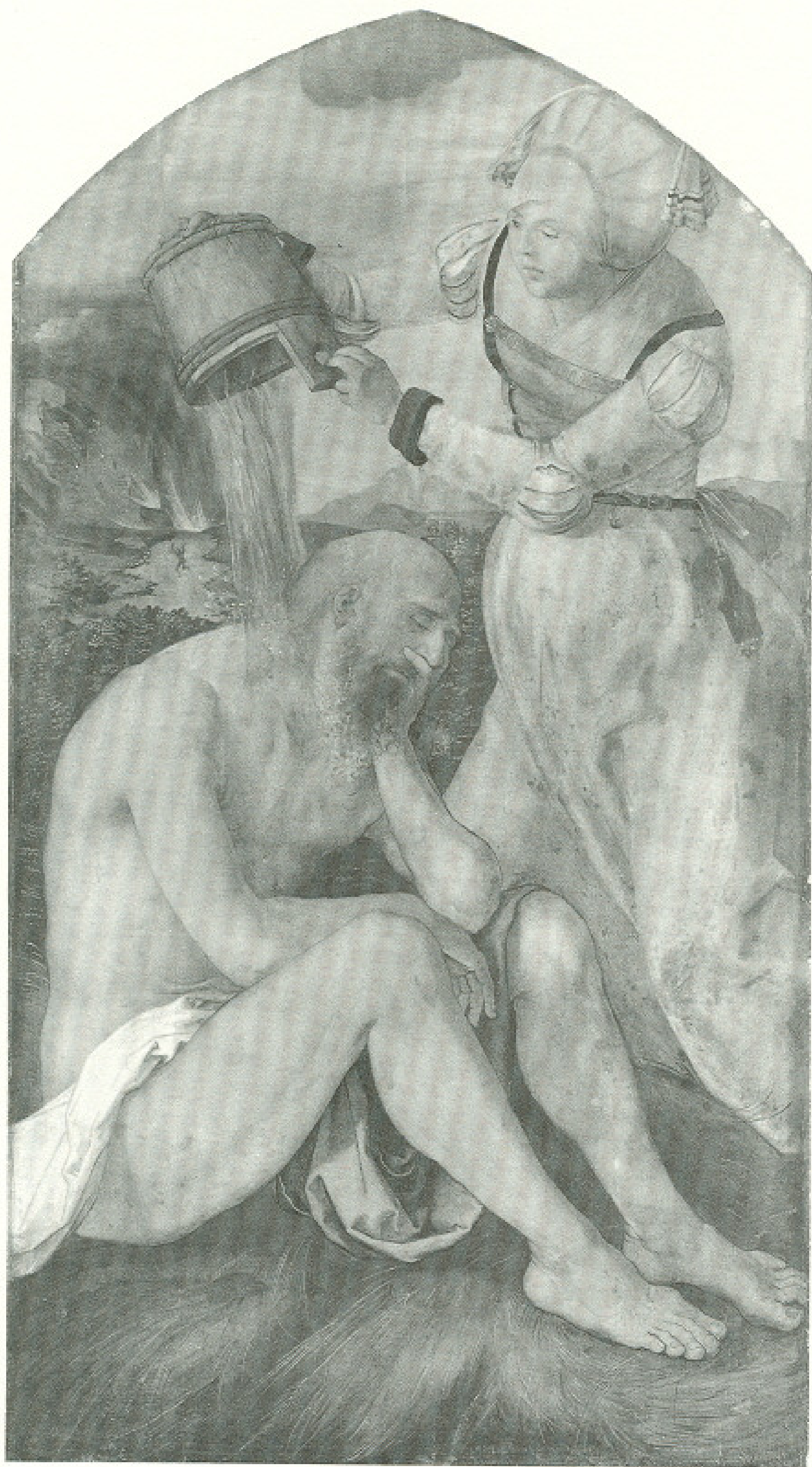
8. Albrecht Dürer, *Christ as Man of Sorrows*, c. 1494, oil on panel, Staatliche Kunsthalle, Karlsruhe.

9. *Job on a Dungheap*, illumination from *Dialogus de laudibus sanctae crucis*, c. 1170–1175, pen and ink on parchment, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Munich, Clm. 14159.

in himself. The suffering Job often assumes this posture, as in a twelfth-century illumination from Regensburg (fig. 9)[25] and an exterior panel of Dürer's own *Jabach Altarpiece*, now in Frankfurt (fig. 10). Closely related are the images of Christ in distress, such as Dürer's Karlsruhe picture (fig. 8), in which Christ, submitting himself wholly to his torments, sits as the emblem of patience.[26] While Christ's posture suggests a moment of rest within the Passion, the stigmata and side wound indicate that the Crucifixion has already occurred. Christ's meditative attitude, isolated from any single narrative context and expressed fully in his pose, exemplifies the self's properly inward response to the entire Passion. Gazing out of the picture, Christ appeals directly to us as viewers in the here and now, encouraging us not only to observe, but also to include ourselves in the subjective experience of suffering.[27] Read in conjunction with the Erlangen *Self-Portrait* upon which it is partially modeled, the posture of Dürer's *Schmerzensmann* becomes invested with a new, personal dimension. The interiority projected onto the viewer originates from the artist as he gazes at himself.[28] And given Dürer's subsequent habit of represent-



10. Albrecht Dürer, *Job Castigated by His Wife*, 1503–1504, exterior of right wing of *Jabach Altarpiece*, oil on panel, Städelsches Kunstinstitut, Frankfurt.

ing himself as Christ, the Karlsruhe panel begins to read less as a conventional religious image for which the Erlangen sheet was but a preparatory sketch than as the radical extension of the project of self-portraiture into the domain of devotional art.[29]

The meaning and function of Dürer's posture in the Erlangen *Self-Portrait* varies from context to context. When applied to the figure of Joseph in the Berlin *Holy Family,* it couples physical presence with spiritual absence or suggests Joseph's distress and doubt concerning the Virgin Birth. This is also true for Dürer's sketch of an old man in a margin of the *Prayer Book* of Maximilian I (fig. 11).[30] This figure, probably representing Joseph, embodies simultaneously the oblivion of the just man to physical hardship, as described in Psalm 46 printed on the same page, and the *tribulatio,* successfully withstood, of spiritual doubt.[31] In Dürer's woodcut *Design of a Monument to the Peasants,* made in 1525 after the great Peasants' War, the farmer ornamenting the column's top assumes a similar posture, now as the bathetic emblem of defeat or betrayal (fig. 118; Kn. 369).[32] And in Dürer's 1521 *St. Jerome,* the aged church father rests head on hand to express his knowledge and contemplation of the vanity of the world (fig. 12).[33] Most centrally, however, the gesture of resting one's chin in one's hand, as sign of inwardness or subjectivity, belongs to the established iconography of melancholy. It appears, for example, in a Frankish woodcut *Acedia* from about 1490 (fig. 13); and it is monumentalized in the winged angel of Dürer's famous *Melencolia* engraving of 1514 (fig. 14; Kn. 74).

One might assume that Dürer, sketching his own mirrored likeness on the Erlangen sheet, strikes his pose because "melancholy" appropriately names that condition where the self, turned inward upon itself, becomes absorbed in, and paralyzed by, its own reflection. The moment of self-portraiture appears suddenly more modern, more familiar. It becomes the premonition of romanticism's myth of genius: the artist as a sad, frail, inward-turned individual, tragically distanced from his life, his surroundings, his society, and his epoch, such as we see him in a *Self-Portrait* by the German romantic painter Caspar David Friedrich, dating from about 1802 (fig. 15).[34] Whether they acknowledge it or not, interpreters of Dürer's Erlangen *Self-Portrait* read the artist's likeness through this gaze of romantic melancholy. Waetzoldt sees the sketch as "melancholy self-brooding"; Helmut Theodor Musper observes a "presentiment of tragedy"; and the catalog of the great 1971 Dürer exhibition in Nuremberg refers to a loss of "spiritual equilibrium" in the artist's features.[35] Others have found evidence of physical frailty. Thus Friedrich Winkler writes, "It is indeed a bandage that the artist wears, and it suggests that Dürer perceived himself as an invalid."[36] This identification of Dürer's headgear is probably fanciful, yet it underscores the inclination of interpreters to decipher self in the Erlangen sketch as troubled or suffering. This is the consequence of Dürer's gesture. Fitted with melancholy's attribute, the artist's likeness conveys a general inwardness that will be read according to whatever model of character is current in the interpreter's own culture.

This sense of familiarity is fleeting, however. The idea of melancholy as it was inherited and revised by Dürer depends on notions of self and image that remain radically alien to us today. And the unresolved and centuries-old debate on the meaning of Dürer's *Melencolia* engraving hardly recommends applying the print as an iconographic key to the

12. (*left*) Albrecht Dürer, *St. Jerome*, 1521, oil on panel, Museu de Arte Antiqua, Lisbon.

13. (*above*) *Acedia*, c. 1490, Frankish woodcut.

Erlangen *Self-Portrait*.[37] The engraving's obscurity is partly the artist's intention. Dürer invokes diverse areas of thought, from medicine, astrology, and numerology to geometry, theology, and art theory, in order to make a statement about or, perhaps more basically, to cause his viewers to think upon the work of the human mind per se.[38] The vast effort of subsequent interpreters, in all their industry and error, testifies to the efficacy of the print as an occasion for thought. Instead of mediating *a* meaning, *Melencolia* seems designed to generate multiple and contradictory readings, to clue its viewers to an endless exegetical labor until, exhausted in the end, they discover their own portrait in Dürer's sleepless, inactive personification of melancholy.[39] Interpreting the engraving itself becomes a detour to self-reflection, just as all the arts and sciences whose tools clutter the print's foreground finally return their practitioners to the state of a mind absorbed in itself. This links *Melencolia* to Dürer's two other "master engravings" of 1514, *St. Jerome in His Study* (Kn. 73) and *Knight, Death, and the Devil* (fig. 144; Kn. 72).[40] Each print pictures a relation of the self to itself, inflected variously in intellectual, spiritual, and moral labor and enacted always against the temporalizing horizon of death (the ubiquitous hourglass).

Yet if these three engravings invite us to attend to ourselves as *inner*, if they are indeed instruments of the Delphic injunction, reiterated for Dürer's culture by Erasmus, to "know thyself,"[41] the self envisioned in *Melencolia* is of a mixed pedigree. Melancholy, as defined by the medieval theory of humors, is black bile, a substance concentrated in the

15. Caspar David Friedrich, *Self-Portrait with Supporting Arm*, c. 1802, pen and ink, Kunsthalle, Hamburg.

human spleen or kidneys. Excess bile makes a person sad and introverted not simply because, as substance, bile causes this mood *in them,* but because melancholy resides *in the bile,* as a psychic manifestation of what, ontologically, bile is. Charles Taylor has emphasized that the theory of humors differs from modern notions of self in this localization. Inwardness as melancholy proposes a protean relation of inner to outer, self to substance, subject to object, one that is foreign to us who feel our moods and selves to be somehow our own.[42] A reading of the Erlangen sheet through the medieval theory of melancholy might thus historicize the self depicted: self-portrayal would record less Dürer's unique and innermost being than melancholy's self-manifestation through the medium of the artist's body.

Medieval medical theory maintained that a person's character is formed by the influence of the humors and the planets and predetermined by the catastrophe in Eden. Adam, striving to be equal to God, ate the apple and fell into a state of existential deficiency whose chief symptom is melancholy and whose consequence is death. The self, heir to Adam, strives ever toward mastery, equating its powers with God's, but falls into a gloom that is the body's bitterness.[43] In their influential 1923 study of the *Melencolia* engraving, Erwin Panofsky and Fritz Saxl argued that Dürer superimposed upon this

older theory of the humors a new glorification of melancholy as the distinguishing characteristic of genius.[44] According to a strain of Renaissance humanism current in Germany at 1514, great artists, born under the sign of Saturn and constituted as melancholic types, create their works in alternating fits of divine frenzy and despondency. This creativity, more abstract and speculative than manual labor, elevates artists to a status akin to God's; hence the compass in Dürer's print as traditional attribute of God as *deus artifex* (fig. 16). The *Melencholia* engraving thus seems to articulate a pivotal moment in the history of subjectivity. Where the Middle Ages substantialized inwardness as the excess of black bile and moralized that excess as the deadly sin of acedia, the Renaissance abstracted inwardness as an inherent quality of creative genius and valorized its effects in the originality of the artist, whose works are wholly his own.

Following this clue, Panofsky and Saxl pressed their modernizing account further, locating the meaning of the 1514 engraving in the person of Albrecht Dürer. The print, we learn, is "a spiritual self-portrait," in which the artist declares himself to be "'inspired' by celestial influences and eternal ideas, but suffers all the more deeply from his human frailty and intellectual finiteness."[45] This interpretative shift from artwork to artist has been criticized as overly "romantic."[46] And indeed the reading of the *Melencolia* as a self-portrait has important precedents in the writings of Caspar David Friedrich's friend and

16. *God as Deus Artifex,* illumination from the *Bible moralisée,* 1220–1230, Vienna, Nationalbibliothek, Cod. 2554.

follower the Dresden romantic Carl Gustav Carus, as well as in an 1834 poem by Théophile Gautier.[47] Historical support for Panofsky and Saxl's argument remains rather scant: the *Self-Portrait of the Sick Dürer* in Bremen, in which the artist points to his spleen as the seat of his malady (fig. 91; W. 482); Philipp Melanchthon's (1497–1560) reference to Dürer's "most noble and magnanimous" melancholy; the artist's own belief, articulated in his theoretical writings, that painters' apprentices should be of a melancholy temperament; and Dürer's melancholy pose in the Erlangen drawing.[48] For our present purposes, however, the account of the 1514 engraving as a self-portrait is illuminating, for it remains consistent with a notion of melancholy as the dangerous foregrounding of self. Dürer's pensive angel, assuming a posture of inwardness that she shares with the artist in the *Self-Portrait* in Erlangen, provides the occasion wherein, exemplarily, the historiography of art can link the visual image to the person of the artist.[49] Undecipherable according to any single preexisting code, *Melencolia* draws its viewers into an ever-narrower locus of reference until the image becomes wholly the product and reflection of the unique, creative self of Albrecht Dürer. Even the winged spirit seated on the millstone carries a possible reference to the artist. Crouching over an object shaped like the monogrammed tablets of the *Jerome* and *Knight, Death, and the Devil* engravings, and wielding what might be a burin, the putto could even engrave the AD initials of Dürer's authorship.

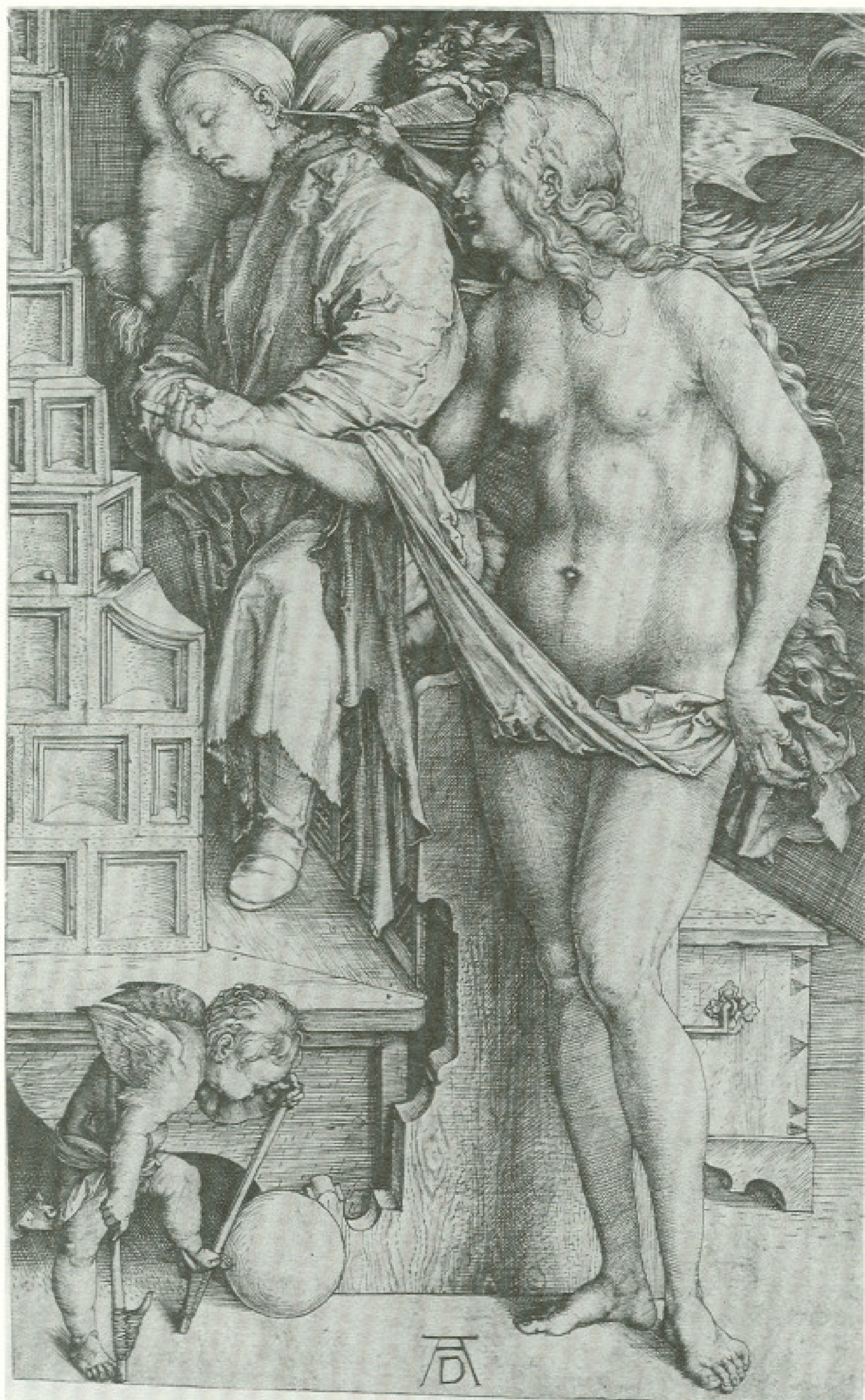
Earlier in my account of the Erlangen *Self-Portrait*, I traced very different trajectories for Dürer's melancholy pose: as practical device for steadying the artist's gaze while he draws himself in the mirror; as mere formal problem to be mastered, like the folds of a pillow; as preparatory model for other works of art. In returning Dürer's pose to his practices as a draftsman, and in observing its subsequent itinerary in other works of art, we are led away from self-portraiture as a portrayal of self. From this perspective, the Erlangen drawing acts as a curious "source" for the *Melencolia* engraving and all its interpretative complexities. The artist has observed and represented himself only so that, once his pose is subtracted from the specificity and implied subjectivity of a self-portrait, it can enter into more impersonal works of art. Yet once invested with his likeness—once linked, however obliquely, to the moment of self-portraiture—that pose will carry with it the face of its maker. Thus it is that, without any recognizable likeness of Dürer himself, the *Melencolia* engraving can be called a self-portrait. What we are approaching here is neither an iconographic nor a historical problem, but a general phenomenon of signification: How is it that *things* (objects as well as works of art) are linked to *meanings* through the agency of the face-as-self?

The discovery of the artist in his works, or more generally the passage from object to self enacted in interpretation, finds a useful demonstration in Dürer's *Six Pillows* (fig. 5). Earlier I suggested that Dürer's study sheet, while containing a self-portrait on its recto (fig. 2), had as its goal the apprehension of the pure object, isolated from its context and reduced to an abstract play of outline and modeling. This movement from face to thing, however, tells only half the story. For as commentators have long noted, the pillows

themselves contain hidden faces in their folds and indentations.[50] For example, the curious spiral on the left edge of the pillow at center left acts as a possible eye for faces discoverable in the lower left corner and, upside down, at the upper left. Similarly, faces appear at the far edge of the pillow just to the right; the curved horizontal fold just below center reads both as the mouth of one face whose nose is the pillow's upper corner, and as the nose and eye of a smaller face in the lower corner. Once set in motion, this game of "seeing as" can be played indefinitely, transforming corners into noses, chins, or satyrs' horns, and creases into mouths and brows, until each pillow is animated by a number of hypothetical masks frowning, laughing, fretting, and speaking.[51] None of these faces, it is true, can be posited with certainty as really being there, nor do they remain stable for us. We lose one possible physiognomy once we discover another that overlaps with it. Yet even the skeptic will admit that the pillows, arranged in pairs and gesturing dynamically, have been rendered animate, if not anthropomorphic, by the artist's pen. These drawings exercise the visual fantasy not only of the artist inventing these grotesque physiognomies, but also of the viewer discovering faces that others might miss.

A pillow is an appropriate place to hide faces. As indicated by the German word *Kopfkissen* (literally "head cushion"), pillows are the head's support in sleep. In Dürer's *Dream of the Doctor* engraving of 1498, a head at rest on a pillow spawns lurid phantasms (fig. 17; Kn. 22). Once used, the pillow preserves in its indented shape a loose impression of the sleeper. In the Metropolitan study sheet, the hidden faces in the pillows merge imaginary sleepers with their place of rest, transforming the amorphous indentations of fabric into twisted, phantasmagoric countenances. We have already observed Dürer's interest in distorted physiognomies. The Erlangen *Self-Portrait* studies the artist's own altered features as he rests his face against his hand. Now, as I noted earlier, Dürer's punched pillows, as well as the calligraphic lines that rendered them, are themselves marks of Dürer as maker. It is appropriate, then, that the first face on the sheet's recto should be the artist's own: Dürer's self-portrait, reversed and subtly distorted through the convex mirror.[52] The Metropolitan sheet charts a movement from face to pillow, self to object, and back again. The artist's likeness may indeed be displayed as a thing among things, as just another exercise within the objective practice of an artist, yet "things" themselves have here been given faces and are invested now with a character that potentially can be read. Who can say which is more expressive, the artist's likeness gazing out at us at the top of the recto, or the histrionic, eyeless physiognomy of the pillow, whose upper left corner reads like a triumphant nose (note the mark, unrelated to the logic of the pillow's folds, indicating a nostril) and whose chin is the pillow's lower left corner? The historiographical uncertainty whether Dürer's early drawings of his own features are "self"-portraits or whether Dürer merely studies his face as just another object to be mastered by his pen is an aporia already staged by the material itself. For objects themselves have been inscribed with faces and are empowered to speak as subjects through the agency of pictorial prosopopoeia.

In his theoretical writings, Dürer terms an artist's object, that is, his visual model as it appears in nature, either a *gegen würff*, which simply translates the Latin *objectum*,



17. Albrecht Dürer, *Dream of the Doctor,* 1498, engraving.

18. Albrecht Dürer, *Self-Portrait*, 1493, oil, transferred from vellum to linen, Louvre, Paris.

or more tellingly, a *gegen gesicht*, which means literally "before (or against) the face."[53] Once themselves endowed with faces, and therefore with character and subjectivity, the pillows change their appearance and orientation, twisting, turning, and grimacing according to the individual viewer's fancy. The pillows are subjected to *our* thought, appropriated by our desire to find meaning in them by rendering them homologous to ourselves. Recent interpretations of the Metropolitan sheet bear witness to this. George Szabo, for example, has linked the pillows to Dürer's personal life at 1493. According to him, the Metropolitan sheet, produced during Dürer's engagement to Agnes Frey (c. 1475–1539), assembles a group of images all associated with love and marriage.[54] The likeness on the recto served as a preliminary sketch for Dürer's earliest surviving painted *Self-Portrait*, the 1493 panel in the Louvre, which the artist seems to have presented to Agnes as a token of their impending betrothal (fig. 18).[55] The sketch of his hand at the right of the sheet might also belong to this project. It offers an alternative formula for the gesture in the Louvre picture, where Dürer holds in his fingers a sprig of sea holly or *Eryngium*. Szabo also links the motif of the pillow to marriage, for according to a medieval custom, if a bridegroom sleeps on a pillow filled with magical herbs on St. John's Day (June 24), he will be able to see into the future. Szabo speculates: "Might the anxious young Dürer, on the eve of his marriage, have attempted to risk a glance at his future with the help of one or more pillows? Are the hidden faces the visions he saw in his troubled sleep?"[56]

Fanciful though this reading might be, it is useful to pursue it a bit further and to consider how it may have been occasioned by Dürer's drawing itself. It is true that in his Louvre engagement portrait the artist gathers around him objects and sayings designed to ward off bad luck in marriage. In the motto at the top of the panel—"My affairs fare as ordained from above"[57]—Dürer resigns his future to the stars, expressing his powerlessness against fortune. The *Eryngium*, associated in folklore of the period with success in love, and often used as an aphrodisiac, is included to magically assist Dürer's impending sexual union.[58] Given what we know about Dürer's unhappy, childless marriage and about his possible attraction to boys,[59] his precautions in the Louvre *Self-Portrait* were perhaps meant apotropaically, against what he already knew about himself. The pillows, while employed to help him into matrimony, would then display in their grimacing features and their arrangement in pairs a nightmare vision of the marriage bed. Included on a sheet containing his self-portrait, the Metropolitan pillows betray the artist's anxiety about sexual coupling born from a fundamental narcissism evinced in the project of self-portraiture itself. The movement charted from his own likeness to the pillow, from self to other, and from narcissism to the conjugal bed discovers at its end grotesque faces, which is to say visions of a disfigured self.

I have pursued this reading of the Metropolitan sheet not because I believe, as Szabo does, that the pillows can best be explained biographically. Rather, interpreting the pillows as expressions of an anxiety about coupling continues an operation begun in Dürer's drawing. For in the juxtaposition of portrait and pillow, and in the carefully devised folds of the pillows, the artist himself couples object with face, picture with person. Dürer's

pillows are prosopopoeias, conferments (*poien*) of a face or mask (*prosopon*) on a thing.[60] As such, they emblematize the operation of any biographical reading, whose business is to make a work of art intelligible and memorable by conferring upon it a face or subjectivity, however phantasmagoric.

The artist's likeness is profoundly suited to appear together with these pillows, for like the faces hidden in the pillows' folds, self-portraiture elicits a mode of interpretation that will always move from image to person, work to artist, so that any further production can appear as some form of "spiritual self-portrait." The Erlangen drawing, then, with its emphasis on depicting and demonstrating the moment of its making, is nothing less than the conferment of a face, and therefore a subjectivity, on the process of representation itself. The drawing's conjunction of hand and likeness, present both in the artist's posture and in his graphic style, merely renders explicit a more primary coupling. For self-portrayal couples the body that draws with the object of its representation: the artist as his own *gegen gesicht,* whose work will be meaningful only as face. This prosopopoeia of representation, however, may never fully be "self"-portraiture, because it always marks only the transition from objects to subjects, things to signifiers. It is in part this transition that I call here the moment of self-portraiture.

The moment of self-portraiture in Dürer's early drawings turns out to be two-faced, hinging, as it were, on an uncertainty observable in the shape of our own interpretation. On the one hand, if I behold the Erlangen sheet according to its traditional title, that is, as "self-portrait," my experience of the work will be determined by my prior expectations of this privileged genre in Western art. My eye is first of all drawn into a special commerce with the sitter's gaze, and confronted by what I believe to be the face of the artist, I settle into a dialogue of self with self. Soon I discover a center of gravity and point of origin: Dürer's active eye at the right of the sheet, from which his vision seems to extend. Everything else follows from here. The artist's hand reads as a stabilizing device for the eye (or else as an attribute of Dürer's troubled psyche); the tensions and distortions of the likeness become embodiments of the work of seeing; and the drawing's agitated line testifies to the authenticity of our encounter, asserting that the eye we see was sketched at the very moment when it returns our gaze. And if I go then to place the drawing in history, I will be apt to celebrate it as a totally new departure in German art. Convinced that in the artist's sketched eye we are witness to the origin and starting point of his labor, I will (as indeed Kehrer does) regard the sketch as a radical rupture with the past, hypostatizing the discovery of the self, and with it the birth of an epoch, in the moment of Dürer's self-portrayal. My interpretation thus returns to the beginning, to the "self-portrait" at *its* historical beginning as a genre, even though it is doubtful that Dürer could have set out with a knowledge of what, if anything, self-portraiture might possibly be.

If, on the other hand, I forget the modern title of the Erlangen sheet and instead place the work in the context of Dürer's general pictorial practices as a journeyman in the early 1490s, then the entire character and orientation of the sheet changes. Linked to works

like the Berlin *Holy Family* and the *Schmerzensmann* in Karlsruhe, as well as to the artist's many studies of hands, arms, and objects in difficult or distorted positions, the sheet appears to have begun with Dürer's observing the hand's, any hand's, interaction with the cheek. That is, before the self-portrait and its seemingly originary gaze, Dürer established his object on the page; and only belatedly, perhaps through sheer visual appetite, did he decide to carry his sketch across the sheet, reaching at the right his active eye. Our eye fixed on the hand at the sheet's center, we experience the likeness as a detour, and with this shift in the picture's moment our whole interpretation changes. Dürer portrays his body as a thing among things, and his project is placed not at the historical start of a new genre or a new epoch, but at the close of medieval model-book tradition, in which the journeyman gathers visual material where he can find it, in order then to produce finished images of traditional subjects—Holy Family, Man of Sorrows, personification of the humors, or what you will.

It is possible to combine these two readings into a single hypothetical plot. Dürer began his Erlangen sketch as a preparatory drawing, but in contemplating the original motif (his hand) he shifted his attention to a new object (his own face). This would occupy him increasingly during the next decade and, through his foundational efforts as self-portraitist par excellence in the Renaissance tradition, would establish what all future viewers mean when they view the Erlangen sketch *as* a self-portrait. It should be noted that the "traditional" projects that might have initiated his hand study were themselves concerned with questions of self: in the figure of Joseph, human doubt vis-à-vis divinity; in the Man of Sorrows, the inwardness of meditation; and in melancholy, a period model of interiority itself. In one form or another, self-portraiture will have been already implied in the practices out of which the Erlangen sketch emerged. Finally, the Metropolitan pillows demonstrate that the "mere" object, insofar as it is represented in Dürer's art, becomes invested with a face, and that consequently our response to it will be *as* toward a human subject. We must attend to these passages in Dürer's art where pillows pass over into masks, where the mere hand opens onto the face of the artist, and where the artwork starts claiming a relation to the body and mind of its maker. For it is in that interstice, both spatial and historical in nature, between an object and an emergent self that the moment of self-portraiture erupts into Dürer's art, in advance of any intention or project or theory that might explain it.