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Dürer as Christ?

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THROUGHOUT HIS LIFE Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528) created numerous self portraits in various media, showing himself in different guises and conditions. The significance of many of them is still open to speculation and investigation. The half-length nude drawing of himself in the Kunsthalle, Bremen (Winkler¹ 482), is curious in that he is pointing to a marked spot on his side (Plate 1), to which the inscription refers. Panofsky has translated this as "Where the yellow spot is, to which I point with my finger, there it hurts."²

Panofsky believed the drawing must have been made for the purpose of consulting an out-of-town physician and identifies the location of the pain as the spleen — seat of the melancholic humor. This interpretation supports Panofsky's dating of the drawing close to the time of Dürer's *Melencolia* engraving but depends on the assumption that the artist has depicted himself "proper" — that is to say, as normally seen by other people. Yet in earlier portrait drawings he has not shown himself in this way but with the image reversed,³ as he saw himself in the mirror used for observing the likeness.

This self portrait as a sick man appears to conform to the same method. It is significant that only one hand is drawn. The other is concealed behind the back of the figure. There is only one likely reason for this. The concealed hand would have been the mirror image of the artist's right hand — the one actually being used to draw his reflection — and therefore not easily or conveniently included by him in the picture. This is usual in his self

¹ F. Winkler, *Die Zeichnungen Albrecht Dürers*, 4 vols. (Berlin: Deutscher Verein für Kunstwissenschaft, 1936-39).

² E. Panofsky, *The Life and Art of Albrecht Dürer*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1948), Vol. 2, p. 103 (Handlist No. 1000).

³ See for example the drawings of 1484 (W. 1), 1491 (W. 26), and 1493 (W. 27, reproduced here as Plate 2).



Plate 1: Albrecht Dürer. *Self Portrait*, drawing (Winkler 482), Bremen, Kunsthalle.

portrait drawings, except that in the 1493 drawing (W. 27, New York, Robert Lehman collection) he has apparently drawn his left hand, apart from the portrait image and on a different scale, without recourse to the mirror (Plate 2).

On this reading the pointing hand in the Bremen drawing would be his actual left hand, and the marked area would therefore be on his right side, not the left where the spleen is located. This reduces the likelihood that the drawing was for diagnostic purposes since a physician would need the sides of the body clearly identified, and this has not been done. Unless the pain was in the left side the drawing could have no significance in terms of the melancholic humor. In any case, if Dürer needed a diagnosis to draw his attention to the spleen as the location of his pain, he could hardly have seen in advance any melancholic significance in the drawing. Assuming it is a mirror image, the indication of a pain in the right side could refer to the liver or the gall bladder, suggesting the choleric temperament. This is improbable since Dürer, as an artist, was likely to identify himself only with the melancholic temperament.

What then could have been the significance of this drawing to him? The absence of reversal to make it "proper" and the lack of identification of sides suggests that it was for his own reference rather than for communication. He has a history of annotating drawings as a means of making memoranda. In this case he may have marked the area on his side as one of these apparently needless reminders. However, once the spot is read as being on his right side it becomes reminiscent of the wound in Christ's side. In fact within the circle there is the suggestion of a stroke resembling such a wound. In size and location it is similar to the wound shown by Dürer in the majority of his various depictions of the dead Christ.

There are several exceptions to Dürer's practice of showing the wound in Christ's right side. Vladimir Gurewich has drawn attention to one of these — the *Deposition* from the Large Passion (Bartsch⁴ 12).⁵ The other is the etching *Man of Sorrows Seated* of

⁴J. A. von Bartsch, *Le Peintre graveur*, 21 vols. (Vienna, 1803-21).

⁵V. Gurewich, "Observations on the iconography of the Wound in Christ's Side with Special Reference to its Position," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 20 (1957), 358-62. All references are to p. 361. Gurewich also draws attention to five examples of the wound in Christ's left side in painted works by Rubens ("Rubens and the Wound in Christ's Side. A Postscript," *ibid.*, 26 [1963], 358), showing the artist's "wish to show the wound closer to the heart of Christ," though this may have seemed heretical at the time — explaining why Rubens did not persevere with the type.



Plate 2: Albrecht Dürer, *Self Portrait; Study of Dürer's Left Hand; Pillow*, drawing. 1493 (Winkler 27), Robert Lehman Collection, New York. Photograph by courtesy of the Robert Lehman Collection.

1515. (B. 22).⁶ Both show the wound in the left side, possibly also the case in the *Lamentation* from the Large Passion (B. 13). In Gurewich's view the change of side is deliberate, and he seems to suggest that the *Deposition* is connected with Dürer's second Italian trip, which he erroneously believes preceded the woodcut. His argument is that this and other exceptions "seem to indicate a desire to show the wound closer to the heart of Jesus." As far as Dürer is concerned, this theory is belied by his prints which show the sacred blood being collected in a chalice. In every case the blood issues from a wound in the right side, and Dürer clearly had no doubts that Christ's side was pierced from the right. Gurewich appears to overlook the fact that in two other woodcuts in the Large Passion cycle the wound is unequivocally shown on the right — hardly consistent with a deliberate intention to place it nearer the heart. A. A. Barb has pointed out a liturgical justification for the emphasis on the right side:

The Anthem sung before Solemn Sunday Masses . . . is replaced, during Paschal time only, by a special Easter Anthem: "Vidi aquam [etc.]" ("I saw water flowing from the right side of the temple, hallelujah, and all they to whom that water came were saved . . .")⁷

This is clearly pertinent to Dürer's representations in which Christ's blood is collected and suggests that his occasional showing of the wound on the left is due to oversight. Emile Mâle has listed the earliest examples known to him, none of them earlier than the seventeenth century.⁸ If Dürer's variant treatment were deliberate, it would be virtually unique in its period.

⁶ In a further possible example, the woodcut Crucifixion of c. 1493 from the *Opus Speciale Missarum*, it is difficult to tell whether the printed stroke defines the wound or merely the lower rib. A small woodcut of the Mass of St. Gregory illustrating a book by Sebastian Brant published at Basel in 1494 is sometimes attributed to Dürer. In it the wound is shown on the left, but since a cleric holds a processional cross in his left hand it should be assumed that reversal in printing was overlooked for the whole design. See Wolfgang Hütt, *Albrecht Dürer 1471 bis 1528. Das gesamte graphische Werk* (Munich: Rogner & Bernhard, 1971), Vol. 2, p. 1420.

⁷ A. A. Barb, "The Wound in Christ's Side," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 34 (1971), 320-21. This quotation from p. 320. He identifies the passage as a short paraphrase of Ezekiel 47: 1-12, and adds that "Christ himself had spoken of his body as the Temple and of its destruction and rebuilding within three days, meaning his own death and resurrection (John 2: 19-22)."

⁸ Emile Mâle, *L'art religieux après le Concile de Trente* (Paris: A. Colin 1932), 275. But see note 21 below.

The occurrence of the wound on the left side in some of Dürer's printed works must be attributed to forgetfulness about the reversal caused by taking impressions from the block or plate. Gurewicz denies this, on the grounds of Dürer's "great love for detail and precision." However, Dürer shows evidence of confusion about reversal in the inscriptions of at least seven of his prints,⁹ and this could easily carry over into pictorial detail. Certainly he does not abandon showing the wound on the right — its appearance on the left side is only a matter of a temporary aberration on several widely separated occasions. It is noteworthy that several other north European engravers of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries fell into the same aberration — sometimes showing lettering in reverse, sometimes showing the wound on Christ's left side — but always as an isolated phenomenon in an otherwise orthodox series. Mâle remarks that

Ayala, in his *Pictor christianus*, appears to us already quite out of touch with the symbolism of the Middle Ages, for if he considers it preferable to represent the wound on the right this, he says, is because Saint Francis of Assisi was stigmatized on the right side by the crucified Seraph.¹⁰ (author's translation)

It is natural that the stigmatization of St. Francis, accepted by the church as authentic, should have become the canonical model for the representation not only of his stigmata, but of the wounds of Christ which they repeated. At Assisi there is no doubt that the wound to the side is on the right. The St. Francis fresco cycle in the Upper Church shows it thus in four separate representations, and it appears on that side right down to Dürer's time. We should be cautious about his version since it is a woodcut (B. 110), but this is one case in which he is likely to have taken especial care with reversal on the wood block since the stigmatization involves transfer of the stigmata correctly from one figure to another. The

⁹ B. 1 (third state), B. 20, B. 22, B. 46, B. 74 (first state), B. 104, Meder 186. For emendations to B. 1 (*Adam and Eve*) and B. 74 (*Melencolia*) see Campbell Dodgson, *Albrecht Dürer*, (London and Boston: Medici Society, 1926), pp. vii, 52, 54 and 94. He writes (p. vii) that these "illustrate a curious carelessness to which Dürer, usually so precise, was liable when he engraved numbers."

¹⁰ Mâle: Ayala, dans son *Pictor christianus*, nous apparaît déjà comme tout à fait étranger au symbolisme du moyen âge, car, s'il pense qu'il est préférable de représenter la blessure à droite, c'est, dit-il, parce que saint François d'Assise fut marqué du côté droit par le Séraphin crucifié.

pose and location of the wounds are substantially the same as in his drawing of the same subject (W. 212), and in the same sense.

In any case, it should be observed that the cult of the Sacred Heart of Jesus is based on the visions, in the late seventeenth century, of the French nun St. Margaret Mary Alacoque. In art it does not gain currency until more than a century later, beginning with Batoni's painting for the Queen of Portugal. Like most examples of the type this shows the heart, in a symbolic representation, outside the body and held in Christ's left hand, but in front of his chest.¹¹ Debate on the right *versus* the left is irrelevant to this type, as no wound is shown, and no incision is suggested. Consciously or not, this is a reversion to medieval allegorical models. The concept of the Sacred Heart is quite at variance with the mood of Dürer's own day, in which allegorical representations never approached this type of symbolism while scenes of Christ's sufferings were based on expressive heightening of fairly literal narratives.

Mystical devotion to the heart of Jesus in the late thirteenth century does not seem to have found its way into art. Rather the contrary. As expressed in the visions of St. Gertrude the Great (died c. 1302), it seems derived from artistic sources, a phenomenon whose possibility was pointed out by Millard Meiss in relation to the experiences of St. Catherine of Siena.¹² The conceptions of Gertrude have been characterised as pictorial in nature.¹³ She

had a vision in which she seemed to rest her head on the Saviour's wounded side and heard the beating of His heart. This occurred on St. John's day, and she inquired of the saint whether he had experienced this. His reply was that he had, but that the revelation had been held over for later ages.¹⁴

This leaves unclear whether she believed the wound was on the

¹¹ Carlo Cecchelli, "Christianity and Iconography," *Encyclopedia of World Art* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1960), III, 596-601. The reference is to col. 601. Batoni's painting is reproduced as Plate 307.

¹² Millard Meiss, *Painting in Florence and Siena after the Black Death*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), pp. 105-07 and 111-21. Catherine's experience of the stigmata was apparently influenced by paintings of St. Francis, but she recounted (p. 117) that five rays came to her hands, feet and heart. She obviously identified the heart with the wound.

¹³ J. Chapman, "Mysticism," *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, (New York: Scribner's, n.d.), 9, 97.

¹⁴ J. A. MacCulloch, "Heart," *ibid.*, 6, 557.

left, or that the heart could be heard on the right, but in general coincides with the image of John resting his head on Christ's left side, as though listening to his heartbeat, in contemporary representations of the Last Supper.¹⁵ If this is the origin of her visions, it implies a certain confusion on her part since at the time of the Last Supper the wounding had not yet taken place. Presumably the cause is to be found in her desire, conscious or otherwise, to incorporate in her experiences the emotional content of two distinct images — Christ's wound and the intimacy of the beloved disciple.¹⁶

Curiously enough, the idea that John was listening to Christ's heart does not seem to recur very often in Last Supper representations in later periods, even when he is seated on Christ's left. Sometimes he is seated on the right (Taddeo Gaddi, Florence, Santa Croce, Refectory; Pietro Lorenzetti, Assisi, San Francesco, Lower Church); often not leaning on Christ's bosom (Castagno, Florence, Sant' Apollonia); or not in contact with his chest (Ghirlandaio, Florence, Ognissanti); while there is a eucharistic type (Dieric Bouts, Louvain, St. Pierre; Ercole de' Roberti, London, National Gallery) in which the relationship with John is not particularly stressed. In the late fifteenth century Leonardo da Vinci's version (Milan, Santa Maria delle Grazie) serves an altogether different, more dramatic purpose, expressing a radical break with the static symbolic tradition. Dürer's three woodcut versions (B. 5, B. 24 and B. 53) show Christ seated immediately behind John, who in one case leans on Christ's left arm, in another on Christ's right arm, and in the third rests his arms and head on the table. The image in the Large Passion is a reversed paraphrase of that in the Small Passion. These interpretations of the biblical text (John 13: 23-25) can have no allusion to either the wound or the heart. A drawing of 1523 (W. 889), related to B. 53, shows a more traditional pose with John leaning on Christ's bosom from the left, but

¹⁵ E.g., Giotto, Padua, Arena Chapel; Duccio, Siena, Opera del Duomo; anon., Mistra, Greece, Peribleptos; anon. German, Christ and St. John, wood, c. 1320, Berlin Staatliche Museen (from Sigmaringen). Gurewicz p. 360) makes it clear that Gertrude's inquiry to St. John referred to his hearing Christ's heart beating while resting on his bosom at the Last Supper.

¹⁶ *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, ed. F. L. Cross, (London, Oxford University Press, 1963) claims (pp. 1199-1200) that the devotion to the Sacred Heart can be traced to the Middle Ages, and it "seems to have sprung from the cult of the Wound in the Side," though "long confined to a relatively small number of mystics and saints."

without being close enough to listen to the heart. The *Ovidio metamorphoseos volgare* published at Venice in 1497 and 1501 refers to Apollo's holding the kithara to his left side while playing it as a sign "that the true knowledge comes from the heart,"¹⁷ but Dürer seems not to have been influenced by either Christian or pagan ideas of the importance of the heart. He was more pre-occupied with his personal visualizations of the Passion.

The possibility that in the nude drawing Dürer was portraying himself in the guise of Christ is reinforced by the facial resemblance to the characteristic Christ-type which he developed particularly in his graphic works. If he did make this mystical identification, he would most likely have interpreted his own pain, whatever its cause, as conforming to the suffering of Christ in the Passion. This is a recurrent subject in his work, and he expressed the belief that a major function of art was to set forth "the sufferings of Christ."¹⁸ Roland H. Bainton has shown that this theme of the *conformitas Christi*, exemplified by St. Francis, was accepted in Dürer's day like the *imitatio Christi* as devoid of any hint of blasphemy.¹⁹ The *De imitatione Christi*, ascribed to Thomas à Kempis, was popular in Dürer's time, and it is not improbable that he came under its influence.

We know from Dürer's hieratically rigid painted self portrait of probably 1500, in Munich, and from the metal-point *Self Portrait as Man of Sorrows* (W. 886) formerly in the Kunsthalle, Bremen, that he had the propensity for seeing himself in this role. Even more pertinent is his 1503 charcoal drawing (Plate 3), *Head of the Dead Christ* (W. 272, British Museum). This is undoubtedly a self portrait. The face resembles Dürer's as depicted in his undisputed self portraits. It has the same tapered shape, similarly prominent eyes, the narrow yet full mouth with its globular upper lip and depression between lip and nose, while even in this foreshortened view the nose is clearly like Dürer's. The beard and hair also resemble those he affected. The drawing is inscribed "This face I have made for you . . . during my illness."²⁰ The head is crowned

¹⁷ Quoted by Emanuel Winternitz, *Musical Instruments and their Symbolism in Western Art*, (London, Faber & Faber, 1967), p. 165.

¹⁸ Cited in W. M. Conway, *The Writings of Albrecht Dürer* (London, 1958), p. 177.

¹⁹ Roland H. Bainton, "Dürer and Luther as The Man of Sorrows," *Art Bulletin*, 29 (1947), 269-72.

²⁰ Panofsky, Vol. 2, p. 72 (Handlist No. 621).



Plate 3: Albrecht Dürer, *Head of the Dead Christ*, drawing, 1503 (Winkler 272), London, British Museum.

with thorns and flung back as if from death agonies. The eyes are closed and the mouth drops open. Obviously it is the symbolic Christ of the Passion. Here is evidence that Dürer not only identified his appearance with that of Christ but saw his own sufferings as conforming to those of the Passion. It should not be surprising for the Bremen self portrait of him as a sick man to have similar connotations. In the period of these two drawings he seems to have undergone a spiritual crisis connected with his illness.

The wound could only have been shown indisputably on the left side in an image not subject to, nor designed for, reversal. In none of Dürer's paintings is it so shown. Nor does the wound appear on the left side in the pictures or sculptures of any of his contemporaries or near-contemporaries apart from a solitary example by Hans Baldung.²¹ In Passion narratives of the time the lance-thrust is invariably shown as coming from the right. In short, in the art of the period there was no cult of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. What there was in the work of Dürer was a persistent adherence to the *imitatio Christi* and the *conformitas Christi*.²² The Bremen drawing of himself sick and naked seems to have been a covert part of that obsession.

²¹ This reference includes wood-carvings, ivories, metalwork, medallions, embroideries and tapestries. Tapestry designs, like those for prints, also undergo reversal, but there is generally less evidence of confusion than there is in prints. The variant by Baldung is pointed out by Gurewich (p. 361). Perhaps it was not deliberate.

²² For elucidation of medical aspects of this study I am grateful to Professor G. J. Fraenkel.