There lives no man upon earth who could give a final judgment upon what the most beautiful shape of a man should be; only God knows that. One must bring it into every single thing, according to circumstances, for in some things we consider that as beautiful which elsewhere would lack beauty. What Beauty is I know not, though it adheres to many things....

One of Albrecht Dürer’s most proverbial statements, this idea sets the path of the artist as a divinely inspired genius constantly striving for perfection never to be attained. The idea of the genius falling prey to the idiosyncrasies of his gift for insight, has been a subject of philosophic concern and analysis throughout essentially the entire time span of western thought development. *Melencolia I*, one of Dürer’s most discussed engravings, presents the viewer with a pictorially and thematically multilayered work of art. It epitomizes the complexity of the idea of the elevated status of the artist as a select one who is closer, in the power of his insight and creative skills, to the divine creator than ordinary mortals are, yet not quite elevated to grasp the multitude of reasons, logic, and organizational principles of the spiritual world, though he is able to understand those of the secular universe. As Erwin Panofsky states, the engraving’s perplexity is due to the fact that it represents both a general philosophy and the subjective confession of an individual man. It is a key idea towards understanding the conceptual significance of *Melencolia I* indeed, since just as much as adhering to, following and transforming the familiar philosophical issue of melancholic-as-genius into the new tradition of the German Renaissance, the work serves as a reflection of Dürer himself – both in terms of his scientific and artistic aspirations and achievements we have biographical evidence for, and in terms of his own reflective consciousness of himself as

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of chaos\(^6\), but presents a seemingly unclear interpretation on the subject. Since the formal chaos of objects invites for a multiple readability of the composition, the beholder is not given a simple illustration of the idea, but is rather left uncertain about the order of events of ‘creation’ – whether Melancholia, like God, attempts to achieve order out of chaos or whether the human finiteness of her intellect condemns her to failure, renders the result of her work chaos, destroying order. Possibly the active efforts of Melancholia were driven by an insatiable intellectual hunger to reach an understanding and a firm grasp of Knowledge and Beauty (in the philosophical-categorical meaning Dürer attributes them), but the drive was so overwhelming that it did not stop at the point of creating order from chaos. Melancholia failed to realize that the spiritual has no physical measures - as if her mind was too human to tell the delicate instance of balance when positive creation is achieved and inflicted chaos again to the physical world she had just ordered. Yet reading even further - perhaps Melancholia never got past the stage of chaos in the debilitating effects of intellectual paralysis. The levels of readability are essentially limitless.

Naturally there is no way of pinpointing the intended meaning Dürer charged his work with and there does not need to necessarily exist a singular, agreed-upon version of readability, or else Melencolia I would cease to be the intellectual challenging it is for the viewer. All those possible levels of readability owe their potential for existence to the fact that the iconography of the engraving is daringly difficult to access. Before all, Melencolia I presents the concept of frustration through an iconographic gesture of frustration, compositionally. An essential moment in absorbing the work’s symbolism is recognizing how the compositional elements are arranged, to a point of being disarranged. One has to bear in