

The joy of sadness

Dürer's Melencolia I is about more than insomnia and depression. Its themes of geometry, cosmology and even politics have influenced artists from Grass to Birtwistle. By Patrick Wright

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Enigmatic variations: Durer's Melencolia I (detail, top) is an influence on Harrison Birtwistle's (bottom) *The Shadow of Night*. In Albert Dürer's engraving *Melencolia I*, an angel sits in the middle of a construction site, surrounded by hammers, planes and geometrical devices. It wears a dark and withdrawn countenance while Saturn radiates nocturnal light over the ocean behind.

The engraving suggests a mysteriously balanced stillness between opposites. Dürer's angel is winged, yet immobile and heavy. The bell is silent and the tools are at rest. There is an hourglass containing equal amounts of spent and unspent sand. On the wall, below the bell, hangs a "magic square" of numbers arranged in rows of four: they always add up to 34, whether counted vertically, horizontally or diagonally.

Every detail in this enigmatic engraving suggests an arcane cosmological meaning. As diverse scholars have demonstrated, Dürer's melancholy involves considerably more than the obsessive nocturnal ruminations of the insomniac or the depressed state of mind in which a sense of mortality presses in and all endeavour seems futile.

The modern reinterpretation of *Melencolia I* was initiated by the German art historian Erwin Panofsky, whose work on Dürer and melancholy was first published in 1923. In early medieval doctrine, melancholy was one of the four humours, alongside the sanguine, the choleric and the phlegmatic. It was associated with black bile and the earth and linked to the planet Saturn.

The association with Saturn may have been established by Arab writers in the ninth century, but Panofsky and his colleagues traced other roots to ancient Greece, citing both the concept of number espoused by Pythagoras and the unity of macrocosm and microcosm established by Empedocles. In its early expression, melancholy was both a temperament and an illness, and associated with fear, withdrawal, depression and madness.

For Panofsky and his colleagues, many details of Dürer's engraving engage this inherited imagery of melancholy: the drooped head of the angel, her "black face" or "shadowed countenance", the purse and keys, even the clenched fist, which had long associated melancholy with avarice.

Other details work against these Saturnine qualities. The wreath around the angel's brow may be a conventional sign of intellectual powers but, being made of water parsley and watercress, it also counteracts the dryness of the melancholy temperament.

Dürer's engraving also seems to raise melancholy from its conventional position as the lowest of the four humours to the highest. It shows it as the humour of the great and prophetic. No longer "inert depression" or mere idleness, melancholy becomes a "unique and divine gift", an inspiring quality of genius and the proper predisposition of intellectual work.

Panofsky finds testimony to this conception in the geometrical elements so strongly present in *Melencolia I*, its ladder, compass, sphere and stone octahedron. "Geometria" had long symbolised the "allegorised ideal of a creative mental faculty", but Dürer combines this with the image of melancholy as a destructive state of mind.

He was bold enough to "bring down" timeless knowledge into "the sphere of human striving and failure" and, inversely, to "raise the animal heaviness of a sad, earthy temperament to the height of a struggle with intellectual problems". He has merged the worlds of thought and feeling and, as a consequence, "Geometria's workshop has changed from a cosmos of clearly ranged and purposefully employed tools into a chaos of unused things".

Panofsky suggested that *Melencolia I* was based on a passage in Henry Cornelius Agrippa's *De Occulta Philosophica*, an idea further developed by Frances Yates in her book *The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age* (1979).

Yates sees the sleeping and half-starved dog in *Melencolia I* as a sign that the body is under firm control: it represents the "starved dog of the senses". She remarks that Dürer's ladder leads up to heaven, not merely to the top of a half-made building. And far from being in a state of failure or inertia, Dürer's angel is in a visionary trance.

Melancholy, a characteristic condition of the 16th and 17th century, has more recent forms: the "ennui" of revolutionary France, the "dejection" of 19th-century romanticism, the "anomie" often associated, rightly or wrongly, with the modern city. As Simone de Beauvoir reveals in *The Prime of Life*, Jean-Paul Sartre chose *Melancholia* as the title for the novel he eventually published as *La Nausée* (Nausea) in 1938.

This book, one of the founding texts of existentialism, retains many traces of Sartre's meditation on Dürer's image: the angel *Melencolia* giving way to the narrator Antoine Roquentin, who nevertheless remains inclined to meditations on blackness, withdrawal ("I am alone in the midst of these happy, reasonable faces...") and even the heaviness with which a seated soul presses down upon a bench.

Dürer's angel is further reinterpreted in Günther Grass's novel, *From the Diary of a Snail*. Here, *Melencolia I* is folded into an account of the 1969 election in West Germany. Grass campaigned for Willy Brandt's Social Democratic Party, giving more than 100 speeches. In the early days of that campaign, Grass received an invitation to present a lecture as part of Nuremberg's celebrations of Dürer Year in 1971. So he took a postcard of *Melencolia I* on the campaign trail and found that "between melancholy and social democracy there are sometimes desperately funny short circuits".

There is, without doubt, a measure of melancholy in the snail of the title, first seen crawling across the floor of the East Prussia Hall as the result is counted. Grass adopts this snail as an ironic symbol of progress: here presented as the slow, sticky business of inching forwards while the weight of history pulls from behind - a struggle against the memory of Nazism and "the dead weight of things as they are". As Grass writes: "In the midst of progress we find ourselves standing still. The excavated future. The mysticism of statistics. Gothically ornate ignition keys. Automobiles wrapped around trees."

Far from being just a "suspicious eccentricity", Grass declares melancholy to be a "social state of mind" to be found in various forms of modern life, from the depression of the student to the boredom of the "suburban widow". In the factory, melancholy becomes "a semi-political dejection" and "the class privilege of the wage earner".

Indeed, Dürer's angel becomes the consort of political utopianism. Particularly on the fringes of the political spectrum, Grass finds people taking "desperately extreme attitudes of resignation or euphoria. Daily flights into utopia found their counterpart in relapses into melancholic withdrawal." He imagines that, one day, "utopia and

melancholia will coincide: an age without conflict will dawn, perpetually busy - and without consciousness".

Grass also sees Dürer's angel "barging in" to the world of "touristically organised leisure", where Touristica becomes her other self: "Herded in groups at attractive prices by our leading agencies to sunny beaches... wherever the sightseeing conveyor belt chooses to operate, Touristica as Melencolia snaps her pictures until, suddenly or gradually, the click of the shutter release, the idiotic mechanism of the exposure meter, and the foretaste of ridiculous results rise to consciousness. Now she's sitting slumped amid picturesque scenes. Exhausted, fed up, she refuses to absorb any more..."

Grass's presentation of melancholy as "stasis in progress" informed Harrison Birtwistle's composition *Melencolia I*, written in 1976 for the clarinettist Alan Hacker, who was becoming paraplegic. Dürer's image is also reflected in the orchestration of that composition: an engraving must evoke its world entirely in black and white, and Birtwistle suggests stark opposition with his use of clarinet and strings.

He knows, too, about the melancholy that attends the passage of historical time. Birtwistle has always had an acute sense of the relic or remnant, be it an ancient musical motif or a ruin or building that features in the metaphors he uses when talking about his work.

Shortly after completing *The Shadow of Night*, Birtwistle visited Santiago de Compostela, in Galicia, Spain, and looked with particular interest at an ancient marble column inside the entrance to the cathedral. Over many centuries, this column, carved as a Tree of Jesse, has been clasped by so many millions of pilgrims that the shape of a hand has been worn deep into the stone.

To this day, people queue up to insert their own hands into this hollow, thereby participating, as the Dutch poet and novelist Cees Nooteboom has observed (in *Roads to Santiago*, a book that helped motivate Birtwistle's visit), in "a collective work of art" that has made an idea "visible in matter".

As Birtwistle says of Dürer and the interpretations of Panofsky and Yates: "That's how I came into it. But into a particular mode, an English mode."

With the hermetic philosophy of Agrippa, the idea of melancholy was taken up by Elizabethans in the late 16th century: its advocates included the poets Edmund Spenser, George Chapman, Walter Raleigh and other members of the so-called School of Night.

Indeed, *The Shadow of Night* takes its title from a long poem by Chapman: a work, Yates has argued, that is both a defence of the occult philosophy condemned by Christopher Marlowe in *Doctor Faustus* and a celebration of the "inspired melancholy" that was its practitioners' preferred spiritual condition.

Yet that Elizabethan melancholy also became music in the lute songs of John Dowland: From *Silent Night*, *I Saw My Lady Weep* and the song from which Birtwistle quotes his opening phrase, *In Darkness Let Me Dwell*:

In darkness let me dwell, the ground shall Sorrow be;
The roof Despair, to bar all cheerful light from me;
The walls of marble black, that moistened still shall weep;
My music hellish jarring sounds to banish friendly sleep.
Thus, wedded to my woes and bedded to my tomb,
O let me living die, till death do come.

For Birtwistle, Dowland's melancholy songs represent "an expression and tempo of music that doesn't really exist anywhere else" that really comes into its own in secular music. It is a lyric voice, that is primarily monodic and isolated from polyphony. There may be traces of this cadence in Henry Purcell's *Dido's Lament*, and a similar melancholy spirit seems to pervade the song of Amiens and Jaques in Shakespeare's *As You Like It*. Indeed, when he set out to compose music for Jaques, Birtwistle found that his words fitted Dowland's music almost exactly.

Birtwistle opens *The Shadow of Night* by sounding the first three notes of Dowland's *In Darkness Let Me Dwell*. This phrase is revisited throughout the composition. Birtwistle

describes the new work as a companion piece to *Earth Dances*, recorded by the Cleveland Orchestra in 1974.

Yet it stands to *Earth Dances* as negative to positive. The latter is overtly rhythmical, whereas *The Shadow of Night* has a more lyrical quality. As Birtwistle says, *Earth Dances* is "quite Cubist" with new structures emerging before others are complete, whereas *The Shadow of Night* is like a series of clouds passing slowly across the moon.

Like Dowland's melancholy songs, it is monodic: a nocturne in which variety is used primarily to sustain a progression that is itself not various. That preoccupation with a form of continuity that is both linear and capable of circling back on itself may, as Birtwistle remarks, also have something to do with insomnia.

• A version of this article first appeared in the programme to the Cleveland Orchestra's 2001 world premiere of Harrison Birtwistle's *The Shadow of Night*, which receives its British premiere at the Proms, Royal Albert Hall, London SW7, on September 12. Box office: 020-7589 8212.

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