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## Reason and madness: reading Walter Benjamin and Anselm Kiefer through Albrecht Dürer's *Melencolia I*

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In this study I propose to appropriate Albrecht Dürer's well-known engraving from 1514, *Melencolia I*, as an allegorical image through which to read both Walter Benjamin's theory of allegory and Anselm Kiefer's allegorical paintings. On the one hand, my aim will be to demonstrate the reciprocity which allegory proposes between the visual and the verbal: in allegory, words are often transposed into purely visual phenomena, while visual images are offered as script to be deciphered. On the other hand, I shall enact a reading of allegory as a figure for, or strategy akin to, the self-reflexive, interdiscursive practice which Mieke Bal calls "preposterous history". In paying special attention to the bidirectionality of melancholia and allegory I shall also relate reading to the complexity of recollection or sublime ethico-theological *anamnesis*.

### Rede en waansin: die lees van Walter Benjamin en Anselm Kiefer deur Albrecht Dürer se *Melencolia I*

*Melencolia I* (1514), die bekende gravure van Albrecht Dürer, word in die artikel voorgestel as 'n allegoriese beeld met oog op die lees van die allegorieteorie van Walter Benjamin en die allegoriese skilderye van Anselm Kiefer. Die oogmerk is enersyds om iets van die allegoriese wederkerigheid tussen die visuele en die verbale te demonstreer: allegorie transponeer woorde dikwels tot suiwer visuele verskynsels, visuele beelde word omgekeerd as skriftuur vir ontsyfering aangebied. Andersyds word allegorie in die artikel beskou as 'n vorm van, of strategie verwant aan die self-refleksiewe, interdiskursiewe praktyk wat Mieke Bal "ongerymde geskiedenis" noem. Weens die besondere aandag aan die wederkerigheid van melankolie en allegorie bring die ondersoek lees in verband met die kompleksiteit van herinnering of sublieme eties-teologiese *anamnesis*.

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This study<sup>1</sup> takes as its point of departure the intricate relation between the figure of allegory and the spiritual or alchemical (rather than merely psychic) state of melancholia.<sup>2</sup> The impetus here is Walter Benjamin's (1998: 229) understanding of the figure of allegory as related to alchemy, magical knowledge, the process of decay, isolation, spiritual death, and ultimately both material and spiritual transformation. Moreover, linking painting to alchemy as something that matters both spiritually and materially, James Elkins (2000: 155) notes: "[a]lchemy is at home in depression, uncertainty, and melancholy". In the following analysis of Benjamin's thoughts and Anselm Kiefer's paintings, as seen through Albrecht Dürer's *Melencolia I*, the proposition is to read allegory through alchemy, and *vice versa*, rooting them both in what will be referred to throughout this article as *melancholia* rather than melancholy. The intention of this cross-reading is "preposterous", by which is meant Mieke Bal's (1999: 6f) notion of a historical "reversal, which puts what came chronologically first ('pre') as an aftereffect behind ('post') its later recycling".

## 1. Preposterous positions

The argument of this study will, furthermore, venture to focus on the related positions of Benjamin and Kiefer as self-critical or ambivalent adherents of the mystic tradition. In this light, Benjamin and Kiefer may be seen to represent one of several strands (or worldview traditions) within the ideological dynamics of crucial historical developments from (rationalist) modern thought to (irrationalist) postmodern thought. The ultimate aim of relating Benjamin and Kiefer in

1 This is an expanded version of a paper presented in Durban at the seventeenth annual conference of the South African Association of Art Historians (July 2001). I would like to thank the session participants for a stimulating discussion of my ideas. Prof Dirk van den Berg generously served as first reader of an earlier draft and, as always, provided me with rigorous and lucid insights. The anonymous referees offered helpful suggestions. In light of several stimulating conversations on melancholia, and in gratitude for her careful editing, I would like to dedicate this article to Maureen de Jager.

2 Cf Buck-Morss (1997: 175) on Benjamin's materialist critique of "baroque allegory for its idealism" *vis-à-vis* Handelman (1991: 35, 38 & 74) for a critique of the poststructuralist appropriation of allegory as an hypostatization of language.



this manner will be to establish a particular position — albeit a dynamic, entangled, and mutable one, semiotically shifting and multiple (cf Preziosi 1989: 167; Richards 1999: 205 n103; Bal 1996 & 1999: 19) — within recent postmodern art. The strategy adopted will involve identifying certain iconographical clues in Dürer's engraving *Melencolia I* (1514) (Figure 1) and (then) reflecting or mirroring them discursively off related images and metaphors in Benjamin's writings and Kiefer's art. This would echo Bal's (1999: 263) appropriation of the baroque mirror. She writes:

History, as a mirroring of the past within the present, is itself, in my preposterous version of it, wed to the act of mirroring, without which we cannot live, yet for which we must not fall.

Dürer's *Melencolia I* lends itself to appropriation to this critical purpose because it was created in the shadow of neo-Platonically inspired, first Renaissance or early modern occultists<sup>3</sup> like J Reuchlin, Agrippa von Nettesheim, Paracelsus and Pico della Mirandola. Though *Melencolia I* certainly does not represent a dominant feature of Dürer's varied oeuvre but is rather an isolated item within the whole, the print is such a powerfully multivalent image that this enterprise can safely be argued to be valid.

Moreover, in the light of a Benjaminian/postmodern<sup>4</sup> understanding of allegory read in close proximity with Mieke Bal's understanding of "preposterous history", this enterprise may gain further momentum. In her book *Quoting Caravaggio*, Bal (1999: 5) refers to contemporary art which, quoting baroque art, exhibits or enacts a "baroque attitude to appropriation [as] a critical engagement" with the past. She writes:

3 As opposed to the "second" or "modern" occultists like Dee, Boehme, Fludd, early Freemasons, Oetinger, Mandeville, Blake, Novalis, late Goethe, late Schelling, Hölderlin, Eliphas Levi, and Mallarmé, as well as to the "third" occultists such as R Steiner, Rilke, Schuré, Leadbeater, Blavatsky, Péladin, Berdyayev, Solovyov, Nietzsche, Jung, Spengler, Benjamin, late Heidegger, E Bloch, G Steiner, Roszak, Baudrillard, Foucault and Derrida. Cf Van den Berg 1993: 1-22.

4 I am referring here to my enfolding of the Benjaminian approach to allegory with its postmodern variant as exemplified, for example, in the writings of Craig Owens.

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Such revisions of baroque art neither collapse past and present, as in an ill-conceived presentism, nor objectify the past and bring it within our grasp, as in a problematic positivist historicism. They do, however, demonstrate a possible way of dealing with 'the past today'. This reversal, which puts what came chronologically first ('pre-') as an aftereffect behind ('post-') its later recycling, is what I would like to call a preposterous history. In other words, it is a way of 'doing history' that carries productive uncertainties and illuminating highlights — a vision of how to re-vision the Baroque (Bal 1999: 6).

### She contends that

[...] the subject's agency, which matters in a way that his or her intention or psychic makeup does not, consists not of inventing but of intervening, of a 'supplementation' that does not replace the image it explains but adds to it (Bal 1999: 13).

And for Bal (1999: 8), "being enfolded in what one is studying", being enfolded in the image, is what lends itself to this intervention and supplementation.

Although Bal (1996: 94, 5) is elsewhere somewhat reductively critical of allegory as "escapist", the genre, as Bal herself suggests later in her Caravaggio book, may be argued to be critically suitable for doing the kind of history that she proposes. Referring to Jasper Johns, Fred Orton (1994: 115) notes that allegory, "as other-speaking [...] other-speaks a pre-text, an anterior narrative or visual image". He writes:<sup>5</sup>

The allegorical mode never aims to hide its lack of invention, especially with regard to its pre-text or pre-texts. Any verbal or visual representation has to be understood as a nexus of several texts or images. But in a more or less conventional representation, even when allusion or reference is meant to be used as a guide to interpretation, the text or image or the nexus of texts or images which make it does not approach the complexity of connection which pertains between an allegory and its pre-text or pre-texts. The pre-text in allegory is not just a good idea taken, borrowed or quoted from some other place; it's not just an appropriated resource: it is, in a way, the original truth or meaning. *Allegory takes over a truth or meaning and adds to it not to replace it but to 'supplement' it* (Orton 1994: 115, emphasis added).

5 In sharp opposition to Bal (1996: 95), who too readily conflates metaphor, synecdoche, metonymy, and allegory as figures, privileging metonymy over the other three, which she claims are prone to escapism through naturalisation, obfuscation and imperialism, Orton convincingly reads the first three as tropes and allegory as figure

What this article proposes to do, then, is to utilise allegory as a means of “doing history” self-reflexively, critically, self-consciously and, by recourse to Bal, preposterously.<sup>6</sup> If, for Bal (1999: 9), the reader is actively entangled in the meaning-making of an artwork, and *vice versa*, allegory is a critically suitable figure for this type of entanglement in which artwork and viewer/reader deictically and actively influence each other. Orton (1994: 117) comes to a similar conclusion:

Allegory ‘does not exhibit devices or hammer away at its intentions [...] it beguiles the reader with a continuous interplay between subject and sense’, image and meaning. It is the most self-reflexive and critically self-conscious of modes and its aim is to make its reader correspondingly self-conscious. The locus of meaning of any allegory is the reader. And the reader must put an immense amount of energy into the activity of reading an allegory. The real action of allegory is the reader’s learning to read texts.

But crucially, one should add, this active, self-conscious reading does not imperialistically obfuscate or repress the “open, dynamic process” in which art (as emblematically illuminated by the enfolded figure of *Melencolia*) may dialogically be shown to “think” (Bal 1999: 9). Bal offers an intricate delineation and employment of the Baroque motif of the fold as a means of establishing a Baroque point of view that is enfolded into the present. Bal (1999: 30) writes:

The fold insists on surface and materiality, a materialism that promotes a realistic visual rhetoric in its wake. This materialism of the fold entails the involvement of the subject within the material experience, thus turning surface into skin in a relation [...] I will call correlativist.

Correlatively, the obsessively detailed folds in the dress of Dürer’s *Melencolia* may be said to prefigure, or be enfolded with, the excessively illusionistic renderings of the baroque. Thus the *Melencolia* may be enfolded with both the Baroque and the present, and *vice versa*, all three mirroring one another. It is, moreover, an enfolding in which a non-Hegelian dialectical relationship is figured within the here and now of Dürer’s engraving.

6 Cf also my paper, “Felix in exile: William Kentridge’s self-reflexive allegories of art and history” (Schoeman 2002), currently being prepared for publication.

## 2. The dialectic between rationality and irrationality, black bile and inspiration

Intricately linked to the notion of the allegorical re-reading or doubling of one image or text by another — of their enfolding — is the question of the doubling or enfolding within them (cf Owens 1996: 1053). A careful study of Dürer's *Melencolia I* would reveal a series of dialectical poles. The central dyad, offset by a number of other polar structures, would be Dürer's compulsively brooding and doubting angel,<sup>7</sup> fatally inert, countered by the writing putto just above and to her right. If the inactive angel represents the obtuse and malign inertia of matter and gravity, the putto represents Eros — that is, amorous writing as Kristeva (1989: 6) would have it, or industry as Klibansky *et al* (1979: 321) would have it. The fallen angel, as in Kiefer's painting *Falling angel* from 1979 (Figure 2), represents the black bile of melancholy while the writing putto represents its lucid antidote.<sup>8</sup>

7 This is a deliberate misprision. Klibansky *et al* (1979: 308, 318) refer to this figure as “winged Eros” and “winged genius”. They note, “the notion of a ‘Melencolia’ in whose nature the intellectual distinction of a liberal art was combined with a human soul’s capacity for suffering could only take the form of a winged genius”. Cf Benjamin (1998: 158) who refers to her as “winged melancholy”. Elkins (2000: 191, 154) also relates the “winged genius” to the alchemical philosopher’s stone, which in turn is conflated with Jesus Christ. This would be consonant with a Protestant reading of Dürer’s print. My misprision may be motivated as a valid strategy deployed for the purpose of illuminating a mystical or spiritualist reading of Dürer. That is, to elucidate the notion of the angel as a spiritual power of revelation in the mystic tradition (the gnostic, mystical, alchemical, hermeticist, occultist, Freemasonic, Rosicrucian, anthroposophist, etc varieties of neo-Platonism). This is the Benjaminian kind of strategy, “brushing history against the grain”, which Bal calls “preposterous history”.

8 Klibansky *et al* (1979: 321) write: “the industry of the writing putto signifies the careless equanimity of a being that has only just learnt the contentment of activity, even when unproductive, and does not yet know the torment of thought, even when productive; it is not yet capable of sadness, because it has not yet attained human stature. The conscious sorrow of a human being wrestling with problems is enhanced by the unconscious suffering of the sleeping dog and by the happy unselfconsciousness of the busy child”. For Benjamin (1994: 51, 1996: 361, 1998: 230), knowledge is guilt, and action is innocence. Benjamin

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Figure 2: Anselm Kiefer, *Fallender Engel* (1979). Oil and acrylic on photograph, mounted on canvas, 190 by 170 cm. Eindhoven: Van Abbemuseum (Arasse 2001: 101)





The melancholy angel in Dürer's print is also dyadic within herself. On the one hand, she represents the Lutheran faith,<sup>9</sup> which would be strongly opposed to superstition.<sup>10</sup> On the other, she represents Saturnian melancholia, an astrological concept which Dürer appears to have derived from a treatise entitled *De occulta philosophia*, written around 1510 by a German physician named Heinrich von Nettesheim, in which he proffers the belief that those born under the sign of Saturn suffer by nature from melancholy (Klibansky *et al* 1979: 352, 360; Harris 1996). Klibansky *et al* (1979: 261) also note the possible influence of the neo-Platonist<sup>11</sup> Ficino on Dürer's print:

Ficino is convinced that not only are children of Saturn qualified for intellectual work but that, *vice versa*, intellectual work reacts on men and places them under the dominion of Saturn, creating a sort of selective affinity between them [...] all 'studiosi' are predestined to melancholy and subject to Saturn; if not by their horoscope, then by their activity.<sup>12</sup>

Then the angel would be a substitute for the artist/creator, a self-portrait perhaps akin to Goya's dreaming artist, as depicted in *The sleep of reason produces monsters* of 1799 (Figure 3).<sup>13</sup> On the one hand, then, Dürer proffers a rationally constructed principle of faith in God, pivoting around the notion of the universe constructed accord-

(1994: 51) notes ironically, "the innocent person cannot do good, and the guilty one must". But knowledge leads to melancholia and the melancholy person is stricken with torpor, the inability to act (Schoeman 2002).

- 9 At least following Benjamin's reading of Lutheranism as resulting in *melancholia*, one might say that the angel augurs Dürer's support of Luther and the Reformation, after Luther nailed his 95 theses to the door of the Wittenberg castle church on October 31, 1517. For more on Dürer's relationship to Luther, and Dürer's criticism of the Catholic Church, see Panofsky 1971.
- 10 Cf Warburg 1999: 597-697.
- 11 For a critique of the neo-Platonic bias of iconological studies *à la* Klibansky, Panofsky and Saxl, see Bredekamp (1986: 39-48). In contrast to Klibansky *et al*, Bredekamp (1986: 43) stresses the influence of Epicurean sensuality, and the Aristotelian attempt at higher knowledge through a study of nature, on Renaissance art and thinking.
- 12 Similarly, if without recall to neo-Platonism, Adorno (1994: 121) writes: "All contemplation can do no more than patiently trace the ambiguity of melancholy in ever new configurations".
- 13 Cf Stoichita & Coderch 1999: 168-83.

ing to reason and order; on the other hand, his depiction of melancholia by way of astrology represents a belief in fate.

According to Walter Benjamin (1998: 138), the Lutheran principle of faith, antonymic as it was to everyday life, and in sharp contrast to the Calvinist notion of “good works”,<sup>14</sup> inevitably produced a heaviness of the soul. Furthermore, it may be argued that the Renaissance notion of reason and freedom holds, dialectically speaking, within itself its own counterforce — that is, unreason, disorder, and irrationality. Dürer himself puts it as follows: “For there is falsehood in our knowledge, and darkness is so firmly planted in us that even our groping fails” (Klibansky *et al* 1979: 365). This duality — between faith and action, reason and unreason, order and disorder, light and darkness, insight and blindness<sup>15</sup> — is then the root cause of melancholia: despite all humanity’s claims to reason and transcendence, we remain trapped in the darkness of superstition, fate, and ignorance. Aby Warburg focused on this duality in his study of Dürer’s *Melencolia I*, exploring “the manifold ways in which supposedly ‘primitive’ astrological beliefs persisted into the Reformation in Germany, even among supporters of Luther, who personally discouraged such practices” (Rampley 2001: 305).<sup>16</sup> Similarly, but writing in the context of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, Terry Castle (1995: 15) notes:

the more we seek enlightenment, the more alienating our world becomes; the more we seek to free ourselves, Houdini-like, from the coils of superstition, mystery, and magic, the more tightly, paradoxically, the uncanny holds us in its grip.

The dialectical relationship between reason and myth continues from the Renaissance into the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, and by extension into the twentieth century; indeed, the latter periods, according to Adorno & Horkheimer (1972), perpetuate myth even as

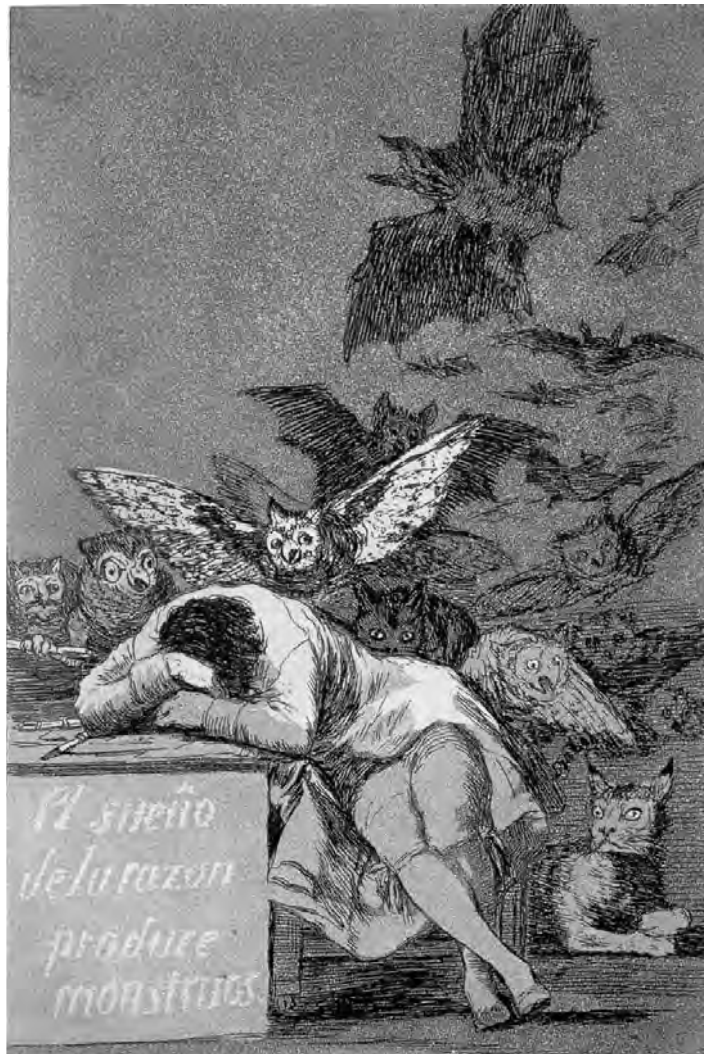
14 Here one should distinguish between the Calvinist, Roman Catholic and Puritan views (the latter being the source of the so-called Calvinist work ethic).

15 For more on insight and blindness see Schoeman 2002 and Barasch 2000. On blindness as insight see Bal 1991: 286-360. On seeing as enfolded with blindness see Elkins 1996. Cf also Derrida’s (1993) self-reflexive metaphors of blindness and insight.

16 Cf Warburg’s (1999: 597-697) “Pagan-antique prophecy in words and images in the age of Luther” of 1920.

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Figure 3: Francisco Goya, *El sueño de la razón produce monstruos* (1799). Etching & aquatint, 21.8 by 15.2 cm. London: British Museum (Sánchez & Gállego 1994: 58)



they seek to liquidate it. One of the most striking and complex images to depict this double bind, and its resultant melancholia or “bad humour”, would be Goya’s *The sleep of reason produces monsters*, in which, as in the Dürer print, the writer *qua* artist is overwhelmed and struck inert by his sombre visions. In Goya’s etching the flight of reason is shown allegorically as the dark flight of ignorance and folly, while the print may more specifically be seen as a self-portrait in which an attempt is made to purge the foulness of “excess humour”.<sup>17</sup>

The struggle between the ideals of rationality and the opposing forces of irrationality is developed further in Dürer’s print (Figure 1). The first important emblem is the magic square in the top right-hand corner of the picture. Here it is important to stress the intricate relation between mathematics and melancholia (Klibansky *et al* 1979: 338). As representative of Jupiter, the magic square serves as a foil to the baleful influence of Saturn. The Jupiter square is magic because each row, column, and diagonal add up to the same number, which in the Jupiter magic square is 34. The numerals three and four also have a special importance in alchemy because they represent the spiritual transformation of the alchemist. Three symbolises the limited, finite life of the physical world and everyday existence while four symbolises the infinite realm of the spirit and the cosmos. On the one hand their product is 12, the number of the Tarot card the Hanged Man, which symbolises the union of physical and spiritual life. This in turn may be related to both the Crucifixion and the Norse myth of the self-sacrifice of Odin, as referenced in Kiefer’s 1985 image, *Yggdrasil* (Figure 4). In the Norse myth Odin is hung upside down from the Yggdrasil tree. Like Oedipus, he gouges out one of his eyes and is wounded with his own spear. When his head hits the ground, he gains entry to the underworld and learns the meaning of the runes in a moment of awakening that is simultaneously the moment of his death (Harris 1996). On the other hand, the sum of three and four is

17 For more on Goya and melancholia see Nördstrom 1962. Stoichita & Coderch (1999: 167-83) consider self-portraiture, melancholia or “bad humour” as giving rise to either genius or madness. See also Barasch (2000: 35) on blindness, black bile, melancholy, and madness. One may also relate the “inner sight” depicted in Goya’s print (Stoichita & Coderch 1999: 167, 8) to blindness as a kind of “inner sight” or hearing.

seven, which in astrological and theological numerology is the perfect number, also denoting the number of stages in the alchemical transmutation of lead into gold.

The second of Dürer's emblems representing the ideals of rationality and the opposing forces of irrationality, alluded to here by way of the duality of earth and spirit, is the polyhedron in the middle and to the left of the image. On the one hand, it represents gravity and matter: obtuse, irrational, and impenetrable. On the other hand, it stands for geometry, reason, lucidity; that is, the transcendence or negation<sup>18</sup> of irrationality by means of reasonable thought. The ladder with seven rungs against which it rests furthers the thematics of ascent and descent. But geometry itself is also enfolded with melancholia and, as Klibansky *et al* (1979: 339f) note, "was the science *par excellence* for Dürer". One might note here Henricus de Gandova's conception of two types of people: those endowed with a metaphysical reasoning not dominated by imagination and those with a geometrical reasoning. In terms of the latter,

[t]heir intellect cannot free itself from the dictates of their imagination [...] whatever they think of must have extension or, as the geometrical point, occupy a position in space. For this reason such people are melancholy, and are the best mathematicians, but the worst metaphysicians; for they cannot raise their minds above the spatial notions on which mathematics is based (Klibansky *et al* 1979: 338).

### 3. The bi-directionality of allegory and melancholia

This section proposes to link the previous section's "preposterous" co-joining of the notion of enfolding and dialectics with Thomas McEvelley's (1999: 229-35) notion of bi-directionality. Referring to the artworks of Marinus Boezem, which figure by way of a *sous rature*, a writing or figuring under erasure, McEvelley speaks of the bi-directionality of their thematics of ascendance and descendance. This bi-

18 In the context of the unstable, tense, or ambivalent dialectic between negation and affirmation (*Aufhebung*) in both Benjamin's thought and Kiefer's art, negation here might be related to gnostic negation or, in the tradition of negative theology, to Benjamin's "blasting", with its undeniable component of violence. See also section 4 of this article.

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Figure 4: Anselm Kiefer, *Yggdrasil* (1985). Acrylic, emulsion, and shellac on photograph, with lead, 102.9 by 83.5 cm. Radnor, Pennsylvania: Collection of Mr & Mrs Stephen H Frishberg (Rosenthal 1987: 140)



directionality would be an apposite way of describing the thematics of ascendance and descendance figured not only in Dürer's engraving, but also in both Benjamin's and Kiefer's figurings of allegory and melancholia.

The polyhedron and the ladder of Dürer's engraving, signifying both ascent and descent, are used respectively in Anselm Kiefer's *Melancholia* of 1991 (Figure 5) and his *Seraphim* of 1983-4 (Figure 6). Kiefer's leaden aeroplane refers to the alchemical transmutation of lead into gold, the transcendence of mute matter into spirit,<sup>19</sup> but also takes on the metaphorical and literal capacity to describe, if not the psychic state, then the constricted and repressed spiritual state of melancholia or *gravitas*.

This bidirectional melancholia may be compared to Marinus Boezem's *Signing the sky by an aeroplane* of 1969, the same year as Kiefer's *Besetzungen* or Occupations series, performed at the outset of his artistic career. Thomas McEvelley (1999: 232) says of Boezem's work:

This perhaps most Kleinian of Boezem's works fulfilled in physical form a project that Klein had proposed in fantasy when he declared that in 1947, at the outset of his artistic career, he had flown into the clear distant sky and signed it as his first work. A generation later, in an action that was part parody and part homage, Boezem had the sky over Amsterdam signed with his (Boezem's) name by a skywriting plane. Boezem's characteristic bidirectionality is present in the piece: while fulfilling Klein's fantasy as an homage to him and to his dream of relocating himself in the sublime, Boezem's use of the material apparatus of the airplane parodies Klein's project of the shamanic flight, pointing to the materiality of the body in the grip of gravity.

Boezem's work implies: "One can ascend out of one's culture only on the vehicle designed by one's culture". But at the same time, "[t]here is a suggestion that 'there is no escaping the gravitational force of culture'" (McEvelley 1999: 234). By extension, Kiefer's *Seraphim* with its snake and ladder refers to the fall into pure subjectivity brought on by the desire for knowledge or omnipotence. Benjamin (1998: 233) notes that this fall from the bliss of Paradise and the univocality of the Name, "[t]his knowledge, the triumph of subjectivity

19 Cf Elkins (2000: 115f, 125, 126, 128, 130) on alchemical transmutation, sublimation, transcendence and distillation.

Figure 5: Anselm Kiefer, *Melanholia* (1990-91). Lead aeroplane with crystal tetrachy, 320 by 442 by 167 cm. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (Cacciari & Celant 1997: 303)





and the onset of an arbitrary rule over things, is the origin of all allegorical contemplation". Furthermore, it is the origin of melancholia.

The bi-directional theme of transcendence and *acedia* is further emblematised in Dürer's print by way of the circle being halved systematically through three corners of the frame of the composition, clockwise from the bottom left, and finally disappearing. The symbolism is strongly indicative of death, but it also indicates resurrection, spiritual liberation or transcendence of melancholia (Harris 1996).<sup>20</sup>

Fourthly, the bat, whose outstretched wings have been inscribed with the title of Dürer's engraving, contradicts the sun,<sup>21</sup> which might be said to represent the Platonic Idea, the supreme truth, the Good. One might relate this sun to Bataille's (1985: 66) reading of Vincent Van Gogh's suns and sunflowers (Figure 7):

[...] the sun in its glory is doubtless opposed to the faded sunflower, but no matter how dead it may be this sunflower is also a sun, and the sun is in some way deleterious and sick.

Bataille (1985: 66) writes: "Even the ideal carries within itself something of the deformities of which it is the exasperated antithesis". Anselm Kiefer's *The famous order of the night* of 1996 (Figure 8) astutely visualises this sick sun or ideal sunflower. Like black suns,<sup>22</sup> the sun-

20 Cf Barasch (2000) on blindness, melancholic darkness, and death as dialectically related to spiritual insight, redemption or resurrection.

21 This sun, according to Klibansky *et al* (1979: 360), is in fact not a sun, but a comet. They write: "It is then scarcely a coincidence that a rainbow shines above Dürer's sea, and that the water has so flooded the flat beach that it is lapping round the trees between two bright peninsulas; for even in Babylonian cuneiform texts it had been considered a definite fact that a comet with its head towards the earth pointed to high water; and it was the melancholic in particular who was able to foresee such misfortunes". Cf Schoeman (2002) on a comparison between the flood in Poussin's *Winter* (1660-4), Kiefer's *To paint* (1974), and Kentridge's *Felix in exile* (1994). My deliberate misprision here is meant to enable a spiritualist, neo-Platonic reading of Dürer "preposterously" entangled with, and subverted by way of a heretic or perverse, gnostic atheology. The sun and its shadow seem to be the perfect double metaphor, aid or "semantic void" (Bal 1999: 133) for this misprision or entanglement of light and darkness.

22 Hartley (2000: 197) notes: "the alchemists used the image of the black sun or *sol niger* to symbolize the death of base matter". This is related to the first part of the process of turning base matter into gold, during which base matter was

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Figure 6: Anselm Kiefer, *Seraphim* (1983-84). Oil, straw, emulsion, and shellac on canvas, 330 by 340 cm. New York: Solomon R Guggenheim Museum (Cacciari & Celant 1997: 250)



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Figure 7: Vincent van Gogh, *Sunflowers* (1888). Oil on canvas, 94.95 by 73.03 cm. London: Tate Gallery (Wallace 1972: 103)



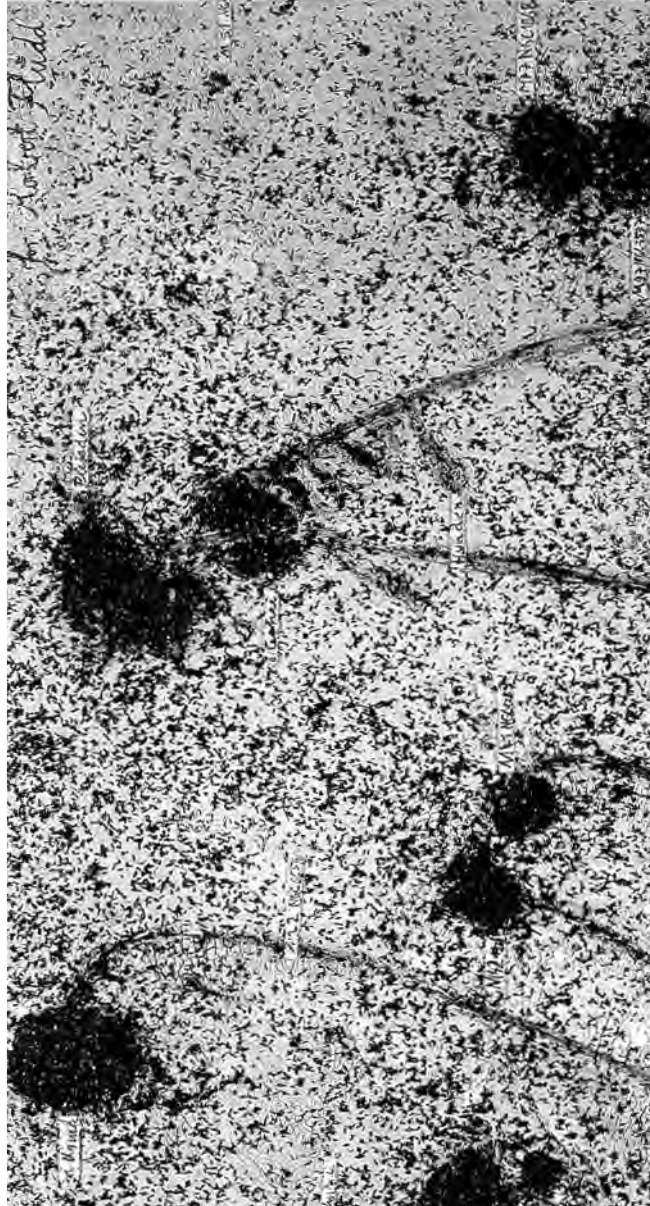
flowers seem to loom over us, as if we were prostrate on the ground. While the sunflowers reach up toward the sun, they also wither and die. But conversely: if one reads the inscription at the top right of the painting, “For Robert Fludd”, an allegorical, alchemical or Kabbalistic counter-motion is put into play. By way of the name or rebus of the sixteenth/seventeenth-century English Rosicrucian, the force of descent here increases another acting in the opposite direction.<sup>23</sup>

Furthermore, the bi-directionality of Kiefer’s sunflowers reflects a recurring theme in his oeuvre. Like the cathedrals in Marinus Boezem’s cathedral series, which extend the theme of Orphic ascent as well as complicating and critiquing it, the sunflowers — seen in the context of the 1991 painting *Evil flowers*, the leaden aeroplane entitled *Melancholia*, and the 1996 book, *Grass will grow over your cities ... Fesaia* — may be said to function as transformative membranes “through

supposed to turn black and enter the stage known as *nigredo*, “in which the body of the impure metal, the matter of the Stone, or the old outmoded state of being is killed, putrefied and dissolved into the original substance of creation, the *prima materia*, in order that it may be renovated and reborn in new form” (Lyndy Abraham 1988: 135; Hartley 2000: 197). Cf Thomas McEvelley (1996: 4) on “the alchemical concept of the *nigredo*, a stage of the transformation of matter in which it burned down to a blackened residue before being reconstituted into a spiritual state in the *albedo*”, in relation to Kiefer’s oeuvre. Cf Schoeman (2000: 72), and Schoeman (1996: 15, no 9) on Derrida’s textual interpolations of light and dark. Derrida (1987: 86) writes, “But did not the Platonic sun already enlighten the visible sun, and did not the excedence play upon the metaphor of these two suns? Was not the good the necessarily nocturnal source of the light? The light of the light beyond light. The heart of light is black, as has often been noticed”. One might compare this to the Gnostic notion of a dark light, and of course to Kristeva’s reading of melancholia and depression by way of the metaphor of the black sun, as the loss of an ideal of “thing”. Cf Marin (1999: 76) who in *Sublime Poussin* writes: “How to show the darkness that all light contains at its source?”

- 23 Cf Benjamin’s (1986b: 312) “Theologico-political fragment” on the dialectical relation between the sacred and the profane: “If one arrow points to the goal toward which the profane dynamic acts, and another marks the direction of Messianic intensity, then certainly the quest of free humanity for happiness runs counter to the Messianic direction; but just as a force can, through acting, increase another that is acting in the opposite direction, so the order of the profane assists, through being profane, the coming of the Messianic Kingdom”.

Figure 8: Anselm Kiefer, *Die berühmten Orden der Nacht* (1996). Emulsion, acrylic, shellac, and sunflower seeds on burlap, 190 by 280 cm. Paris: Claude Berri Collection (Cacciari & Celant 1997: 359)



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which transpositions from nature to culture or below to above can be effected” (McEvilley 1999: 234).

And, finally, the scales hanging above the writing putto in Dürer’s print, which emblemise balance and justice — and which serve as a foil to the hourglass, emblem of the mythological idea of Cronos, the archetype of both Old Father Time and Death, the Reaper — underscore the dyadic or dialectical structure of the print. The scales of justice here counter the forces of fate and myth, in both a Platonic and a Benjaminian sense. Rüdiger Safranski (1998: 217) writes:

The fundamental principle of justice, as demonstrated by Plato in his ideal republic, is the realization of the right measure and of order. In a hierarchically graduated world of unequal human beings, each one is assigned the place where he can develop his peculiar abilities and apply them to the whole. The picture of the harmonically collaborating whole is enlarged by Plato beyond the polis to the even more comprehensive dimension of the Pythagorean harmony of the spheres. And so the circle closes. The soul is of cosmic origin, and the cosmos is soul-like. Soul and cosmos both vibrate in a sphere of tranquility and unchangeability. They are pure Being, in contrast to changeable time.

For Benjamin, justice is equated with the expressionless and the sublime, which he opposes to the ambiguity of myth as well as beauty. Menninghaus (1993: 172) notes that to the incapacity of myth as well as beauty, “for lucidity about themselves, are opposed ‘univocality’, ‘clarity’, decidedness and self-lucidity”, a point to which I shall return.

In the humanist tradition Dürer’s engraving serves both to represent and to transcend melancholia — which is seen as both negative and positive.<sup>24</sup> According to Robert Burton, melancholia is a sign of both genius and insanity, of both heroism and indolence. Lloyd Spencer (1985: 64) notes that the *De anima* of 1548, a work of late-medieval humanism by the early Renaissance scholar Melanchthon, was influential in disseminating the doctrine of melancholy (or melancholia). Through a creative misreading of Aristotle and Plato, the text’s elevation of melancholy (or melancholia) into a theory of visionary artistic genius “played a crucial role in ennobling the idea of melancholy”. Spencer (1985: 64) writes:

24 Much like the dualistic metaphor of blindness as a mental image in Western thought, cf Barasch 2000.

## Schoeman/Reason and madness

Whereas early scholars in the Middle Ages had seen melancholy only as an affliction, Melanchthon's work forms part of the process whereby melancholy became associated with the creative frenzy, or ecstasy, described by Plato. Melancholy came to be seen not only as the driving force behind the scholar's absorption in the world of books, and his compulsive pondering of imponderables, but also as a privileged source of artistic inspiration.

Referring to Fritz Saxl and Erwin Panofsky's study of Dürer's *Melencolia I*, published in 1923, Spencer (1985: 65) writes:

The syndrome of melancholy as laid out in the doctrine of the four temperaments was used to characterize the temper of the age when it was placed in conjunction with the astrological notions associated with the planet and the god, Saturn. At the same time the purely baleful influence of both Saturn and melancholy was re-interpreted and together they came to be seen as the mark of someone exceptional. The gift of prophecy, of inspired visions, of the most extremely spiritual form of contemplation, was thought to have been bestowed on those bowed down by the demonic pull of saturnine melancholy. Saturn was associated with the mythological idea of Cronos, the archetype of both Old Father Time and Death, the Reaper. Intense contemplation and inspired vision were granted the melancholic, who was seized by the palpable passage of time, who was drawn ineluctably to gaze on the lowest and darkest aspects of existence and pondered the riddles of portents left by time's ruin. A creative frenzy which threatened to become madness was a gift, but also a kind of affliction of the melancholic. His rage against the world was the only intimation he was allowed of a better one.

In this context one ought to compare *Melencolia* to another engraving by Dürer from 1514, *St Jerome in his study* (Figure 9). Serving as a visual and spiritual counterpart to the former image, *St Jerome* represents neither the inactivity and heaviness of melancholia, nor creative frenzy or rage, but like the writing putto in *Melencolia*, the bliss of study and the Eros of writing. Here geometrical exactitude counters, while paradoxically also being entangled with, the sloth of melancholia, the impenetrability of matter. Even the skull on the windowsill — emblematic of petrification — looks peaceful rather than terrifying (Panofsky 1971: 154).

One might view St Jerome's sober scholarly activity as a counterpart to the weight of melancholia, to the melancholy or allegorical artist. Dürer's angel's melancholia sees the instruments of reason and craft — “the utensils of active life” as Benjamin (1998: 140) puts it

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— become so many useless and dead things, thus reflecting the transformation of the scientific optimism of the Renaissance into the melancholia of the allegorical Baroque *Trauerspiel* or German “mourning play”, with its landscapes of ruin and destruction. In turn, the Baroque *Trauerspiel* refers forward to Kiefer’s allegorical paintings of ruin and fallen meaning. As Saltzman (1999: 88) argues,

[...] the deadened objects, inanimate, absent of all but imbued meaning, that populate Benjamin’s theorization of allegory, may come to find their most powerful and acute visualization in Kiefer’s work — his landscapes, for example, uncannily embodying the allegorical conception of ‘history, as a petrified, primordial landscape’.

But, as Saltzman (1999: 92) writes in the context of Kiefer:

The melancholic painter continues to work and to produce, and, if not to mourn, at least to confront, through acts of repetition, the deferred and traumatic memory that is the history of his nation. And, in turn, his audiences are repeatedly challenged by the very same anamnestic task.

Saltzman is referring to the distinction Freud draws between melancholia and mourning. As Kuspit (1995: 223) notes: “In mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself [...] it is the effect of the internal work which is consuming his ego”. Freud writes in “Mourning and melancholy”:

[...] the loved object no longer exists and it proceeds to demand that all libido shall be withdrawn from its attachments to that object. This demand arouses understandable opposition — it is a matter of general observation that people never willingly abandon a libidinal position, not even, indeed, when a substitute is already beckoning to them. This opposition can be so intense that turning away from reality takes place and a clinging to the object through the medium of a hallucinatory wishful psychosis (Rogoff 1995: 136).

In short, for Freud melancholia is related to the repetition characteristic of the death drive, while mourning signals a letting go, the amorous release characteristic of the life drive.<sup>25</sup>

25 Cf Lyotard (1999: 30): “This is why there is in the work the terror of a loss suspended within the sensible. The visual work makes one feel as though one’s eyes have been abandoned. [...] It is an event, a birth, but always a melancholic one, a mourning; a *da* that brings the *fort* back within itself”. Cf the metaphors of insight and blindness mentioned earlier in relation to melancholia.



Schoeman/Reason and madness

Figure 9: Albrecht Dürer, *St Jerome in his study* (1514). Engraving, 24.7 by 18.8 cm. Berlin: Kupferstichkabinett SMPK (Anzelewski 1980: 177)



It will be noted here, though, that in his *The origin of the German mourning play*, published in 1928, Benjamin makes no distinction between melancholia and mourning. Given that this text carries the indication “Conceived 1916. Written 1925”, he may, however, have read Freud’s text “Mourning and melancholy” in the interim, as it was published in 1917. In his 1916 text “*Trauerspiel* and tragedy” Benjamin opposes tragedy’s completion in and of time by adducing the mourning play, where the completion of time is eternally deferred to the Last Judgement. “Tragedy”, explains Caygill (1998: 53), “is another form of *agon* [or contest] in which the moment of death marks a point of fulfillment and completion”. Opposed to that, “[i]n the mourning play, the organizing principle is not completion in and of time, but repetition; not praise but mourning”. Here Benjamin clearly relates repetition to mourning, much as Freud does with melancholia.

Moreover, Benjamin (1996b: 60-1, modified in Caygill 1998: 54) contrasts the “eternally full and fixed word” of the tragic dialogue with the “word in transition” of the mourning play. According to Benjamin (1996a: 57, modified in Caygill 1998: 54), “the mourning play is not the reflection of a higher life, but merely the reflection of a mirror in a mirror,<sup>26</sup> and its continuation is no less shadowy than itself. The dead become ghosts”. As Caygill (1998: 54) notes, “In tragedy the word is brought to completion in the dialogue where it receives its full meaning, while in the mourning play the arrival of meaning is perpetually deferred”. Herein lies the key to Benjamin’s understanding of allegory and its relation to melancholia and mourning. Benjamin (1996a: 57) speaks of the distance that “everywhere separates image and mirror-image, the signifier and the signified”. It is this distance, which is the result of the remotion of God from the world, which lends the mourning play its allegorical and, by extension, its melancholic and mournful character.

But again, in the context of the mourning play, Benjamin delineates the bi-directionality of both melancholia and allegory. In allegory, he writes (Benjamin 1998: 175): “Any person, any object, any relationship can mean absolutely anything else”. In allegory there is no

26 Cf Bal’s (1999) discussion, and the self-reflexive or performative use of the Baroque mirror.

unity between signifier and signified; instead there is endless duality and ambiguity. Benjamin (1998: 139) speaks of the “empty world” of the Reformation, which became viewed as “a rubbish heap of partial, inauthentic actions”.<sup>27</sup> He goes on to describe how the melancholy allegorist contemplates all things as empty, dead, discarded masks. The melancholy allegorist suffers from contemplative paralysis and self-absorption, much like the angel in Dürer’s engraving, or the dreaming artist in Goya’s *The sleep of reason produces monsters*.

According to Benjamin (1998: 233), however, this ultra-subjective contemplation, in which evil reveals itself as a purely subjective and allegorical phenomenon, marks a dialectical reversal. For if the German mourning play is characterised in Benjamin’s reading by “the melancholy repetition of inchoate mourning” (Caygill 1998: 59), he speaks of a dialectical about-turn in which melancholy allegory becomes an allegory of itself, and in the process redeems itself. Benjamin’s (1998: 235) reading of melancholia “gives mourning at one and the same time the cue for its entry and exit”. For in sharp contrast to tragedy, the mourning play is just that: a play of mourning. Benjamin (1996: 61) writes:

27 An interesting comparison could be drawn here between Benjamin’s reading of the empty, inauthentic world of the Reformation, which for him serves allegorically and dialectically as an expression of Weimar Germany, and Heidegger’s existential-ontological interpretation of the inauthenticity of the Weimar of his own day in *Being and time* (1927b) — but that will have to wait for another occasion. *Being and time* was published one year before Benjamin’s *The origin of the German mourning play* appeared, although the latter had officially been submitted in his application for *Habilitation* in 1925. Benjamin voiced his criticism of Heidegger’s philosophy as early as 1916, when, in a letter to Gershom Scholem, he criticised Heidegger’s treatment of historical and mechanical time in the essay “Das Problem der historischen Zeit” (Scholem & Adorno 1994: 82). Again, in a letter of 1920 to Scholem, Benjamin criticised Heidegger’s book on Duns Scotus (Scholem & Adorno 1994: 168). And later, in a letter of 1930 to Scholem, writing of the connection between his *Trauerspiel* book and the *Arcades project*, Benjamin opposes his own theory of historical knowledge to Heidegger’s (Scholem & Adorno 1994: 359). Cf, for example, Safranski (1998: 160-62) on Heidegger, authenticity and inauthenticity in relation to the burdensome character of *Dasein*. On Heidegger and Benjamin see Caygill 1994: 1-31. The connection between Kiefer and Heidegger is certainly worthy of attention. Cf for example Biro 1998.

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It is the necessity of redemption that constitutes the playful element of this art form. For compared with the irrevocability of tragedy, which makes an ultimate reality of language and the linguistic order, every product animated by a feeling (of sorrow) must be called a game.

“Sorrow conjures itself up” in this game “but it also redeems itself” (Benjamin 1996: 61).

And yet, continuing the thematics of bi-directionality, the game is also ultimately quite serious. Benjamin (1998: 232) writes:

For it is precisely visions of the frenzy of destruction, in which all earthly things collapse into a heap of ruins, which reveal the limit set upon allegorical contemplation, rather than its ideal quality. The bleak confusion of Golgotha, which can be recognized as the schema underlying the allegorical figures in hundreds of engravings and descriptions of the period [the Reformation], is not just a symbol of the desolation of human existence. In it transitoriness is not signified or allegorically represented, so much as, in its own significance, displayed as allegory. As the allegory of resurrection. Ultimately in the death-signs of the baroque the direction of allegorical reflection is reversed; on the second part of its wide arc it returns, to redeem. [...] This solves the riddle of the most fragmented, the most defunct, the most dispersed. Allegory, of course, thereby loses everything that was most peculiar to it: the secret, privileged knowledge, the arbitrary rule in the realm of the dead objects, the supposed infinity of a world without hope. All this vanishes with this one about-turn in which the immersion of allegory has to clear away the final phantasmagoria of the objective and, left entirely to its own devices, re-discovers itself, not playfully in the earthly world of things, but seriously under the eyes of heaven. *And this is the essence of melancholy immersion: that its ultimate objects, in which it believes it can most fully secure for itself that which is vile, turn into allegories, and that these allegories fill out and deny the void in which they are represented, just as, ultimately, the intention does not faithfully rest in the contemplation of bones, but faithlessly leaps forward to the idea of resurrection* [italics mine, GS].

Thus for Benjamin the repetition of the repetition, which is characteristic of mythic history, brings about a complete *volte-face* in which “time stands still”, in “a Messianic cessation of happening” (Benjamin 1992: 254). Accordingly Benjamin returns to Plato’s eternal Ideas into which all transient things are sublated; or rather, in Benjamin’s re-reading of Plato’s Ideas, the Ideas are brought down into the things, redeeming them in the way geometry might “redeem” mute matter. Thus illuminated from within, matter fills out and denies the void in which it is represented. This is what Benjamin means

by re-membrance: it is the re-cognition or re-collection of the original name, Idea, pure word — the Messianic or divine origin, in the fallen word. Furthermore, Benjamin's re-membrance is close to Saltzman's ethico-theological notion of the anamnestic task of the melancholy painter who, following mystical thought, recalls the dictum: "as above, so below"; or as Kant would have it, "the starry heavens above and the moral law within". Echoing the scales in Dürer's engraving, Benjamin's notion of re-membrance is therefore intricately linked to the notion of justice.

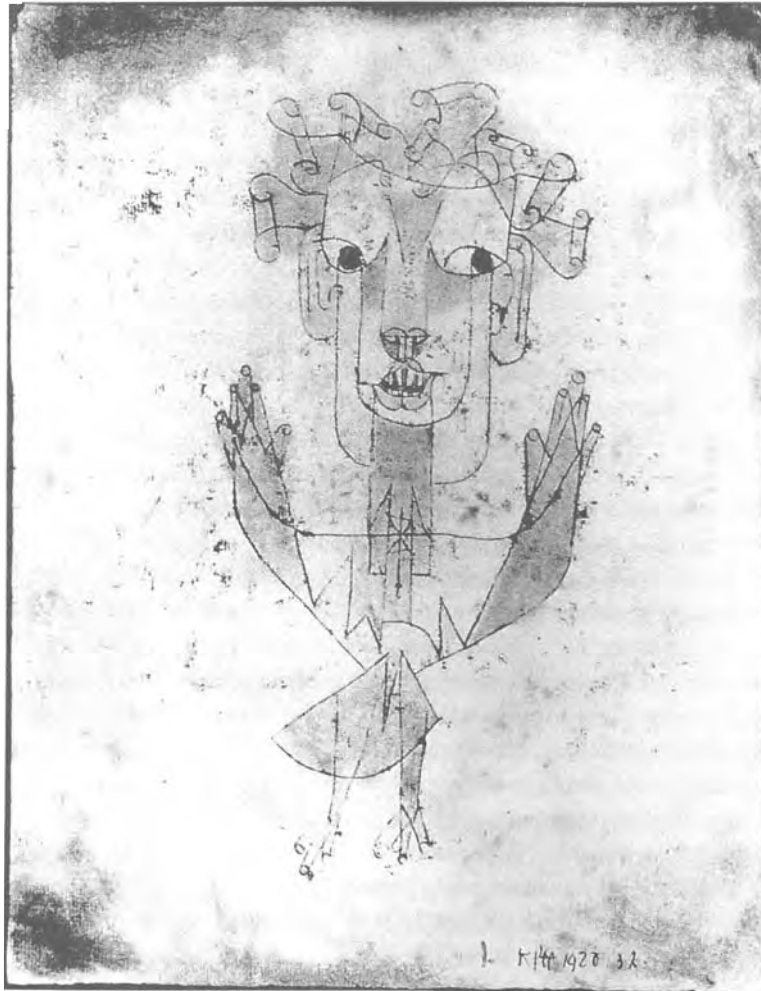
It is in light of this melancholic and mournful anamnesis, and the concomitant leap into the redemption of things, that Benjamin's (1992b: 249) *allegoresis* of Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus* of 1920 (Figure 10) — as representing the petrified angel of history propelled backwards into the future by a storm blowing from Paradise, a storm called progress — links up with Dürer's print and with Kiefer's petrified paintings, as a dialectical counterpoint. For if Klee's scriptural angel, helplessly watching the pile of debris before him grow skyward, appears petrified, like Dürer's angel, in Benjamin's reading petrification is related to the category of the expressionless. That is, the sober and sublime imagelessness of humanity's ethical essence (Menninghaus 1993: 169), rooted in the catastrophe of history which, like the scales of justice in Dürer's etching, interrupts the eternal recurrence of fate and myth, and the *acedia* of melancholia. In its nakedness and state of utter devastation the petrified angel represents the transition of the beautiful to the sublime.

#### 4. Sublime reading, recollection, seeing, and listening

The thematics of bi-directionality from the previous section will continue as a methodological operation in what is to follow. While for Benjamin the anamnestic concepts of the sublime and the expressionless may ethically put an end to the dialectic of ascendance and descendance, both within allegory and melancholia, it will be suggested that this idea is itself enfolded with melancholia. Univocal knowledge here is always already bound to the *gravitas* of impossible endings.

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Figure 10: Paul Klee, *Angelus Novus* (1920). Oil transfer and watercolour on paper, 31.8 by 24.2 cm. Jerusalem: The Israel Museum (Patke 2002)



In order to comprehend, then, the ethico-theological imperative of Benjamin's anamnestic move toward the sublime and the expressionless — as an interruption of linear time, mythical eternal recurrence and, by extension, allegory and melancholia — one must make two distinctions. On the one hand, Benjamin's notion of anamnesis must be distinguished from Plato's; on the other, Benjamin's notion of the sublime must be distinguished from both Burke's and Nietzsche's.

Firstly, Stéphane Moses (1993: 181) notes that Benjamin's anamnesis does not lead back to a "sensory perception of images":

Unlike Platonic memory, which is essentially of a visual nature, the anamnesis to which Benjamin alludes is of an acoustic nature. As in biblical revelation it is not through vision (according to Kant an 'outer form of sense') that truth reveals itself to human perception; it is through hearing ('an inner form of sense'). Hearing must be comprehended here in the physical sense of the word as the faculty of perceiving by ear the sonorous harmonies of the word. In that sense, knowing the origin signifies refinding an original hearing, rediscovering the original signification of language which has faded through repetition and habit. 'In that renewal' — writes Benjamin — 'the original perception of words is re-established' in a constantly renewed movement between forgetting and remembering again.

If this Judaic notion of acoustic anamnesis<sup>28</sup> informs Benjamin's *allegoresis* of Klee's angel, then one might say that the angel listens rather than sees. Or, as Benjamin (1992a: 141) writes in the context of the self-absorbed Kafka: "he who listens hard does not see".<sup>29</sup> Benjamin's acoustic anamnesis may be compared to that of Klee's friend

28 Again a comparison may be drawn here between Benjamin and Heidegger. According to Jay (1994: 269), "Heidegger's thought, for all its fascination with certain Hellenic models, can be construed as recovering the Hebraic emphasis on hearing God's word rather than seeing his manifestations".

29 Another interesting comparison could be made here between Benjamin's reading of self-absorption and Michael Fried's reading of absorption in Courbet's paintings. Fried (1990: 177) writes in the context of Courbet's *The quarry* of 1856-57, "the hunter's immersion in reverie makes him dead to the world". In Fried's reading the relation of the passive hunter's absorption to the active *picneur* blowing his hunting horn, which faces into the painting, is such that one might say he listens to, rather than beholds, his own activity of painting. The denial of beholdership is of course central to Fried's interpretation of Courbet's paintings as anti-theatrical. For a similar phenomenological approach

and colleague Kandinsky, in terms of the latter's notion of musical pictures comprised of *Klänge*, or "pure interior sound[s]", "wholly divorced from representative associations" (Birringer 1983: 146). In this sense, like Kandinsky, both Benjamin and Klee would hold out for mystical nothingness, simultaneously both empty and full. On the other hand, if one replaces Benjamin's reading of Kafka listening to tradition with his reading of Klee's angel, then the latter could also be said to be listening to tradition — in particular the Jewish tradition of the Messiah whose anticipated coming will interrupt the empty, homogenous time of history. As in the Christian notion of "The *ponderación misteriosa*, the intervention of God in the work of art" (Benjamin 1998: 235) (which is assumed to be possible, if inadequately expressed in the German mourning play), the Messiah is anticipated in Benjamin's melancholic allegorical reading of Klee's painting. He writes in the "Theses on the philosophy of history":

The soothsayers who found out from time what it had in store certainly did not experience time as either homogenous or empty. Anyone who keeps this in mind will perhaps get an idea of how past times were experienced in remembrance — namely, in just the same way. We know that the Jews were prohibited from investigating the future. The Torah and the prayers instruct them in remembrance, however. This stripped the future of its magic, to which all succumb who turn to the soothsayers for enlightenment. This does not imply, however, that for the Jews the future turned into homogenous, empty time. For every second of time was the strait gate through which the Messiah might enter (Benjamin 1992b: 255).

The coming of the Messiah, which interrupts the transience of earthly time, may then be further related to Benjamin's interpretation of the expressionless or the sublime. But as mentioned before, Benjamin's notion of the sublime is idiosyncratic.

Menninghaus (1993: 169) notes that,

... in almost the entire tradition — in Longinus, Addison, Dubos, Burke, Klopstock, Kant, etc — the aesthetics of the sublime is con-

to absorption see Clive Dilnot & Maruja Garcia-Padilla's (1989: 41) interpretation in Vermeer's *Woman in blue* (c 1662-64): "The intensity of the absorption depicted, imitative at once of our own transitory state before the picture and of our deeper desire for equivalent self-absorption, pushes us to project our own presence into the picture, which appears at once to evoke, recognize and embody these desires, and to lay them out for our contemplation".



nected to the concept of motion, in many authors even to mystical intensifications of the concept of motion such as ecstasy and enthusiasm.

As opposed to this, Benjamin's expressionless-sublime is "a 'power' of 'petrification': it precisely 'checks' 'motion', interrupts it". Benjamin's idea of "purification through petrification" would therefore also distinguish it from the Nietzschean notion of the sublime — Dionysian ecstasy. Benjamin's notion of the sublime is more Apollonian than it is Dionysian.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, in contrast to Burke and Kant's notions of the sublime as vague and veiled, Benjamin's expressionless-sublime operates as a clear, univocal "pulling aside of the veil" (Menninghaus 1993: 173). In other words, for Benjamin the expressionless-sublime operates as justice and would mean the end of the ambiguity of myth and of the appearance of beauty.

And yet ambiguity persists, as does melancholia. For while in Benjamin's reading the nothingness from whence comes the Messiah, or the nothingness to which we return<sup>31</sup> is sublime, it may paradoxically fill us with both serene gnosis and melancholia. Like Dürer's *St Jerome in his study* (Figure 9), Benjamin holds that learning and knowledge may counter the horror of a life without meaning or purpose. As he writes in the context of Kafka's students, and pre-empting his later *allegoresis* of the storm blowing from Paradise: "It is a tempest that blows from the land of oblivion, and learning is a cavalry attack against it" (Benjamin 1992a: 133). Yet on the other hand, the anamnesis of the coming of the Messiah and the divine redemption of the fallen things remain infinitely flawed ideas — unsayable, unreadable, marked by endless deferral and sublime ambiguity — not least of all for being entangled with the terrifying violence of notions of a secu-

30 Cf Benjamin's (1986a: 301) "Apollonian image of the destroyer" in his text "The destructive character".

31 Cf Benjamin's (1999: 715) text "Agesilaus Santander", written in 1933, where he also speaks of "that road to the future along which he came, and which he knows so well that he can traverse it without turning around". This "future along which he came" and which "he" will return to is, of course, the mystical origin, the pure nothingness, which Karl Kraus, the eminent Jewish Viennese satirist who converted to Catholicism, also saw as the goal (Benjamin 1992b: 252). In Benjamin's *allegoresis* this nothingness, this sublime origin, is quite clearly depicted behind Klee's angel.

lar Last Judgement.<sup>32</sup> Hence also the ambiguity of Kiefer's canvases: characterised by a hermeneutics of undecidability, they cannot but point the way both upward and downward.

In this regard, as has been suggested, a thematics of bi-directionality — in which ascendance is dialectically mirrored by descentance, and *vice versa* — is at play not only in Kiefer's paintings and Benjamin's thoughts but also in Dürer's *Melencolia I* (Figure 1). This follows from the proposition of a "preposterous" reading in which Dürer's *Melencolia I* is enfolded with both Benjamin's thoughts and Kiefer's paintings of allegory and melancholia. Correlatively Benjamin and Kiefer are enfolded with Dürer's engraving, thus complicating the past with the wavering viewpoints of the present. And while all three point the way to the possible checking of the motion of ambiguity, of justice pulling aside the veil of myth, and redemption giving sonority to mute matter, this anamnestic knowledge or expressionless ending remains entangled with melancholia. Like Dürer's angel,<sup>33</sup> neither Benjamin's philosophy of history nor Kiefer's art — of destruction and redemption — can ultimately escape its earthbound origins.

32 Cf Derrida's (1992: 62) uneasiness with Benjamin's vertiginous allusions to eschatological expiation in the name of gnostic or "messianico-marxist" negation or justice. On the tension between violence and redemption that characterises a secularised Jewish reading programme see also Rabinbach 1985: 78-124.

33 Klibansky *et al* (1979: 327) write: "But all these antidotes [from the wreath, which the woman/angel has around her brow, to the magic square] are merely a weak makeshift in the face of the real destiny of the melancholy person. Just as Ficino had already realised that selfless and unconditional surrender to the will of Saturn was after all not only the 'ultima' but also the 'optima ratio' for the intellectual man, so, too, Dürer (as we can see from the dark face and clenched fist) creates a Melencolia whose sad but sublime destiny cannot, and perhaps should not, be averted by palliatives, whether natural or magical. If the cosmic conflict between Saturn and Jupiter ever came to a final decision, it could for Dürer not end in victory for Jupiter".

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