

# The North / South Conflict in Albrecht Dürer

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## The conflict in Dürer's mind

It has been recognised since the nineteenth century that Albrecht Dürer's art vacillated between his native German style and a more Italian manner.

One of the twentieth century's greatest art historians, Erwin Panofsky, wrote a book proposing that Dürer was caught on the horns of a dilemma.

Panofsky thought that the choice was an “innate” division in Dürer's own mind, and that it produced a curiously divided art, never wholly at home either north or south of the Alps.

## The conflict in German art

This division has also been taken as a characteristic of German art in general, which could then be said to have no character of its own, but to borrow, magpie-fashion, from the art of other countries.

The question was widely debated among German scholars in the first half of the twentieth century (as chronicled by Oskar Bätschmann and Hans Belting).

# Sveltana Alpers

The North/South dichotomy surfaced again in Svetlana Alpers's book *The Art of Describing*.

Alpers claims Italian models have made it difficult to see art produced North of the Alps,

except as the opposite of Italian art.

The book posits a Northern European way of seeing:

- Not dependent on Italian models
- Different from Leon Battista Alberti's idea of seeing through a window (perspectival seeing)
- A kind of seeing that is more like touching, like describing



# The question of national styles

This issue is of pressing interest in the history of art.

Do some nations have their own style, while others are fundamentally divided among foreign influences?

Panofsky:

Italy produced the Renaissance

England produced Neoclassicism

France produced Impressionism

‘In this great fugue’, Panofsky says,  
the voice of Germany is ‘missing’

There is no solution to this  
problem, but it can be observed in  
its original form in Dürer’s prints,  
as he struggles to reconcile the  
irreconcilable styles of North and  
South.

## Panofsky's lists of "topics" in Dürer's mind

"Southern" (Italian)	"Northern" (German)
Reason	Intuition
Generalizing formalism	Particularizing realism
Theory (what Dürer called <i>Grundt</i> )	Art that is "powerful but unsound"
Correct practices	Errors ( <i>Yrthumben</i> )
Humanistic self-reliance	Medieval humility
Knowledge ( <i>Kunst</i> )	Imagination ( <i>Gewalt</i> )
Intellectual approach to art	Workshop practice
Collective approach to schools and styles	The artist is an individual "chosen by God"

## Panofsky's list, continued

"Southern" (Italian)	"Northern" (German)
Unity and continuity in compositions	Additive compositions
Pictures built from large forms	Pictures built from small elements
Thinking in terms of line and form	Thinking in terms of light and colour
Systematic	Unsystematic
Method	Insight
Perspectival space	(Idiosyncratic spaces)
Balanced masses of light and dark	(Irregular masses)
Classical equilibrium	Gothic fluency

## Panofsky's summary of the problem:

The constant struggle between reason and intuition, generalizing formalism and particularizing realism, humanistic self-reliance and medieval humility was bound to produce a certain rhythm comparable to the succession of tension, action and regression in all natural life, or to the effect of two interfering waves of light or sound in physics. A mutual reinforcement of conflicting impulses produced a “maximum,” and each “maximum” was preceded and followed by periods of tension or release. [p. 14]

Six examples

# I. *St Jerome in the Wilderness*

Done a year after his first trip to Italy

The space is capacious,

and the composition shows an overall balance between figures and landscape.

But consider the details:





The landscape is densely knotted, a “Northern” fascination with clotted detail.





## 2. *Return of the Prodigal Son*

Another attempt at a coherent,  
stage-like space (“Italian”)

But note the myopic attention  
to miscellaneous details:

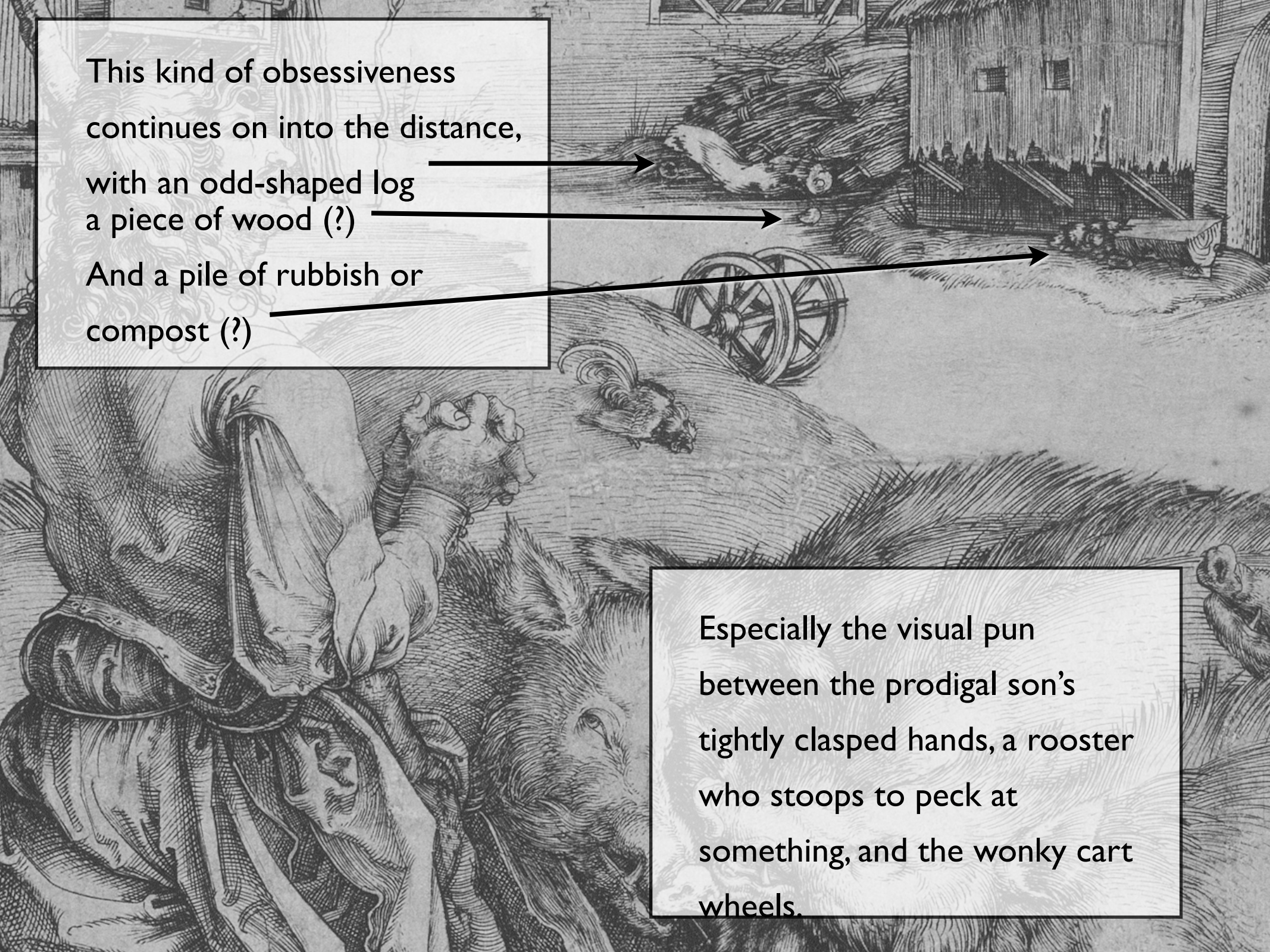




This kind of obsessiveness  
continues on into the distance,  
with an odd-shaped log  
a piece of wood (?)

And a pile of rubbish or  
compost (?)

Especially the visual pun  
between the prodigal son's  
tightly clasped hands, a rooster  
who stoops to peck at  
something, and the wonky cart  
wheels.



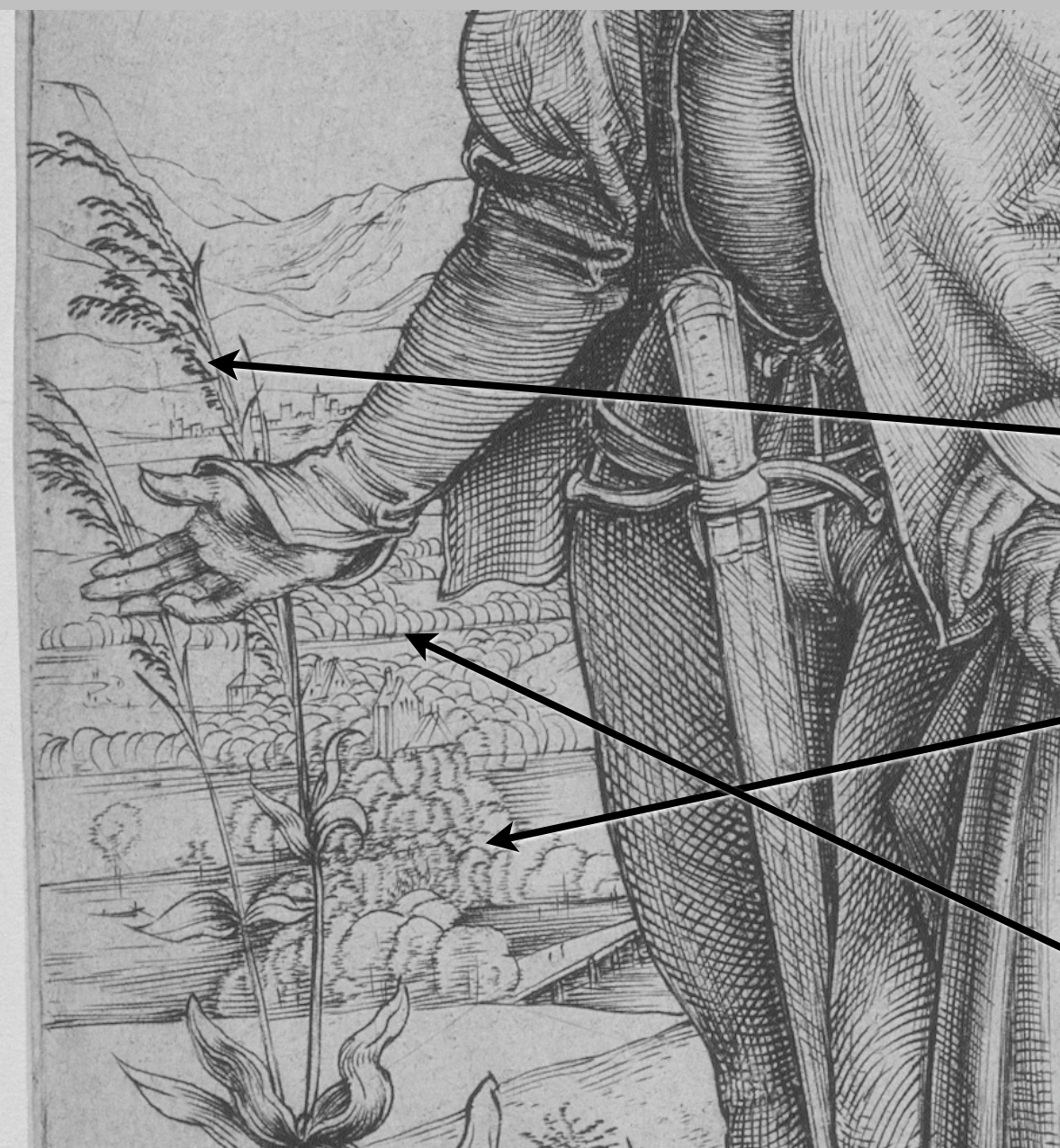


### 3. *Young Couple Threatened by Death*

A full-figure double portrait in a landscape, an Italian form

There is clear *contrapposto*, and the two figures work together harmoniously





On the left, trees recede into the distance.

The sequence begins with a plant in unnatural close-up (a 'Northern' trait)

... it continues with several groves of trees...

... and concludes with a set of cup-shapes: an Italian, geometric shorthand for 'forest'



On the right, a  
desiccated and  
disproportionate  
figure of Death  
celebrates his  
impending victory  
— very “Northern”

