

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF MELANCHOLIA IN ART

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THE SIGNIFICANCE OF MELANCHOLIA IN ART

by

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SIGNIFIKASI MELANKOLIA DALAM SENI

ABSTRAK

Kajian ini meneliti fenomena melankolia sebagai keadaan emosi yang kondusif dalam mewujudkan suasana minda yang produktif. Melankolia dalam hal ini ditakrifkan sebagai keadaan minda yang tenggelam dalam kesendirian ketika dalam proses kreatif, samada semasa menulis buku, bertafakur mengenai hal tertentu atau dalam proses penghasilan karya seni (melukis, mengarang muzik, dan lain-lain). Justeru, takrifan dan pemahaman tentang melankolia yang sedemikian boleh dipakainya dalam pengertian umum tentang sebarang proses kreativiti. Namun kajian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis melankolia dengan lebih menjurus dan meneliti mekanisme di mana melankolia berfungsi sebagai 'kesepian' atau kesendirian yang produktif dalam menyemai pemikiran yang asli dan subjektiviti yang sejati. Seterusnya, hasil dari analisis ini diaplikasikan dalam proses studio seni visual. Hasil kajian ini dibentangkan melalui siri karya seni yang dipaparkan dalam pameran solo di galeri-galeri seni di Pulau Pinang, dan disertai dengan disertasi yang mendokumentasi dan menganalisis proses dan hasil penyelidikan ini. Metodologi kajian ini merangkumi kajian pustaka, analisis teks-teks falsafah tentang melankolia dan estetik, temubual dengan seniman serta penyelidik/sarjana yang relevan dan juga eksperimen studio. Bahkan kajian berasaskan praktik ini menggunakan kaedah kajian aksi-estetika, iaitu kitaran proses observasi, menaakul, merancang dan bertindak. Hasil kajian ini dibentangkan melalui siri karya seni yang dipaparkan dalam dua pameran solo di galeri-galeri seni di Pulau Pinang, dan disertai dengan disertasi yang mendokumentasi dan menganalisis proses dan hasil penyelidikan.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF MELANCHOLIA IN ART

ABSTRACT

This research examines the phenomenon of melancholia as an emotional condition that is conducive for a productive state of mind. Melancholia in this instance is defined as frame of mind that sinks in solitude during moments of creativity in general, whether it be in writing a book, meditating on a given subject or in artistic processes (making painting, composing music, etc.). While such understanding of melancholia is applicable in a generalized sense of creativity, this research aims to analyse the mechanisms through which melancholia functions as a productive 'loneliness' or solitude that cultivates originality of thoughts and authentic subjectivity. Subsequently, the results of these analyses are applied in the studio processes of visual art. Library research, textual analyses of key philosophical texts on melancholia and aesthetic, interviews with relevant artists, researchers/scholars, and studio experiment the methodology of this research. Moreover, Aesthetico-Action Research, which is a cyclical, open-ended, active process that involves observing, reflecting, planning and acting, is used as the methodology for the studio component of this practice-based study. The results of this research are presented through a series of artworks that are featured in two solo exhibitions in art galleries in Penang, accompanied by a dissertation on those documents and analyses of the research processes and outcomes.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Overview

This research investigates the relevance of melancholy in the context of art. Within this context, melancholy is understood as a particular effect of things or events on a person, resulting in a certain action and reaction from those stimuli. Within the context of art, the phenomenon of melancholy can thus occur in two separate instances: (1) During an experience of a piece of art (including music, literature or film), and (2) During an experience of the world (things, events, memories, etc.) which lead to an artistic creation. The first instance refers to the experience of the audience of art, and the second to that of the artist during the process of making art. While the two instances are inter-related, this study focuses on the experience of the artist in creating a work of art. In sum, this research examines the nature of melancholy as a drive that produces intensity of experience that arises from being thrown into a contemplative mood. This in turn sets the psychological and intellectual atmosphere that leads to artistic creation. The results of this research are presented through a series of artworks that are accompanied by a dissertation that documents and analyses the research processes and outcomes.

1.2 Research Background

Studies on the subject of melancholy has a long history, doing back to medical studies in ancient Greece. The Greek physician Hippocrates (460-370 B.C) used the term “melancholia” to refer to a distinct disease caused by excess of “black bile” (produced by the spleen) within the body. This excess or imbalance leads to mental and physical disorders characterized by constant and prolonged experience of “fears

and despondencies”, which are the distinct symptoms of the ailment of melancholia. Physicians also observed the understanding of melancholia as a psychosomatic ailment in the Islamic empire who categorized the disease under the term *hunz*. The physicians Al-Kindi (801-873 C.E) and Ibn Sina (980-1037 C.E) described *hunz* as mental disorder characterized by anger, passion, hatred and depression.

This medical tradition continued into modern Europe, with the seminal publication of *The Anatomy of Melancholy* by Robert Burton in 1621, which defines melancholy as a mental or emotional disorder that produces “sorrow, need, sickness, trouble, fear, grief, passion, or perturbation of the mind, any manner of care, discontent, or thought, which causes anguish, dullness, heaviness and vexation of spirit, any ways opposite to pleasure, mirth, joy, delight”. Melancholy as a form of depression was later analyzed by Freud (1999) who postulates that melancholia as a psychological response to a loss, particularly the loss of love, such as in death. According to Freud, melancholia is an unconscious act of grieving a loss. It is closely related with the act mourning, which is also an act of grieving a loss. The difference is that while melancholia works in the unconscious, mourning is done at a conscious level. Freud continues the long history of understanding of melancholia as a sickness, as opposed to mourning which is a healthy way of grieving a loss. Freud wrote that mourning (such as crying during funeral or any deliberated ritual in dealing with death) is a normal reaction to a loss love object (person). In this case sadness is externalized, through crying or other conscious acts of acknowledging our loss. However, melancholia develops when the sadness is internalized. This internalization leads the person to identify the loss love object with himself/herself at the unconscious level. As a result, the person will torture him/herself as a revenge against the loss love. Freud defines melancholia as anger turns inward and attack the

self from within, leading to the loss of self. For this reason, the melancholic person loses all interest in external activities and isolates himself/herself, i.e. he/she sinks into depression.

1.3 Melancholia and the Arts

In visual art the notion of melancholia develops into a rather different strand from the Freudian legacy mentioned above. The idea of melancholia in the visual arts became particularly important and valorized in Europe during the Romantic period, when artists rebelled against the rational philosophy and objectivity of Neoclassicism and explored emotional extremes and subjectivity. Given that melancholy is associated with a 'troubled' soul and isolated individual, melancholia became a type of philosophical ideal, a mark of an intellectual; a person though thinks and meditates intensely in isolation. Given that Romanticism is an intellectual and artistic revolt, the solitary intellectual/artist therefore harbors within him/her a certain turbulence since his/her intellectual meditation serves a rebellious end against the status quo. This 'positive' attitude towards melancholia can be traced back to the Renaissance philosopher Marsilio Ficino (1433–1499) who regarded melancholia as a "mark of genius ... an indispensable adjunct to all those with artistic or intellectual pretensions" (Strong 1969). The Renaissance art historian Giorgio Vasari similarly saw melancholia in a positive light. He considered painters to be prone to melancholy due to increased sensitivity (Britton 2003). Rather than an ailment, melancholia is seen as an attribute of a true artist and intellectual. This reconceptualization of melancholia was subscribed by the romantic artists and intellectuals in Europe in the 18th century, painting portraits of a single individual often set outdoors where Nature provides "the most suitable background for spiritual contemplation" Strong 1969).

The relevance of melancholia in artistic philosophy continued into the 20th century during which the artistic pre-occupation of the modernist counter-culture was fueled by the notions of *alienation* and *anomie*. Both notions are central to life under modernization and industrialization. *Alienation* was articulated by Karl Marx, describing the economic and social alienation resulted from industrialization in which workers are disconnected from what they produce and why they produce. The concept of *anomie* was postulated by Emile Durkheim, referring to the breakdown of social bonds between an individual and the community brought about by modernization and industrialization. Both *alienation* and *anomie* describe the modern condition where individuals are disconnected socially and subjectively. This entails a deep sense of loss. As (Flatley 2008: 28-34) aptly demonstrates, modernity is related to experience of loss at multiple levels:

1. Loss of tradition: The word “modernity” comes from the term *modernus*, meaning “now” or “of today” (as opposed to “of yesterday”). Thus it implies that the past is lost and gone.
2. “Now” means “the present”, meaning the world around us is forever eluding our grasp, producing an endless accumulation of losses.
3. Death: Technologies of war and destruction was experienced in modern time as a shocking revelation at human capacity to create death.

The development of art after World War II was conditioned by the disappointment resulting from the catastrophe and atrocities of war. Socio-cultural values are ruled by the absolute faith in science and progress, confining the meaning of art as enjoyment under commercial value. Under this intellectually stifling

condition, abstract expressionism came to the fore represented by artists such as Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Franz Kline, Mark Rothko, Robert Motherwell and Barnett Newman. These artists began to experiment with new forms of expression that focused on 'subjective' reality as a critique against such tragic development in human history brought by the leadership of science, technology, war and commercialism. This particular episode in the history of art shows how artistic production born from melancholic sentiment and insightful on existence managed to become one of the most genuine forces in modern art. Artists live in a melancholic state, turning inwards to face the ultimate existential question, on the purpose of living and the possibility of dying. They reject the values of bourgeoisie and indulge in the conviction that they can exist outside the mainstream culture in bohemian enclaves, refusing to recognize or accept their role as producers of cultural commodity. Such choice entails a commitment to solitude and separation from popular opinions and tastes, in an uncompromising commitment to the pursuit of an authentic subjectivity, which are characteristics of melancholia as elaborated further in chapter 3 of this thesis.

1.4 Problem Statement

As mentioned above, the subject of melancholia has been studied since ancient Greece and became an important aspect in the field of aesthetics or the philosophy of art during Renaissance Europe. Such interest in melancholia and art continued steadily into the modern period, up to the 21st century when Brady & Hapaala (2003) elaborated on the subject of melancholia as 'aesthetic emotion' and Flatley (2008) who argued that aesthetic activity has the possibility to transform depressive melancholia into a positive and constructive way of dealing with the psychological and social challenges of modern life. My own position is not aligned with that of

Flatley (2008), which is rooted in medical definition of melancholia as an ailment. Rather, the direction of my inquiry observes similar path to Brady & Hapaala (2003), through the specific lineage of philosophy of art that went back to the Renaissance thinker Marsilio Ficino that never defines melancholia in a negative light. Instead, melancholia in this line of thought is affirmed positively, as a sign of a gifted individual who excels in the field of his/her choice. While Ficino's idea and its further elaboration in the 21st century by Brady & Haapala (2003) provide rich description of melancholia as a favored condition for art, they nevertheless did not provide enough analyses on the mechanism on what lend melancholia a particular condition that makes it conducive to contemplative mode of life. My research attempts to address this shortcoming by: (1) delving into melancholia as an existential condition, whereby an individual strives towards attaining authentic subjectivity (2) analyzing and embodying melancholia through studio processes in the creation of a body of artworks.

1.5 Research Objectives

1. To investigate the historical development of melancholia in artistic thoughts.
2. To elaborate the philosophical significance of melancholia in aesthetic activity (art making).
3. To produce a body of artwork based on these findings.

1.6 Research Questions

What is the creative possibility of melancholia?

How does melancholia function as a constructive drive for art making?

Is the nature of art-making (solitude) itself melancholic?

Is the experience of loss a precondition for aesthetic activity?

Does aesthetic activity compensate for the experience of loss?

1.7 Methodology

1. Library research
2. Textual analyses of key philosophical texts on melancholia and aesthetic.
3. Interviews with selected artists and researchers/scholars whose works are relevant to this research topic.
4. Studio Experiment: A conscious exploration in studio processes to produce art works framed by the concepts investigated and analysed in this research.

1.8 Scope and Limitation

This research doesn't deal with medical aspect of melancholia, which treated melancholia as a psychological ailment. As such, this research does not venture into the therapeutic roles or effects of art. On the contrary, this research is aligned with the understanding of melancholia within the artistic and philosophical tradition related to art. As mentioned above, the discourse of melancholia in the artistic tradition and philosophy of art developed quite differently from the medical one. Rather than an ailment, writers and thinkers of the arts see melancholia in a positive light, as an effect of increased sensitivity among artists, poets, musicians, a

contemplative mood that characterizes a genuine artist and intellectual. My present research builds from this conceptual tradition but in a less romantic way and attempts to provide logical analyses on the mechanisms that melancholia operates as a contemplative mood that is conducive to artistic processes.

1.9 Research Significance

While my present research focuses specifically on visual art, it draws its conceptual framework from a long and wide-ranging tradition of studying the connection between melancholia and creative and intellectual life. Particularly significant to my research is the work by Brady & Hapaala [2003], which is arguably the latest attempt to articulate such aspect of melancholia by defining it as an aesthetic emotion. While Brady & Hapaala provide an elaborate discussion on defining melancholia as aesthetic emotion, they did not provide an in-depth analysis on how exactly melancholia functions as a productive event that energizes the mind and emotion towards a creative and inspiring engagement with the world. My research fills this gap by providing thorough investigation on how melancholia function to stimulate artistic or creative drive. In focusing on aesthetic activity and making the studio context as the foundation of my investigation, this research goes beyond the conventional study in the field of aesthetic that remains limited to textual analyses. In doing so, this research will contribute to a segment of the philosophy of studio practice itself, specifically on the relevance of melancholia to studio practices and processes.

1.10 Thesis Structure

Chapter One introduces the research, outlining its context, objectives, methodology and significance.

Chapter Two surveys various textual sources to trace the historical development of the study on melancholia, with a specific focus on its relevance in art.

Chapter Three provides an in-depth analysis on melancholia as an emotional mechanism that accompanies contemplative mood that produces originality of thoughts and authentic subjectivity that occur in isolation away from the general communal life.

Chapter Four details the methodology of this research, which combines qualitative research and studio practice. Especially important to the increased interests today in arts-based research, this chapter discusses on the methods undertaken in order to gain new knowledge through art- practice. These methods are discussed in terms of how they might link practice with research and vice-versa. Practice-based methods and processes are useful ways to aid the artist-researcher to link art making activity with research activity and emphasize the relationship between these two.

Chapter Five analyses my previous studio practice in which the notion of melancholia first emerged in my art. These function as a significant background to the present research.

Chapter Six discusses the findings of this research, which focuses on (1) Interviews with contemporary artists to verify the continued relevance of melancholia in today's context and across geo-cultural boundaries; (2) the results of studio works of this doctoral project, which are 45 paintings produced during this research and had been featured in TWO solo exhibitions and one-duo exhibitions.

Chapter Seven concludes the thesis, outlining its accomplishment and limitation as well as its future potentials for further research.

CHAPTER 2

A LITERATURE REVIEW ON MELANCHOLIA IN ART

2.1 Overview

Melancholia is a complex phenomenon that has been studied by the greatest humanists and scientists since ancient times until nowadays. Moreover, *melancholia* has found its reflection in art, giving birth to numerous theories, philosophies, and masterpieces. Perception and explications of the notion were changing throughout centuries, in both medical and non-medical sense. In general, *melancholia* is understood as mental or emotional state associated with sadness, despair, or pessimism – under certain circumstances it can be experienced by any individual (Bell, 2014). In dictionaries, *melancholia* is often referred as mental condition of deep gloom, apathy, and uncontrolled fears (Hobson, 2004). According to the Encyclopaedia Britannica, the subjects of *melancholia* are “extremely sensitive to external impressions . . . irritable and impatient of interference,” (Black, 1857) anxious, easy to distress, and often suicidal. From medical perspective, *melancholia* is classified as mental disorder, sometimes diagnosed as “melancholic mood disorder,” (Bell, 2014). That depending on its severity and persistence can result with isolation, delusions, and even madness.

2.2 Literature Review on Melancholia in Art

However, those are the negative attributes of *melancholia*, mostly related to different forms of mental- or psychopathologies, and focusing on them only in order to comprehend the concept of *melancholia* would be a serious mistake, hence its positive aspects should be taken into consideration as well. Among many different scholarly definitions, broad or in particular contexts, one that best resonates with this

research is given by German art theorists Schuster and Vollnagel. Responding in their essay to the work of the Greek physician Rufus of Ephesus, they claim that *melancholia*, despite preoccupied opinions about its unfavourable emotional manifestations, is “a precognition for all great talents” while “the melancholic is the perfect example of the genius” (Schuster and Vollnagel, 2008). The Hungarian art historian Foldenyi agrees that *melancholia* has been displayed in the works of many outstanding artists yet suggests that it is one step from genius to madness (Foldenyi, 2006). In turn, M.A. Holly, the author of *Melancholy Art*, argues that *melancholia* “betrays the world for the sake of knowledge” (Holly, 2013). Thus, to avoid confusion in this variety of opinions, and to understand the nature and consequences of this phenomenon as well as its relevance in arts, it is important to go back to its origins, and trace how the notion of melancholia has evolved until modern times.

Scholars who studied the phenomenon of *melancholia* deeply and thoroughly have discovered that it is “the insistent companion” (Ibid) of art, they have associated it with extreme creativity or artistic genius. Furthermore, *melancholia* can be experienced under certain conditions and with different intensity. The phenomenon of *melancholia* may not only stimulate creative/artistic endeavours (process of creation), but also occur during the experience of a piece of art as a response (reaction). It must be noted that all definitions and characteristics of *melancholia* (including medical symptoms, personal traits, and emotional states) not only refer to its many facets but are vital for better comprehension of how exactly the notion is relevant to art. Tracing its history alongside the history of art is necessary to be able to identify artistic approaches to the process of creation “in a melancholy way” (Sparshott , 2014) and art pieces/objects performed “within the melancholic tradition,” (Schuster & Vollnagel, 2008) or those drawing their spectators into the

state of *melancholia*. Since the creative process demands deep reflection, it can often be accompanied by *melancholia* finding its expression in visual arts, literature, and music. Without a doubt, the phenomenon of *melancholia* greatly contributed to the development of visual arts, involving both artists and spectators, stimulating both creation and appreciation.

Melancholia is originally a Greek word pertaining to anatomy and medicine. The first survived records that mention the term date back to the 5th century B.C and are attributed to Hippocrates of Cos (460 - 370 B.C), the prominent physician from ancient Greece. Most academic writings about *melancholia* inevitably refer to his discovery of *melania chole* (transl. as “black bile”) causing physical and mental disorders due to excessive presence of black bile in the human body. The black bile is produced by the spleen and in case of constant and prolonged production experience evokes fears, desperation, and desire to die.

Furthermore, the concept of *melancholia* found its application in Hippocrates’s theory about the four humours depending on the fluids dominating in a human body, and the four psychological temperaments corresponding to them. He associated them with four colours (the red of the sanguine, the yellow of the choleric, the white of the phlegmatic, and the black of the melancholic) that “became the basic constituents of the ancient Greece four-color palette” (Pavey, 2012). This classification that survived until present time suggests that the melancholic is “especially burdened by many negative attributes, such as his inclination towards sadness, sloth, gloom, and greed” (Schuster and Vollnagel, 2008).

On the other hand, the melancholic is the only type among four temperaments who uses his intellectual talents “correctly”: one is “credited with a special gift for studying sciences and art” (Ibid). This theory originally belongs to Aristotle, an ancient Greek philosopher and scientist (384 – 322 B.C), who stated that the melancholic was a great example of a genius while *melancholia* was a prerequisite for best talents – the notion that later became one of the fundamentals of Humanism (Ibid). In turn, Aristotle’s vision of *melancholia* derived from the theories of his teacher, Plato (c.428-348 B.C), the very first philosopher who linked madness with divine, and the excess of black bile with frenzied, visionary, and creative personality (Lawlor, 2012). However, Aristotle was the one who had asked the rhetorical question: “Why is it that all men who excel in philosophy, politics, or the arts appear to be melancholics?” (Portman , 2008). Moreover, early writers on *melancholia* cited many ancient cases when melancholics sought for deliberate solitude. Thus, the knowledge of melancholic temperament adds to understanding the general concept of *melancholia*, especially with relation to arts, because as Sparshott notes, “Artist’s temperament may affect his performance, so that he does everything in a melancholy way (Sparshott , 2014).” In turn, spectators of such artistic creations may experience *melancholia* as well, but as a “passing mood” (Hatt & Klonk , 2006) rather than a permanent state of mind.

For this reason, it is fair to consider that the earliest art objects/experiences related to *melancholia* date back across cultures and centuries; they existed far before Hippocrates and Aristotle formulated their theories about the notion. From a spectator’s perspective, any piece of art that embodies loss or decay unavoidably evokes *melancholia* in the viewers. Speaking of the prehistoric epochs, gravestones and monuments in archaic cemeteries, architectural objects of decaying civilizations

covered with spider webs, or deteriorating statues of political leaders or military heroes – that was the art that could on occasions invite the emotions similar to *melancholia* (Holly, 2013). In any historical era, *melancholia* can be certainly associated with ruin or death (Havely, 2016).

The distinct attributes of *melancholia* as mental or emotional state were visually represented in certain artworks belonging to ancient civilizations. According to the influential German art historian Erwin Panofsky, who is particularly known for his thorough studies of Albrecht Durer's (1471-1528) famous engraving *Melancholia I* (Fig. 2.1), relayed that Durer's personification of melancholia followed "a traditional depiction of the subject" (Panofsky, 1995). In the image, the woman that impersonates *melancholia* is resting the weight of her head on her hand, leaning against her elbow. Panofsky argues that this is a motif appropriated from the art of ancient Egypt (Ibid). Moreover, *Encyclopedia of Comparative Iconography* implies that melancholia's pose "has an ancient pedigree" that can be traced back to representation of human figures during funerary processions in ancient Egypt (Roberts, 2013). Both sources agree that certain artistic traditions of visual representation of the subject of *melancholia* existed before the notion had attained its scholarly definition.



Figure 2.1: Albrecht Durer *Melancholia I*, engraving, 1514

When Rufus of Ephesus (1st century C.E) wrote his tractate on *melancholia*, he based his explication of the notion on philosophic implications of Aristotle as well as its symptoms as mental disorder observed by Hippocrates. Adopting the theories of both, he was the first ancient physician who not only introduced a physical description of the melancholic – a hairy person with “dark skin, lispng, protruding

lips and eyes” (Portman, 2008) – but also formulated two major approaches to the concept of *melancholia*. Rufus referred to it as a mental disease of psychological origins and as “a disposition leading to both despair and great creativity,” (Ibid) laying foundation for further studies of this phenomenon in creative/artistic context. About a century earlier, another Aristotle’s successor, Theophrastus, was researching the phenomenon of *melancholia* and came up with similar theory – he declared that black bile could be heated or cooled. He asserted that *melancholia* occurred as a result of a “bipolar phenomenon” which depending on the temperature of black bile could cause two opposite types of symptoms: either “rigidity, moodiness, and anxiety,” or “euphoria and ecstasy” (Grafton, et. al, 2010).

Galen of Pergamon (129–c.216 C.E), another influential Greek physician and philosopher who lived and worked in ancient Rome, further developed Hippocrates’s classification of four humours/temperaments. Based on Rufus’s physical descriptions of each type, he formed it into a theory of temperaments related to both psychological and physical characteristics, and added elements, qualities, and seasons – to the melancholic, he assigned earth, autumn, and identified the type as cold and dry (Ibid). Those attributes were later used by several artists and writers in the symbolic/iconographic representation of their melancholic characters, or of *melancholia* in general (Ibid). The studies of the phenomenon of *melancholia* continued in ancient Rome, where beliefs that it was governed by the planet Saturn named after one of Roman gods (characterized as old, slow, and conservative) were rooted in astrology and mythology.

In a few centuries, the phenomenon was examined by the greatest medical practitioners of Islamic empire, Al-Kindi (801-873 C.E) and Ibn Sina, or Avicenna,

(980-1037 C.E): they termed it as *honz*, psychosomatic ailment with distinct symptoms of *melancholia* appearing as anger, passion, or hatred (Porter, 1997). Peter Portman, who translated the texts of Rufus and other essays about *melancholia*, included in his compilation the studies of the Italian physician Constantine the African (the 11th century C.E), which were later used for scholarly references – since Middle Ages until the 17th century. Constantine thoroughly studied the books of Arabic scientists and translated them into Latin. According to the works of the physician Ishaq ibn Imran, he summed up his view of *melancholia* as an emotional state occurring as a result of actions or reactions in the following quotation:

Typical of the rational [soul] are excessive thinking, learning by heart, studying unfathomable things, suspicion, hope, imagination, and correct and incorrect judgments about issues. Any of these things, if the soul should do any of these frequently and without moderation, cause it to slide into melancholy (Portman, 2008).

As evident from this piece, in the early Middle Ages the scholarly perception of *melancholia* had become more like ‘a state of soul’ which could be achieved under certain conditions, assuming that the phenomenon of *melancholia* could be an integral part of intellectual or creative processes.

It is notable that the tradition of visualizing four temperaments continued later in the Middle Ages – according to Panofsky, the melancholic in particular was depicted either as “an elderly, cheerless miser”, or as a dramatic figure associated with laziness (Panofsky, 1995). In that epoch, numerous poems and ballads were written in the ‘melancholic’ manner of sadness and sombreness. The contemporary

poets and playwrights followed the visual and psychological attributes of four temperaments while creating their characters, using the melancholic type for portraying indifferent or apathetic personages. For instance, Ugolino from *Divine Comedy* written by the prominent medieval Italian poet Dante Alighieri (c.1265–1321) is “the figure of melancholia, which passes this state on to Dante” (Havely , 2016) The character is silent and acts indifferently while watching the dying children, similarly to Saturn, who according to the Roman mythology ate his newborns, proving that *melancholia* “is a perception of a breakdown of a system of thoughts” (Ibid). Such medieval portrayal of the melancholic, both visual and literary, was mostly negative, with *melancholia* being compared to *aceida* – the state of apathy.

In early Renaissance times, various aspects of the notion of *melancholia* were also related to the influence of Saturn but from a different perspective. The Florentine humanist and Neo-Platonist Marcilio Ficino (1433-1499) in his work *De vita triplici (Three Books on Life)* reconsidered the ancient concept of *melancholia*. He asserted that artists were distinct from the majority of people because were born “under the sign of the planet Saturn” and because of the excess of black bile: he labelled them as “saturnine” – “eccentric and capable of both the inspired artistic frenzy and melancholic depression” (Kleiner, 2015) – the claim that was rooted in classical tradition, being congruent with the teachings of Plato, Aristotle, Rufus, and the theory about *melancholia* as “bipolar phenomenon” by Theophrastus as mentioned earlier. However, Ficino went further and asserted that melancholia was a mark of a genius, and melancholic artists could be compared to “demigods” (Roberts, 2013). He developed the theory of the latter by dividing the melancholics into “hot” and “cold” from astrological perspective: for instance, if Saturn was in a

good placement – a child would possess best qualities, such as wisdom and understanding of theology and divinity (Ibid). Basically, those born under Saturn have a potential to realize their artistic genius with years, being under the influence of black bile. In turn, Giorgio Vasari (1511-1574), the well-known Italian historian and biographer of the Renaissance epoch, wrote that painters were especially inclined to *melancholia* because of their extreme sensitivity and rich imagination (Britton, 2003).

In general, Renaissance was a period associated with rebirth of arts and sciences – the period when the antique traditions gained their new, humanistic interpretation and representation thanks to the latest scientific discoveries and philosophic theories, and the notion of *melancholia* had not become an exception. Aristotelian concept that formulates relevance of *melancholia* to artistic genius was revived too – Ficino, Vasari, and other humanists started seeing *melancholia* in a positive light, attributing it to any Renaissance man demonstrating brilliance in artistic or intellectual activities. It was not only considered an essential part of any creative process, but could be visually rendered through specific symbolism and iconography, originating from ancient medicine, philosophy and mythology yet seen from a humanist perspective.

The engraving *Melencolia I* (1514) by Albrecht Durer (1471-1528) (Fig. 2.1), the influential artist of German Renaissance, became one of the most profound examples of visual and symbolic representation of *melancholia* and “the most eminent and influential work of art within the melancholic traditions” (Schuster & Vollnagel, 2008). As aforementioned, the winged woman embodying *melancholia* is a central figure in the artwork – she is pictured seated, with her cheek put on her left

hand, in a state of both sadness and deep thinking, staring into space and looking detached from the world. Melancholia is surrounded with a sleeping dog, a cherub, and a number of objects each bearing a symbolic meaning. For instance, the scale symbolizes wisdom, the hourglass means the flow of time, and the bat with “melancholia I” on its wings refers to the four humours as theorized by the ancient physicians (Panofsky, 1995).

Similar to the philosophers of antiquity, Panofsky also sees the parallels between the stillness of the depicted figures and sloth commonly associated with *melancholia* and the planet of Saturn. However, he sees the woman and the cherub not as two slothful figures – he contrasts the inaction of Melancholia with hidden hyperactivity of the winged child, former understanding of the notion with its new vision, and the medical concept of *melancholia* with its artistic interpretation (Ibid). He eloquently sums up his argument in the following quotation:

The former Melancholics had been unfortunate misers and sluggards, despised for their unsociability and general incompetence...Durer imagined a being endowed with the intellectual power of technical accomplishment of an ‘Art’, yet despairing under the cloud of ‘black humour’. He depicted...a Melancholy gifted with all that is implied in the word geometry – with Artist’s Melancholy” (Ibid).

In support of this idea, Kleiner suggests that the positive aspect of *melancholia* in the engraving is represented by means of the light over the horizon behind the bat – “an optimistic note”, a hint that “artists can overcome their depression and produce works of genius” (Kleiner , 2015). Thus, Durer’s engraving became a visual

embodiment of the Renaissance concept of *melancholia*. It is notable that the number in the artwork's title refers to the theory of Agrippa von Nettesheim, German physician, scholar, and Durer's contemporary, who assumed that *Melancholia I* was "the first stage of creative melancholy, operating on the sensory world," (Hatt & Klonek, 2006), hence establishing a strong connection between *melancholia* and creativity. A few greatest artists of Renaissance impersonated both. Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475-1564) was often labelled as a "melancholic genius" with divine powers – a notion rooted in the Neo-Platonic theory (Britton, 2003). Thus, in artistic context, during the Renaissance era the explication of the notion mostly referred to physical and psychological condition of creative personality.

English Renaissance that coincided with Elizabethan era (1558-1603) became a fruitful ground for creating the works of art, literature, and music related to, or representing *melancholia*. The most significant literary works included two plays: William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1599-1602) with its central character being interpreted as a representative of Neo-Platonist Renaissance *melancholia*, who possessed a rare gift for "verbal virtuosity", and Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* (1604) based on the German story about a scientist who never found intellectual satisfaction, later appropriated by Goethe (Bell, 2014). During the same period, Cervantes wrote his famous *Don Quixote* (1605), presenting his protagonist as extremely romantic yet melancholic. As for the music of that period, a composer John Dowland (1563-1626) was "an outstanding example of a melancholy genius," (Procter, 2012) most famous for performing his melancholic songs, accompanying himself on a lute. The Flemish composer Orlandus Lassus (1532-1594), one of the key figures in the development of Renaissance music, also succumbed in *melancholia* which was expressed in his works, both secular and sacred (Ibid).