these great works of art, while being embedded in their times, speak to us more directly and with more power than most of the great monuments of Renaissance art – Spenser's *Faerie Queene* or Botticelli's "Primavera", say. They do so because they ask us to face the fact that neither the traditional Christian message nor the noble Humanist endeavours built on its ruin may quite work, and that there is nothing else to turn to for consolation except the dramatization of this fact.

**If we may mention some of our authors?**

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