Melencolia i

Religion, Bible

Finkelstein’s “ The relativity of Albrecht Dürer” offers an intensely scientific, geometric, linguistic and analytical interpretation of the engraving Melencolia I. With the help of research done earlier by such scholars as Erwin Panofsky and Frances Yates, Finkelstein explores the hidden dimensions of a piece of artwork and uncovers ideas that had before hardly been considered. Drawing on the fact that Dürer was a mathematician as well as an artist, Finkelstein makes several predictions about the content of the work and systematically offers rather logical progressions that identify the predictions as plausible.

He makes one disclaimer: “ We do not look for deep philosophical secrets in this engraving as much as for insights into Dürer’smind and times” (2005, p. 4). This demonstrates Finkelstein’s knowledge that his analysis of the work of a dead artist can amount only to very convincing conjecture. He is cognizant that such a work can offer only insight rather than uncovering of secrets that can be said to have been definitively hidden by the artist. The insight apparently gained by Finkelstein is itself manifold, but primarily demonstrates the idea of relativism within this art by denoting the importance of perspective to an artist and especially to one who was also as much a scientist as Dürer. Secondarily, Finkelstein sets out to identify the Melencolia I as a portrait of the Dürerfamily.

Finkelstein does find a great deal of cogent evidence indicating that Dürer indeed intended meaning beyond the mere surface of the etching. The mysterious aspect of the work, he reveals, is explained by the necessity during that time to be secretive in displaying anything that had to do with

the “ new” sciences or with hermetics. Within the image of the polyhedron Finkelstein notes the presence of two faces.

These are hidden from immediate view, and the presence of hidden faces in other works by Dürer indicates that this vision is not imagination. The visions are of a woman and man, and closely fit the images of previous works done by Dürer of his father and mother. The significance of his parents in an etching ostensibly about melancholy appears odd, yet an even more obscure hidden figure found by Finkelstein points to Dürer himself. These three figures together appear to make Melencolia I the bearer of a family portrait.

The idea of Dürer’s family being a large part of the subject matter of the work is revealed again in the presence of two rebuses in the Dürer coat-of-arms and another in the engraving itself. The initials A. D. appear under the year 1514—which seems to be a play on the Anno Domini interpretation of that initialism.

The Durer coat-of-arms is itself an overt reference to his family and it contains at its centre a picture of an open gate sitting on a cloud. Cross-referencing between the Latin root for burin (a chisel and a figure seen in the coat-of-arms) uncovers a connection between the ideas “ I chisel” and “ heaven.” Finkelstein reads this (along with the picture of the open gates) as Limen Caelo or “ gateway to heaven” (2005, p. 8). This nomenclature is connected to his families name via some linguistic changes that render Dürer a German representation of door or gate.

Further investigation leads to the interpretation of a magic square (which can be seen in the engraving) as a further reference to a member of the Dürer family, namely the artist himself. Finkelstein relies on the phenomenon of the Greek alphabet that renders to each letter a corresponding number. The name Albrecht Dürer contains letters (numbers) that sum to 135, whereas the magic square contains numbers that sum to 136. This, Finkelstein notices, might be taken to mean 135 + 1—with the numeral 1 being in reference to God (not an unusual reference at the time). Upon looking further at the magic square, the numeral 1 does seem set off from the others by being unquestionably larger.

Other messages are uncovered in this work by Finkelstein. He uncovers meanings in the images of the bat, the putto (cherub), the angel, the ladder et cetera. One striking message is in the title of the piece itself—which seems to refer to melancholy, yet spells the word incorrectly in every known language. Previous study of the bat done by Finkelstein had discredited any idea that Dürer considered melancholy a worthy topic—and it might be seen that the “ gates of heaven” ideas uncovered before are far from melancholy. Finkelstein considers “ melencolia” to be an anagram for Limen Caelo, and this can be easily verified.

The research paper points out very detailed aspects of Melencolia I that indicate it indeed possible that the work is a portrait of the Dürer family. The fact that the idea of the bat can be turned to mean that Albrecht Dürer discredits melancholy proves to be a small and negligible idea. However, when coupled with Finkelstein’s other numerological and linguistic

manipulations, the evidence seems alarmingly convincing. It seems hardly likely that a magic square that has been concocted to add to 34 would also spontaneously find all its numbers adding to 135 + 1.

However, two questions arise: How could Dürer have made such a square fulfil so many requirements at once? What could the number 34 mean? Finkelstein does not address the meaning of 34—an omission that serves somewhat to undermine his work's accuracy, as it demonstrates a lack of thoroughness. However, his position might be restored if it is considered that perhaps 34 actually means nothing at all and that the numbers of Jupiter's Table were manipulated specifically and solely for the purpose of coming up with the 135 + 1 total on Dürer's Table. These ideas render believable again the ideas presented by Finkelstein that the etching represents Dürer's family portrait.

Finkelstein also asserts the theory that Dürer's etching is a symbolic reference to relativism. First Finkelstein establishes the relativistic condition that his own perspective of viewing the piece had changed, as he no longer sees it as an expression of melancholy. Finkelstein then demonstrates that his perspective does render the meaning of the painting as malleable as speed does time.

The fact that Finkelstein is able to attach such an impressively argued alternate interpretation of the piece is a strong point in favour of the idea of relativism. For example, he analyses the angel within the engraving, and this analysis does well at undergirding the idea of relativity. Though many before have taken the serious countenance of the angel to mean that she

represents melancholy, Finkelstein’s scrutiny points out (among other things) that the angle at which the angels eyes are inclined indicates that her own “ perspective” does not lead her toward melancholic thoughts.

Nor can her melancholy be considered the creative type, Finkelstein continues, as she is not involved in any creative activity. Rather, her eyes lead toward the realm of the heavens—focused on nothing within the frame itself, but beyond.

Finkelstein’s analysis seems plausible, and again this is especially true because of his earlier discovery of multiple references to the gateway of heaven. It is also quite noteworthy that the angel is looking out (that is, appears contemplative rather than sad). References to the contemporary division of “ the world under God into three concentric spheres, roughly Terrestrial, Celestial, and Intellectual,” as well as to three spheres of thought, unites contemplation with the heavens (Finkelstein, 2005, p. 10).

Therefore, Finkelstein sets the stage for making a convincing case for the angel to be contemplative rather than depressed. However, Finkelstein’s position that the angel could not be experiencing creative melancholy seems a little precarious. He bases it on an assumption that she is far from her creative tools—yet she does seem to be holding something that could be a pencil or other writing apparatus. Plus, execution of art cannot be the only stage in which creativity takes place, as the thoughts that give rise to this execution are perhaps the nuclei of such artistic creativity. Therefore, despite the angle of her eyes, the angel could very well still be in a creatively melancholic mood.

Finkelstein emphasises polymorphism also as evidence of relativity within Dürer’s work. He shows this polymorphism to be evident in many of the images within the piece, and brings out their alternative meaning through connections to physics. The images of the potto and the angel, for instance, flank the image of a scale. This instrument touches each lightly with apparently the same amount of force and is balanced between them. The potto might represent the artisan (mere craftsman) whose works is corporeal, and the angel represent the artistic or heavenly quality of the artist.

In pointing out that the scale touches them equally, Finkelstein identifies the idea that the physical and intellectual aspects of art are equal. However, he makes the point more strongly in his reference to the works of other artists, researchers, and scientists of the past. These works strengthen his own by asserting also “ a balance between the worlds above and below, the Intellectual and Terrestrial spheres represented by the angel and the putto” (Finkelstein, 2005, p. 16). Then Finkelstein caps this idea with a reference to earlier interpretations of the equation e = mc2, which likens energy to the “ immaterial realm of forces” while mass represents “ the material realm of bodies” (Finkelstein, 2005, p. 16).

Though the paper was extremely well researched, a few areas exist in which it might have been more convincing. The explanation of the meaning of the magic square might have included an acknowledgement of the areas in which the author had no interpretation for some of its variables. This is especially true for the number 34, which does represent the most important

number of that particular magic square, according to the established method for interpreting such a square.

Other parts of the interpretations appear to be very far-fetched and exaggerated, such as the existence of facial images in the polyhedron, which I have not been able to see. Another reference is to a nebulous union of the Star of David (seen within the polyhedron) and Dürer's supposed incorporation of a Jewish theme. Why Finkelstein includes this is unclear, as any connection between the star and Jews would be (as he admits) anachronistic. Plus, the significance of Judaism to the painting is not made very clear. It would perhaps have been better to have omitted this or to have made the connections clearer.

David R. Finkelstein's critique and interpretation of Dürer's Melencolia I does present a very cogent (albeit philosophical) view of the etching as a representation of art's relativity. Even if Finkelstein has not succeeded in proving conclusively that Durer's intention was to portray this idea, the methods and approaches that Finkelstein uses to interpret the engraving strongly corroborate this idea. He does succeed in demonstrating that the etchings might be viewed as a portrait of the Dürer family, and his other efforts (in which he utilizes scientific, linguistic, and other analytical devices) at interpreting the different images within the whole work help to make Finkelstein's critique an interesting and convincing one.

Despite this, he does present some far-fetched theories that serve to undermine the cogency (and indeed the scientific reliability) of his argument.

However, considering the subject matter (art), what Finkelstein does accomplish is impressive.

Reference

Finkelstein, David R. (2005). The Relativity of Albrecht Dürer. School of Physics, Georgia Institute ofTechnology. Atlanta.