



Fig. 121. Salvator Rosa, *Poet-Philosopher*, c. 1647, oil on canvas, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

CHAPTER FOUR

Rosa as Poet-Philosopher: The Friend as a Second Self

The enigmatic *Poet-Philosopher*, now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (Fig. 121), is the most intriguing of Rosa's pictorial odes to friendship, and it deserves special attention. Probably painted around 1647, the painting tells a complex story about Rosa's understanding of friendship and its important role for his professional identity as a free painter-philosopher. Made as a gift for Ricciardi, and presumably given to him around the time of its making, the painting has long been described as a self-portrait of Rosa, but convincing proposals have also been made in support of the work as a portrait of Ricciardi.¹ No portrait of Ricciardi survives, however, with which to make a comparison.² The figure in the *Poet-Philosopher* is conspicuous for lacking certain physiognomic congruities with other self-portraits or portraits of the artist, images that collectively offer some sense of Rosa's actual physical appearance—such as the self-portrait in the *Battle between the Christians and the Turks* (Fig. 22), the *Self-Portrait as Pascariello* (Fig. 13), and the contemporary portrait of the artist by Giovanni Battista Bonacina (1662) (Fig. 20). This incongruity is not in itself evidence enough to dismiss the possibility of the Metropolitan Museum painting as a self-portrait: many of Rosa's other self-images appear to be more allegorical or symbolic in nature than expressly veristic in their representation of his physical features.³ The early documents seem to be either divided in their opinion on the identification of the sitter (suggesting perhaps a comparable uncertainty on the part of early viewers), or unclear about the identity of the specific painting in question, referred to alternatively as a portrait of Ricciardi, a self-portrait of Rosa, or an image of a philosopher.⁴ There are two particularly revealing instances among these records, significant because of their close proximity to the date the painting was made and to the period in which it still hung in Ricciardi's house on the Lungarno Gambacorti in Pisa.⁵ The first is a reference to the painting by the painter Giovanni Navarretti (1605–1651) in an entry in his *ricordi*, or diary, dated 28 August 1648 (a recent discovery by Franco Paliaga that has also allowed for a more precise date for Rosa's painting).⁶ Navarretti, who was particularly interested in Rosa's painting technique, records seeing in Ricciardi's house:

a philosopher contemplating a skull, by the hand of Salvator Rosa, which was executed in very strong, dark tones, and the lightest passages in half-tones, painted with a lively brush and without any retouching, and I was told that it was executed without blocking out, but I hesitate to believe this. The figure's head was crowned with cypress and it was done with such great diligence that, examined up close, it was very finished. In truth, there was nothing that was scumbled, and I've studied it very closely and its *chiaroscuro* was extremely gradated.⁷

The second document of significance is an apparent reference to the painting in the 1687 inventory of Ricciardi's belongings, drawn up at his death: "a large painting of a philosopher writing on a death's head".⁸ In both the inventory record and Navarretti's diary entry there is a meaningful choice of words: the figure in the painting is described as a "philosopher" rather than a portrait of Ricciardi or a self-portrait of Rosa, identifications that would presumably have received mention in documents with such close proximity to the painting, had it been intended expressly as a representation of the artist or his friend. Ricciardi's inventory

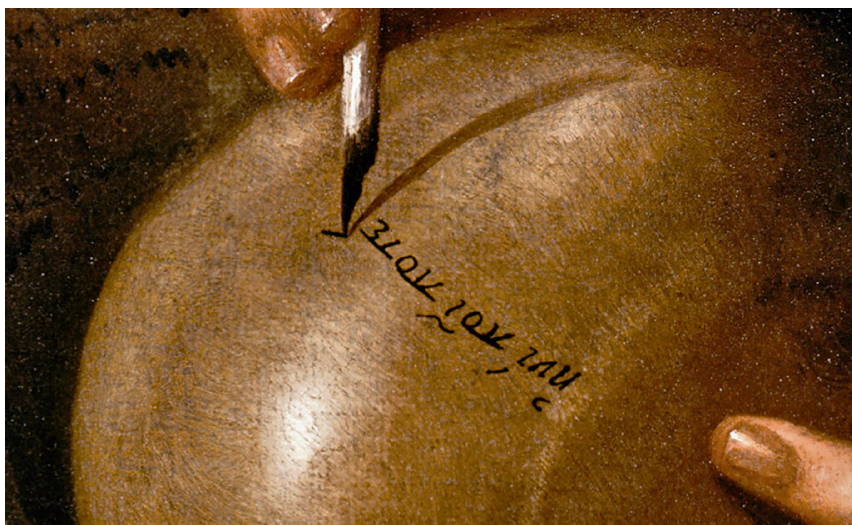


Fig. 122. Salvator Rosa, *Poet-Philosopher*, c. 1647, oil on canvas, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, detail of inscription on skull



Fig. 123. Salvator Rosa, *Poet-Philosopher*, c. 1647, oil on canvas, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, detail of dedicatory inscription

also lists a “portrait of Signor Dottore Giovan Battista without a frame,” further making a clear distinction between “ritratti” (portraits) and various “teste” or heads of philosophers, saints and unidentified figures.⁹ If the *Poet-Philosopher* had been intended as a portrait of Ricciardi, then one might expect it to be identified as such in an inventory that explicitly names another portrait of the sitter, in the same collection. The classification of the painting as a “philosopher” suggests it may well have been interpreted and described as such by Ricciardi himself. This early identification of the figure—indicative either of Rosa’s intended subject or of early viewers’ uncertainty in regard to the figure’s identification—is important in connection with the interpretation of the painting offered here.

The philosopher depicted in Rosa’s painting stands at the edge of a table, his figure silhouetted against a dark and cloud-streaked night sky faintly lit by a crescent moon. Absorbed in thought, he looks down at a skull, its highly polished surface gleaming in the moonlight. Cradling the skull with one hand, he writes a Greek inscription across the cranium with the other: “ἦνί ποί ποτέ” (“Behold whither, eventually,” or, “it is here that we come to our end, sooner or later”) (Fig. 122).¹⁰ His long, dark, wavy hair is crowned with a wreath of cypress leaves, and his neatly groomed beard and moustache and sober yet elegant clothing suggest both modesty and refinement. He recalls many of Rosa’s other images of solitary philosopher-types, but he is no shabby hermit.¹¹ The skull rests on the supple binding of a book, one of its pages marked with a piece of paper. Behind,

on the table, there is another, larger tome propped open and upright—perhaps the source of the austere Greek maxim. A crumpled sheet of paper wedged between the two books bears a dedicatory inscription: “Salvator Rosa dipinse nell’Eremo e dono a Gio Batt Ricciardi suo Amico” (“Salvator Rosa painted this in a solitary place, and gave it to his friend, Giovan Battista Ricciardi”) (Fig. 123). This inscription, together with other iconographic and compositional elements of the painting explored in greater detail, below, provides a key to understanding the painting’s subject and purpose as a pictorial homage to the ideal of the moral and melancholic poet-philosopher, an identity to which both Rosa and Ricciardi aspired and one that they achieved through the intimate and intellectual reciprocities of their unique friendship.

Rosa and Ricciardi

Rosa's friendship with Ricciardi was one of the most significant and long-lasting of all the artist's relationships. Over half of Rosa's surviving epistolary correspondence is addressed to Ricciardi, and these affectionate and sometimes passionate letters, which continue right up until Rosa's death in 1673, offer ample evidence of the degree of their mutual affection and esteem. The letters also reveal a covetous relationship. The younger Ricciardi, who was eight years Rosa's junior, often expressed his jealousy over the friendships Rosa shared with other colleagues, and the artist finds himself frequently compelled to defend and reaffirm his loyalty. Rosa met Ricciardi during his decade-long sojourn in Tuscany, although the exact date and circumstances of their first meeting are not certain. Perhaps they met in Florence, shortly after Rosa arrived in the city in 1640, or, as Paliaga has proposed, during Rosa's time spent at the Maffei family's villa at Monterufoli, around 1646, when Rosa appears to have broken with the Medici family.¹² Rosa's and Ricciardi's shared love of ancient philosophy, literature, moral satire and theatre likely made them fast friends. Ricciardi is listed by Baldinucci as a member of the Percossi, and he was an active participant in their theatrical productions and poetry recitals.¹³ He was close with many of Rosa's other friends, who—like Rosa—also participated in the theatrical activities of the Accademia degli Stravaganti in Pisa, centred upon the performance of Ricciardi's own dramatic compositions. Ricciardi was also friends with the Maffei brothers, and spent time with Rosa at the Maffei family's properties in the Volterranean countryside, in addition to hosting Rosa at the villa of Strozzevolpe, owned by Ricciardi's family.¹⁴ Rosa's letters, which record a constant exchange of books and a trade in ideas, reveal the significant extent to which Ricciardi's knowledge of and expertise in literature and language made him an indispensable resource for Rosa's pictorial and textual production, as well as for the artist's poetic-philosophical self-image. It is this identity, and the recognition of its formulation in friendship, that the Metropolitan Museum painting seems to commemorate. Rather than protract the ongoing debate over the painting's status as either a portrait or self-portrait, the suggestion offered here is that the painting could in fact be understood as both, and may have been intended as such. This interpretation privileges the work's status as a gift, a homage to friendship and an index of the processes of exchange and unification in which that relation consists. In effect, the painting is a *Freundschaftsbild* or friendship painting that, like many contemporary images of its kind, offers the viewer a unitary vision of amity that imagines the friend as a "second self".

Rosa as Ricciardi

Rosa's friends pointed out the similarities between the artist and his friend. In 1652, for example, Rosa noted in one of his letters that their mutual friend, the Franciscan bishop Bonaventura Cavalli (1619–1689), had apparently perceived in Ricciardi a close similarity to Rosa in "exaggerating and expressing things," a sign Rosa took as evidence that he was "in" Ricciardi's heart.¹⁵ In 1641 Rosa expressed his own convictions about this parity when he referred to himself and Ricciardi jointly as "tittatoria," a moniker that unites the Neapolitan names for "Giovann Battista" and "Salvator".¹⁶ In his letters, Rosa often made note of his affinities with Ricciardi, particularly in regard to their shared temperament and experience of hardship: "Believe me, friend, that I feel your sufferings in my soul, and that, together with my own, they create enough of a lamentable concord to produce water from stone," he wrote in 1657.¹⁷ The ideal underlying the sentiment of unity in friendship is succinctly expressed in one of the maxims from Rosa's own collection of proverbs, known as *Il Teatro della Politica* (1669), a collection that speaks to Rosa's love of pithy philosophical aphorisms—comparable to the ones we find in a number of his pictorial and graphic works, including the *Poet-Philosopher*.¹⁸ The maxim reads: "One half of me is myself, and the other half is my friend."¹⁹ The ancient notion of the friend as a second self is one of the central tenets of amity that sustains philosophical practice, and was a common trope in



Fig. 124. Salvator Rosa, *Poet-Philosopher*, c. 1647, oil on canvas, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, detail of “SENECA” inscription

early modern intellectual discourse. The idea of similitude between self and friend has its origins in the writings of Aristotle and Cicero, and was featured in numerous ancient histories and mythologies such as the tale of Alexander and Hephaestion.²⁰ But it was also of particular interest to the Stoic philosophers with whom Rosa had a particular fascination.²¹ Seneca the Younger—whose name (“SENECA”) Rosa initially wrote on the binding of one of the books represented in the *Poet-Philosopher* and then, for unknown reasons, painted out (Fig. 124)—wrote

extensively on the subject of friendship, and reaffirmed the ancient dictum: “true friendship is, in fact, a union of souls.”²² Early modern authors revived the precept in their own discussions of friendship, among them Baldassare Castiglione, Marsilio Ficino, Pietro Aretino, Michel de Montaigne, Francesco Pona and Justus Lipsius.²³ The ancient Greek concept of *homonoia* (“like-mindedness,” “concord,” or a state of “being of one mind together”)—a concept that expresses the conjoining of identities occasioned by friendship as “second-selfhood,” and the closeness and reciprocity of interests and affection that bring about that union—is a key prerequisite for that highest category of amity, true or perfect friendship.²⁴

Rosa’s frequent epistolary recourse to the trope of similitude in friendship suggests his faith in it as an ideal that expresses a sincere sentiment. Relentless in his attempts to reassure a jealous, possessive and emotionally fragile Ricciardi of his affection, Rosa’s countless expressions of love and devotion, oaths of obligation and declarations of loyalty are peppered with appeals to the trope of unity in friendship. A particularly salient example comes in a letter to Ricciardi of 1661, in which Rosa once again laments and reprimands his friend’s suspicious accusations:

I suspected that you’d give in to this heresy, refuting my Bible, but this matters little to my innocence, which knows it has no fault in such matters. So, content yourself to believe that even you are weak and share the qualities of other men. I’ve always believed that the friend is a second self, by virtue of holy friendship. It’s no surprise, then, that sometimes one neglects one’s own matters, even those that are more important. You should understand the truth of this, and I’m astonished to hear you oppose it.²⁵

In a previous letter (the “Bible” to which he refers here), Rosa had informed Ricciardi that his many avowals of friendship were not hyperbolic exaggerations but completely sincere, suggesting that he saw in the trope of similitude in friendship the opportunity to convey a genuine and heartfelt conviction.²⁶

In this regard, too, it is meaningful that Rosa chose to give as a gift to Ricciardi an image of a poet-philosopher, consumed in meditation upon the mortal condition. The figure in the *Poet-Philosopher* embodies the ideals and interests that had first bonded the two friends and that codify their mutual self-identification, an affinity of interests that is also perhaps celebrated in Rosa’s *The Genius of Salvator Rosa* etching of 1662 (Fig. 6), which pays homage to (among other things) the two intellectual pursuits that comprise not only Rosa’s but also Ricciardi’s professional identity: philosophy and poetry. As a gift and a *Freundschaftsbild*, Rosa’s painting is at its heart an image about a relationship. A tribute to Rosa’s and Ricciardi’s mutual interests, the painting’s protagonist resonates simultaneously as a self-portrait and

portrait, an expression perhaps of the notion of “multiplicity in unity” that characterizes a more pervasive seventeenth-century aesthetic conception.²⁷ Such an interpretation of the figure in Rosa’s painting does not discount or problematize any concurrent or future consideration of the figure as a portrait of Ricciardi or a self-portrait of Rosa, identifications for which future documentary discoveries may make a stronger case. It is possible, too, that the physical features of the figure in the painting derive from Rosa’s or Ricciardi’s own. But the figure remains, nonetheless, *more* than just a portrait or a self-portrait. As a poet-philosopher, he is the embodiment of a relational self—a self reliant upon its reflection in an other—whose physical features, as will be argued at greater length, below, seem to have been carefully manipulated in order to present an allegorical ideal. Like the characters of Rosa’s other self-portraits and portraits, he is a role to be adopted. The painting’s dedicatory inscription, a musing upon physical separation, suggests that the *Poet-Philosopher* was made—probably at the Maffei family’s villa at Monterufoli—with the prospect of distance in mind: here, two friends are reunited in both a literal and metaphorical sense, through the exchange of the painting as a gift and through the opportunity of symbolic unity offered by the allegorical personification of the poet-philosopher himself.²⁸

Allegorical Self-Portraiture: The Self Performed in Paint

Attempts to identify the individual represented in Rosa’s painting on the basis of physiognomic features alone are inevitably problematic because of the way in which Rosa conceived of portraiture and self-portraiture. Rosa did not paint official or commissioned portraits, and the examples of explicitly veristic portraits by his hand are very few in number: the only known examples are the *Portrait of Lucrezia Paolini* (c. 1650–1656) and the so-called *Portrait of Rosalvo* (c. 1649–1655) (both Galleria Nazionale d’Arte Antica, Rome) (Figs 125 and 126), the latter of which—a presumed portrait of Rosa’s son Rosalvo—is perhaps a copy after a lost original.²⁹ In his apparent aversion to portraiture Rosa may have been guided by (or was himself an exponent of) the classicist prejudice against the genre, an attitude that culminated in André Félibien’s comments about portraiture in the preface to his *Conférences* of 1667, which privilege at the same time an allegorical treatment of philosophical and historical subjects in painting:

A painter who paints only portraits has not achieved the highest perfection and cannot pretend to those honours that the most erudite receive. For that one must move from one figure to the representation of several together; one must depict history and fable and represent great deeds like historians, or charming subjects like poets; and climbing ever higher, one must in allegorical compositions know how to cover under the veil of fable the virtues of great men, and the most exalted mysteries.³⁰

Rosa’s forays into a portraiture-like vein consist primarily of self-portraits and “teste” or fantasy heads, representations in the main of philosophers and poets. These works belong to a more pervasive type of image that blurred the line between personification and naturalistic representation (*ritrarre*), in which emblematic figures could easily be individualized to portray identifiable persons, or individuals slipped effortlessly into symbolic roles.³¹ As Victoria von Flemming has recently argued along similar lines, Rosa’s self-images belong to the category of portraits and self-portraits conceived not merely as “masks” but as representations of real or desired “social roles”.³² Derived in large part from precedents like Giorgione’s “allegorical” portraits, this kind of image found particular popularity among Florentine artists and patrons in the seventeenth century, exemplified by the work of Lorenzo Lippi, Carlo Dolci, Giovanni Martinelli, Baldassarre Franceschini and Francesco Furini, among others—a tradition of allegorical portraiture that (together with the half-length allegorical figures produced by Rosa’s Neapolitan teachers Jusepe de Ribera and Francesco Fracanzano) exerted a significant influence on Rosa.³³



Fig. 125. Salvator Rosa, *Portrait of Lucrezia Paolini*, c. 1650–1656, oil on canvas, Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica, Palazzo Barberini, Rome



Fig. 126. Salvator Rosa (copy after?), *Portrait of Rosalvo*, c. 1649–1655, oil on canvas, Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica, Palazzo Barberini, Rome

The profoundly melancholic iconography of Rosa's *Poet-Philosopher* plays a key role in the painting's allegorical dimension. Previously considered as evidence for dating the painting to around 1656, when Rosa suffered the heart-breaking loss of both his son Rosalvo and his brother Giuseppe to the plague in Naples, the melancholic content of the image can now be reoriented in connection with Rosa's Tuscan period.³⁴ It can also perhaps be interpreted more along the lines of an ever-present "state of being" than as a reference to a particular incident or moment in time. The "melancholic," in fact, an identity that both Rosa and Ricciardi cultivated as a key component of their philosophical personas (as is suggested by Rosa's letters and Ricciardi's poetry), had by the seventeenth century established itself as one of the roles available—and especially desirable—for the artist and poet to self-consciously adopt and perform.³⁵ It was also a natural fit for the thespian, and the theatrical quality of the *Poet-Philosopher* is inherent not only in its portrayal of a "character" to be performed but in the affective and rhetorical nature of Rosa's pictorial rendering of melancholia, which signals an awareness of the intrinsic theatricality of humorology itself.³⁶ The symbolic or emblematic qualities of Rosa's *Poet-Philosopher* derive in large part from the visual sources on which it draws, in particular Albrecht Dürer's *Melencolia I* (Fig. 127), the first image to provide a synthetic allegorical iconography of melancholy.³⁷ This characteristic of Rosa's painting is also informed by his love of allegorical modes of language, more generally—in the form of maxims, aphorisms, mottos and *imprese*—a predilection that finds obvious expression in the inscriptions of the Metropolitan Museum painting but also colours its iconographic conception as a whole. Like many of Rosa's self-images, the *Poet-Philosopher* circumscribes individual identity directly in relation to a symbolic "type," in order to underscore and accentuate certain characteristics over others. In this regard, the painting is akin to the numerous "teste" or "testaccie" produced by the artist, allegorical fantasy heads or character studies that seem to have been drawn or painted as

experiments in the representation of certain figure types and expressions (frequently fantastical and “exotic” in nature) and that occasionally partake of the actual physiognomies of Rosa or his friends.³⁸ Many of these paintings and drawings were given by Rosa to his friends as gifts, exemplary of the kinds of portraits and poems more commonly exchanged by members of the private literary academies of the period.³⁹ A good example of the type is Rosa’s *Head of a Man* (Fig. 17), which may have been painted as a gift for Rosa’s friend and fellow member of the Percossi, Luigi Ridolfi.⁴⁰ One of Rosa’s self-portraits, the Detroit *Self-Portrait as a Soldier* (Fig. 16), exemplifies an approach to portraiture comparable to that of the “teste”: the portrait is based—as Langdon has suggested—in a naturalistic exercise: Rosa’s close examination of his own features in the mirror he kept in his studio, as is suggested by the “challenging intensity of the gaze”; these features, however, are then idealized in a manner analogous to that of the “teste,” the face “longer and bonier than the slightly plump features” of the *Self-Portrait as an Artist* (Fig. 56), suggesting an intention on the artist’s part to produce more a study of expression than a naturalistic self-portrait.⁴¹ Like the Detroit *Self-Portrait*, the Birmingham *Head of a Man* has been considered a possible self-portrait of Rosa. But this quality of the image, as Langdon suggests, could be merely a product of Rosa’s frequent use of his own visage as a model.⁴² An additional fundamental question, then, in regard to the variable value we grant to these images—as either naturalistic self-portraits or allegorical types, or some hybrid of the two—concerns the artist’s intent: both the Detroit and Birmingham paintings are “types” derived from an examination of Rosa’s own features, but the former is interpreted as a self-portrait while the latter is generally considered a *testa di fantasia*. The question, in regard to both paintings, is to what extent Rosa aimed to privilege one objective over the other—naturalism or idealism. This is a meaningful consideration in regard to the *Poet-Philosopher* as well, which can be interpreted alternatively as a naturalistic representation of an individual (Rosa and/or Ricciardi) or as an allegorical homage to an abstract “type”. As a painting explicitly intended as a *Freundschaftsbild*, the *Poet-Philosopher* is inevitably a treatment of multiple identities—a phenomenon considered in greater detail, below—making especially useful the allegorical potential of the “teste” that clearly fascinated Rosa as a genre. In this instance, the allegorical type in question—the poet-philosopher—presented a convenient symbolic doppelgänger for both Rosa and his friend.

Rosa’s self-portraits are instruments of performance. They convey a vision of identity as a manipulable entity, staged in the service of representing ideal types and *personae* that he (and his friends) wished to embody, rather like the roles Rosa adopted as an actor. External markers of identity are modified in order to convey an idea (or ideal) of inner qualities and characteristics, allowing the sitter to make himself into the vehicle of his own moral-philosophical message. In other words, Rosa’s self-images present an image of “self” in the terms of an abstract ideal, based upon (but not strictly reproductive of) the idiosyncratic and unique features of his real, physical appearance. As Luigi Salerno observed, Rosa devised an “allegorical” brand of portraiture (a type more generally popular among classicizing artists of the seventeenth century) that was based upon his own image and those of his acquaintances, and was distinct from the “official” sort of portrait executed by many of his contemporaries.⁴³ In this respect, Rosa’s self-images express a more general interest on his part in



Fig. 127. Albrecht Dürer, *Melencolia I*, 1514, engraving



Fig. 128. Salvator Rosa, *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas*, 1639, oil on canvas, Museo Civico, Viterbo

the value of allegory as a category of visual—and in the case of his poetic satires, textual and oral—expression.⁴⁴ Indeed, Rosa's practice of making caricature drawings, comparable in kind to those of contemporaries like Pietro Testa and Pier Francesco Mola, can be considered to derive from the same impulse.⁴⁵ In one of the few biographical anecdotes concerning Rosa's activity as a portraitist, emphasis is placed upon his preference for altering features—even changing identities entirely—over striving for accurate, replicative verisimilitude. Baldinucci tells the story of the rather unattractive Florentine inn-keeper, Anna Gaetana, “equally ugly in face as she was humorous, lively, and eloquent in her speech,” soliciting a portrait from Rosa. The artist eventually conceded, presenting Anna with a painted caricature of a hideous old man with a long beard. At first offended by Rosa's portrayal, Anna was quickly converted by the artist's explanation: “Come on, now! You complain to me as though I've given you an ugly face. But ask anyone who knows you well to judge it, and if someone thinks it lacks intelligence—that is, that the portrait you consider to have such an ugly mug is not in fact much more beautiful than your own—I'll admit that you have reason to complain.” Baldinucci continues: “The woman remained even more confused. But because the painting, with its hideous appearance, was still a beautiful work of art, she had to admit to being properly fooled, taking the painting and cherishing it for as long as she lived, and after her death the same painting was sold by her heirs for a large sum.”⁴⁶ This prioritizing of symbolism over naturalism—or the subjection of naturalistic representation to abstract interpretation—also reflects the terms of Rosa's pictorial aesthetic more generally, in which inspired imagination, rather than rote imitation, is the guiding force (a matter

given further attention in chapter five).⁴⁷ A reading of Rosa's portraits and self-portraits as performance pieces also permits a change of interpretative trajectory in the analysis of the *Poet-Philosopher*. Rather than attempting to decipher the figure's physiognomic identity as one or the other friend, Rosa or Ricciardi, we can instead turn our attention to the character or allegorical ideal that is the focus of the image: the melancholic poet-philosopher.⁴⁸

Various scholars have noted the allegorical quality of Rosa's self-portraits, describing this characteristic in different ways—as “idealized” or “exaggerated,” for instance.⁴⁹ Rosa's self-images are also akin to the “allusive” brand of portraiture that Mark Roskill identifies as emerging in the work of Anthony Van Dyck (1599–1641) at the English court of the 1630s. In contrast to the “codified symbolism” of traditional sixteenth-century portraiture, Van Dyck's portraits presented a more “suggestive” and “self-consciously directed quality to the gesture and gaze,” employing only a limited number of props as signs of character or profession.⁵⁰ Rosa's self-portraits also function according to what Roskill describes as a process of “synecdoche”: individually, they convey discrete and essential aspects of the artist's character; collectively, they form a composite, multifaceted identity, expressive of Rosa's aspiration to be recognized as a complex and multi-talented *virtuoso*.⁵¹ Rosa's self-portraits articulate a vision of the self as a malleable and compound

construct, capable of being fashioned into various forms and divided into multiple components—a performative conception of selfhood that was particularly vital to Rosa during his early years in Florence, when most of his extant self-portraits were made. We find Rosa as painter and satirist, as in the case of the *Self-Portrait as an Artist* (Fig. 56); Rosa as moral-philosopher, in the case of the London *Allegory of Philosophy* (Fig. 52) (the revised title of which, replacing the previous identification as a “Self-Portrait as a Philosopher,” also expresses a general scholarly consensus in regard to the import of the work’s allegorical content);⁵² Rosa as actor, in the *Self-Portrait as Pascariello* (Fig. 13); and Rosa as soldier (or perhaps “actor-as-soldier”), in the *Battle between the Christians and the Turks* (Fig. 22) and the debated *Self-Portrait as a Soldier* (Fig. 15). A much later self-representation, *The Genius of Salvator Rosa* of 1662 (Fig. 6), unites various other, philosophical constituents of Rosa’s professional identity as a painter-philosopher into a single image, conceived here as a social gathering or *conversazione* of allegorical personifications. Interpreting Rosa’s self-images as “roles” or “performances” offers a more theoretically-appropriate category for understanding their physiognomic variance and their symbolic nature, both of these circumstances expressing a conscious decision on his part to shape his appearance in the service of adopting a persona.⁵³ As allegories, Rosa’s self-portraits also participate in the more pervasive didactic, moral-philosophical, and classicizing agenda that informs the rest of his pictorial and poetic *oeuvre*.⁵⁴ Some of Rosa’s self-portraits are performative in a more literal sense, taking part as they do in the tradition of the portrait “in-guise,” a type famously mastered by Rembrandt. In the *Self-Portrait as Pascariello* (Fig. 13), for example, Rosa portrays himself in the dress of an actor playing a role, an identity reaffirmed by the theatrical audience (here substituted by the viewer of the painting) and his fellow actors on stage. Other self-images are performative in their presentation of identity as socially contingent, a feature of early modern portraiture more generally.⁵⁵ The two witness self-portraits in the *Incredulity of Saint Thomas* of 1639 (Museo Civico, Viterbo) (Fig. 128) and the *Battle between the Christians and the Turks* of 1642 (Fig. 22), for example, express the artist’s association



Fig. 129. Salvator Rosa, Study for the *Poet-Philosopher* (*A Man Leaning on his Elbows Contemplating a Rectangular Object Resting on a Skull*), c. 1647, drawing, Teylers Museum, Haarlem



Fig. 130. Salvator Rosa, Study for the *Poet-Philosopher* (*A Wreathed Figure with a Skull*), c. 1647, drawing, South African National Gallery, Cape Town



Fig. 131. Salvator Rosa, Study for the *Poet-Philosopher*, c. 1647, drawing, Musée du Louvre, Paris (recto)



Fig. 132. Salvator Rosa, Study for the *Poet-Philosopher*, c. 1647, drawing, Musée du Louvre, Paris (verso)



Fig. 133. Salvator Rosa, Study for the *Poet-Philosopher*, c. 1647, drawing, Gabinetto dei Disegni e delle Stampe degli Uffizi, Florence



Fig. 134. Salvator Rosa, *A Seated Woman Writing on a Skull*, c. 1647, drawing, Gabinetto dei Disegni e delle Stampe degli Uffizi, Florence



Fig. 135. Jusepe de Ribera, *Archimedes*, 1630, oil on canvas, Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid



Fig. 136. Cesare Fracanzano, *Saint Francis Xavier*, 1630s, oil on canvas, Santa Maria di Nazareth, Barletta, Apulia

with and dependency upon a noble patron.⁵⁶ The (probably) self-referential figure in the *Philosophers' Grove* (Fig. 71), engaged in conversation with friends, also situates the artist's identity within the context of social exchange: here, the members of Diogenes's circle seem like stand-ins for the free intellectual community of Rosa's Florentine academy.

The preparatory drawings for the *Poet-Philosopher* (Figs 129–133), which exhibit the variety of ideas that Rosa worked through in devising his final conceit, also suggest the painting's allegorical intent.⁵⁷ In certain of these sketches, particularly the earliest of the group, the figure's face is more of a "type" than a highly individualized visage.⁵⁸ The allegorical nature of Rosa's painting is also suggested by a clearly related drawing (Fig. 134) that repeats almost identically the composition of the final canvas: a figure seen in three-quarter view is represented writing on a skull perched atop a parapet, her head bent in the same melancholic downward glance as the protagonist of Rosa's painting. Here, the young man present in the other preparatory drawings has been replaced with a young woman, whose female gender (as prescribed by the classical tradition of allegorical personifications) indicates the fundamentally allegorical purpose of Rosa's *conchetto*.⁵⁹

The allegorical incentive of Rosa's painting is further suggested by the visual sources that inform its melancholic, *vanitas* iconography. Rosa's interpretation of melancholia derives from two related pictorial traditions, one traceable to Dürer's *Melencolia I* (Fig. 127) and the other to Jusepe de Ribera's and Francesco and Cesare Fracanzano's half-lengths of philosophers and hermit saints (Figs 135, 136 and 137), the latter tradition having exerted a profound impact on Rosa during his youth in Naples.⁶⁰ Of particular relevance



Fig. 137. Francesco Fracanzano, *Philosopher in Meditation*, 1630s, oil on canvas, private collection, Rome

to Rosa's *Poet-Philosopher* is an etching by Ribera, *The Poet* (c. 1620–1621/1630s) (Fig. 138), considered the first image to unite poetry and melancholy within a single iconographic motif.⁶¹ Rosa's interest in Ribera's image is also suggested by his drawing of *A Poet Seated by a Tree* (Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto) (Fig. 139), datable to the 1640s and therefore roughly contemporaneous with the *Poet-Philosopher* as an idea for an allegorical representation of the poet-philosopher.⁶² Rosa's drawing provides a conceptual link between Ribera's etching and the *Poet-Philosopher* itself.⁶³ In both Rosa's drawing and Ribera's print, the setting is almost identical, with a large rock (a throwback to the large polyhedron in the background of Dürer's *Melencolia I*) and single tree trunk both represented on the right-hand side of the two images. The figures in the drawing and the print also share a generic physiognomy and laurel crown (which in the case of Rosa's drawing could instead be the cypress leaves that also appear in the *Poet-Philosopher*). Rosa's drawing makes a few important changes to Ribera's image, introducing ideas present in the *Poet-Philosopher*. While Ribera's figure is an older sage-type, swathed in the toga of the ancient philosopher, Rosa's is a younger man in contemporary dress. Rosa also introduces a variant on the melancholic pose, replacing Ribera's "head-in-hand" motif with the contemplative, downward-inclined head and a more subtle rendering of the partially-shadowed face. Rosa has included the books and pen of the poet, positioning the figure's left hand on a book that, in the Metropolitan Museum painting, is substituted with a skull. Inspired by Ribera, Rosa's work of the 1640s and 1650s clearly shows he was experimenting with and devising his own brand of allegorical imagery comprised of poets, hermits, philosophers and saints. A fascinating half-length poet-philosopher attributed to Ribera (c. 1637, private collection, Toronto) (Fig. 140), which might represent Democritus,



Fig. 138. Jusepe de Ribera, *The Poet*, c. 1620–1621/1630s, etching



Fig. 139. Salvator Rosa, *A Poet Seated by a Tree*, 1640s, drawing, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto

bears a certain physiognomic likeness to Rosa's secure self-images, and the young Neapolitan could well have acted as a model for Ribera in the master's production of images of philosophers and hermits. It may also be from Ribera that Rosa first acquired an interest in—and learned how to produce—a distinctly allegorical brand of self-portrayal.⁶⁴

Humorology, Physiognomy and the Melancholic Poet-Philosopher

Rosa's allegorical self-images, in which he manipulated his natural features in order to enhance certain aspects of his character, draw significantly from humorological and physiognomic theory. The ancient doctrine of humorology upholds that, while the individual is governed by one primary temperament or humour (determined both astrologically on the date of birth as well as diagnosed by physiological traits that predominate in the organs, the bodily fluids of bile, blood and phlegm playing a central role), he or she also comprises the other three temperaments in various quantities, and these other constituents rise and fall as the result of various causes.⁶⁵ Thus, the melancholic can at times experience the rise of his or her choleric, phlegmatic or sanguine proclivities. Rosa's epistolary comments make clear his own convictions about this process. The frequent reference he makes to his "bilious" nature emerges as an intrinsic component of his identity and his artistic and poetic practice, capable of spurring him to irate bouts of anger (thus subjecting him to his "choleric" tendencies toward rage) or plunging him into moments of ponderous "phlegmatic"



Fig. 140. Jusepe de Ribera (attrib.), *Poet-Philosopher*, c. 1637, oil on canvas, private collection, Toronto

contemplation that are alternatively creative and destructive. The “choleric” inclination of the bilious humour is perhaps on display in Rosa’s *Allegory of Philosophy* (Fig. 52) and the Siena *Self-Portrait as a Soldier* (Fig. 15), wherein Rosa’s choleric humour overtakes his natural melancholia and manifests itself as the source of both quick-tempered irritability and perceptive ingenuity.⁶⁶ Rosa’s “phlegmatic” proclivities, alternatively, may be exhibited in his rendering of the ideal poet-philosopher in the Metropolitan Museum painting, whose melancholia is overcome by stoic “flemma,” or phlegm, and lulled into a calm and contemplative state. The melancholic humour features prominently in Rosa’s epistolary musings on his humoral person.⁶⁷ On certain occasions, he discusses his melancholia directly in connection with “disease”—that is, as the cause of physiological and mental suffering—an idea fully in keeping with one ancient school of thought.⁶⁸ Rosa emphasizes in particular his “hypochondria,” a term from ancient and early modern medicine that refers not to a general state of paranoia or anxiety about illness, as we use it today, but to a depressive state of neurasthenia (or the mechanical weakness of the nerves). Closely linked with the humour of melancholia, the condition was brought on by problems with the functioning of the “ipocondri,” or the two lateral parts of the abdominal cavity, the same area of the body considered to be the seat of the melancholic humour.⁶⁹ (Rosa also uses the word in reference to Ricciardi’s own melancholic proclivities—an important instance of affinity between the two friends.⁷⁰)

On other occasions, Rosa touts his melancholic temperament as an intrinsic and desirable component of his creativity, his artistic occupations offering occasional moments of relief from his afflictions.⁷¹ The mental and physical detriments of melancholia are also required by his “bilious” spirit in order to create: the same “abundance” of bile that Rosa laments as the root of his physical suffering is also the source of his fiery, vitriolic righteousness and inventive freedom; his mind is “all bile, all spirit, all fire!” bringing him “to say diabolical things” in his satirical poetry.⁷² Rosa’s comment on this last matter suggests that he regarded his melancholic humour as a potentially unwieldy and even irrational source of inspiration that required mastery in order to be directed toward a positive and purposeful outcome: informing Ricciardi about his satire *L’Invidia*, Rosa asserted his ability to “restrain” his “bilious” proclivity, which—when given too much free reign—could potentially land him in hot water.⁷³ But Rosa also considered himself capable of “phlegmatic” calm: in spite of Ricciardi’s inexplicable inability to reply to his letters, Rosa said he would remain patient (“aver flemma”), “despite my nature, which has plenty of the rage [*non manca bile*] necessary to complain”.⁷⁴

In executing his self-portraits, Rosa also looked to the established codes of the science of physiognomy in the service of producing not truth in physiognomy but performance through physiognomic truth. His interest in physiognomy and its less serious cousin, caricature, is apparent from a series of drawings that were clearly inspired by a curiosity about Leonardo da Vinci’s drawings.⁷⁵ These images partake of the same vocabulary of emphatic gestures and facial expressions that more generally populate Rosa’s pictorial and graphic *oeuvre*, discussed in chapter three. Rosa produced a number of caricature drawings for friends, including an amusing drawing of his friend Reginaldo Sgambati (1640s, British Museum, London) (Fig. 141) and a drawing of a *Young Boy (A Dwarf?) Defecating*, inscribed on the verso with a dedication to Niccolò Simonelli

(c. 1635–1640, private collection) (Fig. 142).⁷⁶ Rosa shared an interest in caricature with contemporaries like Pietro Testa and Pier Francesco Mola, both of whom, as noted in chapter two, also directed their satirical attention as caricaturists to Simonelli.⁷⁷ Rosa's interest in the science of physiognomy may have been inspired by the teachings of the Stoics, who drew a close connection between external appearance and inner character, a primary concern in both the study of physiognomy and rhetoric.⁷⁸ Seneca the Younger, one of Rosa's favourites, discussed the issue at length in his letters and essays.⁷⁹ In formulating his pictorial selves, Rosa may also have found inspiration (directly or indirectly) in the recommendations of physiognomic treatises or commentaries on the *affetti* that aligned certain facial proportions, expressions and gestures with characters and temperaments.⁸⁰ The *Della fisionomia dell'uomo* (1586) by the Neapolitan polymath Giambattista della Porta was the preeminent text on the subject in the seventeenth century, and it enjoyed a particular popularity among Neapolitan artists.⁸¹ Della Porta's book assembled much of the earlier literature on the subject, combining the insights of astrology, humorology and nascent physiological medicine in order to promote physiognomy as a science based in natural principles.⁸² The physical variances detectable across Rosa's self-images may result from his incorporation of Della Porta's observations on physiognomy and humorology, adopted by the artist in order to produce a series of self-representative but idealized "characters". Other artists among Rosa's predecessors and contemporaries had altered their appearance in alternatively subtle or dramatic ways in order to convey a specific self-conception.⁸³ Like these individuals, Rosa seems to have been interested in the potentialities of psychological insight offered by physiognomic variation, and in exploring how those rules might be shaped in order to express an ideal persona.

Passeri paints a biographical portrait of the "real" Rosa, noting in particular the artist's swarthy complexion, dark and lively eyes, and thick black hair curling down to his shoulders.⁸⁴ These features are corroborated for the most part by the only contemporary portrait of the artist, executed by Giovanni



Fig. 141. Salvator Rosa, *Caricature of Reginaldo Sgambati*, 1640s, drawing, British Museum, London



Fig. 142. Salvator Rosa, *Caricature of a Young Boy (A Dwarf?) Defecating*, c. 1635–1640, drawing, private collection

Battista Bonacina in 1662 (Fig. 20), which Ricciardi praised as “engraved by divinity” but that Rosa found unsatisfactory. (Rosa may have considered the portrait to be inaccurate or unflattering, but his displeasure seems to have been motivated more by contempt for Bonacina’s talents in engraving, or perhaps by annoyance at the existence of a portrait that was not by his own hand, than by any actual deficiency in Bonacina’s verisimilitude.)⁸⁵ The print shows the same slightly protruding eyes, pursed lips (the upper lip protruding slightly over the bottom), large hooked nose, sharply angled eyebrows, sloped forehead, prominent cheekbones, groomed moustache, and long, dark curly hair, that recur (with some variation) in most of Rosa’s self-portraits. In his own self-images, Rosa seems to have subtly altered certain of his physical characteristics in order to emphasize different facets of his identity (in particular, the role of the inspired, incensed and melancholic poet-philosopher) according to the physiognomic code laid out by Della Porta. Rosa’s features lent him a rather uncanny natural resemblance to Della Porta’s “melancholic” man, and it is certainly plausible to suggest that, when it came to self-portraiture, Rosa seized upon a ready opportunity to cultivate and exaggerate aspects of those characteristics with that connection in mind. The hooked or aquiline nose, for example, which Bonacina’s portrait confirms as a feature of Rosa’s face, makes a frequent appearance in Rosa’s self-portraits, where it may have been either exaggerated or highlighted in order to emphasize the association Della Porta drew between a “hooked and aquiline nose” and a “magnanimous and regal spirit.”⁸⁶ The forehead and brow also feature prominently in Rosa’s self-images, reflective perhaps of their particular significance in physiognomic theory.⁸⁷ The painter and art theorist Charles Le Brun (1619–1690) noted in his *Traité des Passions* (1696) that the “brow is the part of the face from which the passions can be best known,” and that it “permit[s] an understanding of both nature and the agitation [of the spirit].” Eyebrows lowered toward the middle of the brow indicate “distress.”⁸⁸ In Rosa’s *Allegory of Philosophy* (Fig. 52), the *Self-Portrait as Pascariello* (Fig. 13), and the self-portrait in the *Battle between the Christians and the Turks* (Fig. 22), the figures’ eyebrows appear almost conjoined, a feature that Della Porta considered a sign of the melancholic man.⁸⁹ The eyebrows of Rosa’s self-referential protagonists in these images are prominent and dark, a sign of firmness and constancy according to Della Porta, but never especially thick, a feature associated with a propensity toward vice and poor character, and aligned with traits ranging from betrayal and treachery to arrogance, pridefulness and dissimulation.⁹⁰ In the *Allegory of Philosophy* (Fig. 52), its pendant *Poetry* (Fig. 53) (which Caterina Volpi has convincingly suggested may be interpreted as an allegorical self-image of Rosa, in this instance one that aligns the artist with the female personification of Poetry), and the *Self-Portrait as a Soldier* (Fig. 15), the figures’ brows are dramatically furrowed.⁹¹ For Della Porta, eyebrows arched toward the nose signalled an austere and acerbic personality, while the furrowed brow was associated with nobility.⁹² Both Aristotle and the twelfth-century philosopher Averroës had explicitly linked the “faccia rugosa” (the “furrowed” or “wrinkled” face) with the melancholic man, explaining this physical trait as a result of his physiological “dryness.”⁹³ For Della Porta, to lower the brow was also to signal annoyance, an interpretation fully in keeping with Rosa’s frequent desire to express his sharp and infuriated satirical spirit. Indeed, Volpi has linked the facial expression of the figure in Rosa’s *Allegory of Philosophy* to a line in Rosa’s satire, *Il Tirreno* (probably composed in the 1650s), in which he refers to a symbol identified with moral satirical poetry—the thyrsus: “I jest with the Thyrsus, and threaten with the eyebrow.”⁹⁴ The penetrating stare that characterizes the paired *Allegory of Philosophy* and *Poetry*, and that also features in the Siena *Self-Portrait as a Soldier*, was associated by Della Porta with a troubled or agitated state of mind.⁹⁵ The thin-lipped frown of the figure in Rosa’s *Allegory of Philosophy* may also signal more than just the silence advocated by the painting’s inscription: according to Della Porta, a large mouth with thin lips that turn down at the corners demonstrates “strength of spirit, magnanimity and nobility” since it recalls leonine features.⁹⁶ The downturned frown in this instance also seems to take a cue from Della Porta’s association between smiling and effusiveness of speech, the central subject of Rosa’s painting: “those without much to say,” says Della Porta, “do not smile often,” and those who smile in moderation are perceived as stable, intelligent and even friendly.⁹⁷ Della Porta’s list of the melancholic’s physical attributes, derived from ancient sources, reads almost like a description of Rosa himself: according to the ancient Greek physician Archigenes of

Apamea, for example, the melancholic had “dark skin, puffiness, bad odour, greed coupled with permanent leanness, depression, misanthropy, suicidal tendencies, true dreams, fears, visions, and abrupt transitions from hostility, pettiness and avarice, to sociability and generosity.”⁹⁸ Leaving aside the “bad odour” and any seriously considered “suicidal tendencies” (notwithstanding certain dramatic epistolary statements on Rosa’s part that occasionally seem to verge on this inclination), the rest of these characteristics are rather familiar. Rosa’s self-images typically display a swarthy complexion with protruding eyes, and he would be the first to admit his misanthropy, his conflicted sense of avarice and charity and his particular talent for holding grudges; Rosa was even by his own admission occasionally subject to fear-inducing compulsions: “my head is assaulted by the most beastly impulses,” he wrote to Ricciardi in 1652 “when I’m not thinking about books or canvases”—occupations, moreover, that Rosa’s contemporaries regarded as antidotes to the negative effects of melancholia.⁹⁹ On close inspection, the figure in Rosa’s *Poet-Philosopher* seems to share many physical characteristics with both Bonacina’s portrait of the artist and Passeri’s description: the long aquiline nose, slightly bulging eyes, high cheekbones, moustache and short beard, and the shoulder-length, dark brown, wavy hair. It is also possible that Ricciardi looked a little bit like Rosa, and we know from Rosa’s letters that Ricciardi also identified as a melancholic.¹⁰⁰ It is plausible to suggest that—when it came to devising the protagonist of the *Poet-Philosopher*—Rosa took inspiration, as he did in the creation of his other portraits and self-portraits, from his or his friend’s visage (or perhaps both), manipulating those facial characteristics in subtly varying ways in order to convey an ideal persona that could be adopted and performed by either friend. Less dramatic in its contortions than the aggressively confrontational *Self-Portrait as a Soldier* (Fig. 15) and *Allegory of Philosophy* (Fig. 52), the expression adopted by the figure in the *Poet-Philosopher* seems almost an image of the melancholic poet-philosopher *par excellence*: his aquiline nose and elegant attire signal his nobility; his shadowed face, slightly protruding eyes, dark hair and bent head point to his physiological melancholia; and his closed lips and downcast eyes refer to his intelligent and contemplative demeanour.¹⁰¹

Poetic Melancholy

As a *vanitas*, the *Poet-Philosopher* makes use of various iconographic conceits typical of the genre. There are certain aspects of the image, however, that make it unusual and unique in this regard. The painting articulates a sophisticated understanding of melancholia, in particular a seventeenth-century brand of “poetic” melancholy in which the melancholic experiences a “double-edged feeling” resulting from access to higher knowledge and increased self-awareness: an experience “in which the soul enjoys its own loneliness, but by this very pleasure becomes again more conscious of solitude.”¹⁰² This dual sensation appears to be at work in Rosa’s painting, where the protagonist is both depressed and inspired, creative and languid, subject to and transcendent over the ever-present threat of mortality.¹⁰³ Poetic melancholy finds its most meaningful visual expression in the figure’s “depressed” downward stare. In combination with the swarthy, slightly shadowed face, the downward stare reveals “both the obscure doom and the obscure source of creative genius.”¹⁰⁴ It also signals the melancholic’s particular susceptibility to longing and lamentation, an idea to which Rosa alludes with the “eremo” of his dedicatory inscription to Ricciardi. The term “eremo” refers in general to a “retreat” or “solitary place” but it could also allude to a specific location, perhaps the Maffei family’s villa at Monterufoli where Rosa spent time in the late 1640s and where the painting was very likely made.¹⁰⁵ As an idea, poetic melancholy resulted in part from the “elevation of melancholy to the rank of an intellectual force,” but was even more profoundly influenced by the early modern humanist vision of the primacy of the self, which located the creative force of melancholia in the afflicted individual’s self-agency.¹⁰⁶ Regarded as a subjective emotional condition, poetic melancholy became a “jealously guarded privilege” of the intellectual elite, and a characteristic that bonded its members together in a kind of “selective affinity”—a sort of exclusive club of melancholics, so to speak, to which both Rosa and Ricciardi also aspired to belong.¹⁰⁷ By the



Fig. 143. Salvator Rosa, *Democritus in Meditation*, 1661–1662, etching with drypoint

concept underlying Albrecht Dürer's *Melencolia I* (Fig. 127).¹¹² Significantly, Dürer seems to have paired this representation of a distressed, inactive melancholy with another image that signalled the humour's creative and productive potential: the *Saint Jerome in his Study* (Fig. 144), a representation of the "composed and industrious" melancholic philosopher absorbed in "purposeful meditation and faith".¹¹³ Roworth suggests that, with these two images in mind, Rosa sought with his *Democritus in Meditation* etching to unite the destructive and creative aspects of melancholia together. Unlike the *Democritus* painting, the print bears an inscription that reads: "Democritus omnium derisor, in omnium fine defigitur" ("Democritus the mocker of all things, is transfixed at the end of all things"). The sentiment here suggests a desire to combine the roles

time that Rosa painted the *Poet-Philosopher* for Ricciardi, poetic melancholia was well-established in humorological discourse, having already become entrenched in both literature and art as a "fashionable persona" for the melancholic intellectual to adopt and perform.¹⁰⁸

The discourse on melancholia has long deliberated over the condition's dual nature as debilitating illness and powerful source of creative ingenuity.¹⁰⁹ Rosa's own comments about melancholy frequently indicate this duality. In his last extant letter to Ricciardi of 1673, for example, Rosa described melancholia as an obstacle, its detriments only to be diminished by the consolations and company of close friends.¹¹⁰ At other moments, particularly during an earlier stage of his career, Rosa invoked his melancholic temperament (especially when roused to a heated passion by its choleric proclivity) in connection with an individual, antagonistic and independent spirit. Remarking upon his satire *L'Invidia*, for example, Rosa credited the biting potency of his satirical poetry to his "bilious" nature.¹¹¹ Here, as on other occasions, Rosa shared in the contemporary vision of melancholia as a key component of creative *ingegno* and an integral feature of the painter-philosopher's inspired identity. Wendy Roworth has made an important observation about one of Rosa's other melancholic images that may help explain the iconography of the *Poet-Philosopher*: the *Democritus in Meditation* etching of 1661–1662 (Fig. 143). The etching is based upon the earlier *Democritus in Meditation* painting of c. 1650–1651 (Fig. 26), an image that, as Roworth argues, presents a pessimistic vision of melancholia, derived from the

of the traditionally “laughing” philosopher Democritus with the “crying” philosopher Heraclitus, in order to convey a specific vision of Democritus as mocking but ultimately afflicted by earthly vanities—as simultaneously melancholic and vitriolic, depressed and motivated, destructive and creative.¹¹⁴ A similar combination seems to be at work in Rosa’s *Poet-Philosopher*. Unlike the *Democritus* etching, in which the creative potential of melancholia arises from a choleric inclination, in the *Poet-Philosopher* that productivity results from a ponderous, meditative phlegmatic proclivity. But the figure is active rather than passive in his act of contemplation. This is also the fundamental distinction between the two “modes” of melancholy represented by Dürer’s paired engravings: while the figure in *Melencolia I* sits motionless with the tools of her creative genius strewn about on the ground in front of her, Jerome in his study is deeply absorbed in the act of writing—the same activity in which the protagonist of Rosa’s *Poet-Philosopher* is engaged.¹¹⁵ Following this line of argument, Rosa’s *Poet-Philosopher* may owe a more specific iconographic debt to another of Dürer’s images, the painting of *Saint Jerome* (1521, Museo Nacional de Arte Antiga, Lisbon) (Fig. 145), which unites the two dimensions of melancholia into a single pictorial motif, and was itself highly influential in the development of the iconography of melancholy.¹¹⁶ In the painting, Jerome has moved the skull from the windowsill (where it sits in Dürer’s earlier engraving (Fig. 144)) to the table in front of him, aligning it with the book in his hand as an object of his attention. Here, too, Jerome rests his head in his hand in the familiar pose of Dürer’s *Melencolia I*.¹¹⁷ In the Lisbon painting, Jerome’s body is turned toward the books in front of him and he gestures toward the skull with his left hand, as if to advocate a balanced practice of intellectual pursuit and moral self-admonishment. Having mastered his melancholia, Jerome channels his fatalistic self-awareness (represented by the skull) into creative pursuits, embodied by the books on the table—an allusion to Jerome’s role as translator of the Bible into Latin. Certain characteristics of this “scholarly, melancholic” Saint Jerome would certainly have held an appeal for Rosa and Ricciardi, among them the saint’s passion for and mastery of ancient texts and languages (Greek in particular) and the notion of mortal transcendence implied in the skull-Bible dyad—a reference to the power of Christian faith in particular, but equally applicable in the context of the immortalizing efficacy of humanist endeavour.¹¹⁸ Dürer’s productively melancholic scholar can also be linked to a group of images that seem to have inspired the most novel conceit of Rosa’s *Poet-Philosopher*, the act of writing on a skull.



Fig. 144. Albrecht Dürer, *Saint Jerome in his Study*, 1514, engraving



Fig. 145. Albrecht Dürer, *Saint Jerome*, 1521, oil on panel, Museo Nacional de Arte Antiga, Lisbon

Writing on a Skull

The representation of a figure in the act of writing on a skull is unusual. As suggested above, the Greek text that the figure in Rosa's painting is inscribing can be understood in connection with the artist's more general interest in introducing mottos or pithy axioms into his images, as he does for example in the *Allegory of Philosophy* (Fig. 52), the *Umana Fragilità* (Fig. 65), and several of his allegorical drawings and large-scale prints. This was a practice also taken up by contemporaries similarly inclined toward moral-philosophical themes.¹¹⁹ There are countless images that make the act of writing itself a central motif, and a number of Rosa's own works show his interest in this conceit, particularly within the contexts of poetry and philosophy.¹²⁰ The portrayal of a figure in the act of inscribing words *on a skull*, however, appears to be entirely unique. There are numerous examples of portraits that depict the sitter in the company of a skull already bearing an inscription. Two of these can be found in Rosa's own oeuvre: the *Moral Philosophy* (Fig. 116) and the *Portrait of Rosalvo* (Fig. 126).¹²¹ In a portrait of Lady Philippa Coningsby attributed to Robert Peake the Elder (c. 1605, private collection) (Fig. 146), the message of the painting is spelled out by the lengthy, poetic *vanitas* inscription written on a skull sitting atop the table next to the figure.¹²² In an interesting portrait of Francis Windham (died 1592), Recorder of Norwich from 1575 to 1579, by an unknown artist (1592, Norwich Civic Portrait Collection, Norwich Castle Museum & Art Gallery) (Fig. 147), the sitter rests one hand on a skull inscribed with the commonplace dictum "Cogita Mori" ("Think on death").¹²³ Another



Fig. 146. Robert Peake the Elder, *Portrait of Lady Philippa Coningsby*, c. 1605, private collection, UK



Fig. 147. Unknown artist, *Portrait of Francis Windham*, 1592, oil on panel, Norwich Civic Portrait Collection, Norwich Castle Museum & Art Gallery



Fig. 148. Cornelis Ketel, *Thomas Pead*, 1578, oil on panel, Berger Collection at the Denver Art Museum, Denver, Colorado



Fig. 149. Edward Altham (attrib.), *Self-Portrait as a Hermit*, 1622–1694, oil on canvas, Kingston Lacy Estate, Dorset

example is offered by Cornelis Ketel's portrait of the registrar Thomas Pead (1578, Berger Collection at the Denver Art Museum) (Fig. 148), which also depicts the sitter in the company of a skull inscribed with a *vanitas* motto, close in sentiment to that of the inscription in Rosa's *Poet-Philosopher*: "Respice Finem," or "Take heed of the end".¹²⁴ These images suggest that the conceit of the "inscribed skull" was more widespread, particularly in English circles.

The close resonance of the inscribed skull of Rosa's *Poet-Philosopher* with these examples raises the question of whether or not Rosa was inspired by either an English or northern European source.¹²⁵ Maria Rosaria Nappi has suggested that the English physician and poet James Alban Gibbes—for whom Rosa designed the frontispiece to his *Carminum Iacobi Albani Ghibbesii, Pars Lyrica* in 1668 (Fig. 118), but who had met the artist much earlier in Viterbo—"may have taught Rosa to appreciate the variations on the topic of melancholy which coloured English literature and music in the early decades of the seventeenth century," made famous by Robert Burton in his book, *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621).¹²⁶ Rosa's own impact on English painting is well known, and is detectable not only in the landscape paintings by artists of subsequent generations but also in portraiture, and *vanitas* portraiture in particular: a *Self-Portrait as a Hermit* attributed to the Englishman Edward Altham (1622–1694, Kingston Lacy Estate, Dorset) (Fig. 149) (previously thought to be by Rosa himself) is clearly modelled upon Rosa's *Philosopher in Meditation* (c. 1655–1656, private collection) (Fig. 150).¹²⁷ Altham's self-portrait bears close iconographic and thematic ties to the *Poet-Philosopher*, and is an important and tangible sign of the immediate influence Rosa had in England. Another English portrait, Robert Walker's *Portrait of John Evelyn* (1648, National Portrait Gallery, London) (Fig. 151), which postdates Rosa's *Poet-Philosopher*, also offers interesting points of comparison with Rosa's

Metropolitan Museum painting in regard to its half-length format, its recourse to the established visual vocabulary of melancholy (with the “head-in-hand” motif), and its conspicuous skull and erudite *vanitas* inscription in Greek—here, written on the wall above the sitter rather than on the surface of the skull in the foreground.¹²⁸ If not necessarily offering evidence for a decisive and singular iconographic model for Rosa, this group of images constitutes a broader iconographic tradition and context into which Rosa’s *Poet-Philosopher* can be placed, and they suggest in particular the impact that a distinctly English and northern European brand of melancholic iconography had on Rosa’s work.¹²⁹ To this list can be added another image that bears a close compositional affinity to Rosa’s painting: a drawing by Hendrick Goltzius of 1614 (Fig. 152), identified by Richard Wallace as a possible source for Rosa’s painting. The drawing depicts a young man pressing against the surface of a skull the stem of a tulip, which closely resembles a quill.¹³⁰

There are of course a variety of other examples of inscribed skulls: the phenomenon of the ancient Tibetan *kapala*, the elaborately carved and decorated skulls and skull-caps of the Hindu and Buddhist traditions; the skulls housed in the commemorative ossuaries of Neamt, Romania and Hallstatt, Austria, decorated with the birth and death dates of the deceased—the remnants of a practice with ancient origins in both Judaic and Christian traditions; the skull of the Etruscan king, Olus (Aulus Vulcentanus), who according to legend was killed and buried on the site of the Roman Capitol, his skull—discovered there with the words



Fig. 150. Salvator Rosa, *Philosopher in Meditation*, c. 1655–1656, oil on canvas, private collection



Fig. 151. Robert Walker, *Portrait of John Evelyn*, 1648, oil on canvas, National Portrait Gallery, London



Fig. 152. Hendrick Goltzius, *Young Man Holding a Skull and Tulip*, 1614, drawing, Pierpont Morgan Library, New York

“caput Oli regis” (“the head of Olus”) written across it in Etruscan lettering—supplying the name of the Capitoline Hill; the well-known skull of René Descartes (1596–1650), inscribed in the eighteenth century with a Latin verse in homage to the philosopher’s achievements; and the nineteenth-century practice of phrenology, which necessitated the inscription of the skull or head with detailed maps and measurements.¹³¹ None of these examples, however, can be brought to bear upon what is specifically happening in Rosa’s painting. The pictorial conceit of “writing on a skull” in Rosa’s painting seems to share a close compositional affinity with another popular seventeenth-century pictorial type: allegorical personifications of various intellectual disciplines—or portraits of their exponents—including astrology, astronomy, cosmography, geography, geometry, medicine and philosophy, occupied with the study of a spherical object (a globe, glass sphere, or skull) from which they appear to divine wisdom with their hands or with the use of an instrument like a compass or pair of callipers.¹³² All of these images derive from earlier representations of Geometry, whose symbolic attribute, the compass, was eventually absorbed (via its association with creative aptitude or wisdom and its link to the “divine” generative powers of God) into the iconographic repertoire of melancholia.¹³³ A representative



Fig. 153. Giovanni Martinelli, *Allegory of Astronomy*, 1640s, oil on canvas, Koelliker Collection, Milan

example is the *Allegory of Astronomy* (1640s, Koelliker Collection, Milan) (Fig. 153) by the Tuscan painter Giovanni Martinelli (1600/1604–1659), one of a number of such paintings by the artist that belong to the distinctively Florentine tradition of half-length allegories—also favoured by Rosa’s friend Lorenzo Lippi—that, together with the half-lengths of the Neapolitan tradition, exerted such a strong influence on Rosa.¹³⁴ The type is also evoked in two of the drawings (Figs 133 and 134) that are considered preparatory images for the *Poet-Philosopher*: both are half-length figures, one male and the other female, engaged in writing on a spherical object that is either held in their hands or propped upon a table or parapet in front of them. In the first drawing, with a male figure, the object is quite clearly a skull. In the second, with a female figure, the identity of the spherical object is less immediately apparent. It could be a skull (as the other preparatory drawings for the painting would suggest), but if it is, the face is turned away from us, making it appear more like a globe or sphere. In the preparatory drawings for the painting, Rosa may have been experimenting with the kinds of allegorical images readily available to him, of the sort represented by Martinelli’s *Allegory of Astronomy*.¹³⁵ The drawing with the female figure (Fig. 134) seems particularly revealing in this regard. It appears to be an important transitional step between the explicitly allegorical register of a work such as Martinelli’s and the male figure of the other drawing (Fig. 133), closer in its formulation (and with physical features that suggest a more readily-adoptable analogue for Rosa and/or Ricciardi) to Rosa’s final painting.

The figure in Rosa’s *Poet-Philosopher* seems to combine the iconographic type to which Martinelli’s *Astronomy* belongs—“melancholic Geometry”—with that of the melancholic and scholarly Saint Jerome,

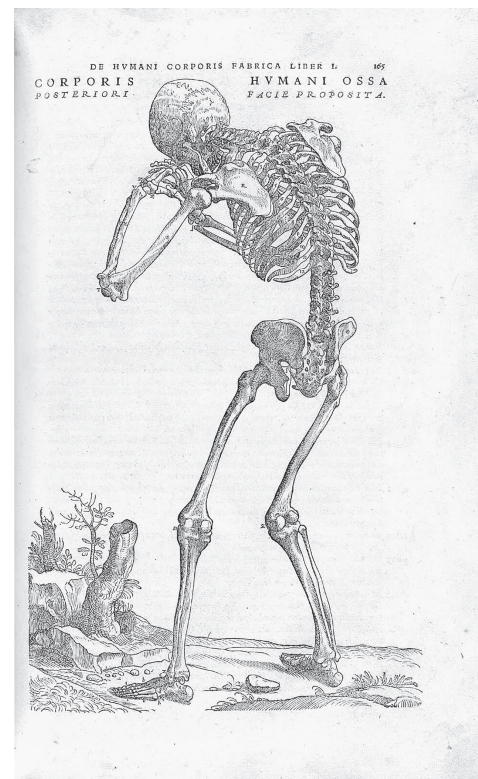
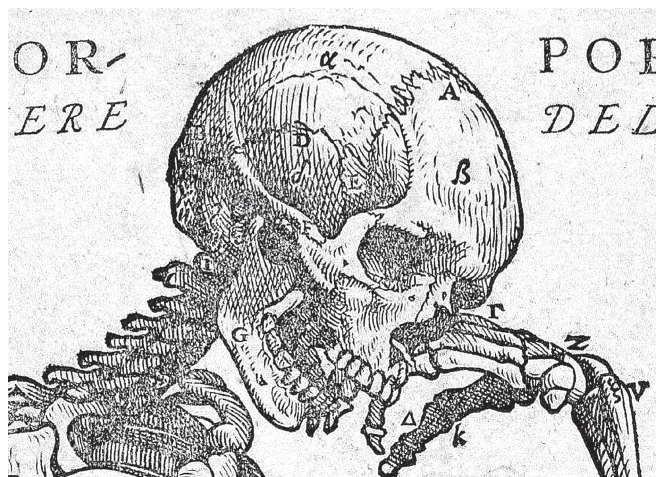
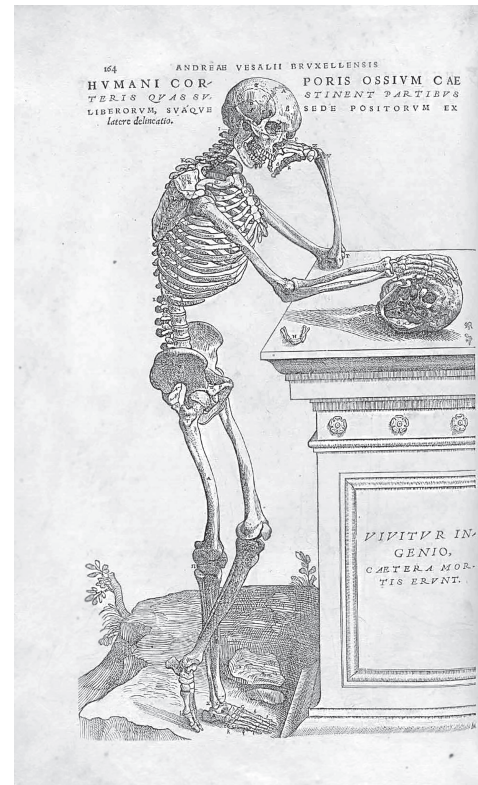


Fig. 154. Lucas van Leyden, *Saint Jerome*, 1521, drawing, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford

frequently represented with a skull close at hand while engaged in the business of writing. There are many images of this type of Saint Jerome, which place the skull and the act of writing in suggestively close proximity or in which the skull acts as a literal “support” for books or texts, the association of which may have suggested to Rosa the possibility that the skull itself could be interpreted as a textual medium of sorts.¹³⁶ In certain of these images, Jerome appears to be almost “reading” the lines of the skull’s sutures (the seam-like ridges between the bone plates, which often look like scribbles of handwriting), as for example in Lucas van Leyden’s *Saint Jerome* (1521, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford) (Fig. 154). A conception of the skull as not only a surface on which to write, but one from which to divine doctrinal or authoritative meaning—as one would do from a text in a book—brings to mind another set of images that may have provided inspiration for Rosa’s conceit: the illustrations found in treatises on anatomy, in which the skull and other parts of the human skeleton are identified with individual letters or words. Of particular significance in this regard are anatomical drawings that allude specifically to the *vanitas* theme, such as the woodcuts illustrating Andreas Vesalius’s *De humani corporis fabrica librorum epitome* of 1543 (Figs 155–159), two of which represent a standing skeleton in a melancholic pose, or Georg Thomas’s woodcut image of a skull accompanied by an hourglass and the inscription

“Inevitabile Fatum” (“Unavoidable Fate”), an illustration from Johannes Eichmann’s *Anatomiae* of 1537 (Fig. 160).¹³⁷ In anatomical treatises, identifying text typically serves a purely diagrammatic and descriptive role. In these examples, however, the text written on the surface of bones is transported by the iconography of the image into an explicitly *vanitas* and moral-philosophical context, suggesting the potential for turning an inscription that identifies the different external, physical parts of the body into one that expresses an aspect of its less tangible internal, psychological dimension.

In addition to its popular role as a symbol of transience, the skull was also understood as a sign of the creative intellect. In this respect it bears a close affinity to the spherical globe of the geometer: together with the compass, the globe stood for the melancholic’s “aptitude for geometry,” a skill that Leon Battista Alberti had considered essential to the artist.¹³⁸ Like the globe, the skull was also considered an intellectual symbol by the Stoics, who drew a close connection between the skull’s physical form and the nature or degree of the rational intellect.¹³⁹ Astrologers considered the skull an enlightening symbol of portent.¹⁴⁰ Rosa’s novel conceit of “writing on a skull” is central to the optimistic, creative vision of melancholia expressed by the *Poet-Philosopher*. Instead of representing his protagonist in the well-worn “head-in-hand” pose—a posture originally associated with the slothful and indolent propensities of the melancholic and aligned by Dürer with the melancholic’s pessimistic proclivities, and one that Rosa seems to have experimented with in the preparatory drawings for the painting (Figs 129 and 130)—Rosa engages his melancholic poet-philosopher in the creative act of writing. Such an action expresses a desire for remembrance. It asserts presence and endurance,



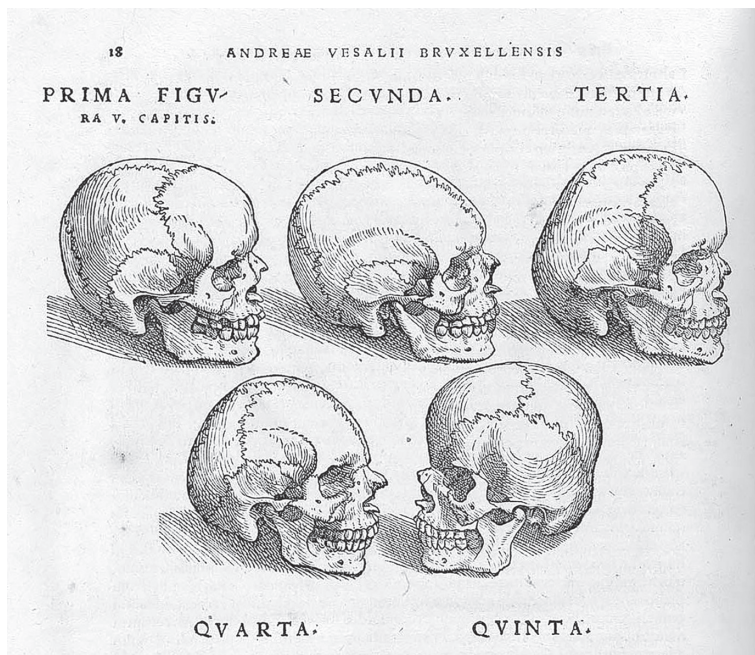


Fig. 159. Andreas Vesalius, *Five Skulls*, from *De humani corporis fabrica libri septum*, 1543, woodcut

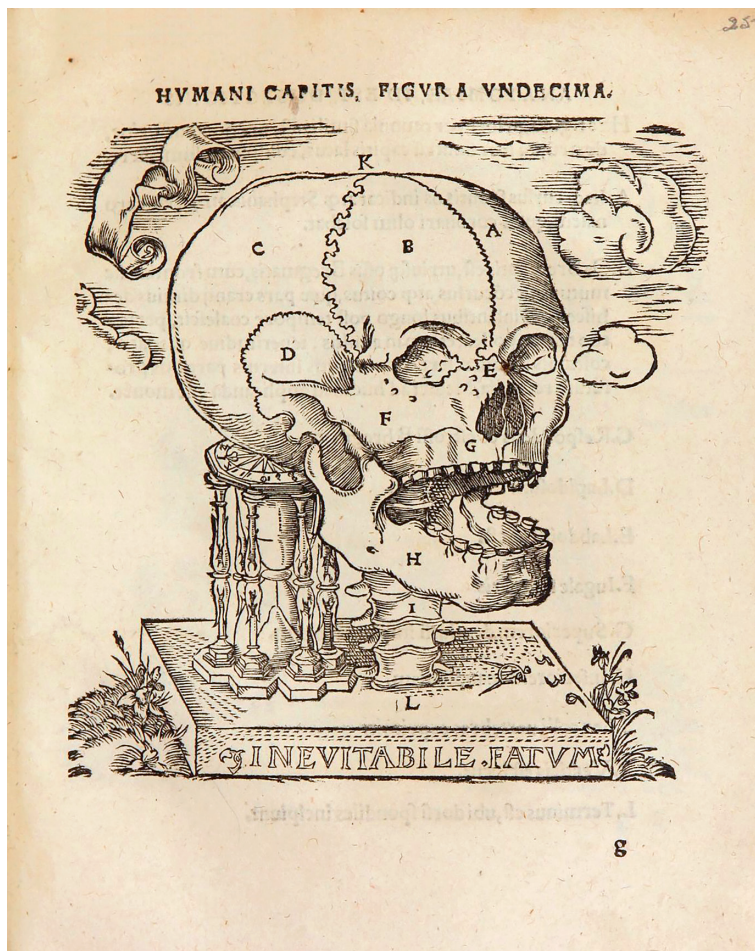


Fig. 160. Georg Thomas, "Inevitable Fatum," from Johannes Eichmann (also known as Johannes Dryander), *Anatomiae, Hoc Est, Corporis humani dissectionis pars prior*, 1537, woodcut

calling to mind the popular early modern platitude that writing has the power to transcend the mortal sphere.¹⁴¹ This notion takes on a particular significance when one considers that the writing surface in Rosa's painting (the skull) functioned most commonly and recognizably within the *memento mori* tradition as a symbol of transience. By inscribing words onto the skull itself, Rosa complicates the object's status as an emblem of ephemerality. A pessimistic conception of the written word would be at odds with Rosa's evident conviction about his activity as a poet, the identity celebrated in the painting itself. Instead, Rosa perhaps intends with his conceit of "writing on a skull" to invert the skull's symbolic import from that of absence and transience to presence and permanence, a process that operates in conjunction with the skull's function as an index of both Ricciardi's and Rosa's own presence within the painting (a function considered in greater detail, below). In the context of the melancholic's creativity, the practice of writing was considered in the early modern period to be both an antidote to the detrimental aspects of the melancholic humour and an illustration of the positive, creative outcome that its mastery could achieve.¹⁴² Rosa's own comments on the matter suggest he may have known Robert Burton's prescription for writing as a remedy to the negative effects of melancholia: "I write of melancholy," he says in *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, "by being busy to avoid melancholy."¹⁴³ In particular, Burton recommended writing about the disease itself as a way to pacify its adverse effects, and, indeed, the figure in Rosa's painting is writing an inscription with a message of melancholic *vanitas*.¹⁴⁴ Importantly, the figure has been captured in the very moment of writing, his pen still touching the surface of the skull, suggesting that the line of text he writes is not yet finished and his task continues beyond the image's temporal confines. That Rosa had more than just a passing familiarity with Burton's text is also suggested by an allegorical drawing attributed to the artist (Fig. 161) that portrays the head of a male figure, his mouth open wide and his eyes turned upward, accompanied by a scroll with the words "DESPERATIONIS RADIX, IGNAVIA" (or "Sloth is the root of despair")—an image that seems to express Burton's advocacy of activity over idleness as yet another cure for melancholic malaise.¹⁴⁵

Rosa's letters make evident his awareness of the alternatively creative and destructive potential

of melancholia, and his *Poet-Philosopher* perhaps expresses a feeling of unease about the humour and its experience. As Julia Schiesari has shown, melancholia was in the early modern period conceived as the privileged and erudite source of a distinctively masculine creative genius.¹⁴⁶ In its negative manifestation, however, it was considered a dangerous affliction that, according to Burton, presented a potential “threat to masculine reason”.¹⁴⁷ There are aspects of Rosa’s painting that suggest an awareness on his part of the humour’s problematics. The inclusion and subsequent erasure of a tear on the figure’s left cheek (Fig. 162), for example, may reflect a desire to emphasize the positive (rather than negative) effects of melancholia and an ability to wield the humour toward productive ends. The *Poet-Philosopher*, in fact, reveals a number of erasures (interesting in view of Giovanni Navarretti’s comment, cited above, concerning the lack of discernible “retouching” in the painting) that collectively suggest a certain anxiety or uncertainty on Rosa’s part about the best way to express the complex nature of his subject. Rosa seems to have been particularly conflicted about the representation of tears: although he chose to paint out the tear on the figure’s left cheek, he seems to have left a much smaller, barely-detectable tear on the right-hand side of the figure’s face, at the corner of the eye (Fig. 162). In Burton’s theory of melancholy, tears represented the expunging of excess fluids—fluids that gave the melancholic man female characteristics such as “inconstancy and changeability, moodiness, sullenness, an inability to be governed by reason, the excess of passion and imagination.”¹⁴⁸ Rosa’s decision to paint out the more prominent, “weeping” tear could have been motivated by the fear of presenting too “irrational” a comportment. His letters, however, show that he was not averse to expressing his emotion and affection with either real or imagined tears, particularly toward friends: the loss of his brother and son to the plague in Naples in 1656 moved

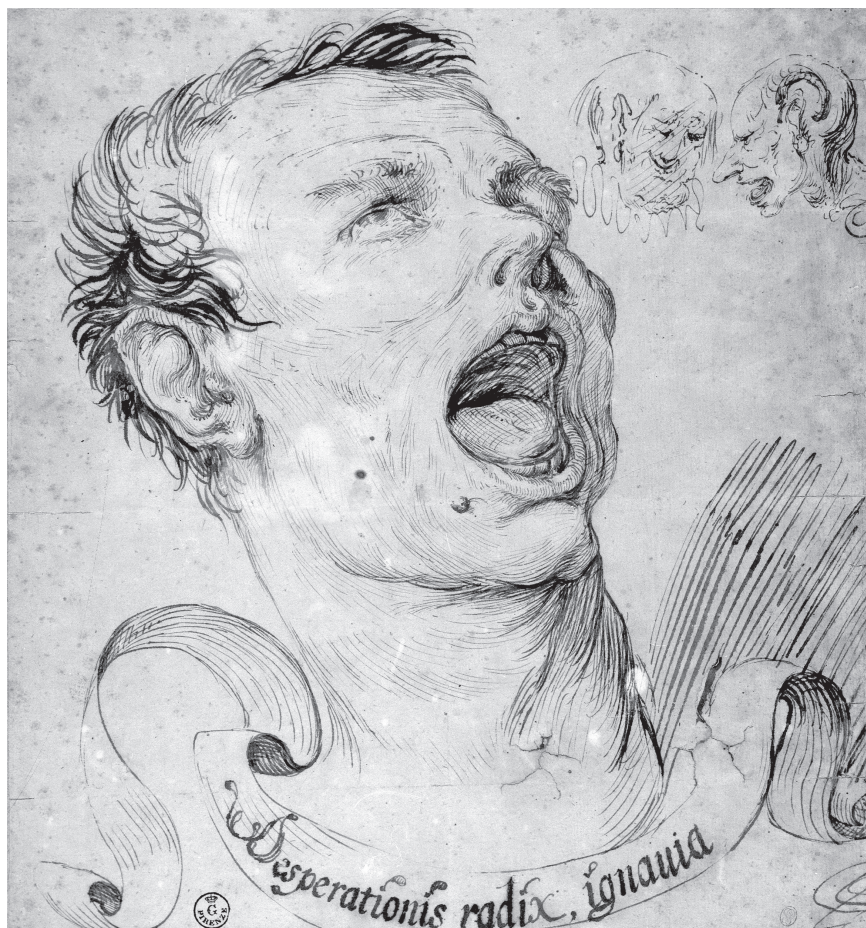


Fig. 161. Salvator Rosa (attrib.), *An Allegory*, 1640s, drawing, Gabinetto dei Disegni e delle Stampe degli Uffizi, Florence

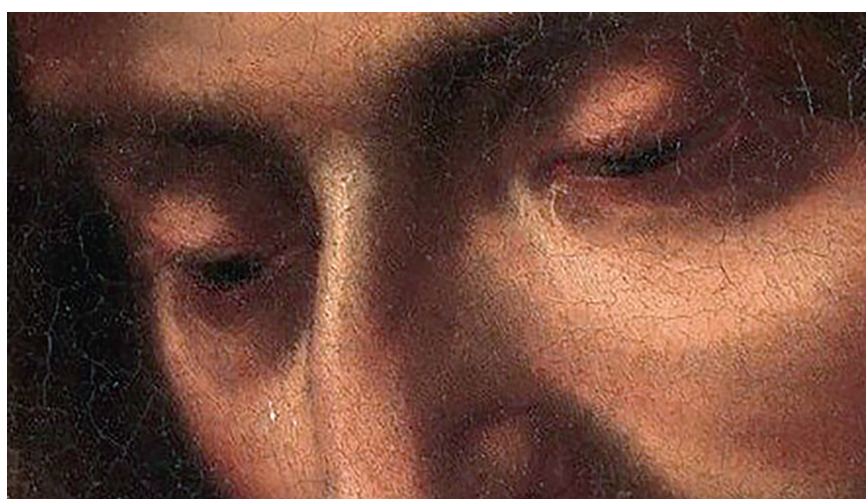


Fig. 162. Salvator Rosa, *Poet-Philosopher*, c. 1647, oil on canvas, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, detail of tears



Fig. 163. Jacopo da Pontormo, *Portrait of Alessandro de' Medici*, c. 1534–1535, oil on panel, Philadelphia Museum of Art



Fig. 164. Giorgione (Giorgio Barbarelli da Castelfranco) (attrib.), *A Patrician Holding a Seville Orange with his Servant in the Background*, 1509, oil on canvas, Palazzo Venezia, Rome

him to tears, as he admitted in two letters to Ricciardi; and in a letter to Giulio of 1649, Rosa was moved “to lamentations, to tears” at the thought of not being able to come to the villas of Monterufoli and Barbaiano.¹⁴⁹ Tears were an important visual sign of affectionate friendship and of longing for distant companions. Rosa’s indecision regarding the tears in the *Poet-Philosopher* may have reflected the conflict inherent in the need to represent, on the one hand, a rational vision of the creative intellectual’s mastery of melancholia, and, on the other, the emotional nature of friendship. This feature of the painting likens it to images considered by gender historians to express the “anxious” condition of early modern masculinity.¹⁵⁰ Allison Levy’s discussion of the problematic confluence of gender, mourning and melancholia within the commemorative function of early modern portraiture offers a particularly interesting interpretative frame for Rosa’s painting in this regard. As an image laden with the iconography of friendship and desire, the tropes of presence and absence, and the angst of threatened memory—aspects of the painting explored further, below—Rosa’s painting can be placed alongside a relatively select number of works that Levy identifies as “men mourning other men,” an example of which is Jacopo da Pontormo’s well-known *Portrait of Alessandro de’ Medici* (c. 1534–1535, Philadelphia Museum of Art) (Fig. 163), its protagonist considered by Levy to be mourning the death of his father.¹⁵¹ The double portrait attributed to Giorgione, representing *A Patrician Holding a Seville Orange with his Servant in the Background* (1509, Palazzo Venezia, Rome) (Fig. 164), belongs to the same tradition, interpreted by Jaynie Anderson as an ode to male friendship that plays upon the ambiguity between homosocial and homoerotic love, its central character a “lovesick youth beset by melancholy” who holds in his hand a fruit symbolic of bittersweet love.¹⁵² Rosa’s *Poet-Philosopher* likewise addresses melancholia as a “malattia amorosa,” or love-sickness, an idea evoked in particular by the dedicatory inscription and its implication of longing for a distant friend. In its inscriptive and documentary impulse, Rosa’s painting also aims to “defer memory loss” and overcome the very threat of absence that love-sickness laments.¹⁵³

The Portrait as a Memorial to Friendship: The *Freundschaftsbild*

The dedicatory inscription in the *Poet-Philosopher* is the clearest sign of the work's intent as a friendship painting, or *Freundschaftsbild*, a painting exchanged between friends as a sign of amity. But there are other elements of the painting that point to its role as a memorial to friendship. The books, for example, which are emblems of intellectual discourse, are visibly worn from repeated consultation and evocative of the tomes frequently shared between Rosa and his friend. One book is propped upright and open, suggesting its significance as the volume of the protagonist's present attention; the book lying on the table has been marked with a piece of paper (a practice mentioned by Seneca the Younger—whose name was originally written by Rosa in capital letters on the book's spine—in the context of sharing books with friends), perhaps one of the many references recommended by his distant friend.¹⁵⁴ The dedication is also significant in this context: carefully wedged between the two books, the sheet looks like the page of a letter—that most vital instrument of social commerce—and is crumpled as if from repeated reading. The ring worn on the figure's left hand is a symbol of male solidarity.¹⁵⁵ The crown of cypress leaves, traditionally understood as funereal (as they are described by Roworth), also has a more optimistic value on account of the plant's association with longevity and the immortality of the soul, and is perhaps a sign of the two friends' mutual desire for the interminable preservation of their bond.¹⁵⁶ The crown also registers as the sign of the poet and his immortal fame. The reference to Seneca that Rosa initially included in the painting may also have been meaningful in connection with friendship, an allusion perhaps to the sage's well-known writings on the subject.¹⁵⁷



Fig. 165. Anthony Van Dyck, *Self-Portrait with Sir Endymion Porter*, c. 1635, oil on canvas, Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid



Fig. 166. Peter Paul Rubens, *Self-Portrait with Mantuan Friends*, 1602–1603, oil on canvas, Wallraf-Richartz-Museum, Cologne

The *Poet-Philosopher* has previously been described as a *Freundschaftsbild*, but little consideration has been given to the specific ways in which it functions as—and inventively modifies the traditions of—this type of image.¹⁵⁸ The friendship painting, which originated in fifteenth-century Florence and reached its apogee throughout Europe in the eighteenth century, typically took the form of a double or group portrait. It frequently included a self-portrait of the artist.¹⁵⁹ Rosa's own interest in the double-portrait type of friendship painting is perhaps on display in the *Plautus and Terence* (Fig. 23), a painting that may have been made as a gift for Ricciardi and that, as Franco Paliaga has argued, might represent an allegorical double portrait of Rosa and Ricciardi—a proposal that suggests Rosa experimented on at least one other occasion with an allegorical representation of self and friend within the same image.¹⁶⁰ The *Freundschaftsbild* could also consist of a single figure, often a self-portrait in isolation, given as a gift to a friend and invested with the same spirit of communion or kinship as that of double and group portraits.¹⁶¹ The pictorial strategy of Rosa's *Poet-Philosopher* argued for in the present study, wherein a single allegorical figure becomes indexical of two friends simultaneously, condenses into an image of a single figure the same principles that define the double-portrait *Freundschaftsbild*.

As an inherently “relational” image, the *Freundschaftsbild* celebrates a distinctively social form of selfhood that acknowledges friendship as the generating force of identity. In attempting to identify and explain the iconographic and compositional strategies at work in Rosa's *Poet-Philosopher* it is perhaps useful to compare the painting with various other early modern friendship paintings that display a variety of visual tactics for representing the social self, and that collectively speak to the broader popularity of such images. Anthony Van Dyck's *Self-Portrait with Sir Endymion Porter* (c. 1635, Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid) (Fig. 165), for example—one of a number of the artist's highly performative self-images—is a rare

instance of the Flemish painter's self-representation in the company of another person, his friend the English diplomat, royalist and art agent for King Charles I, Endymion Porter (1587–1649).¹⁶² Like Rosa, Van Dyck held himself in high regard and was eager to sustain a position of professional freedom while taking advantage of the opportunities (and status) afforded by royal and aristocratic patronage, of which Porter was an important exponent. His double-portrait with Porter pays homage, as does Rosa's *Poet-Philosopher*, to both the affectionate and utilitarian dimensions of friendship.¹⁶³ Two of Peter Paul Rubens's *Freundschaftsbild* self-portraits also offer interesting points of comparison with Rosa's painting. Rubens, whose achievement of professional autonomy had a profound influence on his pupil Van Dyck, acknowledged and even emphasized in his self-images the social underpinnings of his identity as an artist.¹⁶⁴ In the *Self-Portrait with Mantuan Friends* (1602–1603, Wallraf-Richartz-Museum, Cologne) (Fig. 166) and the *Justus Lipsius and His Pupils (Four Philosophers)* (1611–1612, Galleria Palatina di Palazzo Pitti, Florence) (Fig. 167), Rubens pays homage “to those who shared his thinking,” perhaps most important among them the philologist and humanist Justus Lipsius, who—like Ricciardi did for Rosa—played a significant role in Rubens's intellectual development.¹⁶⁵ In the *Justus Lipsius and*



Fig. 167. Peter Paul Rubens, *Justus Lipsius and his Pupils (Four Philosophers)*, 1611–1612, oil on panel, Galleria Palatina di Palazzo Pitti, Florence

His Pupils Rubens adopts a brand of “allegorical” portrayal, but it consists less in the visual manipulation of faces and bodies than in the representation of both living and deceased friends within the same image, a technique that is iconographically different to the strategy employed by Rosa in his *Poet-Philosopher* but that shares the same goal: collapsing the physical distance between friends and turning absence into presence.

A particularly fascinating double-portrait *Freundschaftsbild*, the *Self-Portrait with an Architect Friend* (Martin von Wagner Museum, Würzburg) (Fig. 168) attributed alternatively to Giovanni Battista Paggi (with a date of c. 1580–1590) and Bernardino Licinio (with a date of c. 1530), presents a more sophisticated and visually complex interpretation of the social self, and appears to offer an important prototype for the conceit at work in Rosa's *Poet-Philosopher*. A double portrait of the painter and his (unknown) architect friend, the Paggi/Licinio painting is a pictorial essay on the similitude and intellectual interdependency of friends.¹⁶⁶ The painter is present in the image only in the form of a mirror reflection, his “real” body suggestively redoubled in the position of the viewer. His friend, whose profession as architect (or perhaps sculptor) is signalled by the compass in his right hand, is seen from behind, his own reflection accompanying the painter's in the mirror. The result is a dual reflection—a double-portrait of artist and friend—in which two heads seem almost to be attached to the same, unseen body, in the mirror. Each friend acknowledges his role in the process of social self-fashioning. The painter, with his paintbrush poised at the edge of the mirror's frame, seems to be in the process of painting the image of his friend, the edge of the mirror aligned with the surface of the implied canvas on which he paints. The architect traces lines on the page with his compass while pointing with his free hand (the gesture of which closely echoes that of the painter's hand) to the painter's reflection in the mirror, as if alluding, perhaps, to the role he plays in the “construction” of his friend's identity. The painting



Fig. 168. Bernardino Licinio or Giovanni Battista Paggi (attrib.), *Self-Portrait with an Architect Friend*, c. 1520–1530 or c. 1580–1590, oil on canvas, Martin von Wagner Museum der Universität Würzburg

celebrates a mutual act of self-making, each friend imagined as the creator of the other—a process of creation that is expressed in the terms of artistic practice. The popular conceit of “mirror reflection” that Paggi/Licinio transposes here from the genre of self-portraiture to that of the *Freundschaftsbild* (in order to infer both pictorial verism and the joint notions of separation and unity) is an equally important strategy in Rosa’s painting, as will be argued further below. The Paggi/Licinio painting also resonates closely with Rosa’s *Poet-Philosopher* as an image that makes implicit the tension inherent in the experience of similitude in friendship, wherein competition and rivalry (in the case of the Paggi/Licinio painting there is an apparent allusion to contemporary *paragone* debates) are the ever-present bedfellows of affectionate beneficence.

There are also examples of autonomous self-portraits in which tribute is made to friendship or to other types of relationships, the apparent “solitary-ness” of the figure nuanced by iconographic and compositional references to the social constituents of identity. In Van Dyck’s *Self-Portrait with a Sunflower* (c. 1633, Collection of the Duke of Westminster, London) (Fig. 169), for example, the sunflower and prominent

gold chain express (on one level, at least) the artist's status as court painter, his identity forged in and by the context of his royal patron. The chain also pays homage to a historical relationship—an artistic debt to Titian as the painter who provided the “core of Van Dyck's artistic personality” and the artist with whom he had the most “profound self-identification”.¹⁶⁷ Titian was in fact a frequent point of reference in many artists' self-images, among them Rembrandt's well-known *Self-Portrait at the Age of Thirty-Four* (1640, National Gallery, London) (Fig. 170), modelled on Titian's *Portrait of a Man with a Quilted Sleeve* (c. 1512, National Gallery, London) (Fig. 171).¹⁶⁸ In his *Self-Portrait* of c. 1625–1630 (Musei Civici, Museo d'Arte Medioevale e Moderna, Padua) (Fig. 172), Padovanino (Alessandro Varotari) seems to have constructed an even more specific, corporeal self-identification with Titian. Here, as Maria Loh has argued, Padovanino draws analogies between his own physiognomy and Titian's (alluded to by the bust in the background) in order to position himself as the Venetian master's aesthetic heir.¹⁶⁹ Rosa's *Poet-Philosopher* also finds an interesting conceptual parallel in another autonomous self-portrait, Anthonis Mor's *Self-Portrait* of 1558 (Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence) (Fig. 173). Joanna Woodall has described Mor's painting as an “intersubjective” image in which both the artist and his sitter are implicitly present. Mor sits before a blank canvas, brushes and palette in hand, staring out at the viewer who is inferred as the prospective subject of (or sitter for) his nascent painting. In Woodall's interpretation, the sitter should be considered first and foremost a member of Mor's humanist circle of friends, above all his close friend Dominic Lampson (1532–1599), the author of the poem that Mor has pinned to the surface of his blank canvas.¹⁷⁰ Woodall suggests that the central conceits of Mor's self-portrait—friendship and the theory of painting—hinge upon the ancient principle of friendship in which the



Fig. 169. Anthony Van Dyck, *Self-Portrait with a Sunflower*, c. 1633, oil on canvas, Collection of the Duke of Westminster, London



Fig. 170. Rembrandt van Rijn, *Self-Portrait at the Age of Thirty-Four*, 1640, oil on canvas, National Gallery, London



Fig. 171. Titian, *Portrait of a Man with a Quilted Sleeve*, c. 1512, oil on canvas, National Gallery, London



Fig. 172. Padovanino (Alessandro Varotari), *Self-Portrait*, c. 1625–1630, oil on canvas, Musei Civici, Museo d'Arte Medioevale e Moderna, Padua



Fig. 173. Anthonis Mor, *Self-Portrait*, 1558, oil on panel, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence

friend is both conflated with and distinguished from the self. This allows the artist to “resolve the difference between painting conceived as mimesis [an idea codified by the self-portrait figure in the painting] and textual reproduction [signified by the poem].”¹⁷¹ Mor’s portrait, and the theory of painting it represents, turns on the fundamental simultaneity of “representation” (the self as a distinct entity) and “imitation” (the self as friend) in which the ideal of friendship consists.¹⁷² This is the same concurrency of individuality and mutuality in friendship that Rosa seems to feature, with a different set of pictorial strategies, in the *Poet-Philosopher*.

The Gift as Self and Other: Making Absence into Presence

Rosa’s *Poet-Philosopher* borrows from the visual traditions of both portraiture and self-portraiture, genres that express and record the historical development of theories of the self. Early modern portraits and self-portraits frequently articulate a distinctively social self.¹⁷³ This is true of Rosa’s own self-images, the earliest examples of which adhere to an older tradition (“witness” self-portraits in which the artist is represented as a participant within a larger biblical or mythological scene, or is represented “in relation” to, or dependent upon, a historical person or event, patron, or group of friends) and the mature instances of which (as autonomous self-images) profess a strong conviction about individuality and independent agency. As performative images, both types of self-representation rely upon a social frame, either within or without the image. A number of them, including the *Self-Portrait as Pascariello* (Fig. 13) and the *Self-Portrait as an Artist* (Fig. 56), are, like the *Poet-Philosopher*, works of art executed and/or given as gifts to friends, and as a consequence posit identity as contingent upon the acknowledgment and reciprocation of a recipient.¹⁷⁴ Importantly, the process of self-fashioning encapsulated by these images takes place not only within the confines of the paintings themselves, but in connection with their status as gifts, objects that in their physical exchange embody the tenets of reciprocity and mutuality central to the egalitarian nature of friendship.

Rosa’s painting for Ricciardi belongs to the group of self-referential images he made expressly as gifts for friends, representative of the kinds of portraits and self-portraits that were exchanged and collected more generally in the early modern period as signs of amity.¹⁷⁵ It is possible that Ricciardi solicited the *Poet-Philosopher* from Rosa for his own collection, although the early sources are silent on this point.¹⁷⁶ As a gift for Ricciardi, Rosa’s painting encapsulates the ideal of reciprocity that defines social bonds, a phenomenon with primitive roots first illuminated in Marcel Mauss’s foundational anthropological study.¹⁷⁷ Seemingly “casual” and “spontaneous” in practice, early modern gift exchange was part of a longer-standing tradition of obligatory forms of social engagement. Wendy Roworth proposed that Rosa painted the *Poet-Philosopher* in gratitude for the *canzone* Ricciardi had written for him—the *Sotto rigida stella*—the melancholic subject of which has also previously been interpreted as a response to the sad loss of Rosa’s son and brother in 1656. With the new date for Rosa’s painting as pre-1648, and for the poem as pre-1651, the sequence of events could well be the opposite, the poem perhaps following the painting.¹⁷⁸ Both the painting and the poem revolve around subjects that preoccupied both friends: the vanity of life, the suffering of ill-fortune, the desire for immortality and fame, and the conflicted experience of melancholia. Ricciardi’s poems frequently treat the themes of loss and the vanity of life, and we know that he and Rosa exchanged books, poems, ideas and works of art throughout their long friendship, suggesting the possibility that Rosa may indeed have intended the *Poet-Philosopher* to reciprocate a tangible gift received from Ricciardi.¹⁷⁹ Leaving aside the circumstance of any concrete objects of exchange, reciprocity is implicit in the painting’s intention, as the “dono” (“gift”) of Rosa’s dedicatory inscription makes clear. The painting was assuredly given not only in response to an initial gift but in expectation of a later, subsequent return on Ricciardi’s part. A central tenet of gift-giving holds that the exchange must continue in perpetuity in order for the friendship to endure; the “spirit” of the gift must be kept in continual motion in order to keep friendship alive.¹⁸⁰

More closely associable with Ricciardi’s *Sotto rigida stella* is Rosa’s large *vanitas* painting, the *Umana Fragilità* (c. 1656) (Fig. 65), which together with a series of drawings seems to have been made directly in

response to Ricciardi's poem.¹⁸¹ In the painting, a young putto is guided by the ominous, winged, skeletal figure of Death to write on a large sheet of paper the phrase "Conceptio Culpa, Nasci Pena, Labor Vita, Necesse Mori" ("Conception is sin, birth is pain, life is toil, death inevitable"), a variation on a line from Ricciardi's *canzone*.¹⁸² Certain features of the *Umana Fragilità* also look back to the *Poet-Philosopher*: the dominant pictorial conceit of *vanitas*; the act of inscription or writing; and the reference made to Rosa himself (in the *Umana Fragilità*, Rosa includes his initials on the blade of a knife lying on the ground). The *vanitas* message of the *Umana Fragilità*, which may refer in particular to the death of Rosa's son Rosalvo in 1656, suggests a more extreme experience of loss than does the *Poet-Philosopher*.¹⁸³ By citing in the painting a line from Ricciardi's poem, Rosa acknowledged and expressed agreement with his friend's philosophical and consolatory efforts. Most importantly, the *Umana Fragilità* speaks of the value that Rosa granted to Ricciardi's friendship and influence, as well as Rosa's desire to pay homage to that inspiration in his own work. The *Umana Fragilità*, the *Poet-Philosopher* and Ricciardi's *canzone* belong to a more protracted, ongoing cycle of affective and intellectual exchange between the two friends, in which ideas and selves are formed, contemplated and reiterated. The *vanitas* sentiments that characterize all three of these works suggest that mortality was a subject of frequent discussion—an interest also indicated by the content of Rosa's letters to Ricciardi—and one that they both considered to express a key element of their mutual self-identification.¹⁸⁴

One of the most distinctive capacities of the gift is its ability to function as a surrogate for the giver and/or the recipient. In her study of Melanesian gift-giving culture, Marilyn Strathern observed that gifts frequently "subsume persons themselves," an idea equally applicable to the early modern conception of the ritual of gift-giving.¹⁸⁵ Gifts, like children or the parts of the body, were in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries regarded as an extension of the self in a very real and meaningful way.¹⁸⁶ As an object that participates in an exchange between two persons, the gift implicates both giver and recipient, becoming in the process an embodiment of friendship itself. The portrait, which gives physical expression to identity and presence, is as a gift doubly endowed with the spirit of the sitter and/or recipient. The close connection drawn between portraiture, surrogacy and friendship in the early modern mind is signalled by Alberti's well-known statement on the mimetic power of painting: "Painting possesses a truly divine power in that not only does it make the absent present (as they say of friendship), but it also represents the dead to the living many centuries later, so that they are recognized by spectators with pleasure and deep admiration for the artist." In demonstration of this power, Alberti cites a portrait as his example: according to Plutarch, a portrait of the deceased Alexander prompted such fear in one of the king's commanders that he trembled at the sight of it.¹⁸⁷ As an index of both Rosa's and Ricciardi's identities as poet-philosopher, the figure in Rosa's painting symbolized not only the similitude of friends, but represented the possibility for togetherness and presentness that Alberti identified as the powerful agency of portraiture itself.

Roworth has considered an essential dimension of Rosa's *Poet-Philosopher* to be its "self-conscious allusion to the *concetto* of presence and absence." The figure in the painting, she writes,

appears unaware of the viewer, self-absorbed; he is not depicted as though looking into a mirror (as in most artists' self-portraits), and perhaps ironically—in view of his Stoic stance—he does not peer into the mirror of self-knowledge. Rather, we see him as if through Ricciardi's eyes, not only as described verbally by the poet, but actually, as if viewed by him.¹⁸⁸

Indeed, the eyes of the young man in Rosa's painting are turned downward, the pupils only just visible, his gaze directed toward the skull in his hands. Scholars who interpret the painting as an explicitly self-referential image have considered this "downward stare" a conspicuous deviation from the outward gaze typical of Rosa's other self-images (and a characteristic of self-portraits, more generally). Roworth interprets this feature of Rosa's painting as an allusion to the trope of presence and absence itself: in choosing not to depict the figure gazing directly out at the viewer, an emphasis is placed upon his own "solitary presence" and the "implied absence" of his distant friend. In Roworth's analysis, which argues for the figure as a self-

portrait, only Rosa is “present” in the painting. However, if the figure is interpreted as an allegorical character to be adopted—that is, a potential analogue for both Rosa and Ricciardi—then the absence of the outward stare can be interpreted along somewhat different lines. It could be argued that the downward gaze functions both as a physical trait of the melancholic and a compositional strategy with which to implicate both Rosa and his friend within the same image. In this interpretation, the idea of “presence and absence” remains applicable, but in a different way: the downward gaze infers an oscillation between the states of presence and absence in the successive (or simultaneous) moment of unification brought about by the painting’s exchange. Roworth’s consideration that the figure in Rosa’s painting served “as his surrogate” in order to “remind Ricciardi of their friendship” holds true even if we shift to an interpretation of the figure as an allegory, emblematic of a shared identity. The painting was intended as both an acknowledgement of the distance between friends (also alluded to by the dedicatory “letter,” the interminable void of the background, the “eremo” of the inscription, and the *vanitas* iconography of the work more generally) and an attempt to bridge that distance. If true friendship can be maintained through physical presence, as ancient theorists claimed, then the friendship portrait needs to possess an exceptional surrogate agency. (As noted in chapter three, this was equally true in the case of letters, and Rosa’s own epistolary comments frequently intimate the potential for the letter to unite distant friends.¹⁸⁹)

Various iconographic and compositional features of the *Poet-Philosopher* play upon notions of presence, absence and surrogacy. The Greek inscription, for example, which may signal Ricciardi’s role as Rosa’s advisor in matters of ancient literature and philosophy (Greek was a language that Rosa himself admitted he could not read, and one in which Ricciardi was particularly expert), becomes in this interpretation an important index of Ricciardi’s friendship and his presence in the painting.¹⁹⁰ The apparent obscurity of the inscription’s source, perhaps a secret to be shared between the two friends, would certainly have appealed to Rosa’s predilections in regard to his choice of subject matter and, as a secret between friends, would lend an additional degree of intimacy to the painting.¹⁹¹ Like the texts frequently included in portraiture in order to clarify the meaning of the image, the inscription performs a sort of “verbalizing” function that gives life to the figure represented.¹⁹² The act of writing in which the figure is engaged, his pen still in motion, also lends the image a sense of immediacy and “presentness,” collapsing the temporal distance of two friends into a shared moment in time. The relatively large dimensions of Rosa’s painting, too, point to the *conchetto* of presence: unlike the small, pocket-sized portraits commonly given as tokens of friendship or affection, to be kept on one’s person or tucked away in a private place, the *Poet-Philosopher*, with its sizable dimensions and almost life-sized protagonist, was probably intended to be hung in a fairly prominent location.¹⁹³ The size of the painting also signals the import that Rosa, and perhaps Ricciardi, gave to its subject.

The skull is the most profound and complex symbol of presence and absence in Rosa’s painting. By the mid-seventeenth century, it had become established as a kind of emblem in *vanitas* portraiture, represented with full awareness of the link it forged to a “collective” of other melancholic souls.¹⁹⁴ In one of the apparently final preparatory sketches for the *Poet-Philosopher* (Fig. 133), Rosa included two symbolic sets of skulls and crossbones, one perched ominously behind the figure atop a large tomb-like structure and the other decorating the parapet in front (lacking the skull). In the final painting, Rosa has left out these features, opting for a more visually-economical but metaphorically-complex brand of *vanitas*. A symbol of absence in the extreme, the skull in Rosa’s painting also operates as an index of presence. As a symbol, the skull represents not only mortality and defeat but self-knowledge and moral-philosophical empowerment. This duality of the skull’s symbolic meaning finds poetic analogies in Ricciardi’s *canzone* for Rosa, the *Sotto rigida stella*, and in Rosa’s own satire *Il Tirreno*. In Ricciardi’s poem, the skull is made into an emblem of human frailty: against the whims of “severe fortune,” he writes, any shield we use to protect ourselves becomes a “naked skull”.¹⁹⁵ In Rosa’s satire, Ricciardi’s “naked skull” makes a reappearance in the artist’s claim that he will “give up satire to concentrate on his own moral conduct with *un cranio spolpato* [a fleshless skull] as master.”¹⁹⁶ Here, however, the skull is not merely an image of mortal transience or of human vulnerability to the whims of cruel fortune, but a powerfully didactic instrument from which knowledge (especially self-



Fig. 174. Salvator Rosa, *A Philosopher Contemplating a Skull*, c. 1654, oil on canvas, Christ Church Picture Gallery, Oxford



Fig. 175. Master of Candlelight (attrib.), *Vanitas*, c. 1630–1633, oil on canvas, Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica, Palazzo Barberini, Rome

knowledge) can be gained.¹⁹⁷ This is perhaps the same role performed by the skull in the *Poet-Philosopher*, where the skull is turned into the “document” of an expressly existential brand of philosophical musing, a suitable surface on which to inscribe a pithy Greek moral-philosophical maxim. In this sense, then, the skull becomes an index not only of Ricciardi’s absence (the distance that the friendship portrait attempts to bridge) but also a symbol of his efficacious presence as Rosa’s friend and intellectual guide. In formal terms, the skull in Rosa’s painting—with its highly polished surface and its face turned toward the figure in the painting—is also analogous to a mirror.¹⁹⁸ As the shiny object of the figure’s close attention, the skull alludes to the process of reflection (in both senses of the term, contemplation and replication) entailed in the similitude of true friendship. This analogy is made even more apparent in two of the preparatory drawings for the painting, particularly one of the earliest of the group (Fig. 131) in which the figure lifts the skull close to his own face as if peering into it like a crystal ball.¹⁹⁹ The same idea features in a painting by Rosa with close compositional and iconographic ties to the *Poet-Philosopher*: the *Philosopher Contemplating a Skull* (c. 1654, Christ Church Picture Gallery, Oxford) (Fig. 174). Here, a white-haired and bearded sage—an older representative of the allegorical type to which the figure in the *Poet-Philosopher* alludes—stares down at the skull in his hands with a mournful intensity, as if transfixed by its reflective power.²⁰⁰

Rosa contemplated on other occasions the close symbolic connection between the mirror and the skull, an affinity frequently addressed in early modern *vanitas* imagery.²⁰¹ The relationship is made explicit, for example, in the *Vanitas* (or *La Malinconia*) attributed to the Master of Candlelight (c. 1630–1633, Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica, Palazzo Barberini, Rome) (Fig. 175), in which a female figure—evocative of both the allegorical personification of self-knowledge and representations of Mary Magdalene—displays a mirror to the viewer with one hand and points toward a skull with the other.²⁰² Rosa articulates this symbolic connection in a preparatory drawing (Fig. 176) for the *Democritus and Heraclitus* of c. 1646–1648 (Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna) (Fig. 177): in the drawing, now in the Teylers Museum, Haarlem,



Fig. 176. Salvator Rosa, preparatory drawing for the *Democritus and Heraclitus*, c. 1646, Teylers Museum, Haarlem



Fig. 177. Salvator Rosa, *Democritus and Heraclitus*, c. 1646–1648, oil on canvas, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna

two small figures at the bottom of the composition hold a mirror and a skull, presenting them as a sort of iconographic dyad that “frames”—both literally and figuratively—the moral-philosophical conceit of the image above.²⁰³ The mirror was also a highly personal symbol for Rosa, integral to both his philosophical self-conception and its performative nature. He included it in a preparatory drawing for his self-celebratory etching, *The Genius of Salvator Rosa* (Fig. 6), as one of the attributes of the allegorical figure of Equity (or Moral Philosophy): here, the mirror is intended as a symbol of “the self-knowledge necessary for attaining equability,” in keeping with a more pervasive iconographic tradition.²⁰⁴ A mirror also appears in Rosa’s *Moral Philosophy* (Fig. 116) where it again forms an iconographic pair with the skull: a standing male figure gestures toward a large mirror resting on the ground, attracting the gaze of his female companion (seated in the “head-in-hand” pose of Dürer’s *Melencolia I*) who touches one hand to the skull in her lap. The conceit is analogous to the subject of Socrates teaching self-knowledge, popular in seventeenth-century painting.²⁰⁵ As Roworth has noted, the figure in Rosa’s *Poet-Philosopher* does not “peer into the mirror of self-knowledge”; instead of the more predictable mirror, the skull is here the object that facilitates his self-scrutiny. This substitution allowed Rosa to exploit the symbolic import of both objects at the same time. As a symbol of mortality, the skull is a potent symbol of absence and loss. As an effectual instrument of learning, however, and as a surface upon which to write or in which to see oneself reflected—like a mirror—the skull becomes both “document” and “guide,” an object with didactic and immortalizing agency. In its primary iconographic role as a symbol of absence, the skull also represents the distant other—the friend. (This role is also suggested by the figure’s diligent gaze, which has the effect of turning the skull into a proxy for the viewer himself—either Rosa or Ricciardi—who, standing before the painting, would otherwise hold the figure’s attention.²⁰⁶) In its secondary role as a mirror, the skull becomes a reflection of the figure, a second self.²⁰⁷ Contemplating the specular skull in his hands, then, the poet-philosopher in the painting becomes absorbed in a meditation upon both self and friend, the two united in a single symbolic referent. As a “role” to be performed by both Rosa and Ricciardi, the figure in the painting functions as one friend and then the other, an embodiment that alternates according to the work’s spatial and temporal parameters. Implicit in this process is an acknowledgment of the fundamental role of friendship in self-knowledge, an idea frequently repeated in ancient theory, where the phenomenon of “mirroring” is inherent in the topos of the friend-as-second-self.²⁰⁸ The reflective activity taking place within the painting is also duplicated by the canvas itself, by virtue of its status as a “mirror” of reality. Standing in front of the painting, Ricciardi experienced “self-reflection” in both senses of the word, as self-contemplation and self-mirroring. At the same time, the painting’s authorship by Rosa and its resonance with his own person kept Rosa ever-present in Ricciardi’s company, sustaining a dialogue between otherwise distant friends. The self-conscious mimeticism of Rosa’s painting—both a feature of the work’s accomplished execution (given special mention by Navarretti in his description of the painting, cited above) and a quality of the mirroring conceit to which the subject and composition of the painting allude—can also be observed in the painting’s attempt to secure “presentness” in place of absence. As Tarnya Cooper has noted, the distinctively mimetic prerogatives of late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century northern *vanitas* allegories and *memento mori* portraits (the tradition from which Rosa’s painting is derived) have both memorialization and “stasis” as their aim: these images, with their “insistence upon fixing time, and [upon] specular mimetic illusion, underscore the role of portraiture as the realm of stasis, where unstable fleshy bodies can be fixed and memorialised in paint.”²⁰⁹

The Gift as Consolation

The chronological relationship between Rosa’s *Poet-Philosopher* and Ricciardi’s *canzone*, the *Sotto rigida stella*, remains uncertain without a more secure date for the poem, however the two works share certain themes. Rosa’s painting may also share the poem’s intention as a *consolatio*. Both the painting and the poem participate in a broader early modern humanist revival of interest in “the theory and practice of proffering



Fig. 178. Domenico Gargiulo, *Piazza del Mercatello during the Plague of 1656 in Naples*, c. 1656–1660, oil on canvas, Museo di San Martino, Naples

consolation,” a subject about which countless letters, treatises and funerary orations were written. Attention to consolation was directed as much toward self-help as to the assistance of others, occasionally uniting the two motivations together.²¹⁰ This is a significant point in connection with Rosa’s painting and its apparent concern to establish an emotive equation between self and friend. There are iconographic and compositional elements of the *Poet-Philosopher* that closely align it with the philosophical discourse on consolation.²¹¹ One of these is Seneca’s name, which Rosa perhaps chose to include in his painting on account of the philosopher’s association with the subject of consolation. Seneca made well-known contributions to the genres of *consolatio* and *epistola consolatoria* (the consolatory letter), advocating “the role of practicing moral rhetoric, offering substantive advice to friends and acquaintances.”²¹² The tears of Rosa’s protagonist are also meaningful in this context. Images of lamentation were given special note by Alberti for their therapeutic value: inspired by the ancient discourse on tragic drama, Alberti described the range of emotions experienced upon viewing paintings, extolling the particularly cathartic effects of sorrowful imagery.²¹³ (The same notion of pictorial efficacy informed seventeenth-century theory: Giulio Mancini (1559–1630), for example, opined on the various effects that different subjects might have on the viewer, recommending in the viewing of paintings a consideration of the “way of life one desires to maintain, augment, diminish, correct, or change for the opposite.”²¹⁴) In Alberti’s discussion of the empathetic and rhetorical efficacy of painting, moreover, it is the “melancholic”—easily recognizable for his characteristic physical traits and gestures—who is offered as the illustrative example.²¹⁵ Poetry—the art to which the activity of the protagonist in Rosa’s painting alludes—

was also closely linked to *consolatio*. Petrarch, among others, touted poetry's consolatory and cathartic function.²¹⁶ Philosophy, too, was considered to have a calming and uplifting effect on the melancholic mind: the idea was propounded by the sixth-century CE philosopher Boethius in his *Consolation of Philosophy*, popular in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and deeply influenced by Stoic thought. Famed for his moral didacticism, Boethius (to whom Rosa directly compared himself in a letter to Ricciardi) would also have appealed to Rosa on account of his opinions on the fickle nature of Fortune and his promotion of "the role of free will in the construction of man's destiny".²¹⁷ Epistolary and poetic forms of writing (both of which feature in Rosa's *Poet-Philosopher*) were considered by early modern commentators to have consolatory efficacy.²¹⁸ This agency was closely allied to the notion of friendship itself as a curative for illness and source of comfort in times of malaise, a conviction frequently voiced by Rosa in his letters.²¹⁹ In one of his missives to Ricciardi, Rosa alluded in particular to poetry's curative faculty: beset by frustration over accusations of poetic plagiarism and anxieties about the plague in Naples—recorded with alarming visual detail in paintings such as Domenico Gargiulo's *Piazza del Mercatello during the Plague of 1656 in Naples* (c. 1656–1660, Museo di San Martino, Naples) (Fig. 178)—Rosa wrote to Ricciardi in 1656 about the various preventative and curative potions that people were adopting in the city, declaring that he would "willingly undertake another satire in order to distil from it however much aloe, hemlock and aconite I could," referring to plants popularly used for medicinal purposes.²²⁰ The writing of poetic satire itself, then, had a potentially restorative and therapeutic value. (The cathartic function of satirical poetry in particular was an essential component of its significance for Juvenal, one of the ancient satirists Rosa particularly admired and emulated.²²¹) In 1657, Rosa once again praised the benefits of writing poetry in times of illness and distress:

I swear to you that, if ever poetry was of benefit to anyone, today I can prove it to be an extraordinary relief to my hellish afflictions, which are so acute that I'm sick of myself. Lest I think too much about the ongoing wrath of God, I've set about preparing to compose a short satire, and you can see it whenever you wish.²²²

Rosa's *Poet-Philosopher* may incorporate an allusion to the benefits of two different consolatory practices—the writing of poetry and letters. The close iconographic resonance of Rosa's painting with images of Saint Jerome is also significant in this context, for the saint made important contributions to the discourse on consolation.²²³ In his painting for Ricciardi, Rosa created a pictorial parallel to the same themes treated by Ricciardi in his *canzone*, asserting the power of poetic painting (in an image that represents the poet-philosopher) as an effectual and cathartic instrument of consolation.

The Gift as Contest

By creating a poetic-philosophical painting as a gift for an expert in poetry and philosophy, Rosa was making an implicit argument about his own mastery of both disciplines.²²⁴ As a painting, moreover, the *Poet-Philosopher* treats the two subjects from a perspective unavailable to Ricciardi (incapable, as Rosa was often quick to point out, of either painting or of fully grasping matters to do with the art).²²⁵ Rosa's skilful virtuosity as both a painter and poet of philosophical themes was something of which Ricciardi and other friends of the artist frequently made note.²²⁶ The *Poet-Philosopher* therefore pays homage to a friend's contributions to that virtuosity while simultaneously drawing attention to the one skill that sets Rosa apart. In this way, the painting's primary objective—to commemorate the unity of friendship—is inflected with an element of the rivalry also implicit in that bond, sustaining for the artist a subtle but important position of distinction from Ricciardi without jeopardizing the overarching *concetto* that informs the painting's otherwise beneficent purpose. The experience of parity in true friendship generates not just peaceable equality but an ever-present anxiety in each friend to demonstrate his or her uniqueness.²²⁷ This need for differentiation is reflected in the implicit competition of gift-exchange, wherein the giver is obliged to outdo the receiver.²²⁸



Fig. 179. Salvator Rosa, *Aethra and Theseus*, 1666, oil on canvas, Earl of Verulam collection, Gorhambury

Rosa's *Poet-Philosopher* participates in a contemporary revival of interest in the *paragone*, and expresses—like much of his pictorial production—a conviction in particular about the rhetorical efficacy of the visual arts.²²⁹ Rosa's interest in the subject of *ut pictura poesis* is apparent in paintings such as the paired *Allegory of Philosophy* and *Poetry* (Figs 52 and 53), which jointly allude to the ancient, twinned themes of “painting as mute poetry” and “poetry as speaking painting.”²³⁰ The idea also features in Rosa's poetic satires. In *La Pittura*, for example, Rosa describes painting, music and poetry as the “sister arts,” while in *L'Invidia* (in defence of his poetic prowess against the charges of his academic detractors) Rosa praises the painters of the past who were also celebrated as great poets.²³¹ In *La Pittura*, where Rosa is preoccupied with touting the powers of painting (which, in his estimation, is inherently and always poetic), Rosa stakes a claim for the superiority of a pictorial over a textual brand of poetics when he declares he will “paint for glory and write poetry for amusement (*“pinger per gloria e poetar per gioco”*).²³² Rosa's friends also took up the debate. In his description of Rosa's now-lost painting of “*Pittura Solitaria*,” for example, Antonio Abati constructed an image of *Pittura* that was based on Simonides's famous dictum but gave it an important twist: instead of conceiving of painting as “silent poetry,” Rosa's allegorical personification of Painting was “mute Poetry [...] becoming *speaking Painting*.” As Roworth has noted, painting is here *contrasted* with poetry and conceived by Abati as an active rather than passive force, more capable of asserting Rosa's satiric indignation.²³³ Rosa endeavours to make painting into

the instrument of his indignant poetic spirit, and to find a “pictorial” mode of satirical philosophy.²³⁴ This is the same active, efficacious interpretation of painting that Rosa asserts in his satire *La Pittura*, with which the lost painting described by Abati may be closely related.²³⁵

The *Poet-Philosopher* seems to argue for its own authority as a “poetic” painting capable of competing with, reproducing or even surpassing poetry in its emotive and illusionistic efficacy. By presenting Ricciardi with a gift that proclaimed Rosa's own superiority as a skilful creator of poetic images, Rosa may have also intended to point up the emotional or cathartic efficacy of painting itself: in this pursuit, painters outdid poets on account of their ability to convey emotion through facial expression and physical gesture. Rosa took special pride in his ability to equal and even surpass the textual source of his pictorial and graphic imagery. In 1663, he boasted to Ricciardi that his *Conspiracy of Catiline* (Fig. 82) was “precisely as it was described by Sallust” in the *Bellum Catilinae*, implying that the painting reproduced its originary text in immediacy and emotive effect.²³⁶ In 1666, Rosa told Ricciardi that his painting of *Aethra and Theseus* (Fig. 179), which “depicts the moment when Aethra shows her son Theseus the rock under which the shoes and sword of his father Aegeus were hidden,” was fully “in keeping with what Plutarch narrates at the beginning of his biography”.²³⁷ Ricciardi, in turn, made his own contribution to this friendly competition, as is suggested

by a correction that Ricciardi appears to have made to one of the names mentioned in Rosa's letter, above, evidence of a desire on his part to assert his own authority in matters of poetry and literature.²³⁸

The Night and the Moon

Two final iconographic elements of Rosa's *Poet-Philosopher* deserve attention for the role they play in the painting's complex pictorial conceit, particularly in connection with the dual nature of melancholia: the night sky and the crescent moon. The nocturnal setting of Rosa's painting was perhaps inspired by Dürer's *Melencolia I* (Fig. 127) where, although the moon is absent, the scene is conceived as if "bathed in moonlight".²³⁹ The night and moon feature in other images on the theme of melancholy, such as Gregor Reisch's woodcut representing the allegory of Geometry, from his *Margarita philosophica* (1504) (Fig. 180), and Jacques de Gheyn II's *Saturn* (*The Melancholic Temperament*) (c. 1595–1596) (Fig. 181).²⁴⁰ In both Reisch's and De Gheyn's images, the clouds, night sky and moon share a close affinity with their equivalents in Rosa's painting as atmospheric symbols of melancholia that express its double (and duplicitous) nature. De Gheyn's print—perhaps another compositional, iconographic and thematic source for Rosa's painting—contrasts a positive appraisal of melancholia as the source of quasi-divine creativity with a pessimistic view of the temperament as a psychological affliction: the "melancholic" is here likened to the god Saturn, the master of geometry who presses his compass against the globe in his hand; a Latin inscription, however, proclaims that "Melancholy, the most calamitous affliction of soul and mind, often oppresses men of talent and genius."

Like De Gheyn, Rosa seems to have aimed for a more complex interpretation of melancholia as both affliction and asset.²⁴¹ The night and its moon represent the dual nature of melancholy: the night is the dark, harmful sphere of the melancholic experience but also the birthplace of its creative promise, while the moon, associated with corruptibility, changeability and madness, could also be the source of ingenuity and insight.²⁴² Black, nocturnal imagery was often linked to the negative experience of melancholia as the "clouding of consciousness, depression, fear and delusions".²⁴³ Marsilio Ficino associated melancholia—the humour linked to black bile—with the "ruinous and destructive effect of night study".²⁴⁴ Others related night imagery to dreaming sleep, conceived according to an ancient paradigm as the place of divine creative inspiration, an idea that would have appealed to Rosa's convictions about his own inventive *fantasia*.²⁴⁵ Alchemical theory also put a more positive spin on the colour black as a sign of "the beginning of consciousness".²⁴⁶ The idea of the moon itself as a source of insight is a recurring theme in both ancient and early modern texts: in the *Metamorphoses*, for example, Ovid described the moon as "conscious" witness and discloser of nefarious deeds;²⁴⁷ Plutarch emphasized the moon's creative potency, considering it to have "effects similar to those of reason and wisdom";²⁴⁸ and Lodovico Ariosto located on the moon the lost wits of his protagonist in the *Orlando Furioso* (1532).²⁴⁹ The moon could also represent the melancholic's divided nature. For John Milton, it



Fig. 180. Gregor Reisch, *Geometry*, from the *Margarita philosophica*, 1504, woodcut



Fig. 181. Zacharias Dolendo, after Jacques de Gheyn II, *Saturn or The Melancholic Temperament*, c. 1595–1596, engraving

stood for the melancholic's contradictory position in the creative and destructive simultaneity of his pensive and self-reflective state.²⁵⁰ For Ricciardi, too, the moon was a symbol of the inconstancy of fortune.²⁵¹ The nocturnal aspect of Dürer's *Melencolia I* also signals the melancholic's ambiguous state: the scene represents not a specific time of day, but rather the "twilight of the mind," capable neither of "cast[ing] its thoughts away into the darkness nor 'bring[ing] them to the light'."²⁵² Here it is worth noting that both the night and the crescent moon also make an appearance in Rosa's *Moral Philosophy* (Fig. 116), where they are similarly intended to evoke the realm of philosophical introspection and revelation.

The figure in Rosa's *Poet-Philosopher* is not sleeping, and therefore not dreaming, but there is nonetheless a dream-like quality to the indeterminate, nebulous space he occupies. The table and books suggest the interior setting of a scholar's study (as in the case of Dürer's representations of Saint Jerome, (Figs 144 and 145)), but they lack any sort of grounding in an otherwise open, indefinite, exterior space and seem almost to float against the night sky. This is perhaps the night of inspiration, dreams and imagination, to which the melancholic was considered to be particularly susceptible.²⁵³ Rosa's own estimation of the night as the place of thoughtful and creative productivity is suggested by a comment in a letter of 1668, in which he recalls "[rising] at midnight to work on future subjects" with Ricciardi and his fellow academics in Florence and Pisa.²⁵⁴ The *Poet-Philosopher* attempts to translate this purely psychological experience into visual terms that rival the otherwise intangible nature of the poet's "inner" vision. The ability of dreams to construct an alternate reality in which distant friends seemed to be reunited together again also made the nocturnal setting suitable for an image with unification as its goal: in two letters to Ricciardi of 1659 and 1661, Rosa claimed to be "dreaming" of the treasured time he had spent with Ricciardi at Strozze.²⁵⁵

The particular type of moon represented in Rosa's painting—a thin, crescent moon—may also refer to the melancholic's dual nature. In De Gheyn's *Saturn (The Melancholic Temperament)* (Fig. 181), the crescent moon expresses both the lunar association of the melancholic humour and Saturn's sickle or *sicilis*, understood as a symbol of the god's contradictory disposition as a creative and destructive force: the sickle represented Saturn's productive role as the god of agriculture, but it was also the instrument with which he castrated his father Uranus.²⁵⁶ Saturn-as-Melancholy was granted both positive traits (a talent for acquiring riches, an aptitude for geometry and architecture, a "knowledge of hidden things," and a profound intelligence and strength) and negative ones (the ability to inflict suffering, destruction and death).²⁵⁷ The type of crescent moon in Rosa's painting—waning, old, or decreasing—was also interpreted alternatively as a harmful or beneficial portent, as "light heading into darkness" or, as a sign of hope in times of despair, a "remedy for the shadows of darkness".²⁵⁸ There is yet another aspect to the moon that emphasizes the positive, favourable proclivities of the melancholic humour. Prior to its adoption by the melancholic, the moon was strictly an attribute of the phlegmatic humour, due to its physiological association with the "watery" brain, lungs and phlegm.²⁵⁹ Unlike the volatile melancholic, the phlegmatic was characterized as calm and unemotional. By appropriating the moon from the phlegmatic's symbolic repertoire, then, the melancholic sought to partake of the celestial body's calming effects.²⁶⁰ Rosa's own understanding of these humorological mechanics is suggested by his comment in a letter to Ricciardi of 1663, in which he expresses a desire to adopt the calm stolidity of the phlegmatic in spite of his melancholic (and choleric) inclinations:

I don't know what more to think about this utterly obstinate silence of yours, which is beginning to pass the point of reprieve. I promise you that I'll be patient [*aver flemma*], despite my nature, which has plenty of the rage [*bile*] necessary to complain.²⁶¹

Rosa makes various poetic references to the moon that suggest both an awareness of and interest in its symbolic multivalency. Some of these passages link the moon with inspired creativity, while others implicate its deceptive and detrimental nature.²⁶² A particularly revealing interpretation of the moon appears in Rosa's collection of maxims, the *Il Teatro della Politica*, in which the moon is aligned with Fortune—that fickle entity indispensable to Rosa's self-image: "Fortune resembles the moon, which just eclipses itself when at

its fullest.”²⁶³ A similar statement appears in Rosa’s final satire, *Il Tirreno*: conceding to the will of the stars, Rosa appeals to the moon as a portent of good fortune as much as bad.²⁶⁴ The crescent moon in Rosa’s *Poet-Philosopher*, then, could also be interpreted as duplicitous Fortune herself, either emerging from the darkness to offer Rosa and Ricciardi her fruits, or depriving them of hope as she moves into obscurity.

Rosa’s epistolary comments reveal not only an aesthetic interest in astrology but a credence in an astrological form of fatalism, capable of influencing existence. He frequently appealed to “the stars” as representatives of Fortune’s favour or cruelty, both in reference to his achievements and (especially) his afflictions.²⁶⁵ Rosa’s statements along these lines belong to a more widespread and commonplace tradition. Seen in connection with his professional persona, however, a demonstration of faith in astrological portent was also an important requirement of Rosa’s performance as a poet-philosopher.²⁶⁶ The *canzone* that Ricciardi dedicated to Rosa, the *Sotto rigida stella*, also turned on the theme of astrological determinism, attributing mortal suffering at the outset to the influence of a “cruel star” (*rigida stella*), an interesting point of affinity perhaps with the celestial body in Rosa’s painting. Ricciardi’s poem emphasizes the predestination of one’s humorological-astrological character: “Under a cruel star,” he begins, “he who was born to suffer can expect nothing but a horrible fate”.²⁶⁷ Ricciardi might be referring specifically to melancholia, the temperament he shared with Rosa. Indeed, the “cruel star” seems a fitting description of Saturn, and the idea of “languishing” or “pining” expressed by the verb *languire* recalls the ancient Saturnine characteristics of slothfulness, depression and sorrow. In his letters, Rosa frequently quotes lines from Ricciardi’s *canzone* (including the passage cited above) in affirmation of his friend’s assessment of their mutual identity and its subjection to a melancholic fortune.²⁶⁸ Rather like the problematic tenets of Stoicism, however, the astrological component of Rosa’s and Ricciardi’s shared philosophy also elicited scepticism. In the midst of lavishing praise on celestial influence, Ricciardi interjected a rather more level-headed passage, urging Rosa to take responsibility for his own misery:

Rosa, this is the deceit
of the disillusioned intellect,
[...]
And time well expresses,
that he complains wrongly,
Not willing to believe
that the only misery is man as he esteems himself;
He complains to the Sky, but the stars are not to blame
for his situation—the misfortune is his own doing.²⁶⁹

Rosa’s *Poet-Philosopher* commemorates melancholia as the source of a shared identity and an amicable bond, celebrating that same friendship as a means through which to master the humour and direct it toward creative purpose. Burton claimed that in order to deter the negative effects of melancholia one should avoid solitude and idleness, and Rosa’s letters often express the same conviction.²⁷⁰ In 1657, for example, Rosa attributed his melancholic sufferings to the physical distance of his friend, writing to Ricciardi: “My greatest affliction is considering myself so far away from you, nor do I know when this chain of calamities will cease, which have exacerbated my melancholy to such a degree that I doubt I’ll ever find a remedy, nor ever recover again.”²⁷¹ In 1659, Rosa wrote to Ricciardi after leaving Strozze: “I’ve arrived in Rome, accompanied by the fiercest melancholy, since—separated from you—my spirit hasn’t been able to find anything to satisfy it.”²⁷² Many of Rosa’s epistolary references to his melancholic sufferings, in fact, accompany expressions of longing for time spent with friends at their villas, also alluded to by the “eremo” of the dedicatory inscription in the *Poet-Philosopher*.²⁷³ Rosa’s last extant letter to Ricciardi of February 1673 reads like a postscript to the painting itself, protracting its anticipation of reunion into perpetuity:

If your coming doesn't cure me, nothing will make me feel better. So I implore you, for the sake of our friendship, to change your mind and come visit me much sooner than the end of March, as we'd agreed upon, otherwise you'll put me in a state of continual impatience and a more atrocious melancholy. Don't tell me, either, that you'll only stay a month, because it will send me into hysterics. Enough. I'm waiting for you to do all you can to fulfil our agreements, and if you really love me, then this will be the ultimate proof of it—considering that I've never needed nor desired you more [...].²⁷⁴

Rosa attributed the distress of his later years to his melancholic predisposition and the fault in his stars, but in moments of success it was also to melancholy that he gave credit for his achievements as an inspired, free poet-philosopher. To this end, melancholia was for Rosa a veritable catch-22: a creative force to be wielded in the service of maintaining an intellectual self-image, and a potential threat to the logic or reason that sustained that very identity. In his *Freundschaftsbild* for Ricciardi, Rosa was perhaps attempting to devise a novel pictorial conception of melancholia—one that was derived from the established iconographic tradition but that gave it a new spin (a preoccupation of Rosa's art more generally) and expressed a unique and personal message: the poet-philosopher in Rosa's painting is an ode to the shared melancholic, moral-philosophical spirit that eternally unites two distant friends.²⁷⁵ An erudite essay on the poet- (and painter-) philosopher's melancholic nature—its duality, its self-consciousness, and its inherent artifice—the painting locates the humour's experience and mastery in friendship. It encapsulates in pictorial terms many of the ideas and ideals that inform the broader discourse in which Rosa participated and the set of professional practices he adopted in the service of cultivating his own persona as a moral-philosophical artist and poet. These form the subject of the next chapter.