

SENSES OF HUMOR

Christopher S. Wood on *Saturn and Melancholy*

Saturn and Melancholy: Studies in the History of Natural Philosophy, Religion, and Art, by Raymond Klibansky, Erwin Panofsky, and Fritz Saxl. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2019. 632 pages.

ACCORDING TO AN ANCIENT TEXT attributed to Aristotle, black bile “can induce paralysis or torpor or depression or anxiety when it prevails in the body; but if it is overheated it produces cheerfulness, bursting into song, and ecstasies and the eruption of sores and the like.” Such “fits of exaltation” were believed to be conducive to creative achievement. “Maracus, the Syracusan,” the text tells us, “was actually a better poet when he was out of his mind.” The aesthetes of the Renaissance and the Romantic era were equally convinced of the natural link between melancholy and creativity. In *As You Like It*, Shakespeare’s philosophical idler Jaques, savoring his own moodiness, boasts, “I can suck melancholy out of a song as a weasel sucks eggs.” To this day, the notion persists that spleen, ennui, depression, and even madness might be correlated with genius—or, at the very least, with an artistic sensibility.

Saturn and Melancholy: Studies in the History of Natural Philosophy, Religion, and Art (1964) tracks the fortunes of this idea across two thousand years. This classic of collaborative scholarship, long out of print, has been reissued with supplementary materials, including updated bibliographies and translations of its Latin quotations. More than six hundred pages in its newest version, a trove of cosmological, physiological, and psychological learning and lore, the book comes to us as a precious gift because it reflects on a question seldom posed today: not that of art’s destination—its uses and purposes—but rather that of art’s origin.

For the physicians and philosophers of ancient Greece and Rome, personality was governed by the four humors: blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile. The healthy person enjoyed a balance of these fluids. An excess of black bile, however, induced states of gloom,



Albrecht Dürer, *Melencolia I*, 1514, engraving on paper, 9½ × 7½”.

irrationality, apathy, despair, and anxiety. Physicians sought various remedies for this condition—some fantastical, others quite sensible, like gymnastics, music, and moderate, compassionate conversation—but at the same time recognized that the melancholic was often a superior individual: sinister, but also sublime in his unmanageability and immorality. One poet described melancholy as “a disease of heroes”; Plato understood this morbid “frenzy” as a divine gift. Aristotle observed that “all those who have become eminent in philosophy [including Plato] or politics or poetry or the arts are clearly melancholics.” It was said that the philosopher Heraclitus fell prey to the affliction and so lost himself in contradiction, leaving most of his work unfinished. Melancholics, possessed of a highly susceptible *vis imaginativa* (imaginative power), were also more likely to be besieged by unbidden memories, phantasms, and prophetic dreams.

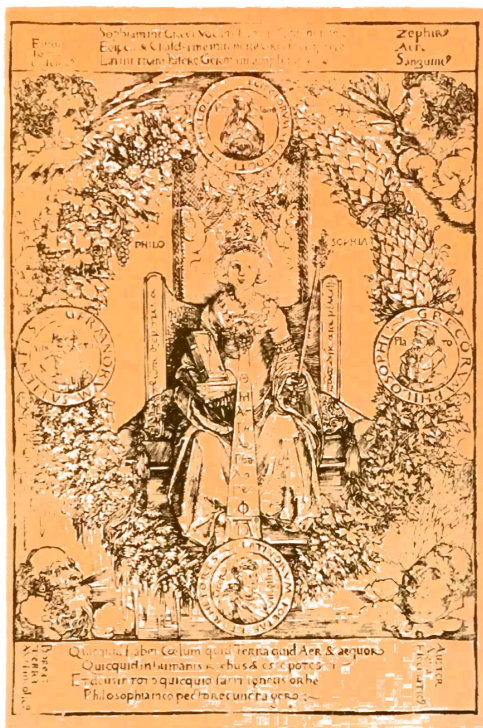
The Scholastic theologians of the Christian Middle Ages were not inclined to indulge such moods and

enthusiasms. Saint Hildegard of Bingen blamed melancholy on the fall of man in the Garden of Eden. Nor were the medieval physicians, following the lead of the Persian philosopher Avicenna, convinced of the link between melancholy and the imagination; they simply considered the former a disease. And yet the “curious mental illness” that afflicted the great Netherlandish painter and cleric Hugo van der Goes in 1482—apparently a severe bout of depression, described by a fellow monk with a certain anxious awe—was treated by his abbot with music, which was also prescribed to King Saul when he was troubled by an “evil spirit.” (Vincent van Gogh, by the way, was later much impressed by this episode and identified with the despairing painter.)

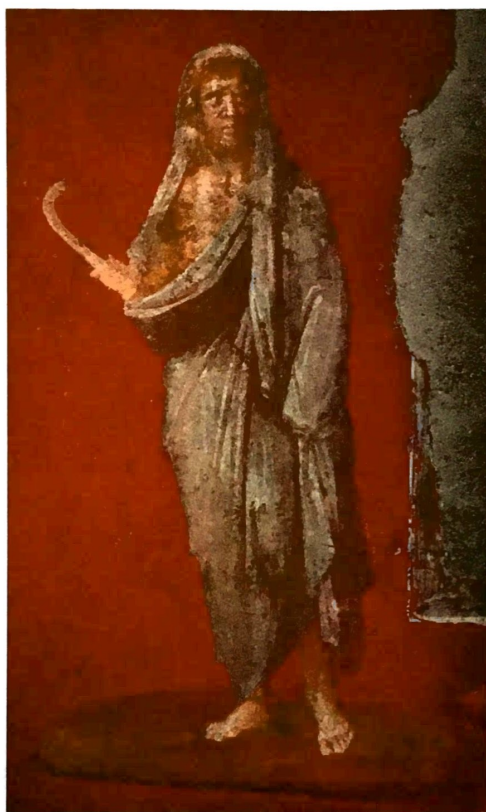
Saturn came into the picture at the close of the Middle Ages, when medical doctrine was permeated by astrology, a set of teachings first shaped in antiquity and subsequently developed by Arab translators and commentators, who disseminated them in vernacular poems, almanacs, manuals, and broadsheets. Recovering lost ancient traditions, these so-called iatromathematicians held that the body was governed by the stars and classified melancholics, including speculative thinkers and those given over to study, as the “children of Kronos” (or his Roman equivalent, Saturn). As Christians, medieval astrologers had to deny the divinity of the Greco-Roman deities, and yet they feared their influence. Now the melancholic found himself in the double grip of the stars and his bodily fluids.

When *Saturn and Melancholy* finally arrives at the Italian Renaissance, we hear the voice of Erwin Panofsky, one of the preeminent art historians of the past century, author of classic texts on premodern art theory, perspective, and the symbolic languages of Renaissance and Baroque art. He describes that era’s new breed of humanistic poets and thinkers, who were aware of their own genius—Petrarch, for example, who nevertheless could not perceive his alternating states of *acedia* (listlessness) and *dementia* as aspects of one and the same “bipolar” disposition. It was the Neoplatonic philosopher Marsilio Ficino, recovering Plato’s concept of divine madness, who first associated melancholy with artistic genius. He prescribed therapies and remedies for the condition, yet at the same time seemed to admire, if not exalt, all that was saturnine. The connection was

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Above: Albrecht Dürer, *Philosophia*, ca. 1502, woodcut on paper, 8 1/2 x 5 7/8". Right: Fresco detail of Saturn, ca. 63 CE. From the House of the Dioscuri, Pompeii.



thus made once and for all between intellectual disorder and outstanding intellectual ability. Panofsky follows with a gripping sketch of the emergence of the idea of the sovereignty of the *vita contemplativa* (contemplative life). The genius, it would seem, is liberated from the norms of morality as much as from the rules of art, living “beyond good and evil.” (On the topos of the gifted artist’s instability and unreliability, see the great study by Rudolf and Margot Wittkower, *Born Under Saturn: The Character and Conduct of Artists* [1963].)

The climax of the book is Panofsky’s ninety-page reading of the engraving *Melencolia I*, 1514, by Albrecht Dürer; *Saturn and Melancholy* is in effect an extended gloss on this iconic image. Panofsky shows here how the history of ideas intersects with the history of art. The basic conceit of melancholy personified as a seated, lethargic woman derives from fifteenth-century French precedents. Dürer was the first to add wings, thus lending the figure an angelic dignity. Head supported on a clenched fist, face darkened by a scowl, and hair unkempt, she is surrounded by the tools of the geometer, or the architect. Strewn about her feet are a polyhedron, a sphere, and various devices associated with the art of building. There is a book tucked in her lap, and she absently clutches a compass. On top of this primary meaning, Panofsky detects a second order of meaning, encoded in the saturnine symbols of dog, bat, and

herbal wreath. The magic square on the wall behind her, by contrast, is associated with Jupiter and is meant to offset the saturnine influence (not very effectively, it would seem).

Panofsky’s conclusion is already known to readers of his *Life and Art of Albrecht Dürer* (1943): that *Melencolia I* is a “spiritual self-portrait” of the artist himself. Dürer, the author of several treatises on art theory, valued geometry most highly among all the liberal arts: “I will take measure, number, and weight as my aim,” he wrote. Panofsky argues that the artist was also familiar with the ideas of Ficino on the susceptibility of creative genius to melancholy, and points out that Dürer himself was described by a learned contemporary who knew him well as one who suffered from “noble melancholy.”

According to Panofsky, Dürer’s ponderous, brooding alter ego had hoped that geometry and more generally theoretical knowledge would yield the secrets of nature. She found, however, that measurement did not open her mind to any realm beyond the Earth itself. She is frustrated in her pursuit of art; the print depicts her creative paralysis and her inability to recover the innocent industry of the putto writing or drawing on a small tablet while perched beside her on a millstone. The source of her creative block is found in the writings of Pico della Mirandola, who asserts that geometrical or mathematical thought, inherently limited, falls short of religious

or metaphysical insight: “There is falsehood in our knowledge, and darkness so firmly planted in us that even groping fails.” Dürer knew these texts and believed that to get beyond merely correct and objective measurement he must hope for something like divine inspiration, a mystical “influx” of figures or forms, for which the protagonist of his engraving waits and waits. This is an idea of art, Panofsky argues, that goes well beyond the rationalism of Italian Renaissance theorists Leon Battista Alberti and Leonardo da Vinci.

Panofsky’s tragic, existential reading of the artist’s predicament is the opposite of that of his mentor, the renowned art historian Aby Warburg, who, in what seems to me a blatant misreading, described Dürer’s engraving as a positive image of the artist’s victory over the baleful influence of Saturn. He argued that the work, with its “consoling, humanistic message of liberation from the fear of Saturn,” could thus serve as a kind of talismanic remedy for melancholy; this interpretation was endorsed and developed in Mitchell B. Merback’s challenging 2017 study, *Perfection’s Therapy: An Essay on Albrecht Dürer’s “Melencolia I.”* Merback reprises the conventional view that whereas Panofsky’s account of the Renaissance was “Apollonian,” or triumphantly rationalist, Warburg was not afraid to embrace the idea that art and culture are shaped by ungovernable occult forces and drives—but, in fact, just the opposite is true. Panofsky’s interpretation of *Melencolia I* suggests that the art of the Renaissance, even or especially when effective, is inhabited by negativity and failure, and that while whatever it is that permitted Dürer to overcome his paralysis and create such a work as *Melencolia I* is finally incomprehensible, it is not necessarily unrelated to the same morbid disposition that first thwarted his inspiration. Warburg, by contrast, did not at all understand instability, delusion, and inner chaos as the matrices of creativity. Rather, he considered irrationality a danger to civilization, to be vanquished at all costs by the exercise of reason and by an affirmative concept of art as an instrument of cultural renewal.

Warburg was by any measure himself a melancholic man (he was treated for a paranoid psychosis by the psychiatrist Ludwig Binswanger); Panofsky, by all accounts, was not. Yet it was the older scholar who was unable to recognize the artist’s melancholic character. Warburg shut his eyes to the tragic content of the engraving, whereas the younger scholar saw it clearly. At the close of this monument of modern scholarship, it is the troubled, self-doubting, and inexplicable Dürer who stands out in sharp relief. □

CHRISTOPHER S. WOOD IS A PROFESSOR IN THE GERMAN DEPARTMENT AT NEW YORK UNIVERSITY, AND A MEMBER OF THE AMERICAN ACADEMY OF ARTS AND SCIENCES. HE IS THE AUTHOR, MOST RECENTLY, OF *A HISTORY OF ART HISTORY* (PRINCETON, 2019). (SEE CONTRIBUTORS.)