



Melencolia I, Albrecht Dürer

A Meditation on Albrecht Dürer's *Melencolia* in a Time of Pandemic

Paul Brutsche

Although this engraving by Albrecht Dürer is 500 years old (1514), it can reflect something that is also experienced in the current corona virus crisis. One could say that the Covid-19 disease forces us to a collective experience of melancholy. The psychological situation into which this has brought us, the challenges and practical measures that became necessary to cope with them collectively and individually, as well as their possible historical significance, seem to me to be expressed symbolically in this engraving.

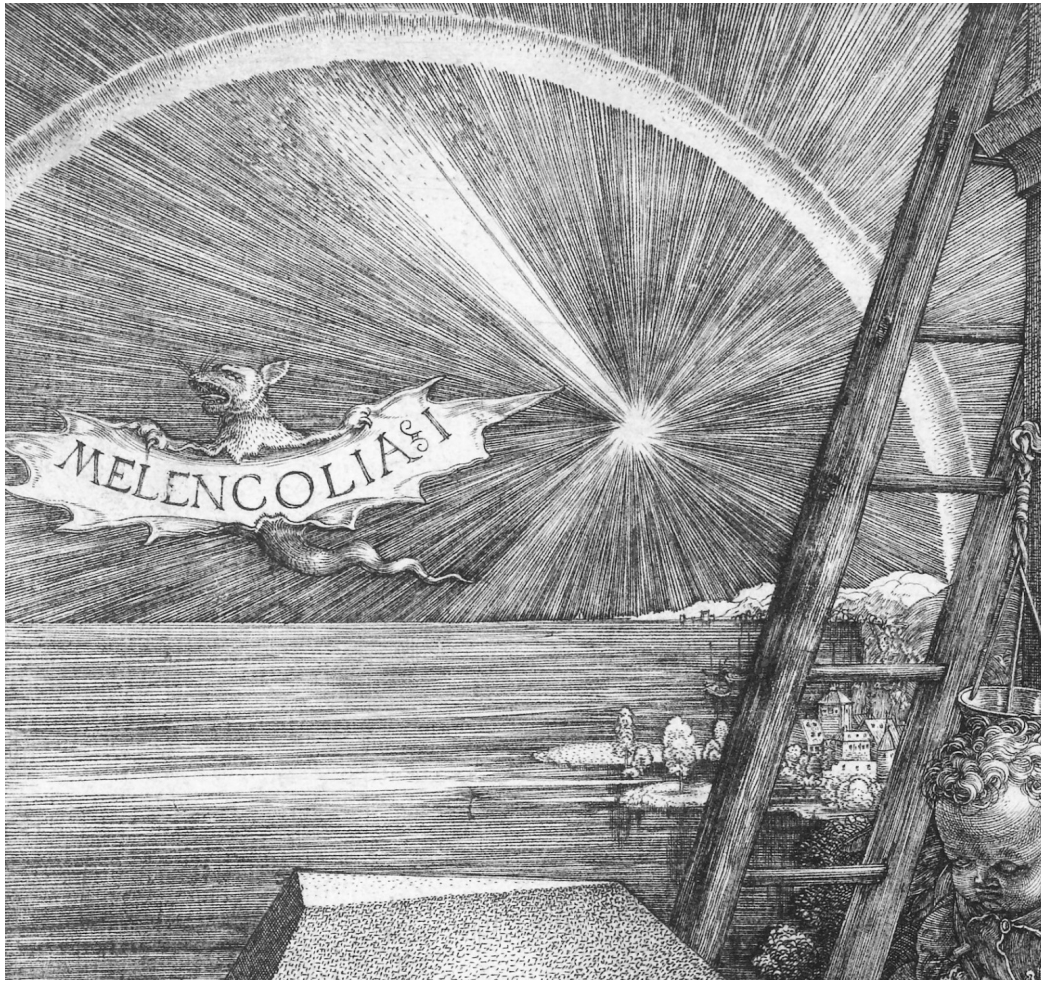
A superficial certainty has been lost. Suddenly, insecurity and doubt have taken the place of previous security and confidence. The clarity of our familiar outward circumstances has given way to a complex reality of questions, doubts and longings. The world is no longer as tightly knit as it used to be. It is called into question. Suddenly, unpleasant questions arise about meaning, questions about what is important in life, what is ultimately important. When life is threatened and one is not quite sure whether one is caught up by the deadly virus or is spared, inner, existential questions open up. The world presents itself as a jumbled multitude of isolated things. Suddenly any big picture is missing. That is why it is so strangely difficult to really concentrate in such a time.



Dürer's angel sits outside the house, without any social connection to a place and to other people. He is not contained, but left to his own devices, and lonely. But the unusual nature of his situation of being outside also creates the possibility to consider new things and to try the unusual. It is a consciousness torn out of habit, which thinks beyond the familiar and well known. As a result of the uncertainty of existence, consciousness is given the quasi-divine gift of designing its own existence. Its gaze allows us to sense that possible worlds are opening up to it. With its wings, it

can rise into regions of the imagination and leave the limited world of the familiar and proven. Using the compass tool it holds, it designs possible new realities.

And at the same time, this consciousness is 'confined'. At least externally, it cannot move. It is crammed into a confined space, sitting sluggishly on a stone slab, straining to support its heavy head, as if tied to the wall of the house in the background, and which makes free physical movement impossible. This consciousness is isolated, just as 'social distancing' is suddenly called for in the face of the corona virus. The only release from this perceived heaviness of existence is the angel's longing look into distant possibility. The sense of heaviness demands some spiritual expanse. In this melancholic consciousness, a painful tension becomes apparent between striving for distant horizons and being bound to a limiting existence with all its heaviness. The corona virus has brought this limitation with it: it restricts outer movement, prevents any kind of travel, condemns us to being sedentary. It forces a melancholic mode of movement of the spirit, a creative movement, upon all people.



What this melancholic corona-virus consciousness longs for can be seen in the upper left corner of the picture. It is a situation of transcending vastness: sea horizon, rainbow, and a comet, indicating birth. It is an appearance and experience of true, essential, uniquely great being, in all its radiance. In this longing would lie the healing from the fragmentary nature of real existence. It would be the star of the three wise men that announced a new rejuvenated consciousness. But this longing for a new rising light, for the transcendental ideal, also evokes the opposite: a shadowy consciousness of spiritual limitedness. In the engraving's radiant left upper corner, this is expressed by a bat-like animal, which openly symbolizes the reality of the melancholy state. It is the absolute counterpoint to the sought-after brightness, vastness, enlightenment and possibility. It is the experience of a demonic darkness, of an overly clear superficial certainty which completely lacks depth of meaning, of mere

conceptual logic without any symbolic understanding. (It is strange to note that this present pandemic is again thought to be caused by an animal-to-human transmission, with bats acting as an intermediary. Dürer's motif appears to be of astonishing reality).



There are other elements in this engraving that make one think of the current corona virus situation: For example, the building in the upper right-hand corner. It seems like a building for scholars and scientists, like the virologists and epidemiologists who ask questions about “where from” and “how long” and how to deal with the virus. The mysterious Tabula Smaragdina with its 16 numbers, hung on the wall, suggests this thought. Science, this fixed systematic thinking with statistics, standards and comparative values, is becoming the pillar and benchmark in this

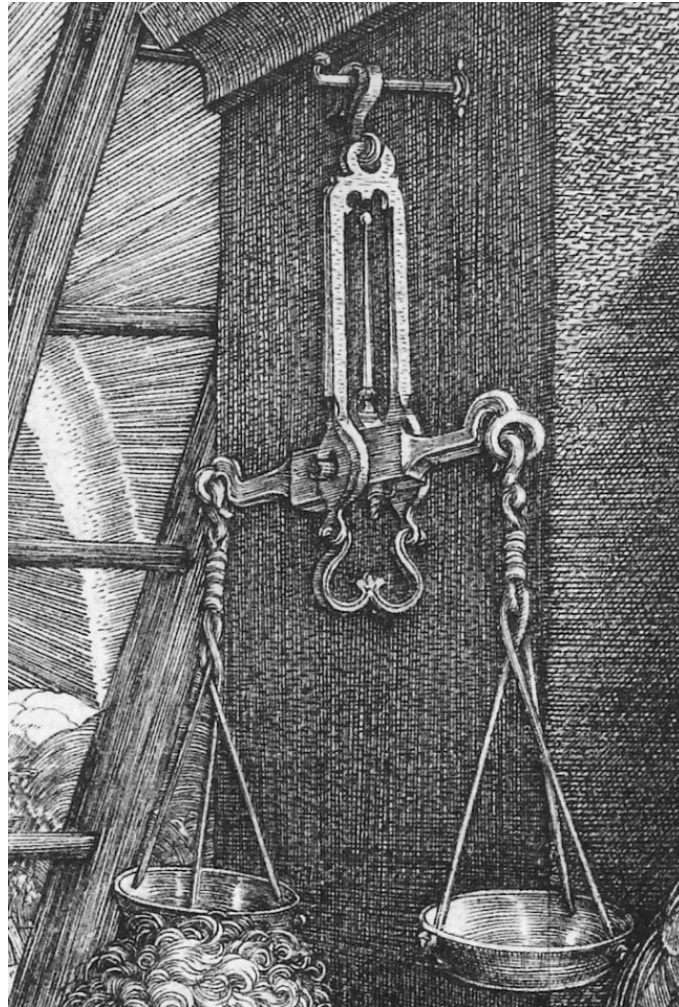
unsettling pandemic. The melancholic consciousness, which is excluded from this, sees itself at the mercy of such objectively rational thinking.

The factor of time, represented here by the hourglass on the wall, plays an enormous role. A frequent question is whether measures were taken too early or too late, or whether they were too mild or too drastic. The corona virus phenomenon reveals astonishing time-related moments: when did it start? How long does the probability of infection last? How long must the quarantine last? When will the return to normal life take place? When will a vaccination be given, when will a drug be found? Almost never in history of mankind, has the whole of humanity, all of a sudden, been affected by such a pandemic. It is an unbelievably powerful event that affects the whole world in a flash. It is an event of world historical significance, with the potential for huge change in both a destructive and constructive sense. It is an hour in the history of the world, in the history of humanity. The melancholic consciousness, the angel, is aware of the significance of this moment. He is in contact (with his one wing on the wall), with this moment in contemporary history, and knows about this significant turning point.



A winged cherub sits on a cloth-covered millstone. He is writing, and makes one think that at this moment, a lot is being recorded in the form of blogs, diary notes, etc. The power of a creative genius can also be felt everywhere. The millstone of the painful, repetitive experience of negativity, senselessness, narcissistic nothingness, the central pain of existence is sublimated by creative writing. Writing transforms the senselessness of existence. It creates a continuing story instead of the idleness of constantly rotating time. With reference to the corona virus, one could say that a great uncertainty and insecurity is the central feeling illustrated by the central hub hole in the middle of Dürer's millstone. Nobody knows how long Covid-19 will last, when vaccination is possible, how the virus will behave, whether several waves can be expected. This uncertainty is visible in the rotation of the millstone. There is no clear development, no predictable progress. It is a kicking in place. There is a

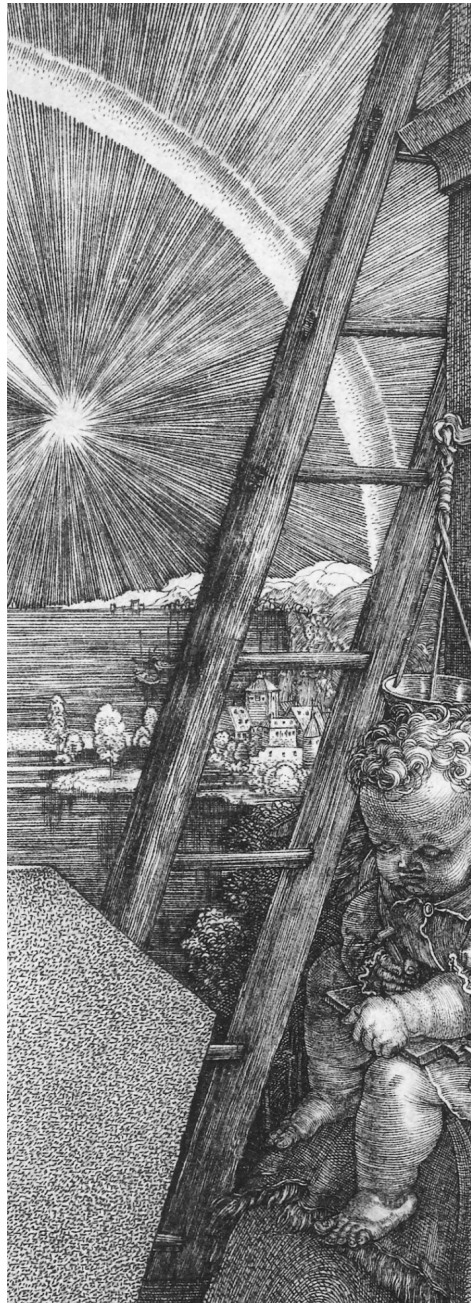
narcissistically insulting uncertainty that reflects the metaphysical state of existence. We do not dispose of life; we are at its mercy. In creativity we can cloak it in the mantle of an illusion of continuity and progress and coherence. We can counter the 'senseless return of the same' with a vision of meaning and purpose.



On the wall is a scale with the two bowls, which makes one think of weighing and judging. In these times of the corona virus, all governments around the world are trying to take the right measures to meet the needs of both public health and the economy. This political judgment is based on the one hand on the information coming from the House of Science and on the other hand on the popular spirit (see the scales touching the writing cherub), which suggests decisions appropriate to the social and cultural reality of a country.

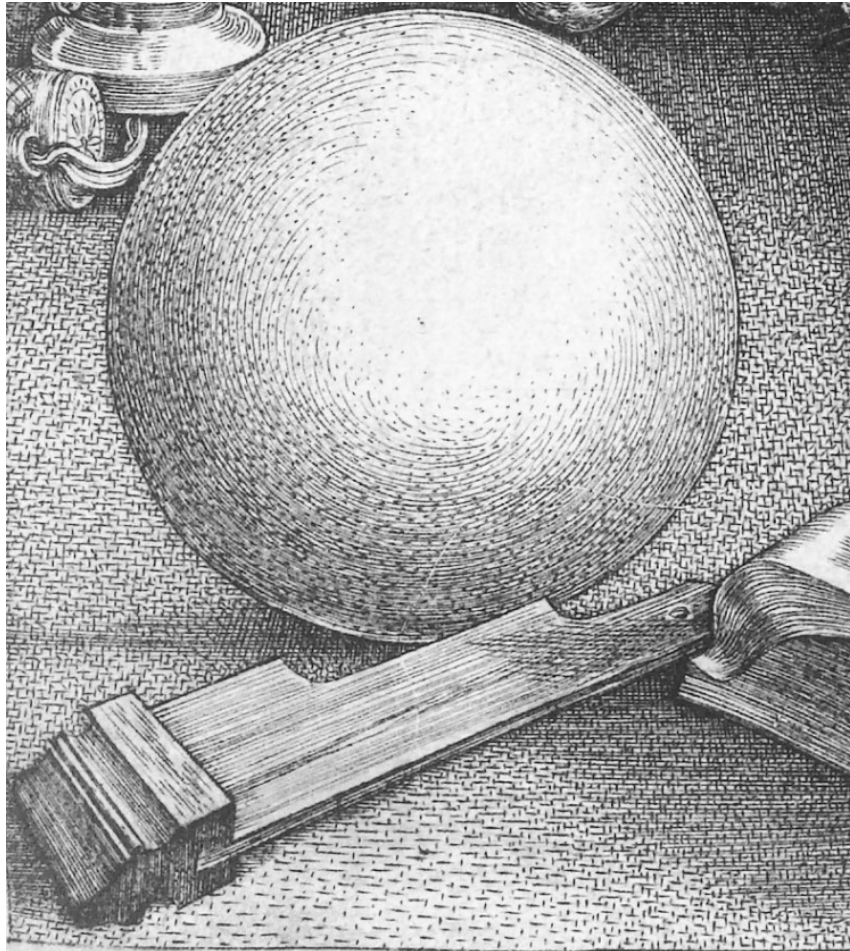


The bell in the upper right corner could remind us that through this corona virus experience many people, indeed all of humanity, have suddenly realized that something decisive has happened, that a new hour has struck, that we are called to awaken to a new consciousness. The bell marks a transition, a beginning, and a morning. It awakens a consciousness of change. It heralds a new era.



In connection with the tower building, a fifth motif should be noted: the seven-rung ladder, which, starting from the polyhedron at its base is leaning against the back of the building. Symbolically, the ladder denotes an object used to climb higher, to gain height, to hoist oneself to a higher level. The seven rungs remind us of spiritual development. The celestial ladder of Jacob also comes to mind, referring to a connection between heaven and earth, higher and lower. The corona virus phenomenon causes metaphysical (i.e. “behind” the physical) questions that point to

the higher, the fundamental issues, such as questions about the meaning of existence, about the meaning of material progress, about the meaning of our basic conditions, e.g. capitalism. The challenge posed by the Corona crisis generates and demands the questioning of previous material certainties; it demands a higher point of view and a look at and examination of previously self-evident facts.



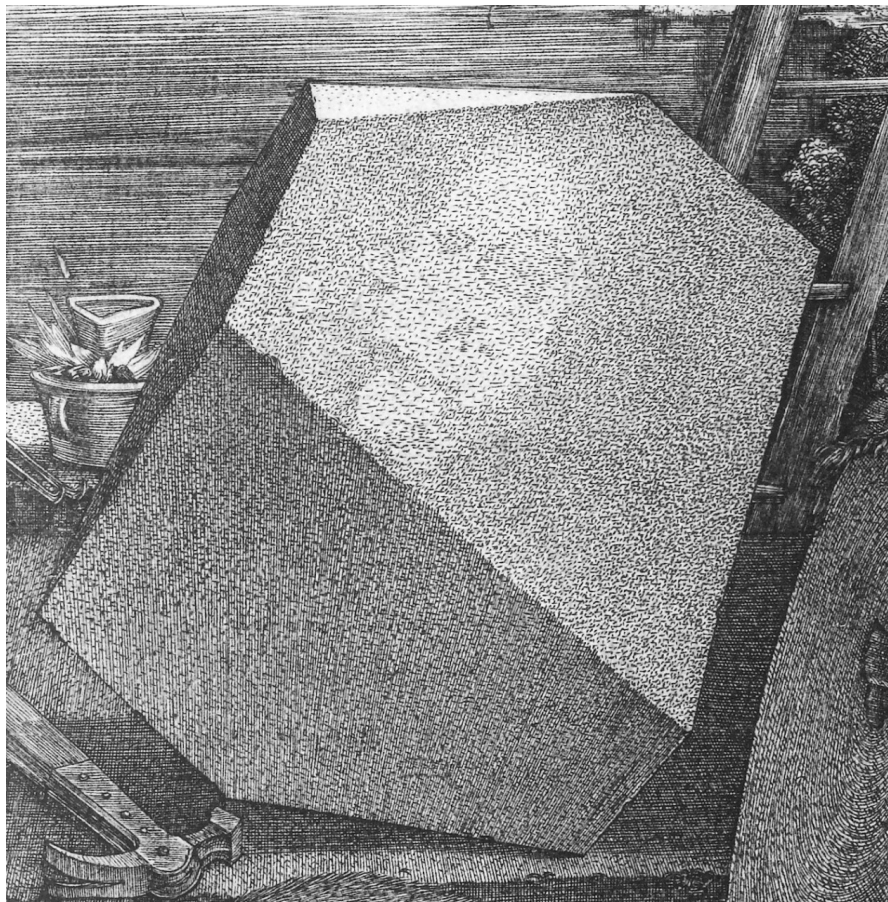
Let us look at the lower left section of the picture: We see a sphere: a perfect, round and solid sphere. It could symbolically express the idea of wholeness, perfection and completeness, the idea of a lost origin and an ideal paradisiacal, primal situation from which the melancholic consciousness experiences itself separated and ejected. It denotes a world which, in its round wholeness and pure originality, contrasts with the tower building and its square-built reality: an adult-constructed world of knowledge, of norms and laws. The sphere embodies the

childlike world of innocent and experienced certainties and playful fantasies. In the Corona crisis, children are, strangely, conspicuously spared, while the world of adults and elders are particularly affected. Even less developed countries, which function in a childlike mode, as it were, are less affected than the old developed countries with their differentiated scientific and technical thinking habits. - The collective melancholy consciousness also measures how much it has lost of the naïve playful consciousness of the past as a child. It also remembers the happiness of a simple uncomplicated life with memories of father, mother, and landscapes. And it remembers the value of the simple people, nurses for example. Or see the example of Daniel Humm, the top Swiss chef in New York, who normally cooks for the upper class and now does so for the needy. It is the proudest chapter of his career. "Corona has opened my eyes", he says. (Tages-Anzeiger, Kultur & Gesellschaft, Monday, April 27, 2020).



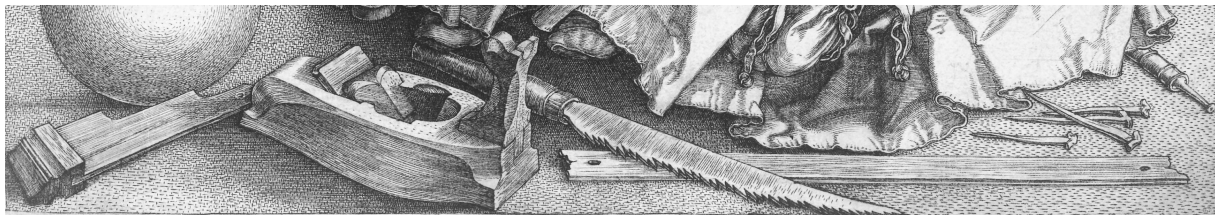
The skinny dog, curled up in itself, is a well-known sign of melancholy. It is an expression of the basic emotional state of the melancholic person. It is a rather sickly turning-around, a contraction, a focusing on oneself. The ordinary animalistic flair

for the new, nourishing unknown is lost. It is the sick principle of absolute self-reference and the tendency of absolute focusing and narrowing one's view. Such an “only-this” is typical of the Furor Melancolicus. Even in the collective phenomenon of Corona, there is this tendency to monomaniacal narrowing of the gaze and concentration on just this one theme. This is, as it were, the sick and disease-causing aspect of melancholy: a fascination that leads to fanaticism and a deadly circling around itself and around a single theme.



The polyhedron is an important motif in this engraving, as it takes up a lot of space and plays an important optical role. It is a foreign body, apparently not to be used for anything and yet representing a geometrically ingenious form, like a celestial body hitting the earth, a meteor, that suddenly appears out of nowhere. In spite of this irrationality, it has a quality of structure suggesting logos. In other words, something of meaning becomes visible in this unexpected appearance, which,

however, is not easy to grasp, just as this figure cannot be described geometrically. In the Corona pandemic, something similar also becomes noticeable. Suddenly, an elusive reality appears on the scene, which manages to upset the whole world in no time. The virus seems like a fate sent from nowhere, with which the whole of humanity has to struggle. It is an unexpected foundling that invades the known human world and causes fear and confusion. It creates a situation of general melancholy uncertainty. This stone of offence and melancholic distress can also become the stone of the wise. It does so by pushing the world out of its comfortable and questionable functioning, by awakening new longings for a more existential life, by questioning the self-evident and by evoking the creative power of the melancholic individual. Corona behaves like the polyhedron: it represents a koan that is difficult or impossible to analyze rationally.



At the foot of the painting and at the foot of the Melencolia figure, several instruments are depicted: from left to right, we see a straight-edge, a plane, iron pliers under the angel's hem, a saw, a ruler, four nails, an enema syringe (?) and a leather money bag. Most of these objects are traditionally attributed to the Saturnian character of the melancholic temperament, and are tools for working with wood. Symbolically, these objects could be understood as the melancholic consciousness's own efforts to carefully work and design for better understanding of things, while at the same time recognizing the limitations of one's own creative and cognitive abilities. The will to grasp things clearly can lead to the evidence of failure and produce the typical melancholic pain of experienced inadequacy. The more the

melancholic consciousness strives for excellence, the more obvious its incapacity becomes. In the present Corona time, the effort for accuracy and clarity becomes visible in the hectic effort for studies, statistics, measures, prognoses, therapies to get the uncanny under control. All this contributes all the more clearly to the general melancholy uncertainty, and creates the melancholy evidence that there is no certainty at all: no certainty as to the origin of the pandemic, no certainty as to the characteristics and behavior of the new virus, no certainty as to the timing of the successful development of vaccinations and treatments, no certainty as to the end of the crisis and the return to normality.



The angel figure has a band with 6 keys and a purse hanging down the side of the skirt. Keys make us think of the ability to open new rooms or lock old ones. The melancholic consciousness has a threshold function: it can make new ways of thinking possible or find new things in the old or make the old accessible to today's people. The melancholy into which Corona plunges us has in itself the potential to put an end to the past and make something new possible. The hanging purse can make us think that the collective melancholy caused by the Corona virus also brings money problems, energy problems. The economy and finances are in the doldrums, a general recession is inevitable. In addition to mental distress, collective melancholy is accompanied by economic depression. A low point of material prosperity is apparent: the purse is at the very bottom of the hem of the skirt.

What does it mean when we recognize in this engraving, which Dürer created some 500 years ago, so many symbolic references that also characterize today's Corona crisis and the various effects it has had? Can we assume that Dürer's experience of artistically induced melancholy in his time and the collective melancholy caused by the virus today are comparable? Is it a historical correspondence of comparable experiences of then and now or an archetypal basic situation that can be reactivated at different moments in human history? Is it a worldwide, human experience of new creativity that arises from a collective experience of melancholy?

If the collective melancholy situation created by today's pandemic can be described by an image that Dürer created some 500 years ago in a time of upheaval, it could mean the following: today's situation is comparable to the situation and time in which Dürer worked. Or: today's situation follows the archetypal pattern of a melancholy experience, which was expressed in its various aspects by the artist Dürer in his time, and which today, *mutatis mutandis*, collectively appears in various

phenomena. In other words: all the circumstances that emerge in today's corona situation fulfill in their entirety a basic form of melancholic experience. They are not accidental, but essential and necessary and archetypal. They allow humanity to live through a melancholic experience, which in itself is that of a melancholic creative individual. In so far as melancholy and Renaissance belong together, they mark a new Renaissance period.

Included in these thoughts is the notion that it is possible that a worldwide political situation can be shaped by the constellation of an archetypally given symbolic form. What is meant is not that this symbol causes the Covid-19 illness, but that the illness that occurs is *represented* by the different aspects of the melancholy figure. In its appearance, it fulfills, as it were, a symbolic pattern that corresponds to the mental experience of melancholy. This pattern or figure acts as a final, targeted empty form, which forces the world shaken by the illness to shape itself according to the complex aspects of this form. This form is the primal form of melancholy, whose ingenious outline is expressed in Dürer's *Melencolia*.

This means several things that I would like to express here in brief theses:

1: that there exists a basic form of melancholy; that this basic form can manifest itself in an individual as well as in a time; that this basic form can be repeated at different times; and that this basic form is manifested above all in a creative individual or in a creative new time, which means that our present time can be considered as a time with a special creative potential. It further means

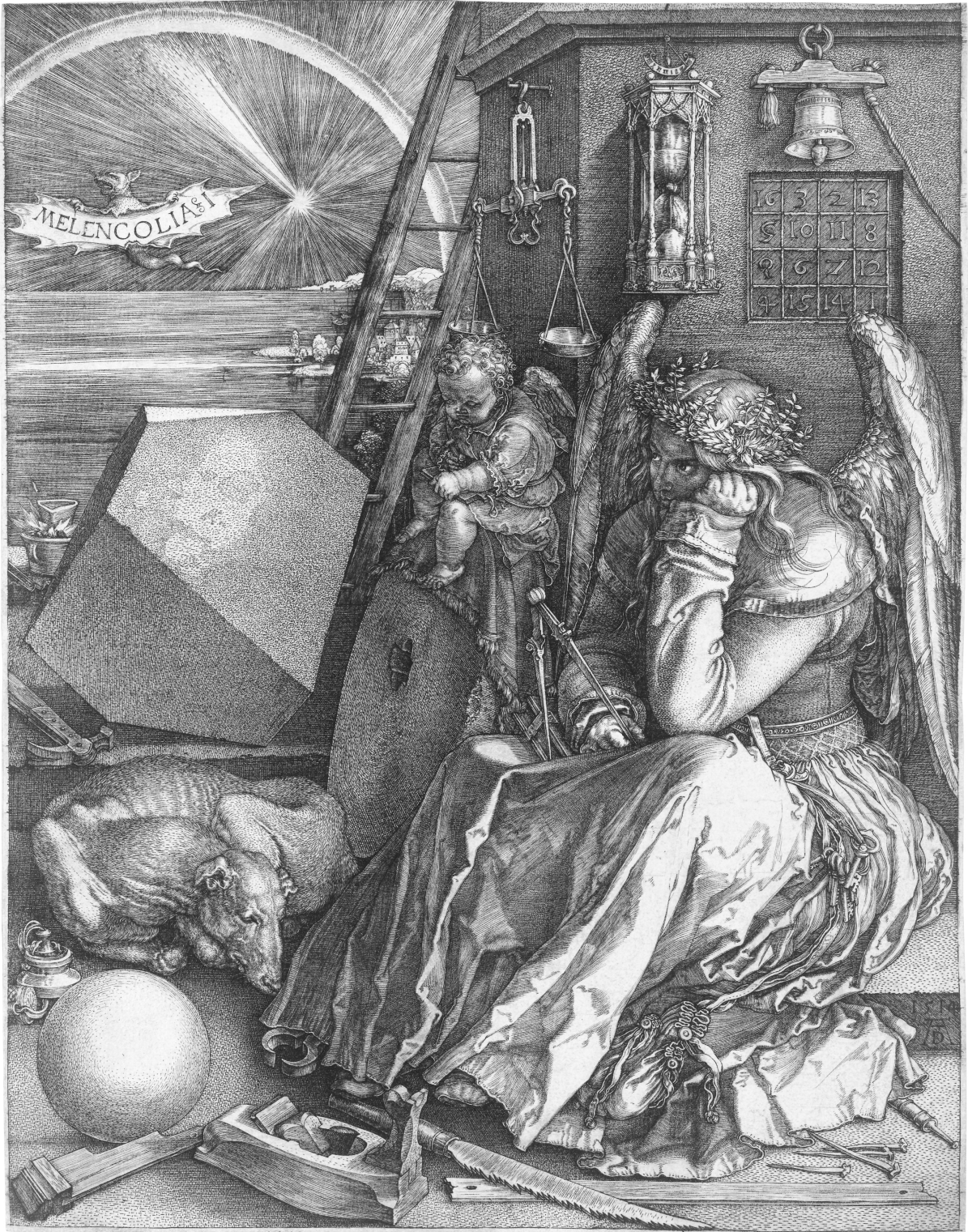
2: that we must assume a power of symbolic design which succeeds in bringing about events in humanity in such a way that a given form or pattern is fulfilled and actualized: the form of melancholy, or the form of transformation, or of the transition to a new consciousness, i.e. the form of the Renaissance. Furthermore, that this creative power of the symbolic reality is the world of the soul, which moves in the

medium of manifestation, and that this world of soul is as effective as the world of causes and physical-material things. Furthermore, that this creative power of the symbolic is subject to final, artistic principles instead of the usual causal, scientific principle. It also includes the idea that understanding by means of the symbolic principle requires the understanding of symbolic products of the unconscious and of creative works of artists and poets, whereas explaining by means of the scientific principle requires investigation, statistics, scientific dialogue, study and observation. It is further concluded

3: that symbolic understanding is nourished by an autonomous capacity for imagination or by a sovereign principle of representation which shows the things to be understood from within themselves, so that the understanding person can grasp them through interpretation. The deeper meaning is already present; it has only to be understood by transferring it into words. In Dürer's *Melencolia*, everything that can be said about melancholy is already there and can be grasped. In scientific explanation, on the other hand, cognition and knowledge must first be produced by the researching ego. Furthermore, it means that such a symbolic reality is not simply a nice addition to life as opposed to a serious examination of it, a cultural surplus value and pastime, as it were, a nice, inconsequential occupation of the mind with itself, but, on the contrary, it is a highly effective thing. The just-celebrated memory of the unconditional surrender of the Nazi regime 75 years ago is a reminder of the extent to which symbolic reality can determine the concrete world. National Socialism, with all its staged symbolism, was a frightening demonstration of the extent to which the symbolic dimension was and is capable of shaping social and political reality.

The above thoughts also include the idea that art has a special status in order to understand autonomously-occurring phenomena in their archetypal essence. A

final idea concerns the fundamental importance of cultural workers: artists, poets, musicians, actors and filmmakers. Compared to politicians, scientists, financial experts and doctors, they seem to play a subordinate role in the event of a pandemic. Of late, they were only thought of in terms of financial support. They do not seem to have a vital function. The fact is that such a pandemic not only requires practical solutions, but also poses a challenge in terms of experience of sense or meaning. It cannot be created only by conventional measures. It requires art that represents and expresses, thus transcending superficiality and aiming essentially at the individual, elevating him or her and giving him or her a living experience of meaning. Art elevates the spirit and this is of existential importance in order not to fall into melancholic nihilism. Art creates a space of its own, a world of its own, a world of satisfying and healing goals, which give comfort and meaning and which give the courage to face the melancholic conditions of being. Art is the wonderful possibility of inventing something new, of stepping out of the conditions of reality and moving towards the future. Art overcomes melancholy; it overcomes melancholy's own resignation and fixation on the given and the unchangeable. It is the divine gift of inventing the world, i.e., like the melancholy angel on Dürer's engraving, to appropriate the gesture of using the compass tool, to which normally only the Creator God is entitled and to design and shape new existence.



Paul Brutsche, Ph.D. has a doctorate in philosophy from the University of Zurich. He graduated from the C.G. Jung Institute Zürich in 1975 and is a training analyst and supervisor at the International School of Analytical Psychology (ISAPZURICH). Since his doctoral thesis on the psychological meaning of pictures in analysis and his

work as director of the Picture Archives of the C.G. Jung Institute he has been interested in questions of picture interpretation, symbolism in art and creativity and has regularly lectured and published on this topic. He is author of “Creativity - Patterns of Creative Imagination as Seen Through Art”, Spring Journal Books, 2018.