Albrecht Dürer's Melencolia I abounds in symbolic images: the lost and vacant stare of the main figure Melancholia, the sands of time running through the hourglass, the forlorn, scribbling winged putto, and the magic square (Plate 1). Art historians have discussed these images for decades; however, the focus is usually on what those images represent separately. Instead, the main question should be: why did Dürer create Melencolia I? There are numerous possible answers to this question. One common belief is that contemporary concepts of mathematics fascinated the artist. The main images used to support this theory are the magic square and the geometric stone. Another possibility is that Dürer enrolled in the growing Humanist movement. To support this conjecture, art historians typically discuss the closed book under the main figure's hand. Whereas both mathematics and Humanism may have contributed to the inception of Melencolia I, there is another more plausible and simpler possibility: Dürer himself suffered from depression. This paper argues that Dürer's depression is the primary reason for the creation of this haunting image.

Dürer was born in Germany early in the morning on May 21, 1471. He began working with his father, with whom he developed a strong bond, as a goldsmith and went on to learn painting. By the time he was thirteen he had already completed his first of many self-portraits (Plate 2). In 1494, shortly after getting married, Dürer decided to travel to Italy for a "bachelor's journey" (Hutchison 42). It was while he was on this sojourn that Dürer experienced the Italian Renaissance. Because of his fortuitous timing, the artist escaped the plague that broke out in Nuremburg and returned safely, ready to incorporate into his art all he learned in Italy. From there, he rapidly developed into the most recognized German painter-engraver from the Northern Renaissance (Hutchison 40-42).

Although Dürer's life began well, after his return from Italy frustrations began to beset the rest of his life. His marriage to Agnes Dürer was loveless and never produced children. In 1502, shortly before beginning his Life of Mary series, the artist witnessed his father, Albrecht the Elder, die. Anton Koberger, Dürer's godfather and a strong impetus for his early career, also died in 1513. The grave illness and subsequent death of Dürer's mother between 1513 and 1514 quickly followed. After these losses, one can hardly blame Dürer for his depression when beginning the third work in his Meisterstiche: Melencolia I (Hutchison 121).

A drawing from 1513, the year before Dürer's famous engraving is focal to an understanding of the image (Plate 4). Many art historians believe The Sick Dürer is a sketch he drew to illustrate his illness for his physician. The work depicts the artist pointing to the area around his spleen, liver, and gall bladder, which he has colored yellow. At the top of the page, the artist wrote a note for his doctor saying, "Where the yellow spot is and where the finger is pointing, that is where it hurts" (Grass 67). One interpretation of this drawing is that Dürer suffered from indigestion after drinking and eating the rich Italian cuisine; this seems unlikely after the work is thoroughly examined (Waetzoldt 25). Rather the artist is trying to depict his melancholy. At the time, records show that Dürer frequently complained of a swollen spleen, a fact which explains his pointing finger. The reason melancholy is attached to the spleen is because, "peasant calendars referred to Saturn as a peevish, sick planet that caused disease of the liver, gall bladder and kidneys," and Saturn represented melancholy (Grass 67).

To understand thoroughly melancholy's connection to Saturn and the spleen, it is necessary to analyze melancholy as a humor. The idea of the four humors, or four temperaments, dates back to Ancient Greece, which favored concepts of harmony and symmetry. The study of the four elements – earth, air, fire, and water – led to the study of the elements of the body: blood, yellow bile, phlegm, and black bile. These elements then correlated to specific temperaments: sanguine, choleric, phlegmatic, and melancholic respectively. The temperaments were the determining factors in a person's character because if one or more were not in balance with the others, then, according to contemporary belief, the person became wanting in some form whether it be physical or mental. For example, an increase in yellow bile led to choleric symptoms (Klibansky 3-7).

Arabic writings from the ninth century were some of the earliest to establish Saturn's connection to melancholy. People wanted to connect the humors with astrology so they found that the correlation between the temperament and the planet is physical appearance. Black bile is dark like Saturn; therefore, according to the Arabic people, the two are related. The connection of Saturn to the spleen can be found in Arabic writings from the end of the tenth century from the "Faithful of Basra" or "Pure Brothers":

‘The spleen occupies the same position in the body as Saturn in the world...For Saturn with its rays sends forth transcendent powers which penetrate into every part of the world...Even so goes forth from the spleen the power of the black bile, which is cold and dry and it flows with the blood through the veins into every part of the body, and through it the blood coagulates and the parts adhere to one another.’ (Klibansky 129-30)

This passage describes the way melancholy works its way slowly through the body after originating in the spleen. It also explains the connection of the spleen to Saturn, and Saturn's physical resemblance to black bile connects the planet to melancholy.

Ancient literature also connects Saturn and melancholy. Cronus, the Greek Titan notorious for devouring all but one of his children and who was killed by Zeus, is commonly described as having a dual aspect. Because of this duality, he
is usually described as the god of opposites. The father of Zeus, Poseidon, and Hades, Cronus is half “benevolent god of agriculture, whose harvest festival was celebrated by free men and slaves together,” and half “gloomy, dethroned and solitary god conceived as ‘dwelling at the utter most end of land and sea’ (Klibansky 134). The Greeks developed the connection between Cronus and Saturn although they learned about the planets from the Babylonians. They believed that each of the planets represented a god:

Mercury as Nebu, the god of writing and wisdom, Venus as Ishtar, the great goddess of love and fertility, Mars a Nergal, the grim god of war and hell, Jupiter as Marduk, the kingly ruler, and Saturn as the strange god Ninib. (Klibansky 136)

The Greeks associated Ninib with Cronus because, based on the length of the planet’s revolution, he is the cruel and old god. Therefore, as the Romans adapted the Greek gods for their own mythology, the name Cronus changed into Saturn, thereby, connecting the planet with the melancholy of Cronus in ancient literature.

These popular conceptions figure into an understanding of Dürer’s Melencolia I, starting with the figure of Melancholia. Numerous pertinent details surround the figure. Her clenched fist has elicited various explanations (Plate 5). Some scholars believe it is just “[clenched] in helplessness” (Grass 69). However, even though helplessness could direct a person into a melancholy state, Dante Alighieri provides another suggestion. He believed a clenched fist was the sign that a melancholy person has reached insanity because of his/her belief of grasping onto some sort of treasure that does not exist. This idea developed by Dante is the reason that during Dürer’s time a melancholy person was always shown with a clenched fist, almost like a defining characteristic. Erwin Panofsky describes the action as, “she does not hold on to an object which does not exist, but to a problem which cannot be solved” (163). The person’s melancholy is so strong that the individual no longer has a grasp on reality.

Another characteristic of the melancholic in art is a dark face, such as that of Dürer’s main figure (Plate 1). An important belief during the Renaissance regarding Saturn and sufferers of melancholy is that, because of their increase in black bile, they “were by the ancients reckoned swarthy and black of countenance” (Klibansky 290). This idea could be found in medical literature of the time, and Dürer managed to use this technique to echo the notion of melancholy by depicting a complex emotion expressed by subtle physical manifestations.

Next to and attached to the figure of Melancholia are a purse and some keys (Plate 1). On a sketch of a winged putto that Dürer completed as a study for Melencolia I, the artist wrote, “keys mean power, purse means wealth” (Bartrum 188). According to Giulia Bartrum, the purse and keys are symbols of the god Saturn, the controller of melancholy. These images reveal that from the beginning, Dürer knew the focus of the engraving. (Bartrum 188).

Melancholia’s slouched form is also significant. The figure is completely lost in thoughts that are not fully formulated, so she is not struggling to remember to sit up straight with her shoulders back; it is an acquiescent stature. The importance of this posture dates back to a 1494 drawing that Dürer created of his wife inscribed “Mein Agnes” (Plate 4). In this depiction, Agnes has the same posture that Dürer used for the personified Melancholia (Hutchison 41). Agnes is slightly slouched over, her head propped on one arm, with one of her fists clenched. It seems quite possible that Dürer used his depiction of his wife to create Melancholia, drawing a parallel between his marriage and his ailment.

Another detail that may reflect Dürer’s personal melancholy is the dog by Melancholia’s feet on the left side of the work (Plate 1). The poor creature is emaciated and appears to be near death. This animal could be representative of Dürer’s mother. He was never on the best terms with her, so he would see nothing wrong with associating her with a dog, but she was his mother and he probably did care for her. She was sick for over a year before she finally died. When people are ill for that long, they take on a weak form of their former self, and that might be what the dog is: a weak form of its former self.

The role which melancholy plays in contemporary Humanist thought is also significant, although is not the impetus behind the work. Humanists glorified melancholy during the Renaissance, and, had Dürer not been involved with as many humanists as he was, he may never have become interested in the ailment. Italian humanism focused on the revival of ideas from antiquity, and this includes those regarding melancholy. When Dürer visited Italy he was exposed to humanist ideas regarding melancholy and Saturn that are mentioned in Cornelius Agrippa’s De Occulta Philosophia. Humanists believed that both the planet and the god Saturn were associated with the melancholy temperament; therefore, Saturn could control melancholy (Panofsky 166-8).

Humanism also explains another aspect of Melencolia I: the building and the ladder behind the main figure (Plate 1). These two images, which are normally paired together, can be seen in two different ways. One is that the building is unfinished and will apparently remain so since the tools are strewn on the ground. The other view of the building and ladder is that it is a structure being repaired after having been demolished in a disaster. The humanists were, according to Günter Grass, “foreseeing disintegration and disruption, war and chaos” because in studying history they were expecting a downfall similar to that of previous civilizations (Grass 71).

The final evidence in support of the idea that the print involves the artist’s personal illness is in the title: Melencolia I. Why not just Melencolia? Or Melencolia 27? The answer is found in the book mentioned earlier, Agrippa’s De Occulta Philosophia. Dürer used this book as the source for his information about melancholy, and it is what Panofsky declares to be “the most important literary source of Dürer’s composition” (168). Agrippa separates genius into three different types: mind, reason, and imagination. The genius of imagination, or “Artist’s Melancholy,” he believes to be more significant than the genius of either mind or reason. It is this genius that is also known as Melencolia I. It is logical for Dürer to be drawn to this version of melancholy since he was an artist. Grass encapsulated the idea well when he said, “where melancholy
has taken demonic forms, it has been accepted as a professional quirk of genius” (70).

Albrecht Dürer's life began with a father who supported his decision not to follow in his footsteps and this allowed him to live his dream, but he suffered greatly the second half of his life, and the depression caused by that anguish and torment influenced him to create Melencolia I. The engraver inundated his work with references to his ailment. Even though the work can be shown to reflect many influences, its principal genesis was Dürer's own melancholy.

Works Cited
