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BEING A CHOSEN ONE: SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS AND SELF-FASHIONING IN THE WORKS OF GEROLAMO CARDANO

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Being a Chosen One: Self-Consciousness and Self-Fashioning in the Works of Gerolamo Cardano

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Introduction

In contrast to the generally accepted view that modern science, born or at least formed in the Humanist Renaissance, met no substantial resistance, and thus simply swept magic and superstition away from world history, Paolo Rossi claims that "the Hermetic-magical tradition had an important influence on many of the leading exponents of the Scientific Revolution... Today, the Enlightenment-era positivist image of scientific knowledge marching triumphantly through the darkness and superstition of magic has definitely been laid to rest."[1]

There is another aspect to the Renaissance that must be clarified – that of the role of solitary adventurers in the new fields of "science" (whether in a modern, or at least proto-modern, sense, or their own), scholarly rather than scholastic, and indebted to no tradition, only keen to share their new discoveries with their peers, often by means of correspondence and personal visits rather than communal endeavour. Although the romantic attitude of Burckhardt that viewed the Italian Renaissance as the revolt of particular individuals against the darkness of the medieval heritage has been successfully criticised, there is no question that there were important participants of the intellectual sphere (and certainly that of art) who did not belong to philosophical schools or institutions. These intellectuals were not necessarily supported by powerful patrons; rather, they were scholars who made their own way through the complex network of ideologies and traditions, following their own

[1] Paolo Rossi, *The Birth of Modern Science* tr. by C. De Nardi Ipsen (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 26. This is the view of Steven Shapin as well, who states that "There was no such thing as the Scientific Revolution… Many historians are no longer satisfied that there was any singular and discrete event, localized in time and space, that can be pointed to as "the" Scientific Revolution. Such historians now reject even the notion that there was any single coherent cultural entity called "science" in the seventeenth century to undergo revolutionary change. There was, rather, a diverse array of cultural practises aimed at understanding, explaining, and controlling the natural world, each with different characteristics and each experiencing different modes of change," Steven Shapin, *The Scientific Revolution* (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 1-3.

presentiments while utilising – consciously or not – a great variety of sources and thoughts. The fact that they stood outside the universities and traditional institutions (even if they often had some temporary experience of them) on the one hand provided them with a freedom of choice, while on the other it also meant that the sources and ideas they made their own were not part of or rooted in the mainstream. "Scientific activity was being carried on in an unstructured ideological framework wherein everyone tried, with difficulty, to make his way, practising two or three disciplines at once, teaching one but not the other, without any spirit of specialisation in the present-day sense of the word."[2]

The period this paper focuses on is the sixteenth century, the third generation of Humanists, and as such it "no longer presented the exciting aspect of continuous discovery, renewed year by year"[3] by the publication of new materials and fresh approaches: the new discoveries were no longer new; the anxiety the sensational discovery of the Hermetic texts[4] caused in the late fifteenth century was dying down. Their presence became usual, similarly to other discoveries, both literary and geographic; they became absorbed in that mass or complexity of traditions, cultures, attitudes that now we call Renaissance.

The "new intellectuals,"[5] or, as some of their contemporaries would simply call them, sorcerers, magi, or even charlatans, were thus solitary figures without the financial and social support a courtier could enjoy, and as a result they laboured under

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[2] Robert Mandrou, *From Humanism to Science 1480-1700* tr. By Brian Pearce (Bungay, Suffolk: Penguin , 1978), 22.
[3] *Ibid*., 138.
[4] On the Hermetic tradition and its impact on Renaissance culture, see, Frances A. Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1964) which still represents the most trustworthy authority on this subject; Garth Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes: A Historical Approach to the Late Pagan Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986) and Eugenio Garin, "Nota sull'ermetismo," in *La cultura filosofica del Rinascimento italiano*. *Ricerche e documenti* (Florence: Sansoni, 1992), pages 143-154.
[5] Mandrou, *From Humanism to Science*, 122.

the necessity of fighting their way up to the scholarly community unaided. In consequence they had to create extremely strong "survival strategies" to find a public, and more especially, a patron ready to support them. More often than not it was the printer who took on the task of being the intermediary between the author and the readers;[6] consequently the market-forces played a very direct role in the publication, as the response to a certain work was quite explicit and graspable – and of immediate practical importance to a publisher. Thus raw business influenced the careers of all intellectuals.

The "new intellectual" had to be a conscious, determined businessman who knew how to sell his literary products, and shaped himself into whatever form was the most required. "In the sixteenth century there appears to be an increased self-consciousness about the fashioning of human identity as a manipulable, artful process."[7] The matter of the ability to control one's own identity (and, by extension or at least by persuasion, that of others) played a decisive role in the person's further career: if one negotiated well enough among the capricious market-forces, one was able to survive, or even to acquire fame and success with all that those factors imply: wealth, recognition.

Some of these "new intellectuals" went further than simply embracing the opportunities: they really believed that they were meant to do more than fulfil the requirements of the readers, but to lead some kind of a mission. They felt themselves initiated, chosen for knowing the secrets that others were not allowed or prepared or able to know. The occult, the mysterious, the unexplainable was the borderline which divided the masses from them, the ones chosen for the mission.

[6] Roger Chartier, *The Cultural Uses of Print in Early Modern France* tr. by Lydia G. Cochrane (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), especially pages 145-182.
[7] Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning. From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1980.) 2.

Already in the 1960s Frances Yates drew the attention of scholars to the fact that the Florentine Neoplatonist philosophers did not focus exclusively on the sublime philosophy of Plato and other authorities of the same importance; a further and similarly intriguing source of their ideology was the Hermetic corpus, a late Hellenistic written tradition, a collection of occult and obscure writings.

The word "occult" has the meaning of something hidden, not available for everyone, but the wise and virtuous: as Matthew said, "Do not give dogs what is holy, and do not throw your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under foot and turn to attack you."[8]

In the time when astrology and the various branches of divinatory arts still played an exceptional role in everyday life, the figure of the solitary scientist-magus, isolated from the others since he was in possession of a higher knowledge, could intrigue people more effectively. The nature of a secret consists in the constant curiosity it causes: the singular secrets of nature, furthermore, are the steps that lead to the final, ultimate secret, that is, life. One in possession of the knowledge of the hidden, the occult could sense a more intimate relation to the divine. The "new intellectual" engaged in the eager search for secrets while not having the institutional background could easily get in trouble: the accusation of heresy was something that Paracelsus, Agrippa, Della Porta, or even Campanella and Bruno were familiar with.

Their ideas in fact often fell between various categories or lay at the edge of various discipline, occupying a queer liminal[9] or marginal zone: the one between faith and heresy, between science and magic or superstition, old and new, ancient and modern, absolute nonsense and sensational novelty. The diversity of the sources they could reach back to, and those they could make their own, was very intriguing: a good

[8] Gospel of Matthew, 7:6

and wise choice could make someone famous and widely accepted, while a bad or ill-considered step could exclude one from the scholarly community forever, even earning one the title of "sorcerer," "magus," or "witch-master." Thus the reader who decides to study them has to be very cautious with the labels that are so easy to apply: one must not think in terms of science and superstition in the modern sense of these words, because there was a complicated nexus and interaction between the most different fields of knowledge: alchemy was the forerunner of today's chemistry; the study of humours was not so very far from later (and still accepted) theories on the blood or on the brain; astronomy and astrology were not two separate branches.

Since it is always easier to approach an epoch through the life and work of a characteristic individual, this paper will focus on a very enigmatic and controversial figure of the Italian Renaissance, one whose life and works reflect faithfully the problems and difficulties a scholar in sixteenth-century Italy had to face. Such a one is Gerolamo Cardano,[10] whose worth is estimated by a respectable authority in the following:

> It seems to me that knowledge exerts magic that is comprehensible only to those who have been seized by it. I am not only referring to factual knowledge which is not concerned with the powers of reasoning, but rather that kind of

[9] The term "liminal status" and "liminality" was introduced by Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process. Structure and Anti-Structure* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977), see especially pages 94-130.

[10] Gerolamo Cardano was born in the year 1501 in Pavia. He graduated in Medicine and Arts at the age of 25 at the university of Padua, but his illegitimate birth impeded him from being accepted into the College of Physicians in Milan for many years, thus he could not practise his profession officially. He was a man of universal interests, who dealt with mathematics, moral and natural philosophy, and botany, contributing to each branch of science. In some of the cases he performed something really outstanding (in the field of mathematics, the demonstration of the method for the solution of cubic equations, or a special suspension, designed for the carriage of the Emperor Charles V, the so-called "joint" of Cardano), while in other cases his role is not easy to define. There is, furthermore, a growing interest shown towards the works of Cardano: from year to year there is someone who aims at exploring one of the numerous fields of knowledge he was involved in. In relation to his medicine, see Nancy G. Siraisi, *The Clock and the Mirror: Girolamo Cardano and Renaissance Medicine* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997); on his astrology Anthony Grafton, *Cardano's Cosmos: The Worlds and Works of a Renaissance Astrologer* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999). There are also great collections of articles on his work, such as Eckhard Keßler, ed. *Girolamo Cardano: Philosoph, Naturforscher, Arzt* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1994); M. Baldi and G. Canziani, eds. *Girolamo Cardano. Le opere, le fonti, la vita. Atti del convegno internazionale di studi, Milano 11-13 dicembre 1997* (Milan: Francoangeli, 1999).

> knowledge which Cardano possessed. He was a truly great man, despite his misconceptions. If not for them, he would have been unequalled.[11]

Leibniz's estimation is a high one; he is truly impressed. This is all the more interesting as it is not simply a comment from one mathematician-philosopher (famous for his work on calculus) on another – Leibniz is not referring to Cardano's mathematical skills, but to something more occult, something very unlike Leibniz's own rationalist philosophy. Still he remains impressed. And yet he states that Cardano had misconceptions. In this thesis, I shall attempt not to trace and castigate those misconceptions, with the dubious benefit of five hundred-odd years of hindsight, but rather approach the question of Cardano's beliefs through his individual career. Individual, that is, in at least three senses: particular, solitary, and not a little eccentric. This is important: Cardano was self-consciously isolated, and indeed took an odd melancholy pride in this. That confluence of pride and melancholy (not pride *in* melancholy) was both his reaction to his status and (or at least so he believed) its root cause.

In the following, I intend to examine the means and modes this particular scholar used for the various purposes one needed to reach in order to acquire fame and earn a livelihood in the scholarly world. The research will focus mainly on the traditions which indicated a possible connection between physiological phenomena and purely spiritual capacities, and the way some scholars utilised them to accentuate their uniqueness, or even to support by well-known authorities their claim to be chosen ones. Through the analysis of Cardano's efforts aiming at the creation of the

[11] "Die Wissenschaft und Gelehrsamkeit scheint dergleichen Anmut zu haben, die von Leuten, die sie niemals geschmeckt, nicht kann begriffen werden. Ich verstehe nicht ein bloßes historisches Wissen, ohne die Erkenntnis der Gründe; sondern ein solches Wissen, wie Cardan seines, der bei allen seinen Fehlern in der Tat ein großer Mann war: und ohne diese Fehler unvergleichlich würde gewesen sein," in Leibniz, *Theodicee Herrn Gottfried Wilhelms Freiherrn von Leibniz* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1996), 260. Translated by Helga Niman in Markus Fierz, *Girolamo Cardano 1501-1576. Physician,*

image of himself as a chosen one with special abilities, I will try to show how the raw market-forces challenged him and his fellow scholars to perform (or at least claim to do so) something outstanding and often astonishingly bold in the scientific world. First a brief overview of concepts and traditions present from the fifteenth to the end of the sixteenth century Italy will be provided in this thesis, then I turn to analyse the concrete case of Gerolamo Cardano, by proof-reading his autobiography and highlighting particular moments of his scientific works.

Natural Philosopher, Mathematician, Astrologer, and Interpreter of Dreams (Basle-Stuttgart: Birkhäuser, 1983), 175.

I. The Sources of Renaissance Self-Consciousness

> *Medium te mundi posui, ut circumspiceres inde comodius quicquid est in mundo. Nec te celestem neque terrenum, neque mortalem neque immortalem fecimus, ut tui ipsius quasi arbitrarius honorariusque plastes et fictor, in quam malueris tute formam effingas. Poteris in inferiora quae sunt bruta degenerare; poteris in superiora quae sunt divina ex tui animi sententia regenerari… O summam Dei patris liberalitatem, summam et admirandam hominis foelicitatem! Cui datum id habere quod optat, id esse quod velit.*
>
> Pico della Mirandola, *Oratio de Dignitate Hominis*[12]

I. *Centrality of Man in the Hermetic Texts*

The words above, taken from Pico's *On the Dignity of Man*, reflect very faithfully the pride and self-consciousness which were so characteristic of the Renaissance ideal of man. This is an image of a man who takes his destiny in his own hands: instead of being a passive subject of God's will, he becomes an active creator in his own right. *Magnum miraculum, o Asclepi, est homo!* – thus runs the favourite motto of the Florentine Neoplatonists, attributed to a certain Hermes (or Mercurius) Trimegistus ('Thrice-greatest'), the supposed author of various dialogues which – due to an error of dating – were considered contemporaneous to the revelation of Moses. The texts were brought to Italy by a Macedonian monk, and were immediately paid special attention, so much that Cosimo de' Medici ordered Marsilio Ficino to put Plato aside for a while and translate Trismegistus' work instead, because he wanted to read them before he died. The texts were divided into two major parts: the *Asclepius* (which has come down to us in Latin) and the *Pimander* (or *Corpus Hermeticum*, which has survived in Greek).[13] Ficino was impressed first of all by the *Asclepius* concerning

[12] Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *De dignitate hominis*, Eugenio Garin, ed. (Florence: Vallecchi, 1942).

[13] On the reception of the magical elements of the Hermetic tradition in the Renaissance, apart from Yates, see Lynn Thorndike, *History of Magic and Experimental Science* (8 vols.) (New York: Columbia University Press, 1923-1958).

two points.[14] One was the part that accentuated man's centrality in the universe, his power, his importance, his potential greatness. The other one was the idea that man himself can become a creator. These are ideas[15] that – according to György Endre Szőnyi – can easily be considered as the framework of the theory of *exaltatio*, the magical process of man's re-divinization.

The Renaissance Italian Neoplatonists argued – as opposed to the medieval understanding, which imagined ascension of the soul towards the celestial realm only after the individual's terrestrial career – that it is possible here on earth to reach the ancient state of innocence, which characterised men before the Fall. Ficino believed that some men are chosen ones, with the capacity to take their destiny in their own hands, to reach the state of perfection and to share in omnipotence and omniscience with God. "The Mind in men is God, and for this cause some of mankind are gods, and their humanity is nigh unto divinity."[16]

What are the features of these chosen ones? How can someone approximate to this ideal state of mind? The questions of the criteria to be satisfied in order to be recognised as a chosen one were very important. The Italian Neoplatonists – following their favourite Plato in this regard, too – all agree that purity of the soul is a basic requirement, just as is the study of divine things. This, then, accounts for the status of the chosen one – it explains how such a status may be attained, consciously and with effort, and it also explains why it is that some individuals may naturally approximate to such a condition. However, it does not answer a more prosaic

[14] György Endre Szőnyi, '*Exaltatio' és hatalom. Keresztény mágia és okkult szimbolizmus egy angol mágus műveiben* (Exaltation and Power. Christian Magic and Occult Symbolism in the Works of a Renaissance Magus) (Szeged: JatePress, 1998), 102.

[15] It is true, however, that there are some parts in the Hermetic corpus which represent a negative attitude toward humanity and the cosmos. The dialogue entitled *In God Alone is Good and Elsewhere Nowhere*, for instance, is a reminder that these documents are relics of a diverse and not necessarily consistent school of thought. On the distinction between positive and negative gnosis, see Frances Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, 22.

[16] *Corpus Hermeticum*, XII. 'About the Common Mind', 1, translated by G. R. S. Mead.

epistemological – and indeed social – question: how is such a status to be verified empirically? How is it to be recognised? Is it – to use a more modern term – veridical?

In some cases the chosen one was recognisable by physical features and unusual behaviour, too: a look always fixed on the ground, constant meditation over the greatest questions of life and death, isolation from the rest of the world, and so on. With the physical and psychological description of the chosen one, we are now entering a rather unusual field of particular interest from the point of view of this research.

II. *Melancholy, Genius, Divination*

There is a direct reference to the Hermetic texts and their influence in the Renaissance, and especially in the Florentine Neoplatonic circle whose greatest exponents were Marsilio Ficino and Giovanni Pico della Mirandola. It is no secret that they used those sources openly, by quoting them and utilising their ideas in their own work; however, as I have mentioned, there is also the tradition of melancholy,[17] a more elusive set of principles and criteria, which served for Renaissance scholars – and now I even have to narrow down the research basically to Italy – as justification for the consciousness of their position, both as central to the cosmos and as aware of their centrality.

We have seen that science and spiritual purity were considered to be means of bringing some chosen ones closer to divinity, or even raise man from the terrestrial to

[17] Concerning the part on the history of melancholy, I am heavily indebted to the great book of Raymond Klibansky, Erwin Panofsky and Fritz Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy. Studies in the History of Natural Philosophy, Religion and Art* (London: Nelson, 1964).

the celestial realm in the earthly life, by means of the Platonic frenzies,[18] and magic as an alternative.

Nevertheless, these are means that could be – at least theoretically – appropriated by anyone meeting certain preliminary conditions (purity of the soul and devotion to science, for instance). In this tradition man has an emphatically elective role: he is presented with the choice to reach to a higher level, to approach the most-desired perfection, the absolute knowledge, while he is also granted the possibility to leave all these things out of consideration, to live happily (or not) under the circumstances given him by God. In the course of the following pages we will see that the tradition of melancholy implies a completely non-elective way of reaching a higher state of mind, a gift or a burden (depending on the point of view and the interpretation in different epochs and scientific circles, as we shall see later) that one is provided with by nature. However, even a non-elective feature, such as the melancholy character, could contribute to the creation of an image of the chosen one in the Renaissance, if someone found adequate sources to rely on and refer to as authority in that respect.

1. *The Ancient Greek Tradition of Melancholy*

Διὰ τί πάντες ὅσοι περιττοὶ γεγόνασιν ἄνδρες ἢ κατὰ φιλοσοφίαν ἢ πολιτικὴν ἢ ποίησιν ἢ τέχνας φαίνονται μελαγχολικοὶ ὄντες; – Thus runs the very important question of pseudo-Aristotle[19] in his *Problemata Physica* (953a).[20] The term

[18] Plato describes four different frenzies in his *Symposion*: (1) religious frenzy, (2) prophetic frenzy, (3) frenzy of love, and (4) poetic frenzy. While the first two types imply a rather passive attitude, the latter two suggest a more active participation on the part of the subject.

[19] In fact it derives most probably from Theophrastus (Greek peripatetic philosopher, the favourite pupil of Aristotle and his immediate successor in the leadership of the Lyceum), the author who – according to Diogenes Laertius – first wrote a book on melancholy. That book was lost, and public opinion from Antiquity onwards attributed this work to Aristotle. The author is very often referred to as pseudo-Aristotle.

'melancholy' derives from μέλαινα χολή ('black bile') which was not considered something belonging exclusively to the body: on the contrary, it originated from the body but was transferred to the spiritual realm and to the whole cosmos.[21] This treatise of pseudo-Aristotle represents the first instance when melancholy, a physical symptom of an excess of black bile, is linked to the abstractions of singularity and excellence, and this idea, very interestingly, both became extremely popular in the eyes of posterity and provoked constant controversies among scholars, philosophers, physicians.

In the fifth century BC, in his *De Natura Hominis*,[22] Hippocrates describes the four humours and makes them responsible for the person's health, accentuating the importance of the κρασία ('mixture') of those humours. Even he agreed that melancholy in itself is not an illness,[23] but becomes that only in case of δυσκρασία ('bad mixture'). In fact, the origin is purely physical,[24] while the consequence is far more spiritual or psychological.

Indeed, according to Hippocrates, melancholy is the result of a certain slip in the usual order of the universe, since on the basis of the cosmocentric attitude of the Greeks, man as the microcosm was an organic part of the macrocosm, not something

[20] The passage on melancholy is quoted entirely in Greek by Klibansky, Panofsky and Saxl. Here, as elsewhere in this paper, I shall refer to the Italian translation of the English original, *Saturno e la melanconia* (Turin: Einaudi, 1983), tr. by Renzo Federici, in lack of the original, 21 – 23.

[21] For a better understanding of interdependence between man and cosmos the book of Klibansky, Panofsky and Saxl provide a brief summary of three basic principles of the Greeks). Throughout the combination, in fact, of a need (1) to trace the apparently complex structure of the macrocosm and the microcosm back to primary and simple elements, (2) to find a numerical expression for this complex corporeal and spiritual system, and finally (3) to place all the phenomena in the framework of harmony, symmetry, and isonomy, one could more easily grasp the importance of the characterisation of man by four primary humours.

[22] *Corpus Hippocraticum*, E. Littré, ed. (Paris, 1839-1861).

[23] Around the fourth century BC we find the illness called "melancholy" to be characterised by essentially psychological alterations in a wide range, from a simple fear or phobia throughout misanthropy until depression and madness. Due to the influence of the notion of madness and that of the fury, melancholy slowly became the illness of the heroes, as is shown in the text of pseudo-Aristotle, too. Klibansky - Panofsky - Saxl, *Saturno e la melanconia*, 19.

standing in contrast to it,[25] and so in consequence any kind of change occurring in the order of one substantially affected the other as well. Therefore the melancholic individual was seen as someone who does not obey the laws of the cosmos or those of his own inseparable destiny. The Greeks used the expression ἐξισταμένοι to describe the melancholy character, a term which indicates 'those who surpass themselves.'

The interpretation of pseudo-Aristotle was much more spiritual and had an extremely strong influence upon the attitude of Renaissance scholars[26] to the same question, as we shall see later on. According to the author of the *Problems*, melancholy was a higher state, in which the "sick" person, despite his condition (or because of it) is nonetheless able to create durable, fascinating works also. He explains their unstable temperament as being due to the changeability of the temperature of the black bile: it can vary considerably, and it is a certain mixture moderately heated which can lead to extraordinary accomplishments in the arts or in statesmanship. Melancholy enables those who take part of it to transcend the ordinary boundaries of human destiny, although only in case its temperature is acceptable, not too high, but not even too low. Thus, the melancholic is characterised by the idiopathic dichotomy of oscillation between average and extreme. According to the actual temperature of the black bile, he can be like any other member of the community, or conversely can perform something outstanding.

[24] Diet was considered to be responsible for the introduction of various substances in the body: some of them were utilised, while others were indigestible. These latter substances were the "surplus humours" (with the exception of blood), the ones that formed the four substantial humours.

[25] In Theophrastus we find, for instance, that man and universe derive from the same primary elements, therefore, there is unity between them, the macrocosm and the microcosm. Klibansky - Panofsky - Saxl, *Saturno e la melanconia*, 10.

[26] The connection between melancholy, genius and divination is quite a well-studied field of research. The most important books on melancholy in general, and this aspect in particluar, apart from the book written by Klibansky, Panofsky, and Saxl, are the following: Winfried Schleiner, *Melancholy, Genius, and Utopia in the Renaissance* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1991), Wolf Lepenies, *Melancholie und Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1969), Hellmut Flashar, *Melancholie und Melancholiker in den medizinischen Theorien der Antike* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1966), and Hubertus Tellenbach,

It is precisely the dichotomy, which makes the melancholic surpass limits all the time, and inspires him to create great works. Pseudo-Aristotle refers to Bellerophon, Hercules, Empedocles, Plato and Socrates as famous examples of the melancholy character. The first two are mythological figures, who both, while being human, have something divine in them, too. This is an ambiguity that gives them a liminal status: they dwell in between the two realms, not belonging completely to either of the two, and later on they are both taken over by a kind of madness. After having completed so many great works, Bellerophon becomes loathsome to the gods because he starts to think he is one of them, while Hercules, after having been introduced to the mysteries of Eleusis, goes mad and kills his own family. The madness of the heroes Hercules and Bellerophon was a consequence of their singularity, and their particularity is due to the fact that they have inside them the possibility of becoming mad, outsiders. This is the first time when the cluster of concepts all concentrated in one precise term, melancholy, becomes related to madness, too. The sequence of thoughts and ideas is not finished, since more and more is added to this in the course of the interpretation that follows. Madness, represented in Greek mythology by the goddess Lyssa,[27] is connected with the night and the darkness, the realm of invisible things, and thus in consequence even to the world of dreams.

Just like the night that makes invisible things visible, dreams were also considered means by which the hidden rises to the surface. In his *De divinatione per*

Melancholie: Problemgeschichte, Endogenität, Typologie, Pathogenese, Klinik (Berlin: Springer, 1974).

[27] The name of the goddess requires an etymological explanation. The Greek term ἡ λύσσα has the primary meaning of 'fury' or 'rage' (in Homer it is always a martial rage), after Homer, it stands for 'raging madness', 'frenzy,' such as was caused by the gods (for example that of Orestes, or of the Bacchants).

somnium,[28] Aristotle says that during the night-dream deep truths reveal themselves to the dreamer, since it makes possible the vision of things otherwise invisible, which implies that it helps divination, too. Here we have a new member in the conceptual set of melancholy, namely divination.

Certainly not the whole ancient Greek tradition shared the same enthusiasm for melancholy. Plato himself, mentioned by pseudo-Aristotle as an example for genial melancholy, put that phenomenon in contrast to divine frenzy (μανία or *mania*), saying that melancholy was a kind of madness (but not *mania*) that chained man to earth, to the terrestrial realm, while he saw the *mania* as enabling man to enter the celestial, divine realm. (In fact, the divine frenzy was one of the five channels, including magic, which provided man the possibility to ascend to the celestial realm). However, pseudo-Aristotle managed to resolve this dichotomy, uniting the metaphysical features of Platonic mania with the psychological characteristics of melancholy: he made a distinction between pathological and natural melancholy. While the first appeared to be a temporary and qualitative alteration of the humour, which provoked different illnesses, the second seemed to be a constitutional and quantitative prevalence of the black bile over the other humours in the body. The one who was provided such a natural melancholy was considered to have an entirely particular ἔθος (which means 'ethos,' custom or habit) even in state of perfect health. This approach made the melancholic individual fundamentally and completely different from the masses, the normal people.[29]

We have seen so far how different concepts are brought together in a systematic view of the whole universe, including man as an organic part of it. However, we can go further if we follow the Greeks and add new elements to this

[28] In *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, Richard McKeon, ed. (New York: Random House, 1941).

conceptual sphere. According to pseudo-Aristotle the melancholic is able to foretell the future with amazing precision and reliability, and in his juvenilia[30] Aristotle connected it with dreaming, too. Thus it is asserted in fact that the ability to foresee the future is very much related to the melancholy temperament, and this is even more obvious in the case of dream-divination since dreaming is a state in which the dreamer is closer to the secrets, the invisible truth.

The seer is beyond time and space as he moves freely between present and future, here and now, there and then. He always focuses on truth: since he is beyond the concept of time and space, he does not depend on changing views and illusionary beliefs. The figure of the seer is always a chosen one by the gods. Plato says[31] that the ability of divination is given by gods in the form of the divine frenzy, the above mentioned mania: the power which raises the seer into the celestial sphere. The inscription of the oracle of Delphi (Γνῶθι σεαυτὸν, "Know yourself") testifies to the belief that the greatest seer is the one who sees the present, reveals what we, at the moment, have inside us. That is what mysteries were made for: they reveal some truth to the chosen ones, very often making them aware of the triviality and futility of terrestrial life – the parallel to Plato's and indirectly to Socrates' view on the vanity of earthly life compared to that after the body's death is striking. While they were still mortal beings, the initiates realised that they no longer belonged to mortal life, as they knew what most other people did not, and, conversely, this knowledge in this life excluded them from the divine sphere too.

Not being able to share with the others what he knows, the melancholic becomes silent and introverted, neglected by the rest of the community or the society.

[29] Klibansky - Panofsky - Saxl, *Saturno e la melanconia*, 29.
[30] Aristotle, *De divinatione per somnum* (pages 626-630); *De somniis* (pages 618-625), in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, Richard McKeon, ed. (New York: Random House, 1941).
[31] Plato, *Phaedrus*, 244a-245c.

Their silence is a requirement on the one hand that comes from the outside; on the other, it soon becomes an internal demand, too. This provoked partly envy, partly despite from the non-melancholic outsider. The others usually tried to tame melancholy by labelling it a simple, curable illness, a characteristic of the average man (a tendency very characteristic of the Middle Ages).[32] Furthermore, the melancholics are very often misanthropes because they despise those who still live in ignorance. According to Plato, in fact, when the soul reaches to the state of knowledge, it becomes perfect, and the rest of the time it spends in the truth among the gods.[33]

Traditionally the melancholic's planet is Saturn: in Orphic theology, Cronos has prophetic abilities, he is a πρόμαντις ("soothsayer") who reveals the secrets of being, while Romans associated Saturn directly with melancholy, calling this planet the 'midnight sun.' The view that those who are able to prophesy and know the esoteric rituals of the mysteries were born under Saturn[34] was widely disseminated in the Hellenistic period.

Over the course of the centuries the organic unity of the cosmos had been broken and turned into something completely different: the cosmos and the individual were no longer seen as forming an organic unity in which they interacted in mutual co-dependence, but they were seen as diametrically opposed points in a chain of being. The organic interdependence turned into a system of correspondences, and the vague ideas concerning the four humours were elaborated into a system where every single man could be described as a melancholy, sanguine, choleric or phlegmatic

[32] There are numerous correlatives also in Renaissance context, such as *A Treatise on Melancholy* of Timothie Bright (London, 1586), which is almost entirely a medical treatise on the physiological symptoms of melancholy that provides detailed regimen in order to cure the patient suffering from an excess of black bile.
[33] Plato, *Phaedrus*, 249c-d

character. With this transformation in the history of a concept, we have arrived at the Middle Ages.

2. *The Middle Ages and a Different Attitude to the Same Question*

The medieval understanding of the humours was completely different from the Renaissance Neoplatonist one: the humours of the man before the Fall were seen as having been mingled after the Fall, and in consequence the four temperaments are four different manifestations of the same sin. There is no man without temperament and there is no temperament without sin.[35] Melancholy was a sin or a disease whose subject excluded himself from the community and the society. Thus the primary concern of some medieval authors, such as Avicenna (see the quotation below) was to establish an intricate network of kinds of melancholy in which every single individual could be fitted, while others dealt with the possible medication of the patient suffering from an excess of black bile.[36]

The question, whether a perfect, a completely balanced temperament was possible, engrossed the attention of medieval scholars above all, although they seemed to agree that this *temperies* was a privilege of Christ and no human being was destined to reach that perfection after him.[37] Furthermore, the *studium vehemens*, too

[34] See the book of Rudolf and Margot Wittkower, *Born under Saturn. The Character and Conduct of Artist* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1963).

[35] In the preface to the eighth book of her *Subtilitatum diversarum naturarum creaturarum libri novem* (*Patrologia Latina*, vol. 197) Saint Hildegard of Bingen says that all creatures were good before Adam's fall. After Abel's blood stained the soil, noxious humours arose.

[36] Gentile da Foligno, in his *Consilia* (commentaries on the Canon of Avicenna, written most probably between 1338 and 1340, in Muratori, ed. *Scriptores Rerum Italicarum* XVI and XXIV), for instance, describes cases of brain desease, and brings forth melancholy as an example for it, while Michele Savonarola (1384-1466) in the *De decorandis Ferrariensibus*, states that every artist appears to be a little bit bizarre, thus he is a forerunner of the modern idea that relates the artistic temperament to genius and insanity.

[37] Alfonso Ingegno, "Cardano e Bruno. Altri spunti per una storia dell'*uomo perfetto*," in Eckhardt Kessler, ed., *Girolamo Cardano: Philosoph, Naturforscher, Arzt* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1994), 78; Ingegno reminds the reader that Petrus Abanus, in his *Conciliator* (Pietro d'Abano, *Conciliator: Ristampa fotomeccanica dell'edizione Venetiis apud Iuntas 1565*, Ezio Riondato, Luigi Olivvieri, eds. Padua, 1985), for the first time suggests a relation between the miracles of Christ and the doctrine of a

much intense study and effort, was considered the origin of melancholy: in fact, while in both Antiquity and in the Renaissance again knowledge was one of the means by which man could ascend to divinity, in the centuries that intervened theology was the only official way to enquire the fate.

The medieval melancholic was seen as someone who retreats into the depths of his own soul; one who builds up the world from himself and creates a God from his own efforts – a God which is not the God of anyone but the one who created it. There is of course a sin inherent in this solipsism: the sin of *acedia*, since the melancholic thus turns away from both God and the universe which God has created as good.[38] The melancholic is thus estranged from God's grace and communion with his fellow creatures. As mysterious the world is for him, so does the world find him mysterious.[39] In Christianity it is the faith that brings the man to redemption, but this faith has its very precise subject, it is καθολικός , general, the same for everyone. The way to redemption in the eyes of the melancholic is far too simplified and finite, due to the fact that all the believers, average people and highly cultivated *litterati*, share the same mysteries: Catholicism is a common act. The melancholic realises that the way only leads to one single end, and is desperately trying to widen the dimensions of his microcosm. It leads to solitude, which in fact was considered in the Middle Ages as an estrangement from divine grace.

perfect temperament, claiming however that the presence in him of some elements of melancholy (his *tristitia*, for example) was in striking contrast to the possibility of it.

[38] A more recent authority on melancholy, the philosopher and psychologist Julia Kristeva, characterises the depressed person as "a radical, sullen atheist." Kristeva, *Black Sun. Depression and Melancholia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 5.

[39] Albertus Magnus links the melancholy character to the figure of the saint and the prophet, gifted ones who have a great sharpness of mind, since their perception is not disturbed by mundane thoughts and influences. See Marta Fattori, "Sogni e temperamenti," in Tullio Gregory, ed. *I Sogni nel Medioevo* (Rome: Edizioni dell'Ateneo, 1985), 100.

Melancholy indeed, apart from being a sin, was also treated as a mental illness: Avicenna[40] said that it was the devil that painted the bile black.[41] The medieval melancholic does not feel any progress either in time or in space, but stays in one place hesitating all the time. This is why his figure became characterised very often by sloth ('sloth' being the most common – if inaccurate translation of acedia in English lists of the seven deadly sins), passivity, and lack of interest in worldly matters ("the devil makes work for idle hands").

Nevertheless we have to admit that the understanding of melancholy in the Middle Ages was far from being categorically negative: there are many examples when it is related to special abilities, such as an extraordinary disposition for visions and dreams.[42] In fact, the *complexio melancholica* was characterised as especially adequate for the reception of veracious dreams.[43]

3. *The Melancholy of Renaissance; The Renaissance of Melancholy*

So far, I have attempted to find the reason for the popularity of the hermetic texts and I have indicated the possibility of their interpretation as justifications for the self-consciousness of Renaissance scholars. Summarising the history of and the attitude to the conceptual sphere of melancholy, I intend to give a brief overview of an idea that had a great effect on the Italian Neoplatonic and Humanist circles.

[40] Avicenna summarises the characteristics of the four substantial humours in the following way: "Et dicimus quod cholera nigra faciens melancholiam, cum est cum sanguine, est cum gaudio et risu et non concomitatur ipsam tristitia vehemens. Si autem est cum phlegmate est cum pigritia et paucitate motus et quiete. Et si est cum cholera, vel ex cholera est cum agitatione et aliquali daemonio et est similis maniae. Et si fuerit cholera nigra pura, tunc cogitatio in ipsa erit plurima et agitatio furiositas erit minus: nisi moveatur et rixetur et habeat odium curius non obliviscitur." Avicenna, *Liber canonis* (Venice, 1555), III, I, 4, 19.

[41] The black bile was also called "balneum diaboli," 'bath of the devil'.

[42] The commentary on the *De divinatione per somnum* of Aristotle by Averroës, for example says: "Et quidam homines sunt verioris somnii, quam quidam, propter diversitatem eorum in hac virtute imaginativa: et isti sunt habentes complexiones melancholicas frigidas et siccas. Humiditas enim cooperit virtutes et oppilat vias spirituum et facit somnium simile morti, ita quod fere nihil imaginatur dormiens." *De divinatione per somnum*, *Opera omnia* (Venice, 1562), VI, 2, 36-37.

[43] The *Oneirocriticon* of Muhammad Ibn Sirin (recently translated into Italian with the title *Il libro del sogno veritiero* (Turin: Einaudi, 1992), which enjoyed a great popularity in the course of the

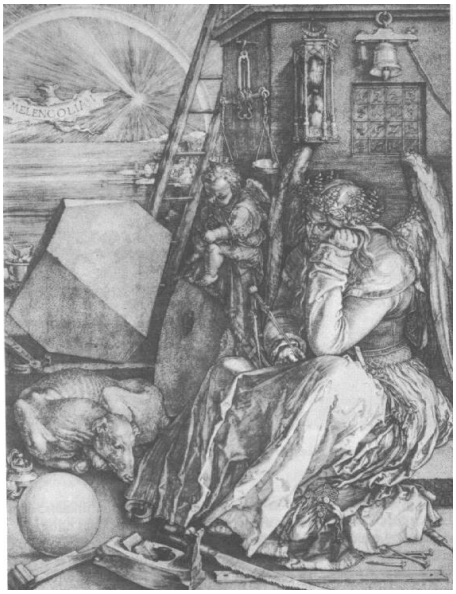

Figure 1 The image above is an engraving of Albrecht Dürer, which contains all the iconographic accessories of the representation of melancholy. The ball, for instance, indicates the insecurity of the melancholic, while the *Mensula Iovis* was believed to cure that strange "illness."

Let us now examine the perception of the concept of melancholy in the Renaissance where it gains new features. The greatest exponents of the Florentine Neoplatonic school, such as Ficino and Pico della Mirandola, were also very interested in the problem of characters, and especially the melancholy temperament. They knew the ancient Greek tradition of pseudo-Aristotle and the medical treatises of Hippocrates and Galen and were more than conscious about the importance of these.

A new interpretation was born to the same concept in the course of the period between the fifteenth and the seventeenth century, fashioned to the taste and requirements of the epoch. It was rather a reformulation of the pseudo-Aristotelian thesis, which adorned the melancholic with special abilities, such as the ability to foretell the future and to create or perform extraordinary works. This was most acceptable to Ficino, too, because in developing the original theory he could find

Renaissance as well, was translated for the first time into Latin by Leo Tuscus in 1175, and this is the period when the first translation of the *Problemata* of pseudo-Aristotle was made.

another justification for the claim that man is not a passive but an absolutely active participant in the chain of events.

Ficino argued that by using his capacities and making efforts man is able to surpass the boundaries of the ordinary and enter the sublime, widening the dimension of the world. The melancholic, according to him, is ambiguous and dynamic, demented and sane, enthusiastic and depressed at the same time. He is responsible for his own destiny, able to control and change it. The reason for his solitude is due to a choice: he has chosen to know more than is usual. Even if the others take him for a fool and leave him alone, this is to be seen as a reasonable price to pay, and indeed the melancholic sees himself as the balanced and ordinary one.

In the interpretation of the Ficinian school the Platonic metaphysical view of *mania* is combined with the pseudo-Aristotelian, mainly naturalistic attitude to melancholy. The *litterati,* primarily philosophers, are particularly subject to melancholy, because the philosopher has to sever his mind from the external motions of the body and bring it closer to God, making it an instrument of the divine, *Unde divinis influxibus oraculisque ex alto repletus, nova quaedam inusitataque semper excogitat, et futura praedicit*.[44] Ficino himself was a melancholic, which he explains through the constellation of the planets at his birth, "Saturn seems to have impressed the seal of melancholy on me from the beginning... But Venus in Libra and Jupiter in Cancer have, perhaps, offered some resistance to this melancholy nature."[45] On the basis of the passages just quoted we can see how ambiguous was the interpretation of the melancholy temperament in Ficinian thought, but, even if his idea of black bile was the most influential one in the Renaissance, views on the ability of the

[44] Marsilio Ficino, *Three Books on Life*, Carol V. Kaske and John R. Clark, eds. and tr. (Tempe, AZ: The Renaissance Society of America, 1998), Book One, VII, 123.

melancholic to foresee and foretell the future could find strong support in other authors, too.[46]

The figure of Cornelius Agrippa of Nettesheim, the disciple of Trithemius, is best known as the author of *De occulta philosophia*,[47] a juvenile compendium of occult wisdom of his time, in which he also deals with the interrelations of melancholy, genius, divination and even demons. He makes a clear distinction between good and bad melancholy: the good melancholy is that which – after having reached the right temperature – incites man to a fury leading to insight and divination (like Ficino he believes that this could happen only under the influence of certain favourable planetary constellations, namely that of Saturn), while the harmful melancholy attracts only bad spirits (*mali daemones*).[48]

"Moreover, since [Saturn] himself is the author of the mysterious contemplation, not given to public dealing, the highest of the planets, he first recalls the soul from offices to its core, then has it ascend from lower matters, leading it to the highest, and grants it the sciences and the foreknowledge of the future."[49] This passage bridges the gap between the two criteria on the basis of which I studied the possible sources (that is to say, Hermetic texts and the interpretations of melancholy) of the self-consciousness of Renaissance scholars. Agrippa indeed points out the possibility of the ascension of the soul, even if he makes Saturn responsible for that.

[45] Letter of Marsilio Ficino to Giovanni Cavalcanti in *The Letters of Marsilio Ficino*. Tr. by members of the Language Department of the School of Economic Science (London: Shepheard-Walwyn, 1978) (2 vols.).

[46] Certainly, not all Renaissance thinkers considered melancholy to be "the most desirable temperament." According to Schleiner, the example of Celso Mancini, in his *De somniis ac Synesi per somnia, De risu ac ridiculis, Synaugia Platonica* (Ferrara: Baldini, 1591), for instance, shows that in the late sixteenth century "it was no longer possible to expound at length the melancholic's outstanding abilities of foresight and divination without taking into account an increasing opposition to this view," 39. Indeed, later on the critical approach, mainly clerical, to the question of genial melancholy transformed "the most desirable temperament" into the "humor pessimus."

[47] Cornelius Agrippa von Nettesheim, *De occulta philosophia libri 3* (Cologne: J. Stoer 1533).

[48] Schleiner, *Melancholy, Genius, and Utopia in the Renaissance*, 26.

[49] I use Schleiner's translations of Agrippa, in *Melancholy, Genius, and Utopia in the Renaissance*, 26

This was not contrary at all to the idea of *exaltatio* taken from the Hermetic corpus, but was a very useful completion, necessary for the sake of it for the sake of the sublime theory of the "chosen ones."

We have now sketched out the history of ideas concerning melancholy and transcendence of this world, and seen that from the ideas of Antiquity and Hermetism to those of Renaissance Neoplatonism there is a certain correspondence, a circle.

Given some preliminary conditions (being born under Saturn, the highest of the planets, and having a melancholy character, possessing a certain purity of the soul and yearning for the contemplation of celestial beauty by ascending to God, being familiar with the means that make the ascension possible, such as the furies and the magical practices) one can enter the higher spheres (carried away by the divine frenzy, receiving revelation by dreams or in other mystical ways) and foresee the future. This all could happen due to the immense goodness of God: it is true that His love, providence and grace concern all, but there are some chosen ones[50] particularly dear to Him whom He finds worthy of sharing some of His secrets with.

4. *Gerolamo Cardano: A Case Study of a Chosen One?*

Within the framework of the conceptual sphere of selectness I intend to examine Gerolamo Cardano's attitude to and interpretation of the single ideas contained in the the term "melancholy": his understanding of the role of dreams and good demons (*daimon*s) as intermediaries between the terrestrial and the celestial realms, his solitude, volunteer or not, the extraordinary intelligence he claimed to possess.

[50] There is evidence in Aristotle, too, for the obvious relation between God-sent gifts, such as dreams and selectness: "For, in addition to its further unreasonableness, it is absurd to combine the idea that the sender of such dreams should be God with the fact that those to whom he sends them are not the best and wisest, but merely commonplace persons." *De divinatione per somnum*, in Richard McKeon, ed. *The Basic Works of Aristotle* (New York: Random House, 1941) 462b, 626.

In my understanding he considered himself a chosen one with special abilities in foreseeing the future, one who was particularly dear to God as proven by the fact that he received admonitions and information in a great variety of forms regarding the future (the future of his family and himself, almost exclusively).

The sources for my research are of two different kinds: on the one hand I shall study the *De propria vita,* which I consider the non-scientific formulation of the author's ideas and which is full of miraculous stories all accentuating Cardano's centrality in his *microcosmos*, while on the other I shall try to find the passages that refer to the traditions of Hermetism and melancholy. There is written evidence that he agreed with pseudo-Aristotle concerning the ability of prediction attributed to the melancholic character, *Quod melancholici futura praevideant, innumeris confirmatur exemplis*[51] but it is not made clear whether he considered himself a melancholic, or even used melancholy as justification for his special abilities. The relation between melancholy, divination, genius, dreams, and *daimon*s is far too striking and the temptation to examine the work of one particular Renaissance scholar within this framework is far too great to resist.

[51] Gerolamo Cardano, *Paralipomenon*, *Opera omnia* X, 462.

II. Image of the Self in the Autobiography

In the previous chapter I provided a brief summary and overview of the concepts which lay behind the very concise term "melancholy." The idea of a nexus between melancholy and genius, the gift of divination in relation to the character determined by an excess of black bile, became a crucial topic, which divided Renaissance thinkers. My argument in the previous chapter was that there were some written sources (the *Corpus Hermeticum*) and traditions (that of melancholy, first of all) that some Renaissance scholars (Marsilio Ficino and Pico della Mirandola, to mention only the greatest exponents of Florentine Neoplatonism) used as justifications for their claim to be the centre of the universe, chosen ones ready to ascend to the divine realm before the end of their terrestrial career. Besides this Neoplatonic idea, we find further examples of the very characteristic self-consciousness in the early modern period, but the best way to shed light on this particular aspect is to take a concrete example, an enigmatic and symbolic figure whose personality and ideology will serve as a case study.

Gerolamo Cardano was a very prolific writer, a fertile mind whose various writings on the most diverse topics fill ten folio volumes, and yet the book that has always been the most widely read is undoubtedly the *De propria vita*, entitled the *umbelicus scriptorum* by the author himself.[52] Before entering upon a more profound analysis of this work, we should highlight the importance of the genre of self-narrative from the point of view of this research, dedicated to the very complex network of ideas contained in the term "melancholia," and which – in the hands of an expert – can be transformed into a means of self-fashioning.

Traditionally – on the condition that we accept John Freccero's statement – the *Confessions* of Augustine "presented for the first time the literary self-creation of an individual seen both as object and as subject, with all of the contradictions that those aspects imply."[53] Although Freccero's article focuses mainly on confessional autobiographies (such as those of Augustine and Teresa of Avila), claiming that the autobiographical genre implies in a way "the death of the self as character and the resurrection of the self as author,"[54] some of the medieval confessional-literary patterns can be applied to late Renaissance, non-confessional self-narratives as well (such as the *Vita* of Benvenuto Cellini,[55] the *Diario* of Jacopo Pontormo,[56] or the *De vita propria* of Cardano). Some of these patterns are the following: the autobiography, which is a very specific genre,[57] implies a separation between the self as protagonist and the self as narrator (in Freccero's understanding, Augustine's *Confessions* can be formulated as "from *Augustinus* to *alter Augustinus*"[58]): the observing self is segregated from the observed. Furthermore, he argues that "every self-narrative is the extension of a moment of self-consciousness into a temporal sequence,"[59] a certain awakening, the beginning of a critical approach to one's own past and present. This consciousness, the self being aware of itself sometimes as totally other, this peculiar reduplication of it, is retraceable in autobiographies from

[52] Cardano, *De propria vita*, in *Opera omnia* (Lyons: Ravaud and Huguetan, 1663.) I, XLV, 43. There are reprint editions of these ten volumes of 1663: Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt, 1966, and New York, 1967.
[53] John Freccero, "Autobiography and Narrative," in T. C. Heller, M. Sosna, D. E. Wellbery, eds., *Reconstucting Individualism. Autonomy, Individuality, and the Self in Western Thought* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1986.), 16.
[54] Freccero, "Autobiography and Narrative," 16.
[55] *The Autobiography of Benvenuto Cellini*, J. A. Symonds, ed. (New York: Modern Library, s. a.).
[56] Jacopo da Pontormo, *Diario*, Roberto Fedi, ed. (Rome: Salerno, 1996).
[57] See Stefano Pittaluga, "L'autobiografia nell'Umanesimo," in *L'autobiografia nel Medioevo. Atti del convegno storico internazionale, Todi, 12-15 Ottobre 1997* (Spoleto: Centro Italiano di Strudi sull'Alto Medioevo, 1998).
[58] Freccero, "Autobiography and Narrative," 19.
[59] *Ibid*., 19.

Augustine through Petrarch[60] to Cardano, and even, to our own days, as something essential in this literary genre.

Petrarch – often seen by historians as the first Humanist and the first conscious melancholic – portrays himself in a manner following in the footsteps of Augustine, writing a "hagiography of the sinner": the portrait of himself as a sinner is essential for his characterising himself as unique.[61] This is the approach and the kind of conscious self-fashioning that in my opinion one can clearly notice in Cardano's *De propria vita*, as well.

The *De propria vita* was completed in 1576, in the year of the author's death. In his article,[62] Buck classifies the genre of autobiography in three categories on the basis of the author's motivation: (1) self-justification in the eyes of contemporaries and future generations; (2) fathoming the self in order to regulate one's life; (3) curiosity about one's self-realised individuality. Cardano's work is generally considered as belonging to the first group. The fact that Cardano wrote the *De propria vita* in his declining years (and it proved to be his last work, indeed) implies a certain synoptic, summarising approach on the part of the author to the events of his own life. The reader can suspect with good reason that this writing represents a last effort at justifying himself before contemporaries and for posterity, an attempt to show the world the author of hundreds of scientific works, the serious scholar, the well-known physician and mathematician, denuded, in his pure and feeble mortality. In fact, Cardano follows the Humanist tradition of self-narrative, but refuses to depict himself in the idealistic way, the way he should have been (rejecting thus the example of Marcus Aurelius); on the contrary, he portrays himself without any embellishment

[60] Petrarca, *Posteritati*, in *Prose* (Milan: Ricciardi, 1955).
[61] Freccero, "Autobiography and Narrative," 21.
[62] August Buck, "Girolamo Cardano's *De propria vita*," in *Studien zu Humanismus und Renaissance. Gesammelte Aufsätze aus den Jahren 1981-1990* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1991), 203.

(in this respect seeming to follow Suetonius).[63] However, while acknowledging his shortcomings (both physical and psychological), "this realisation remains of no consequence on his conduct. Without remorse he accepts the way he is."[64]

What is the reason for the great popularity of this book? First of all, it is full of the description of supernatural events, prophetic dreams, extraordinary visions, presentiments which all seemed to be extremely fascinating for readers both in the Renaissance and in our own times. The characteristic that made the *De propria vita* even more peculiar is the fact that Cardano does not seem to make any distinction between psychological and physical aspects: he treats body and self as elements inseparable from each other.[65] Being a physician, he subscribed to the fundamental significance of experience for the understanding of man and the world around him.[66] Furthermore, he sees himself as one of his patients, or as a case study: his own self represents a part of nature, and he collects retrospectively the many observations he has made during a long life, he is subject to his own thorough observations; he even reports his illnesses faithfully, which is also unique or at least very unusual in Humanist writing. In the following I will try to find examples of his conscious effort towards making, or building up, an image about himself: an image that shows a man full of pride and very much aware of his particularity. Let me use his own words for his description:

> *Scientia multarum rerum, itinera, pericula, munera quae exercui, conditiones oblatae, Principium amitia, fama, libri, miracula circa sanationes, et in aliis*

[63] *Ibid*., 205.
[64] *Ibid*., 205.
[65] Anne C. E. van Galen, in her article "Body and Self-Image in the *De propria vita* of Gerolamo Cardano," in Karl Enenkel, ed. *Modelling the Individual: Biography and Portrait in the Renaissance* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1998) argues that Cardano regards the physical as so much a substantial aspect of the self that we can almost say they are considered by him to be identical. She argues, furthermore, that Cardano applies Renaissance medical theory to the description of the self.
[66] Buck, "Girolamo Cardano's *De propria vita*," 206.

> *quae contigerunt, et res rarae pene supra naturam, Spiritus insuper, et cognitio splendoris.*[67]

I will try to show how the different concepts contained in the idea of melancholy have their correlatives, one by one, in Cardano's *De propria vita*. We have seen that according to the ancient Greek tradition of melancholy, and especially the *Problems* XXX, 1 of pseudo-Aristotle, the man characterised by the excess of black bile is often seen as belonging to neither of the two realms: neither to the human, nor to the divine. The melancholic surpasses all kinds of limits very often – this transgression is necessary to perform something outstanding. In the case of Gerolamo Cardano, his very birth involved a certain transgression of limits, since he was born in spite of many interventions aiming at abortion, and mournful portents:[68]

> *Tentatis, ut audivi, abortivis medicamentis frustra, ortus sum an. M. D. VIII. Calend. Octobris, hora noctis prima non exacta*[69]*… Damnatus a prima pueritia ad mortem spirandi illa difficultate ... Astra quae minitabantur omnino obitum, ut omnes dicebant ante annum xlv. omnia vana inventa sunt.*[70]

His conscious will to live is illustrated by the lines that follow: *Natus ergo, imo a matre extractus, tanquam mortuus, cum capillis nigris et crispis, recreatus balneo vini calidi, quod alteri potuit esse pernitiosum*.[71] The family could not expect anything better, having read the stars at the moment of the child's birth: Cardano says that very little was lacking for him to become a monstrous creature, had the stars not been more benevolent in some respect. Apart from a few imperfections in his physical appearance, they provided him with a special ability to foresee the future. This is reported by him in the following way:

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[67] Cardano, *De propria vita*, XXXII, 24.
[68] In fact, his own birth appeared to him as exemplary from the astrological point of view, as we can see from the horoscope he cast for himself in the *De exemplo centum geniturarum*, *Opera omnia* V, 517–541.
[69] Cardano, *De propria vita*, II, 2.
[70] *Ibid.*, XLI, 36.
[71] *Ibid.*, II, 2.

> *Et cum Venus*[72] *dominaretur, ut dixi, toti figurae, et Iupiter esset in ascendente, factus sum abiectae sortis: lingua parum blaesus, et addita est propensio (ut Ptolemaus ait) media inter frigidam et Harpocratiam, id est rapacem et inconsultam divinationem: in quo genere (praesensionem honestiore vocabulo dicunt) non obscure aliquando valui: similiter ac in aliis divinandi generibus.*[73]

As a kind of corroboration of the aforementioned particularity, namely the idea that Cardano considered the self (that is, the psychological self) and the body as identical, I shall quote a passage on a strange portent that appeared on the child Cardano's body, very interestingly, in the shape of a cross: *Mihi carbunculi quinque in facie crucis in effigiem, supervenerunt, ut unus, forest in nasi apice.*[74] The author claims to have had mysterious signs on his body, with the obvious intention of accentuating his peculiarity, which thereby manifested itself in this way, as in others, at a very tender age. He was a child of delicate health, and subject to the most various accidents, which he attributed to the wrath of the planet Jupiter: first he rolled down the stairs, then a piece of plaster fell on his head while he was sitting on the doorstep of his parents' house, and in general, his childhood is depicted by him as a well-designed field of obstacles.[75] (In fact, Cardano dedicates whole chapters to the dangers avoided due to his presentiments, such as the one entitled *Pericula et casus,*

[72] In his *De rerum varietate*, *Opera omnia* III, XV, 79, Cardano states that among the five things that are necessary for one to acquire power of prediction one is being born under the planet Venus. Although traditionally Saturn was considered the ruling planet of melancholics, Cardano departs from received wisdom here. The question of whether he does so in good faith, or whether he rather conveniently ignores certain traditions when they appear to disprove or undermine his claim to elect status, is open.

[73] Cardano, *De propria vita*, II, 2.

[74] *Ibid*., IV, 3.

[75] This is an interesting parallel between Cardano and another fifteenth-century autobiographer, Ambrogio Traversari (*Hodoeporicon*, first published in 1431; a modern edition is also available of it, in V. Tamburini, ed. Florence: 1985) who claims to be protected by divine providence when almost falling from a mule. Even if this seems to be rather banal, we have to be aware of the constant centrality of the ego which makes the two authors belong to the same tradition of self-consciousness and pride. In the *Itinerarium* of Ciriaco d'Ancona (written in the 1450s, first published in L. Mehus, ed. Florence, 1742), furthermore, another similarity catches the reader's attention: we can see the same narcissistic self-celebration as in Cardano's work, when Ciriaco inserts a series of *encomia* into his autobiography, which – according to him – were written by the most famous Humanists of the epoch. Cardano does much the same when he attaches a list of all the scholars who mentioned his name in

et de insidiis multiplicibus, variis, et assiduis).[76] The gods (as he puts it) kept an eye on him even in his adulthood:

> *In adversis autem quae levia erant, pro admonitione ut caverem accepi; et o quoties eiusmodi monitis, maximas vitavi calamitates!*[77] *... Non de hoc miror quod ita contigerit, sed quod cum toties viam mutaverim, nunquam sponte, nini in huiusmodi periculis, forsan alias non animadverti. Attamen res magna, non admiranda, si exemplum frequens non adesset.*[78]

What is more, his father – a highly cultivated man – had the habit of taking the young boy with him, wherever he went, as a kind of servant who had to carry his paraphernalia. These were the occasions when Cardano became familiar with the rudiments of mathematics, astrology, and geometry; however, his account of his father's attitude reveals something less than enthusiasm: *Sed non mutata sors mea, nam rursus pater me ut servum ducebat secum mira pertinacia, ne dicam saevitia, ut divino potius consilio factum, ex his quae post sequuta sunt credas quam patris culpa.*[79] This statement (or perhaps it is better to call it an allusion) is again a manifestation of his conviction that someone somewhere had serious designs for him. The physical features of Cardano and his extraordinary self-image, which explains the physical by the transcendent and vice versa, are very well illustrated by the passage that follows: *brachiis admodum tenuibus, dextra manu crassiore, digitsque incompactis, ut chiromantici rudem esse pronunciarint ac stupidum: inde ubi norunt puduerit.*[80] Thus, then, he had a poor constitution, he suffered from the most various illnesses, he seemed to be exposed to constant life-threatening danger, when finally,

their work. The question whether this displays vainglory, narcissism, or disappointed insecurity must remain open at this point. See Pittaluga, "L'autobiografia nell'Umanesimo," 304.

[76] Cardano, *De propria vita*, XXX, 18.
[77] *Ibid*., XXIII, 15.
[78] *Ibid*., XXX, 19.
[79] *Ibid*., IV, 3.
[80] *Ibid.*, V, 5.

after all these mournful portents and events, it was a dream that foretold to him the positive changes to come in his life.

Figure 2 Portrait of Gerolamo Cardano from 1557 (source unknown).

Bearing in mind what we have said in the introduction about the melancholy character, we can see clearly how the basic features of the melancholic type (liminal status, capacity of foreseeing the future, ability of divination by dreams, inclination to madness and loneliness, claims to be chosen ones, connections to the transcendent, for instance) reappear in Cardano's self-descriptions in his *De propria vita*.

Dreams are extremely important in this context: they are considered to be a link between the divine and the human sphere, a mystical field where a unilateral communication from God's side to human beings seems to be possible. The dreamer's soul is freed – loosed by Lyssa, one might say, referring to an older, but still influential, if latent and atavistic tradition – from the chains of the senses and the characteristics of the waking state, and as such it can partake of a higher knowledge, that of future events, for instance. Considering the importance of this aspect, instead

of proceeding in chronological order from event to event in his biography, I prefer to analyse the concepts which overlap with the ones we have already used to describe the melancholy character.

Dreams had a special place in Cardano's work: he dedicated a vast book to the classification and interpretation of them, the *Synesiorum somniorum libri IV*,[81] but I find it much more idiosyncratic and peculiar that he uses his dreams as evidence for his ability to foresee the future, and in general, for the unspoken claim that he was a chosen one. Very interestingly, these dreams usually reveal a misfortune to come in his family, or a turn in his professional career: indeed, in the majority of the cases they are directed to different members of his familial and social circle – that is to say, his personal microcosm of the world in general.[82] A colourful collection of prophetic or at least important dreams is available in his *Synesiorum somniorum*, book IV, and the *De propria vita* is also full of accounts of various *somnia*. Here I report the one he had before he met his wife, because – according to his own interpretation – that dream intimated to him all the fateful and sorrowful events to come.

> *Ac quasi mortalis in immortali sede collocatus, aut ut melius dicam, iucunditate: cum ecce nocte quadam, video me in horto quodam amoeno, nimisque pulchro, floribus ornato, fructibus diversi generis referto, spirabat aura suavis, ut nihil iucundius non pictor, non Pulcius Poeta, non cogitatio simile quicquam confingre posset; etiam in vestibulo horti, ostium apertum patebat, et aliud inde ex adverso: cum ecce video puellam candida veste indutam, eam adeo amplector, exosculor, statim a primo osculo hortulanus clausit ostium, enixe coepi rogare ut apertum dimitteret, nunquam potui obtinere: moestus itaque, et puellae haerens, exclusus manere visus sum*.[83]

Cardano explains this dream as predicting his marriage to a beautiful young woman, but at the same time the sense of being trapped in a situation unpleasant to

[81] Cardano, *Synesiorum somniorum libri IIII*, *Opera omnia* (Lyon: Huguetan & Ravaud, 1663), V. I will return to the analysis of this work in the next chapter, dedicated to his scientific works, where I intend to describe briefly the traditions (Aristotle, Macrobius, Artemidorus, *inter alia*) he used for the creation of his own theories on and classification of dreams.

[82] There are a few exceptions, such as the case when he foresaw that Cyprus would fall to the Turks.

him, one he could not escape from. There are topics that seem to be central to Cardano's interest, as proven by the fact that he returns to them, under different titles. One of these favourite motifs in his life is his awareness (obsession, in fact) of being a victim to the spite of some contemporary scholars who went as far as to even try to poison him, more than once, in his own house. These are stories that sometimes verge on slapstick, but we should note that Cardano reports them very gravely, to such an extent that he finds it no exaggeration to say that the death of his enemies (even those who accused his son, Giambattista[84]), which occurred briefly after they wanted to hurt him, was due to divine providence:

> *Ergo cum viderem me potius providentia divina fervatum, quam propria solertia, desii, in posterum solicitus adeo esse de periculis: verum quis non videt haec omnia, quasi fuisse gloriae consecuturae praeiudicia, aut vigilam quandam* (*...) ?*[85]

Divine providence indeed has a central role in the creation of Cardano's image of the self.[86] His accounts of his special abilities are even more central to his *De propria vita* than the stories on vicious enemies ready to murder him. There are various chapters on extraordinary presentiments, visions, and phenomena both natural and supernatural, which were all destined to draw his attention to those things that he should avoid, or simply take into consideration. Let us gather some of the most interesting accounts from his *De propria vita*. A dream I have quoted in its entirety showed him that his marriage would be full of difficulties, manifested first of all in the children granted to him: two boys, Giambattista and Aldo, and a girl, Chiara. There were, however, further admonitions for Cardano, which were supposed to point

[83]Cardano, *De propria vita*, XXVI, 16.
[84] "Eorum qui ipsum accusarunt nemo non nisi magna calamitate evasit, aut perculsus, aut enectus." *Ibid.*, XLI, 36.
[85] *Ibid.*, XXX, 21-22.

out the mournful events to come. The elder son, Giambattista, was only a few days old only when a huge wasp flew into the room where the whole family was, and after having terrified everyone for some minutes, it just left the place all of a sudden without doing any harm to the child. It was a grave portent in the eyes of the Cardano family, something that provoked fear and anxiety in them. Later on, when Giambattista was taken to prison under the accusation of having poisoned his wife, a stain of blood in the shape of a sword appeared on Cardano's palm, and stayed there for fifty-two days. The way he got to know that his son had married the woman whom he had recommended him not to marry (because of her bad reputation) was an earthquake that no one else experienced or even noticed but him: *Cogitavi divinum nuncium, quod cognovisset conclusum vesperi, nocte voluisse significare, nam ubi illuxisset, antequam domo prodiret, agressus eram filius*.[87] A few months afterwards, he heard a monotonous singing voice from the street, and he realised that his son had confessed and was thus lost, because the song he heard was very similar to a lament and in its tone it was similar to a confession. The death of Giambattista, however, was not due to God's wrath, according to the author, but was the result of a conspiracy against him by his numerous enemies, and the many rivals who envied him. He claims that his enemies wanted him to lose his mind (or even die) of the pain he would feel on the loss of his favourite son:

> *Confessi sunt quidam e Senatu (sed puto non de seipsis intelligi voluisse) ea spe damnasse illum, ut dolore interirem, aut insanirem, at unoque quam parum abfuerim, Superi norunt (et ego suo loco enarrabo) sed non successit."*[88]

[86] "Et similiter de successu, quod non nisi deplorata iam omni spe illuxerit occasio, ut omnino Dei voluntate factum videri debeat." *Ibid.*, XXXVII, 27. We should not neglect the evolution in the terms he uses: this is no longer *providentia*, but directly *voluntate*.

[87] *Ibid.*, XLI, 35. Very interestingly, we can find the following lines in Hippocrates' *Regimen*, 4: the trembling of the earth or of a house means an illness when the dreamer is in good health, and vice versa. In Steven M. Oberhelman, "Dreams in Graeco-Roman Medicine," in *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt*, II Principat 37.1, Wolfgang Haase, ed.. 121-156 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1980).

[88] Cardano, *De propria vita*, X, 8.

At this point, another very important concept known from the sphere of melancholy (and mentioned in the previous chapter) should be introduced to the interpretation of Cardano's *De propria vita*, that is, madness. We have seen that the burden of being a chosen one, with a liminal status, was seen as something very difficult to bear with a sane mind. Those gifted ones, who had an insight in the hidden dimensions of life, were often considered madmen. The same applies to Cardano. There is a vast literature on his supersensitive mind.[89]

The younger son, Aldo did not give him any joy in his life: he became a thief, who even broke into the house of his own father in order to burgle him, while the daughter was feared to be barren for a long time.[90] It seems, despite all the tragedies which happened to different members of his family, that he tells all these things in his *De propria vita* in order to accentuate his own mournful destiny, and perhaps to win the compassion of his readers. If we go further in the interpretation, we see that he suggests something like this: the tragedies could have been avoided had he been able to use his special abilities more efficiently. This is a very grave responsibility that he has to bear: it is not only his own destiny in his hands but also his relatives' fate; to a certain measure, albeit from a different point of view (by means of science, as a kind of mission on earth to disseminate knowledge), even the whole of mankind owes him a lot. I shall return to this aspect later.

[89] Cesare Lombroso's *Genio e Follia*, just to mention a well-known example, contains a rather lively description of Cardano's strange habits. Nevertheless, I agree with August Buck, who states, "it would be difficult, indeed impossible, to obtain a definitive picture of Cardano's psychological make-up from the available materials, since he is himself essentially our only source of information." Buck, "Girolamo Cardano's *De propria vita*," 209.

[90] In the *De rerum varietate*, VIII, 40, Cardano asserts that the sons of the wisest men go to the bad: "Et ob id filii sapientissimorum ignavi videntur quia iam mixtio ad summum subtilitatis pervenit: igitur infirmi fiunt corpore atque ideo etiam anima." This, again, is a very ambiguous statement, for it implies that Cardano judged his children as being somewhat degenerate, while it also implies that he considered himself a "sapientissimus." Again, the question of whether he was taking a kind of comfort

His accuracy in saying extraordinary things goes as far as reporting some of the miracles occurring to him in a list where the different "items" are indicated with numbers. (It is rather unusual, after all, to see a "miracle number one" in a written work.)

Miracles may be impersonal, but in Cardano's case – typically, in the age of Humanism and its emphasis on the human actor rather than the empyrean and impersonal cosmos or the mind of God – they involve protagonists. These protagonists may be agents, or they may be passive, affected by the events of this world, or by the repercussions or reverberations of events in some other sphere. For the most part, they are Cardano's family members. But they need not be so – and indeed, they need not be human.

In the case of melancholy character in general, and now, in the case of Gerolamo Cardano in particular, we can see how important the role of various intermediaries is in this context. The melancholic has a straight connection to the transcendent world: this connection, always somewhat mysterious, is more easily graspable in the case of dreams, but less perceivable when we have to face demons, angels, or different kinds of messengers.

Cardano reports some very interesting stories in his *De propria vita* on guardian angels, *daimones* and other, indefinable creatures that appeared to him with the intention of helping him or revealing to him something from the future. The first apparition was that of a young man who visited Cardano many times while he was sleeping: he sat down by the side of Cardano's bed and talked to him in a gentle

even in such familial troubles, since they could be seen as proof of his status, or whether he was simply desperate to use any factor remotely plausible as such proof, arises.

manner. Once the scholar asked him what his name was, and the young man answered gravely: *Stephanus Dames*.[91]

What is even more peculiar is the fact that Cardano's own father came to him in a dream:

> *Secundum, ibidem non multo post moranti: videbatur mihi quod anima mea esset in Coelo Lunae, nuda a corpore, et solitaria, et ob id quaerebar, audivi vocem patris mei dicentis Datus sum tibi custos a Deo ... Id ego sic interpretatus sum, Patris anima tutelaris spiritus, quid amicius aut iucundius.*[92]

The attitude of Cardano (and his contemporaries also) to the question of such intermediaries is more than ambiguous; it is inconsistent in a way that one might pose the question whether Cardano had any system underlying his scattered ideas on transcendent beings at all. I shall not answer this question now, because a thorough analysis of his scientific works is needed, which I will provide in the chapter that follows. Nevertheless, we can suspect on the basis of what has been said so far that in the figure of Cardano we are not dealing with a scholar who had been building up an ideological system step by step, work by work, but most probably someone who was led by his various interests and curiosity in far too many ways.

He was a much-feared foe in scholarly debates, but he denies confidently and vehemently the rumours that his aptitude and ability in those discussions was due to a

[91] "Visus sum etiam aliquando invenem mihi bladientem agnoscere, cuius tamen experectus minime memini, quem cum interrogassem quis esset, et cuias, gravate respondit *Stephanus Dames*: Non fert lingua Latina aliter explicari quam aliena sonet. Ego saepius cogitavi de hoc, *στέφανος coronam* significat *μέσος media*, *medietasve*," Cardano, *De propria vita*, XXXVII, 29. The author's explanation is again a good example of his accentuation of his uniqueness. Instead of a well-known angel, the one appearing to Cardano is an undefined, unknown visitor, whose name is the only key to his being. Etymologically, *Stephanus* means – in Cardano's understanding of the words - a kind of crown, while *Dames* stands for 'middle' or 'state in between.' The latter element is more interesting for us, since here we deal with the different intermediaries Cardano claimed to have, and his translation of *Dames* is exactly a being in between, an intermediary.

[92] *Ibid.*, XXXVII, 29. In comparison I would like to quote Tommaso Campanella, who had the habit of hearing a warning voice: "Ma io, sempre che ho da patir qualche cosa, mi sento tra il sonno e la vigilia un che mi chiama: - Campanella -, chiaramente, e ogni poco lo provo e sto attento, e non so chi sia, e se non è angelo o demonio, bisogna che sia l'aria turbata dalla mia passion futura, o infatta da chi me la

certain *daimon*.[93] This is – in my opinion – a conscious step in building up the image of the self, designed to present an image of a very intelligent scientist who fought his way up to the zenith of his career unaided, using nothing but the capacities of his mind. Despite his ironical comment on the simplicity of his adversaries, later he states that *Spiritus affidentes, aut praesidentes ... favisse quibusdam viris pro constanti, ut dixi receptum est. Socrati, Plotino, Synesio, Dioni, Fl. Iosepho, sed et mihi.*[94]

The liminal status, so characteristic of the melancholic, leads to a kind of separation from the rest of the society or community: this explains why the chosen ones are often lonely. This loneliness can be the result of a conscious choice, but it might also derive from the character of the melancholic. In the first case we can say that the choice is a voluntary and proud isolation from others, who do not know what the gifted ones (to whom a higher knowledge and insight in the secrets of nature is given) do. *Solitudine potius quam sociis, quoniam paucissimi non improbi, nulli vere docti*,[95] reports Cardano, and this statement places him in the company of the consciously lonesome men. He avoided the company of others, because they were not highly cultivated enough and he could not share his thoughts with them. However, the situation is not unequivocal in this case, either. Later on he complains, for instance, that the greatest misfortune in his life was the fact that he did not have anyone, relative or friend, ready to help him to tide over his hardships, and in consequence he had to face all his difficulties alone.

prepara." *Opere di Giordano Bruno e Tommaso Campanella*, A. Guzzo and R. Amerio, eds. (Milan: Ricciardi, 1956), 1055.

[93] "Dignique etiam venia sint, qui ad malum daemonem talia referunt, quando neque bonum, neque Dei benignitatem agnoscunt." Cardano, *De propria vita*, XLIV, 39.

[94] *Ibid.*, XLVII, 44.

[95] *Ibid.*, XVIII, 14. In his autobiography he admits that he was solitary as one could be, although, ha says, he understood that Aristotle condemned that sort of life, because according to the Philosopher's opinion a solitary man was either a beast or a god. See *De propria vita*, XIII, 10-11.

Nevertheless, Cardano argues that all these peculiar phenomena, such as the *daimon*, or meaningful and prophetic dreams, do not distinguish him from the others at all, because they can occur to anyone; on the contrary, they are destined – in his opinion – to accentuate even more the weaknesses he had compared to the average. He describes the "real" peculiarities in Chapter XXXVIII. The first one (they are listed as the miracles were) is a certain ringing in the ears:

> *Sentio ingredi foris in aurem, rem cum strepitu ex ea parte directe, unde sit sermo de me: et si ad bonum decumbit in latere dextro, aut si a sinistro venit penetrat in dextrum, et sit strepitus ordinatus.*[96]

The second one is the ability of divination by dreams,[97] while the third one is a luminosity that suffused his mind from time to time, providing him with inspiration and an extreme sharpness of mind.[98] The fourth special ability is that any time he concentrated on God and on his own faith, he reconciled himself to the world. As for the fifth:

> *Quintum peculiare fuit, quod et ipsum perpetuo duravit, ut non nisi desperatis rebus emerserim, non nisi florentibus mersus sim, quales triremes in tempestate esse solent, modo ex imo ad suprema, modo ex supremis in vortices, idque tota vita. O quoties conditionem meam adeo miserabilem mecum deflevi: non solum quod omnia pessum issent, et omnis spes salutis sublata foret, sed quod neque res meas cogitatione disponenti ut vellem, invenirem modum evadendi*.[99]

In relation to another particularity, not listed here, but nonetheless attributed generally to the melancholic, Cardano's autobiography can serve with a good example. Schleiner states that "humanists and physicians of the first half of the sixteenth century… rarely give examples that illustrate what we would consider

[96] *Ibid.*, XXXVIII, 30.
[97] "Nec velim quemquam opinari, quod haec longius petita sint, aut ex Daemone, aut ex Astris, sed ex Aristotelis oraculo: solum enim, inquit ille prudentum, ac sapientum, esse veram divinationem." *Ibid.*, XLII, 37.
[98] He says that he managed to bring this capacity ("Si non est res divina, certe est perfectissimum opus mortalium." *Ibid.*, XXXVIII, 30) to perfection in the course of the years.
[99] *Ibid.*, XXXVIII, 30.

prediction. Usually they cite examples of 'speaking in tongues'… speaking languages that were never learned, or of particular insight, again baffling because not achieved through painstaking study."[100] This statement suggests a changing attitude to the tradition of melancholy: it is not associated necessarily with the ability of divination, but rather, any kind of special ability. In the *De rerum varietate* the reader can find a passage that tells the story of an Italian who spoke beautiful German although he had never studied the language, but when a doctor cured him of worms, his proficiency in the language vanished all of a sudden.[101]

In his *De propria vita* Cardano proudly tells the story of his miraculous acquisition of the Latin language, and he never stops reminding the reader about his sharp mind, which permitted him the study of various things, often without painstaking study. I have quoted Cardano's self-characterisation from the *De propria vita*, according to which he was a stutterer (although he attributed it to different planetary influences). Pseudo-Aristotle says[102] that a stutter is a sign of melancholy, too, since it is a consequence of the fact that the word is not able to keep up with the thought. The melancholy character in some of the Ancient sources[103] was seen as one provided with an extremely strong imaginative power, and the capacity of affecting it deliberately: this was an ability which made the reception of veracious dreams possible for him. This is again present in Cardano's self-narrative.

The examples taken from Cardano's *De propria vita* corroborate the argument that he built up an image of himself in a very conscious manner, using accounts of

[100] Winfried Schleiner, *Melancholy, Genius and Utopia in the Renaissance* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1991), 28.
[101] The passage, taken from Cardano's *De rerum varietate*, VIII, 43, 164, is quoted in Lynn Thorndike, *History of Magic and Experimental Science* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1923-1958) vol. V, 578.
[102] Pseudo-Aristotle, *Problemata Physica*, XI, 38. In Aristotle, *Problemata Physica*. Ruelle, Knöllinger and Klek, eds. (Leipzig, 1929).
[103] Aristotle, *Etica Eudemia*, VIII, 2 (1248a, 40), quoted in Klibansky – Panofsky – Saxl, *Saturno e la melanconia*, 34.

miraculous apparitions and special abilities in order to support his unspoken claim, according to which, he was a chosen one, especially dear to God, guarded and protected by transcendent beings, admonished by natural and supernatural portents. The question *Remanent dubitationes cur haec sollicitudo pro me non aliis?*[104] after all seems to be useless, and even sacrilegious.

Thus far we have looked at Cardano's melancholia through the glass of his autobiography – this is of necessity a highly subjective account. The *De propria vita* is not without worth when taken as an early example of the science which was much later to be known as psychology – is the only writing that provides the reader with an insight into the most hidden secrets of the self. However, we must now turn towards a different kind of knowledge, one more objective, since it is less concerned with the act of, or reasons for, perception, than phenomena perceived.

In the next chapter I intend to analyse the scientific correlatives of the topics brought up from the *De propria vita* in connection with melancholy. I shall also try to answer the question whether there is any difference in the formulation of his ideas between the scientific treatises (destined to expose his miraculous findings), and the *De propria vita*.

[104] *Ibid.*, XLVII, 44.

III. Self-Fashioning through the Scientific Works

I. *Introduction*

Bearing in mind what Stefano Pittaluga stated[105] about the possibility of considering as autobiography any kind of text in which – supposing the identity between the 'I' as author and the 'I' as narrator – the writer becomes protagonist, there may be a link between Cardano's (late) explicit self-narrative (the *De propria vita*) and the implicit one, that is, the scientific corpus (if we accept the idea that for Cardano, life and work were so closely interlinked that both became the expression of the ego).[106]

If in the case of the *De propria vita* the motivation was clearly definable, first of all to justify himself and all his prior endeavours in the eyes of contemporaries and future generations, in relation to his scientific works[107] (for the sake of precision I should call them "all the works except the *De propria vita*," since the correct application of the term "science" to the Renaissance would require a chapter on its own) we have to try to think in terms of self-advertisement and a slightly different kind of self-fashioning, too, when the aim of the author was not to make a better impression on the reader through his peculiar personality, but to impress a prospective

[105] Stefano Pittaluga, "L'autobiografia nell'Umanesimo," *L'autobiografia nel Medioevo. Atti del XXXIV convegno storico internazionale, Todi, 12-15 ottobre 1997* (Spoleto: Centro Italiano di Studi sull'Alto Medioevo, 1998), 292.

[106] See Fierz: "Only after reaching the end of one's deliberations does one realize the entire course one's argument ought to have taken in order to have smoothly arrived at the insight which was achieved. It is this logical path which is presented to the reader. But Cardano does not write like this; even his philosophical writings are, as it were, biographical in nature." Markus Fierz, *Girolamo Cardano 1501-1576. Physician, Natural Philosopher, Mathematician, Astrologer, and Interpreter of Dreams*, tr. by Helga Niman (Basel-Stuttgart: Birkhäuser, 1983), 57.

[107] In the 1663 edition of the complete works of Gerolamo Cardano the editor, Carlo Spon organised the volumes according to the various fields of interest, helping thus the reader in the orientation among the hundreds of writings. Volume I contains treatises related to philology, logic, and *moralia*, while the second tome includes the *naturalia*. In the third volume one can find the encyclopedic works, the *De rerum varietate* and the *De subtilitate*, while the fourth one involves mathematics, first of all. Volume five is dedicated to the divinatory arts; the sixth, seventh, eighth, and ninth tomes deal with medicine. The tenth volume includes various treatises, from *historia animalium* to music.

patron in order to find a sponsor for the publication of further works, to build his scholarly career, and to increase the number of his readers.

Nevertheless, perhaps in a less concise and systematic form, one can still, even with regard to this first phase of his career, retrace moments of self-consciousness, self-narrative, and records in the so-called scientific works, of his conviction that he was someone with prophetic abilities, and even with a mission on earth to disseminate knowledge for people, or at least those people ready to accept it. In the framework of this thesis it appears to be impossible to systematically analyse the entire scientific corpus, since the hundreds of treatises, which fill ten folio volumes, deal with the most diverse branches of science or fields of interest. In consequence, I will have to narrow down my study, instead of providing a detailed description of each field of interest, to singular moments, in which the efforts on the part of Cardano to positively affect the reader's attitude towards himself even in supposedly (value-) neutral and objective works are clearly visible. I expect to find further evidence for my argument that Cardano always considered himself as one who was gifted, who had a privileged position among the others.

There are two questions involved here. Firstly, how could the idea of being a chosen one gain new formulation and expression in a genre, the scientific treatise, completely different from the autobiography? Secondly – but perhaps logically prior - what is it exactly that makes the two genres (if we can ever consider them genres on their own) differ so substantially from each other? Structurally, I shall follow the method applied to the second chapter, that is, to proceed step by step, idea by idea, inside the conceptual sphere of melancholy: being a chosen one, being gifted with special abilities (especially in foreseeing the future), being admonished throughout divine intermediaries (such as indefinable visitors, guardian angels, and *daimones*),

and feeling isolated, solitary, or suffering from mental disturbances. However, the question here is inverted (at least in linear, sequential, chronological or logical terms): this is not a question of self-justification in terms of explanation for conclusions previously reached, but rather a matter of additional authority and rationale for the choice of paths to be taken and reasons why the reader (be he member of the scholarly public or potential patron) should trust this particular (in every sense) *homo novus*.

II. *Signs of Being a Chosen One in the Scientific Corpus*

1. Miracula *and* Mirabilia *in the Encyclopedic Works*

In the so-called scientific corpus there are two works that require separate treatment: these are the *De rerum varietate*[108] and the *De subtilitate*,[109] two encyclopaedias, which were written with the purpose of collecting all the information available on the most peculiar topics, such as interesting inventions, machines, supernatural (or at least mysterious) phenomena, sirens, demons, and many other curiosities. They were designed by the author to answer the expectations of the public, not necessarily a scholarly one in this case, yet also first of all to satisfy his own curiosity. In fact, many of the peculiar topics that emerge in the *De propria vita* as unexplainable, miraculous things are treated in the encyclopedic works in a much more detailed manner. Cardano never stops accentuating the importance of *experimentum*, even when he fills these volumes with *miracula* and *mirabilia*,[110] and he stoutly states that sirens, for instance, do exist since Theodore Gaza and George of Trebizond say so,

[108] Cardano, *De rerum varietate libri XVII* (Avignon, 1558).
[109] Cardano, *De subtilitate libri XXI* (Lyon: Guillome Rouillé, 1558).
[110] This subtitle refers to the article of Luisa Simonutti, "*Miracula* and *Mirabilia* in alcune opere di Cardano," M. Baldi and G. Canziani, eds., *Girolamo Cardano. Le opere, le fonti, la vita. Atti del convegno internazionale di studi, Milano (11-13 dicembre 1997)* (Milan: Francoangeli, 1999). Simonutti points out that for Cardano *miracula* and *mirabilia* were simply *naturalia*, "pur risultando straordinarie e rinviando a cause sconosciute, non per questo presuppongono l'intervento di angeli o demoni, al contrario sono proprietà di cui l'uomo può avere esperienza" while Cardano "riserva alla

and why would they lie[111] (while the reason for his criticism towards Albertus Magnus is exactly the fact that he was prone to believe anything from hearsay).

They seem to form a separate unit in the whole of the scientific corpus, since that they appear to be the only instances in which Cardano lets his personal interests overcome his conscious self-fashioning.[112] What is more, the author claims to have received an admonition in a dream to expose his thoughts in the book *De subtilitate*.[113] Thus we cannot treat these works as expressions of a wish to pander to public fancy; their genesis lies in something other than market forces – and yet their rationale coincide with such quotidian demands: publication, publishing, propagation, all serve a purpose both public and private, both overt and occult.[114]

2. *Cardano's Melancholy*

Despite the great amount of his scientific treatises which have come down to us, there is no work dedicated exclusively to the question of melancholy as the humour of the chosen one. Cardano, who liked to style himself officially as a physician, was interested basically in the physiological – rather than psychological, or spiritual – aspects of the excess of black bile.

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divinità la possibilità logica di compiere "vera miracula", ossia di modificare il corso, i moti della natura." Simonutti, 196, 198.

[111] Cardano, *De rerum varietate*, VII, 38.

[112] As Maclean formulates it, "the *De subtilitate* allies itself to some degree with the genre of occult writing... On the one hand they claim to open up a hidden universe to the uninitiated; on the other, they protect this hidden universe from the eyes of the vulgar by a number of expressive and argumentative plays." Ian Maclean, "The Interpretation of Natural Signs: Cardano's *De Subtilitate* versus Scaliger's *Exercitationes*," in Brian Vickers, ed., *Occult and Scientific Mentalities in the Renaissance*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 234-235.

[113] Cardano, *De libris propriis*, *Opera omnia* I, 108.

[114] These two works (among many others, except the treatises on medicine) were put on the Index in the year 1571, since errors of faith were found in them. In fact the Holy Congregation ordered the inquisitor of Bologna (where Cardano stayed at the moment) to force the scholar to abjure and prohibit his books, especially the *De rerum varietate*. The encyclopedic works in which there one could see "il gusto dell'occulto, del segreto e del misterioso mescolandosi, magari, a osservazioni ed esperienze di indiscutibile valore" reflect the effort to reconcile *magia naturalis* and religious orthodoxy. See Cesare Vasoli, *Profezia e regione. Studi sulla cultura del Cinquecento e del Seicento* (Naples: Morano, 1974), 473.

There are only a few exceptions that I found during my research: one is the sentence I quoted at the end of the first chapter, that is, *Quod melancholici futura praevideant, innumeris confirmatur exemplis*,[115] and the other is a reference to (pseudo-) Aristotle, *Quin etiam illud ei respondet quod Philosophus ait, et quotidie experimentum docet, sapientes plerumque esse melancholicos.*[116] Is it, then, an acceptable hypothesis that Cardano, so deeply involved in every kind of divination, was simply not interested in the tradition of a nexus between melancholy, genius and divination? My answer is a definite no: one has to search for the explanation, making recurrent overviews of context and background, in order to understand the circumstances to which a Renaissance scholar had to adapt himself. There may well be a discrepancy between the image put forth in the later autobiographical work and that in the "scientific" corpus, in which Cardano had, *volens nolens*, to accommodate himself to the demands of the age. My aim in this chapter is to give the main features of the complexity of the factors which determined Cardano's attitude to some scientific questions, so much so that in certain cases we might suspect that what we read in a treatise does not exactly correspond to what the author's conviction was.

This is all only indirect evidence of his being a melancholy character, if not mere coincidence. In the so-called scientific works the reader cannot encounter passages stating clearly or proudly that he was one. The quotation taken from the *Paralipomena* is not elaborated into an argument on melancholic divination; it stays on the level of a simple note, one that the author does not intend to pursue further in the direction that we would like to study in this paper. What the reader finds there is a very serious scientific, more precisely medical, approach to the problem; in consequence there is no direct answer to the question of whether he was conscious

[115] Cardano, *Paralipomenon*, *Opera omnia* X, 462.

about the complexity of a nexus between melancholy, genius and divination, and whether he considered himself a melancholic.

3. *Divination and Self-Fashioning*

The so-called divinatory arts, such as astrology,[117] chiromancy, metoposcopy, and interpretation of dreams, despite the very ambiguous attitude on the part of scholars throughout the centuries,[118] still enjoyed a great popularity in the age of Cardano. He was a devoted and acknowledged practitioner and defender of astrology and dream-interpretation. However, he insisted that in order for one to be able to practise it at a high level, one should learn the art very profoundly, although he admitted that a natural disposition was also of great importance.[119] He never seemed to lose his faith in his own capacities, not even when a prophecy turned out to be wrong:[120] in these cases he usually put the blame on the inaccuracy of the data which the commissioner made available for him.

The role of Cardano's works on astrology is of particular interest from the point of view of this research, since it shows "the lifelong effort to understand and explicate his own experiences, and a systematic demonstration of the unique powers of analysis and prediction that he had dedicated his life to developing."[121]

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[116] Cardano, *Theonoston*, *Opera omnia* II, 424.

[117] On Cardano's understanding of astrology, see Jerży Ochman, "Il determinismo astrologico di Girolamo Cardano," in *Magia, astrologia e religione nel Rinascimento. Convegno polacco-italiano (Varsavia: 25-27 settembre 1972)* (Wrocław: Ossolineum, 1974), 123-130.

[118] A good example for the ambivalence in the evaluation of these "arts" is the *Disputationes adversus astrologiam divinatricem* of Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (Florence, 1496).

[119] The question of whether he saw himself as one perfectly disposed to the interpretation of future events by reading the stars or explaining dreams is beyond doubt. In the previous chapter I quoted a passage on the astrological circumstances at the moment of his birth, and that he attributed his ability to foresee the future to the conjunction of the dominant planet, Venus, and the planet in the ascendant, Jupiter.

[120] A well-known case was that of King Edward VI of England, for whom Cardano prophesied a long life, albeit one with many difficulties, while not much later the young king, who suffered from a very weak constitution, died.

[121] Anthony Grafton, *Cardano's Cosmos. The Worlds and Works of a Renaissance Astrologer* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 180.

Furthermore, it was the genre of geniture (the standard form of a geniture was a mosaic-like format,[122] a two-dimensional, schematic rendering of the three-dimensional configuration assumed by the planets at the moment of the client's birth) that the *De propria vita* emerged from, because astrology "offered a means of understanding one's own character – and not allowing it to become one's destiny."[123] Thus Grafton argues that the astrological works, the great number of genitures and prognostications Cardano cast in the course of his life did not simply contribute with some autobiographical information to a more precise image of their author, but in many cases they proved to be much franker and more straightforward than the later autobiography itself. What could the explanation for this be? Following the train of thoughts of Grafton we can see that "Cardano had deliberately broken the normal rules of literary self-presentation – the rules that the prudent writer would follow in all cases," because he liked to play "the hero of science,"[124] who exposed himself completely to the reader in order that they could learn from him, from his mistakes, thus subscribing to the moralising aspect of astrology.[125]

From the beginning of his scientific career Cardano cast himself in the very engaging character of the prophet.[126] He was aware of the call of readers for prophecies concerning political, economic and social issues, and he understood that an adept intellectual could profit by a pamphlet full of predictions about the short and

[122] Grafton states that this mosaic-like format of the commentary on a horoscope proved the ideal mirror for Cardano's fractured soul. *Ibid*., 198.
[123] "The good astrologer – like the good biographer – promised to teach his disciples to read, and even to rewrite, the book of human character itself." *Ibid*., 194.
[124] "If I am silent, what use will be to students of the discipline? Let love of truth and public utility win out!" Cardano, *Liber xii geniturarum*, *Opera omnia*, V, 523, tr. and quoted by Grafton, *Cardano's Cosmos*, 191.
[125] Cardano states in fact that "Alia enim est naturalis affectio, alia studiorum et disciplinae, qua mores uniuscuisusque instituuntur." Cardano, *Liber xii geniturarum*, *Opera omnia* V, 523.
[126] Even if in his autobiography he complained that his enemies (we have learned from the analysis of the *De vita propria* that Cardano had many of them) "afferebant quoque nativitatum fasciculos, ut de his pronunciarem, tanquam ariolus et vates, non ut medicinae professor, " *De vita propria*, *Opera omnia* I, XXXIX, 31. Grafton states that "He adopted an assertive, dogmatic tone – more that of the

the long term. Thus he produced the *Pronostico*,[127] a rather equivocal and still, noteworthy debut in the scientific world.[128] He also knew how to sell his literary products: for example he brought into the realm of print materials previously excluded from it,[129] he chose very prudently the addressees of his books – among them we can find cardinals and popes (and we may recall here his concern to mollify the church authorities, since he was in danger of persecution as well as the prohibition which he indeed suffered). Indeed, Cardano was conscious about the cut-throat competition between astrologers, and he tried everything to fashion himself in such a way that he could survive; thus he made a constant and effective advertisement for himself.[130] He evaluated his own works from time to time, which testifies to the fact that he was conscious of the evolution of his scientific performance. He excluded, for instance, his first astrological work, the *Pronostico* from the list of his books.[131] This suggests that he did not find it scholarly enough later on, but it also suggests that he saw it as less than attractive to the reading public (scholarly or otherwise) and thus refashioned himself in a way which obviated potential objections to earlier expositions of his thought.

prophet who had a direct link to a divine source than that of the astrologer to take all the facts into accounts," in *Cardano's Cosmos*, 94.

[127] Cardano, *Pronostico*, Germana Ernst, ed. In M. Baldi and G. Canziani, eds. *Girolamo Cardano. Le opere, le fonti, la vita*. *Atti del convegno internazionale di studi, Milano (11-13 dicembre 1997)* (Milan: Francoangeli, 1999).

[128] Grafton, *Cardano's Cosmos*, 38.

[129] *Ibid*., 71.

[130] He was able to change the tone of his writings so much so that later he managed to win the attention and recognition of Lutheran circles as well. This is to be seen as a very conscious (and successful) attempt to conquer new segments of the market for himself.

[131] On the interpretation of the lists of his own books, see Ian Maclean, "Interpreting the *De libris propriis*," in M. Baldi and G. Canziani, eds., *Girolamo Cardano. Le opere, le fonti, la vita. Atti del convegno internazionale di studi, Milano (11-13 Dicembre 1997)* (Milan: Francoangeli, 1999).

4. *Dreams and Demons*

Astrology was Cardano's profession, but dream-interpretation[132] was his real delight, as is proven by the great number of dreams that the author brought up as examples for divine providence in his non-scientific writing, the *De propria vita*.

The vast book entitled *Synesiorum somniorum libri IIII*[133] was dedicated exclusively to dreams, their classification, their origins: in content it is heavily and proudly indebted to the *De insomniis* of Synesius[134] (as the title of the work suggests), and to Artemidorus Daldianus.[135] Similarly to Galen,[136] whom Cardano followed and criticised with the same vehemence, he acknowledged divinatory dreams sent from the god(s); indeed, this is the category which Cardano considered to be the most noteworthy.

We have seen several examples taken from the *De propria vita* of prophetic dreams, and the reader can encounter many more of them scattered throughout the

[132] Dreams and their interpretation have always been at the centre of attention; consequently there is a great amount of literature, both primary and secondary, which has come down to us. Concerning Antiquity in general, see first of all the book of Patricia Cox Miller, *Dreams in Late Antiquity. Studies* in *the Imagination of a Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994); the article of Steven M. Oberhelman, "Dreams in Graeco-Roman Medicine," in Wolfgang Haase, ed. *Aufstieg und Nierdergang der Römischen Welt*, II Principat 37.1 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1980), and Kessels, "Ancient Systems of Dream-Classification," *Mnemosyne* ser. 4, 22, (1969): 389-424. On Synesius, who was one of the sources of Cardano's dream-theory, see Christian Lacombrade, Synesios de Cyrène, hellène et chrètien (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1951), especially pages 150-169. Another important predecessor of Cardano in dream-interpretation was Artemidorus Daldianus; on his dream-book see Dario Del Corno, "C'è del metodo in questa follia: Artemidoro," in *Il sogno in Grecia*, Giulio Guidorizzi, ed. (Rome: Laterza, 1988) 147-159, and Hans Bender, "Predizione e simbolo in Artemidoro alla luce della moderna psicologia del sogno," in *Il sogno in Grecia*, 161-171. Steven F. Kruger, *Dreaming in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992) provides a detailed description of medieval dream-interpretation, while on the Renaissance tradition of dream-divination see Marina Beer, "Sognare a corte," in *L'ozio onorato: saggi sulla cultura letteraria italiana del Rinascimento* (Rome: Bulzoni, 1996); Richard L. Kagan, *Lucrecia's Dreams: Politics and Prophecy in Sixteenth-Century Spain* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

[133] It was first published in the year 1562, in Basle.

[134] On Synesius see Jay Bregman, *Synesius of Cyrene, Philosopher-bishop* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982) and Christian Lacombrade, *Synesios de Cyrène, Hellène et Chrètien* (Paris: Belles Lettres, 1951).

[135] A detailed analysis of the sources of Cardano's dream-classification is available by Alice Lavinia Brown, "Girolamo Cardano's *Somniorum Synesiorum Libri IIII*," in *Bibliothèque d'Humanisme et Renaissance* (1979): 41. The *Oneirocritica* of Artemidorus was first published in 1518, in Venice, together with the *De somniis* of Synesius, which was later translated into Latin in 1539.

[136] Steven M. Oberhelman, "Dreams in Graeco-Roman Medicine," in Wolfgang Haase, ed. *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt*, II Principat 37.1 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1980).

scientific treatises too. The dream for Cardano is always a manifestation of divine providence (which, however, remains a reflection of natural order and not that of the supernatural), such a complex phenomenon that the human mind has to limit itself to generalities when trying to perceive it.[137] This attitude to dreams is similar in a contemporary of Cardano, Giambattista Della Porta,[138] because they both believed that there were rules of sympathy between dreams and the natural world, and in consequence, that one possessing the appropriate means[139] and skills to do so could affect the formal aspects of his dreams. In fact, in the *Synesiorum somniorum* we can find a detailed description of the effects that various foods have on the dreamer:

> *...si quis in prandio edat sanguinem nigrae ovis, aut agnae, cum sale, dormieritque paulo post in pellibus nuper mactatae eiusdem atque aliarum furvarum pecudum, nondum bene siccatis, somnia vedebit terribilia*.[140]

In relation to dreams as well we can see the reflection of the proud Renaissance attitude that placed man, the dreamer, at the centre of the universe, being just another level on which divine nature reveals and exhibits itself. Cardano definitely subscribed to this idea when he specified three reasons for the creation of man: (1) to know God, (2) to function as an intermediary between heaven and earth, (3) to rule earthly things.[141] Even if dreams seem to have a purely natural cause, the prophetic, revelatory type of them needs a very cautious interpretation. (After all, it is God who reveals himself through nature.)

[137] Francesco Gandolfo, *Il "dolce tempo." Mistica, ermetismo e sogno nel Cinquecento* (Rome: Bulzoni, 1978), 282. In contrast to the Neoplatonic, or Averroist understanding of dreams, indeed, which traces them back to a supernatural cause, Cardano shows his infinite belief in divine providence which – he argues – makes possible to the mind the exploration of his "secrets" simply through the profound study of nature. "La "magia" di Cardano definisce con questo la sua più sostanziale distinzione rispetto alla prospettiva neoplatonica del sogno come estasi liberatoria, termine finale di un processo ascetico di rigenerazione spirituale." Gandolfo, *Il "dolce tempo,"* 282.

[138] Giambattista Della Porta, *Magia naturalis* (Naples, 1589) and *Phytognomonica* (Frankfurt, 1608). On Della Porta, see Luisa Muraro, *Giambattista Della Porta mago e scienziato* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1978).

[139] By taking care of diet and the balance of humours, for instance.

[140] Cardano, *Synesiorum somniorum libri IIII*, *Opera omnia* V, 682.

This is the point where the figure of a chosen one with special abilities (in this case that of the ability to interpret dreams in general, and dreams of divine origin in particular) seems to be instantiated again by Cardano, and in a very specifically scholarly, academic, and indeed professional context he claims to be one of the few who are qualified enough to understand the message encoded in the *somnia*: a profession that is the most divine and most human at the same time, since it is a mirror of the universe, but also a human narration.[142]

Here one could use Herophilus' classification of dreams[143] in order to connect them to my next topic: he divides dreams according to their origin as (1) godsent dreams, and (2) natural dreams. A "godsent dream" in his definition is one in which a single dream-figure presents itself, gives a prophecy, advice, or warning; this figure can be a god or a father-image.[144] In my second chapter, dedicated to the analysis of the *De propria vita*, I have quoted a passage where Cardano claimed that his guardian angel was none other than his own father. Even if this statement is rather surprising, it becomes more acceptable if one takes into account the tone and the context of the autobiography. More oddly, this motif emerges in some of the scientific works, too. The passage that follows is of particular interest, for it includes, indeed, it is based upon, personal testimony, while remaining true to the standards of the time in terms of attempts at objective (if not quite veridical) reportage. It relates how his father reported to Cardano the way he would ascend through the divine spheres (after his death?) and draws his attention to the fact that God was constantly taking care of him:

Hieronymus: Quis ergo mortalium miserior? Aut quid agam!

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[141] This idea is retraceable in many of Cardano's works, such as the *Proxeneta*, *Theonoston*, *De subtilitate*, *De rerum varietate*.
[142] Agnese Grieco and Mauro Mancia, *Introduzione a* Sul sogno e sul sognare (Venice: Marsilia, 1991).
[143] E. R. Dodds, "Dream-Pattern and Cultural Pattern," *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1951), 107.
[144] Although divine dreams were sent only to the privileged dreamer, kings, while commoners had to be content with the ordinary symbolic dream to be interpreted with dream-books. *Ibid*., 107.

Facius: Quid eiulas stulte?
H: Heu quoniam etiam a Demoniis agitor.
F: Non ego Daemon, sed amicus et amicorum optimus. Pater tuus olim et nunc sordido (ut scis) iam diu corporis velo exutus, Facius Cardanus.
H: Omittam quae dum solum me esse putarem (nam non magis quam olim, eo somnio te video) audisse reor id maximum, ut nec hic manere nec recedere possum.
F: Opportune meministi eius somnii: nam si recte animadvertis nunc tempus est quo ad lunae coelum pervenisti.[145] (...)
F: Sane hic ergo dies pridie Nonas Aprilia anni MDLXXIV. Pro primo tibi ac quasi natali computandus est. Vides quomodo ex lunari orbe a singulis ad supremum ascenderit. Gaude ergo quod interpretationem nactus sis somnii: et quod tempus advenit.
H: De quo gaudere debeo?
F: Quod intelligas quam speciali dono Deus te remuneraverit. Nam ita sit: Quid tam durum aut acerbum pati potuisse, aut in posterum superveinre queat quod non solum sporite sed libenter non subeas, videns quantae curae illi fueris?[146]

This is a very peculiar game with double intermediaries: one is his dead father, who is now in possession of a higher knowledge, while the other one is Cardano himself, the writer of this imaginary-fantastic dialogue, who assumes the role of the interpreter and communicates his own selectness to the world.[147]

In fact, Cardano uses an intermediary through which he can express his own conviction about his being a chosen one. That intermediary is himself an intermediary, a messenger, since he visits the author to reveal something of great importance to him. The fact that both Cardano and Bruno found this way to formulate their ideas concerning their own particularity testifies to their belief that if such an astonishingly explicit claim was communicated through the figure of someone else

[145] Cardano, *Dialogus Hieronymi et Facii Cardani Ipsius Patris*, *Opera Omnia* I, 637. In the Latin text there is a reference to a dream Gerolamo had earlier, and which is reported in his *De propria vita*, when his father appeared to him in a dream and described to him the celestial spheres. See *De propria vita*, *Opera omnia* I, 29.
[146] Cardano, *Dialogus Hieronymi et Facii Cardani Ipsius Patris*, 637.
[147] This is a striking parallel to the *La Cena de le Ceneri* of Giordano Bruno, where the author makes one of the protagonists of the dialogue talk about his spiritual and intellectual greatness, his superiority above the masses: "Or ecco quello ch'ha varcato l'aria, penetrato il cielo, discorse le stelle, trapassati gli margini del mondo, fatte svanir le fantastiche muraglia de le prime, ottave, none, decime ed altre, che vi s'avesser potuto aggiongere, sfere, per relazione di vani matematici e cieco veder di filosofi

(such as Teofilo in the *La Cena de le Ceneri* of Bruno, and Fazio Cardano for Gerolamo) it could appear less presumptuous in the eyes of the readers. It is entrusted to the taste of every single reader whether he or she finds the claim expressed in this manner more convincing and trustworthy than it would be if announced unreservedly. However, one should be careful here: no hint of cynical manipulation of the readership is necessarily implied. Perhaps one of the most extraordinary aspects of Cardano's writings is that he appears, genuinely and sincerely, to make no distinction between the truly scientific (in the veridical sense) and the anecdotal: he reports all that occurs to him.

III. *Conclusion*

As I pointed out earlier, in relation to Cardano's activity as astrologer, we have to bear in mind that the so-called scientific works were written in various periods of the author's career, without the organic and systematic nature that characterises the *De propria vita*. The various treatises undoubtedly reflect an evolution of the author's ideas, especially taking into consideration the efforts on his part to fashion himself and his works into an up-to-date scientific "product."[148]

Cardano did not isolate himself hermetically from the outside world: he always followed with attention the constantly changing pretensions of the market, and he did his best to satisfy every requirement. He was, however, more than conscious about the great number of rivals he had to outclass in order to earn a livelihood, and what seemed to be even more important, to perpetuate his name in the scholarly world.

volgari... ha donati gli occhi a le talpe, illuminati i ciechi." Giordano Bruno, *La Cena de le Ceneri*, Augusto Guzzo, ed. (Milan: Mondadori, 1995), 22.

[148] We know from Cardano's autobiography that he had the habit of rewriting and revising, and often burning those works he was not satisfied with. See Grafton, *Cardano's Cosmos*, 48.

In terms of scientific works, in sum, Cardano was, if anything, even more conscious about his image, since he had to create a very specific image of himself for the sake of his favourable reception in the scholarly community and market. In contrast to the old man who, looking back at his past, writes his memoirs in which he admits to have had special abilities, guardian angels, and a *daimon*, here *Hieronymus Cardanus physicus Mediolanensis*, the scientific scholar, could sense that the world and science itself were heading for new directions. He understood that superstition did not have a place in serious works, and he wanted to be acknowledged even if he had to give up (or at least remain silent about) some of his personal convictions: this is the reason why we cannot encounter passages stating that Cardano had a *daimon*, for instance. What we can find in some of the scientific treatises are endeavours to describe supernatural phenomena in terms of popular, encyclopedic science, in a very objective and scholarly way:

> *Sed et si genius addatur, causa manifestior fiet, videturque hoc verisimilius. Sic totam Platonicorum scholam, Iamblichum, Plotinum, Arrianum, Proclum, Porphyrium; cumque ipso Platone, Aristoteli, atque suis afflectis Theophrasto, Themistro, Alexandro, Averroique concordem reddemus. Unum in utraque opinione commune est, ut Genius sit bonux et verax, animi mores pravi, ut in plerisque ex illustrioribus, qui genium habuisse feruntur: nam qui Genium fallacem et mores pravos habuerunt, omnibus his finis acerbus fuit, quemadmodum Brutus et Cassius, et M. Antonius: at qui bona natura fuere et bono Genio praediti, hi felicissimi fuere.*[149]

> *Finxere, seu quoniam ex effectibus crediderint veteres, incorporearum substantiarum inferiorum nomina diversa; Daemonem id est sapientem, Cacodaemonem id est pulchrum et propitium sapientem, quem vocamus bonum genium; ut contra. Cacodaemonem malum et infaustum genium. Genium quidem incorporeum cui assistimus, a quo norma vivendi ostenditur*.[150]

The two encyclopedias, the *De subtilitate* and the *De rerum varietate*, which I have treated separately, are the exceptions to the rule: they constitute the forum where

[149] Cardano, *Paralipomenon*, *Opera omnia* X, XXI, 471.
[150] *Ibid*., XXIII, 476.

Cardano decided to expose his otherwise denied, or at least hidden, interests in *magia naturalis*.[151] We must not forget, however, that what we today, from more than five hundred years of distance define as superstition and magic, or supernatural phenomena in Cardano's works (dreams, demons, apparitions), for him were all manifestations of the divine providence, natural portents, since nature is a means of God of transmitting His will.

[151] We could add two more minor works, the *De arcanis aeternitatis* and the *De fato*, although they were less known (and the latter was not even published in the author's life), because they both are very

Conclusion

In conclusion to the analysis of Gerolamo Cardano's autobiography and some of the particular moments in his scientific works, I have sketched out the possibility of placing him in a tradition which viewed man as being the centre of the universe and its heir.[152] This is nothing new. From Petrarch's revision of Dante's (still medieval, his views on Empire and the vernacular nothwithstanding) worldview to Shakespeare's "paragon of animals," the anthropocentric "Great Chain of Being" was commonly accepted in Cardano's time. Yet this new position, adroitly judged, by C. S. Lewis, *inter alia*, as being a departure from the medieval conception of man as outcast, exile, in the peripheries of the cosmos and on the lowest rung of the ontological ladder, brought with it not only a sense of liberation – and the "Praise of Folly" which followed – but also a lonely responsibility. From the Italian Neoplatonist enthusiasm for the Hermetic texts through the re-elaboration and reshaping of the ancient Greek tradition of melancholy into a complex, yet ambiguous, network of ideas which involved genius and divination, madness and mental disturbances, intellectual supremacy and moral deviance, to the sixteenth-century notion of conscious self-fashioning, more than a century has passed.

In the understanding of man's role and function it had brought some new attitudes: the conduct, both personal and professional, of Cardano has served in this paper as a case study for the interaction of various requirements (either internal or

much involved in *magia naturalis*.

[152] Paracelsus' view of the dignity and capacities of man is summarised by Webster in the following way: "Man was cast in the image of God; he was the centre part of creation, the summation of all the elements in the macrocosm. His status was so high and great that he is provided with *arcana*, *mysteria* and *magnalia* without number from the heavens. As God's legitimate heir, the effects of the Fall notwithstanding, man was destined to inherit the kingdom on earth." In Charles Webster, *From Paracelsus to Newton. Magic and the Making of Modern Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 49.

external) that a scientist had to satisfy in order to earn a livelihood and recognition in the scholarly community.

In connection with a case study a series of questions emerge. All that was stated on the basis of his works could take the research into two different directions in this concluding part: being a case study might imply that one's life and works were such an organic part of the tradition of his time that we cannot really talk about dynamism and evolution (as such, parallelism to contemporaries could highlight one's characteristics better), while a representative figure of an epoch could also be an example for progress (and thus we should indicate the points where he differs from his fellow scholars and his scientific background). The difference between the two approaches is obviously striking, while we cannot exclude the possibility of the coexistence of the two interpretations.

Before describing Cardano as belonging to the one or the other category, a brief overview of the context, and an evaluation of his activity in general, and his reception or rejection in particular, is necessary. On the basis of the autobiography and the numerous elements of self-narrative in the scientific corpus, we could see how Cardano built up the image of a chosen one of himself, step by step, through the advertisement of his special abilities, albeit always in a rather implicit manner. He appears to be quite innovative in this respect: while the Florentine Neoplatonist philosophers utilised mainly the Hermetic corpus, and – with reservations – the tradition of melancholy as the sources of their justification for their claims to be chosen ones, Cardano accentuated his particularity even through his independence from these well-known traditions.

Looking at the scientific, and especially the medical treatises, it becomes clear that Cardano did not deal seriously with the idea of a nexus between melancholy,

genius, and divination, and his attitude to melancholy (despite his notion of its metaphysical interpretation) remained purely medical. This, in my understanding, is due to the ambivalent view of this tradition, which did not stimulate anyone (at least not someone who wanted to be taken seriously in the scientific world) to refer to it as an authoritative source. This can be applied so much the more in the case of Cardano who was proudest of the successes he attained in the healing of the sick. Yet, it seems, most of his contemporaries did not doubt his being a melancholy character; most probably they discovered the salient correspondences between the features of the melancholy prototype (which we described in the first chapter) and that of Cardano: the dedication of Joannes Sambucus in his *Emblemata*[153] is a very good example.

Μισάνθρωπος Τίμων

Ad Hieron. Cardanum
ODERAT hic cunctos nes se nec amabat amicos,
Μισῶν ἀνθρώπους nomina digna gerens.
Ho vitium et morbus de bili nascitur atra,
Anxiat haec, curas suppeditatque graves.
Quapropter cecidisse piro, fregisseque crura
Fertur, et auxilium non petiisse malo.
Suavibus a sociis, et consuctudine dulci

[153] Joannes Sambucus, *Emblemata* (Budapest, 1982, facsimile edition of Antwerp, 1564), 126-127.

Qui se subducunt, vulnera saeva ferunt.
Conditio haec misera est, tristes suspiria ducunt,
Cumque nihil causa est, occubuisse velint.
At tu dum poteris noto sociere sodali,
Sublevet ut pressum coraque dolore vacet.
Quos nulla attingunt prorsus commercia grato
Atque sodalitio subsidiisque carent:
Aut Dii sunt proprii, aut falsus pervertit inanes
Sensus, ut hos stolidos, vanaque cordo putes.
Tu verotandem nobis dialectica sponte
Donata, in lucem mittito si memores.

Cardano was an eccentric misanthrope, a recluse who led a cloistered life, especially in his declining years. Even if he was not a conscious and proud melancholic (simply both proud of his skills and status, and aware of his previous inclination to melancholy[154]) he used other means – his works, that which he *did* rather than which he *was* – very efficiently while shaping his identity and stressing his special status.

The epoch was characterised by an excited and continuous search for the hidden secrets of nature, as I have pointed out in my introduction. The initiated was in possession of a higher knowledge, but not everyone could live as well with the notions acquired: the solitude of the melancholic has thus a parallel in the solitude of the scholar, because they both were prone to search for answers and explanations inside themselves, turning away from others, and very often from God in their *acedia*.

Doctor Cardano's favourite patient was signor Cardano,[155] and the way he was absorbed in the observation and detailed analysis of his physiological functioning, he was ready to explain psychological or even supernatural phenomena through his personal perspective. Many of the contemporaries and future generations for that

[154] In his autobiography Cardano, while recounting his "defects," casually mention that as a young boy he had a melancholy temperament. See Cardano, *De propria vita*, *Opera omnia* I, LII, 29.
[155] See the article of Ann C. E. Van Galen, "Body and Self-Image in the Autobiography of Gerolamo Cardano," in Karl Enenkel, ed. *Modelling the Individual: Biography and Portrait in the Renaissance* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1998), 133-152.

very reason labelled him an atheist:[156] it is true that he dedicated his energies to the understanding of the creatures of God, not that of God Himself. This is nothing surprising or new in the sixteenth century: all those who were involved in the constant exploration of nature considered it to be the manifestation of God, and the secrets they happened to find there (such as the dreams or demons were, for Cardano), were seen as testimonies to God's infinite goodness and providence. However, reading those texts today, one often has the impression that God, being on both sides of the equation, as it were, may be dropped out of consideration (or "put in brackets," in twentieth-century philosophical terms), and thus appears to play quite a minor role in the speculations of natural science. Indeed, the suspicion arises that for many such thinkers that lip-service only is being paid, as in the less scientific cases of Machiavelli and, admittedly later, Hobbes. It was not the fact that he practised natural philosophy that caused him many troubles or bad reputation and criticism, but the way he did it. He chose to write in Latin, since writing in vernacular put the author beyond the range of normal academic discourse, but his Latin was very difficult to understand for traditionally educated scholars (such as Julius Caesar Scaliger, who mocked Cardano for this[157]) who expected to encounter the terminology of Aristotle's *Organon*, that being the model in academic circles.[158] Furthermore, Cardano

[156] C. W. T. Blackwell, "The Historiography of Renaissance Philosophy and the Creation of the Myth of the Renaissance Eccentric Genius – Naudé through Brucker to Hegel," in Eckhard Keßler, ed. *Girolamo Cardano* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1994), 339-369. In fact, Cardano is included in the following histories of atheism: J. F. Buddeus, *Theses theologicae de atheismo et superstitione* (Jena, 1717), J. F. Reimman, *Historia universalis atheismi* (Hildesheim, 1725), while they both came to the same conclusion: Cardano was superstitious but not an atheist.

[157] Julius Caesar Scaliger, *Exotericae exercitationes de subtilitate* (Frankfurt: Claudius Marnius, 1607). On the philosophical controversy between Cardano and Scaliger see Guido Giglioni, "Girolamo Cardano e Giulio Cesare Scaligero. Il dibattito sul ruolo dell'anima vegetativa," in M. Baldi and G. Canziani, eds. *Girolamo Cardano. Le opere, le fonti, la vita* (Milan: Francoangeli), 313-331; and Ian Maclean, "The Interpretation of Natural Signs: Cardano's *De subtilitate* versus Scaliger's *Exerctitationes*," in Brian Vickers, ed. *Occult and Scientific Mentalities in the Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 231-252.

[158] Kristian Jensen, "Cardanus and his Readers in the Sixteenth Century," in Eckhard Keßler, ed. *Girolamo Cardano*, 265-308. Jensen claims that Cardano's bad Latin was one of the reasons why the encyclopedic works, addressed to the academic world with the intention of filling a gap in scientific

repeatedly claimed that no textual authority could oppose conclusions drawn from experience[159] and he also took a position rather contrary to the occult tradition, when stated that human knowledge was finite. This statement is again something that makes a clear-cut labelling of his work almost impossible. The strenuous effort with which Cardano was looking for the secrets of nature with the intention of describing them in terms of natural science, would easily place him among the many others involved in *magia naturalis* and the occult tradition;[160] at the same time he appears to oppose the idea that all things are knowable to the wise.[161]

This controversy or difficulty in the interpretation of his attitude leads back to a question posed in the beginning of this thesis: Is there any system underlying his scattered ideas? Is the confusion that the reader might find here and there in Cardano's work, especially after having confronted some contradictory parts, due to the author's own inconsistency? So far no researcher has claimed to have found a coherent ideological system in Cardano's numerous and most diverse writings (indeed, he did not found any philosophical school, and had no immediate followers).

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literature, became source books of extraordinary events, and what is more, they won attention first of all among students and non-scholarly circles. Jensen's judgement of Cardano is the following: "He could take part in the initial phases of a scientific revolution, consisting in a critique of the established system of description of the natural world; but he could not push on to the next phase, providing a cohesive alternative which could accommodate facts better than the system he wished to replace… he used old words to mean something new." Jensen, "Cardanus and his Readers in the Sixteenth Century," 306.

[159] I have pointed out earlier that the category of experience, *experimentum*, for Cardano included hearsay and things that others have observed before him as well, as happened in the case of the sirens, and that of the demons (In the latter case, for example, it was the testimony of his father that was crucial for him: the fact that Fazio Cardano claimed to have a demon convinced Gerolamo Cardano of their existence, although he never expressed his belief in the explicitly, except in his autobiography). As Findlen states, "Experience now played a greater role in the constitution of scientific authority, and the naturalists who claimed the greatest level of "experience" subsequently came to possess the highest degree of knowledge." Paula Findlen, *Possessing Nature. Museums, Collecting, and Scientific Culture in Early Modern Italy* (Berkeley-Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994), 157.

[160] See Paula Findlen, *Possessing Nature. Museums, Collecting, and Scientific Culture in Early Modern Italy* (Berkeley-Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994): "For seventeenth-century naturalists, knowledge of nature increasingly signified *power over nature*. Constantly critiquing Renaissance natural magic for being overly speculative in its claims to perform extravagant and unheralded experiments, they nonetheless drew inspiration from these activities." Findlen, *Possessing Nature*, 54.

It is, however, much clearer what he was aiming at. He took part in a movement that intended to reform knowledge through an attempt at synthesising some of the major traditions of the European culture, such as the Aristotelian and the Humanist traditions. Apart from the synthesis of respected old traditions, the goal of their activity was to reach to something new and revolutionary. The stress put on the importance of experience reflects this conscious effort and indeed the understanding of its essential role in science (even if both the words "experience" and "science" meant something rather different for them) can be considered as a decisive step towards rational science hallmarked traditionally by the name of Descartes, whose contemporary, Leibniz, noted Cardano's worth in the quote given in the introduction.

In this respect we can acknowledge the scientific activity of Gerolamo Cardano as contributing to the birth of modern science; the restrictions we have to bear in mind are clear now. There are no real restrictions, however, when it is his merit as a mathematician under examination, since it is a fact that he was the first scholar who managed to demonstrate the formula of cubic equations.[162] There were, furthermore, a number of genial observations he made in the field of medicine,[163] and also some of his inventions[164] proved to be long lasting.

His manifold interests, the numerous difficulties he had to face as a scholar and even more as a private individual (we must not forget Cardano's social background: he was not born to a rich noble family, he did not enjoy the numerous advantages that solid background could have provided) of and the eager search for

[161] In his *De arcanis aeternitatis*, *Opera omnia* X, he classifies three types of sources of knowledge: (1) intuition or innate ideas, (2) senses and reason, and (3) ecstasy.
[162] On Cardano's contribution to mathematics, see Silvio Maracchia, *Da Cardano a Galois – Momenti di storia dell'algebra* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1979), especially pages 17-57.
[163] The most recent and most detailed analysis of Cardano's medicine is in Nancy G. Siraisi, *The Clock and the Mirror. Girolamo Cardano and Renaissance Medicine* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).
[164] The so-called "joint of Cardan," for example. On this invention see Berthold Laufer, *Cardan's Suspension in China* (Washington, 1916).

knowledge dissipated his energies: this is the reason why his figure is still seen as very controversial, despite his indisputable merits in many of the fields of knowledge he was engaged in. He, similarly to many of his contemporaries, wanted to grasp too much, although it would be very unjust to say that he held too little. "Little" is hardly applicable to the quantity of his writings: the ten folio volumes (not considering the works that he himself destroyed or the ones that might be lost) are the fruit of his infinite curiosity and the need to record everything he observed, the things around and inside him.

The intertwining of life (both physiological and psychological) and work to such an extent is a particular feature of Cardano. In the world of artists one can encounter similar phenomena: also Benvenuto Cellini, in his *Vita*, gives evidence of a shameless self-confidence,[165] and his many adventures testify to the fact that he did not make a distinction between his private life, emotions, personal preferences and work. Yet Cardano's attitude is unique in many respects: the autobiography's importance is beyond doubt, but, had it not been preserved throughout the centuries, we still would know plenty of things about his life from the so-called scientific corpus, and what is more peculiar, about his feelings, his conduct in a scholarly ambience and in the circle of his family.

Cardano's case is by no means the best-known among his contemporaries, to say nothing of his predecessors and successors in these Renaissance endeavours, those savants, half medic and half mystic, who are celebrated today. Yet perhaps this is to his credit – he has no ill fame of the like which is accorded to Paracelsus, or Dee and Kelley. Accusation of heresy may have some validity in the context of his time, and accusations of naiveté or histrionic self-obsession may have some currency in the

context of ours, but accusations of malice or duplicity or fraud will not stand up. Whatever else Cardano was, he was sincere. Only some reservations need be made with regard to his eagerness to seize upon any evidence of his elect status, be they wayward progeny or the planet ruling over him (Venus, not Saturn, which both raises and begs certain questions). If he was hungry for recognition, he was not greedy for anything else – no alchemist in the Kelley mould he. Despite his fascination with himself as self, he maintains a (pre- or proto-) scientific objectivity in medical matters as they were understood to him. Thus we can understand Leibniz's estimation: Cardano was indeed great, but working within a confused tradition, and with limited tools of analysis and data (save in pure mathematics, where mental effort and conceptual reasoning sufficed and prevailed, without being sullied by contact with the surly bonds of quotidian personal experience).

> As an exception, however, he found room in his library for the celebrated twenty-two volumes *De subtilitate*, and for some anti-peripatetic work of Cardano's, in consideration of his knowledge of astrology; for he would say that anyone who could write the treatise *De restitutione temporum et motuum coelestium* and the book *Duodecim geniturarum* was worth listenting to, even when he erred; and that the man's great defect was having too much talent; and that no one could guess where he might have got to, even in philosophy, if he had always kept to the right road.[166]

Cardano's work is far from being completely explored. There are further avenues of research, especially in the form of more profound parallels with contemporaries, such as Giambattista Della Porta, who, in imitation of Cardano, styled himself a "man of

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[165] Similarly to Cardano, Cellini, himself a melancholic, felt that he was always protected and guided by divine providence. In *The Autobiography of Benvenuto Cellini*, J. A. Symonds, ed. (New York: Modern Library, s. a.).

[166] "Per eccezione però, dava (Don Ferrante) luogo nella sua libreria a que' celebri ventidue libri *De subtilitate*, e a qualche altr'opera antiperipatetica del Cardano, in grazia del suo valore in astrologia; dicendo che chii aveva potuto scrivere il trattato de restitutione temporum et motuum coelestium, e il libro *Duodecim geniturarum*, meritava d'essere ascoltato, anche quando spropositava; e che il gran difetto di quell'uomo era stato d'aver troppo ingegno; e che nessuno si può immaginare dove sarebbe arrivato, anche in filosofia, se fosse stato sempre nella strada retta." Alessandro Manzoni, *I promessi sposi* (Florence: Le Monnier, 1985); in English *The Betrothed*, tr. by Archibald Colquhoun (New York: Dutton, 1961), 419.

inventions," and claimed to be a magus capable of exceeding anything done by the ancients.[167] While this parallel would lead us backwards compared to the position Cardano's work occupies in the history of science (if we accept that rational science is a higher level than natural philosophy) to the *magia naturalis*, a different parallel could direct us towards even more exciting research: that is, a comparison with the self-awareness of the great French essayist, Michel de Montaigne.

There are several similarities and numerous diversities between the two authors and the two works: Montaigne was not much older than Cardano; yet what he represents is a much more critical attitude to the same sources, a step further towards rationalism and criticism. What these two philosophers share is the immense curiosity for the outside world, and what is more, "We find self-awareness in the Renaissance… but Montaigne outstripped them all. He looked into himself and found things strange and monstrous."[168] Montaigne "had a melancholy element in his complexion which encouraged him to take all forms of ecstasy and mania very seriously"; nevertheless the position he took was different: he was "the heir to the best part of a century of criticism of such doctrines. The *Essays* show that he rejected a great deal of what Ficino and the others stood for; what he kept he hedged about with caveats and provisos."[169] They both entertained manifold interests, and in both the works (in the case of Cardano the whole corpus, while in Montaigne's the statement is true basically for the *Essays*) it is very difficult to find a system.[170] The latter's

[167] See Findlen, "Cardano was an inventor because he repeatedly established first knowledge on a variety of different subjects. This was the model that Della Porta strove to emulate when he surrounded himself with the various technologies that completed his identity as a magus," in Paula Findlen, *Possessing Nature*, 324.
[168] M. A. Screech, *Montaigne & Melancholy. The Wisdom of the Essays.* (London: Duckworth, 1983), xi. "I have no more made my book than my book has made me, a book consubstantial with its author, concerned with my own self, an integral part of my life," *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, tr. and ed. Donald M. Frame (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), v.
[169] Screech, *Montaigne & Melancholy*, xi-xii.
[170] The *Essays* do not treat such matters systematically. The pleasure to be found in them depends partly on their apparent lack of order – a feature sometimes artistically contrived but also attributable to

criticism indicates the path which Cardano took, the path that was supposed to lead to experience; however, while Cardano agreed to identify the "Anthropofagi" with cannibals, "Montaigne did not accept such notions, he did his best to find out what cannibals were really like by reading and inquiry."[171]

The comparison of these two excellent figures of the late Renaissance, through the misconceptions of the one and the scepticism[172] of the other, could help to perceive what the nature of *change* (that most of the contemporaries were aware of but could not define) in the understanding of "science" and "nature," or man's role in the universe was in the course of the sixteenth century.

the various layers of text which the reader is confronted. Montaigne may return to the same topic in widely different places or, more confusingly, on the same page at widely different dates. That is because the *Essays* are not a work expounding an established doctrine; they lead us along the criss-cross paths of a journey of discovery. Montaigne set out to discover himself. What he discovered was the human race," Screech, *Montaigne & Melancholy*, xii.

[171] *Ibid*., 3.

[172] "Socrates, Plato or anybody else may teach us something as men, but nothing at all infallibly, so that we must not take them for God's mouthpiece. If we are to find infallible guidance, we have to turn away from Man to God or his Church," *Ibid*., xiii.

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