

BORN UNDER AUSCHWITZ

*Melancholy Traditions in
Postwar German Literature*



MARY COSGROVE

Born under Auschwitz

Studies in German Literature, Linguistics, and Culture

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For Adrian, Sinéad, Noel†, and Michelle

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Introduction: In Defense of Melancholy

The “Genius” of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*

IN 1963 WALTER JENS PUBLISHED a short work, *Herr Meister: Dialog über einen Roman* (Mr. Meister: Dialogue about a Novel), that, in the form of an exchange of letters between a novelist (called A) and a literary critic (called B), considered the usefulness of melancholy traditions for the contemporary novel concerned with the memory of the Holocaust.¹ The letters are not fictional but showcase an intellectual exchange that took place between Jens and the German-Jewish writer Wolfgang Hildesheimer in the years 1961 and 1962 (*HM*, 11).² Hildesheimer, correspondent A, was interested in melancholy discourses at this time, as his fascination with Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and his later novels *Tynset* (1965) and *Masante* (1973) demonstrate.³

Despite the fact that *Herr Meister* commemorates Jews in the Holocaust, it is a minor text that has not been accorded much attention in discussions of postwar German literature.⁴ However, its scholarly focus on the aesthetic possibilities of different melancholy traditions for developing a literary discourse of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*—a problematic appellation that delineates the task of coming to terms with the Nazi past and the Holocaust and that for all its inadequacy will be used throughout this book to designate questions of remembrance—renders it an appropriate starting point for the present study.⁵ *Born under Auschwitz* examines melancholy self-fashioning in works by Günter Grass, Wolfgang Hildesheimer, Peter Weiss, W. G. Sebald, and Iris Hanika, all of whom, in their reflections on the poetics of remembrance after the Holocaust, revive and subvert European melancholy traditions. In *Herr Meister* Jens and Hildesheimer identify these traditions as a fecund source for the development of a literary language of commemoration. In so doing they query the still-pervasive concept of a caesura in representative and aesthetic practices after Auschwitz. A recent study, for example, asks the pertinent question whether “it is possible to talk about postwar poetics in terms of creativity rather than merely in terms of the destruction of traditions.”⁶ In their theoretical reflections the authors return to the concept of a gap in representation, however, which reinforces the idea of destruction and under-theorizes how creativity may beguile the problem of representation. Axel Dunker’s study of literature after Auschwitz

also emphasizes the moment of silence and absence in representation—the idea of the unrepresentable—embracing a negative aesthetics that, as he points out, approaches the sacred.⁷ From a different angle, Dominick LaCapra argues that to frame historical events in terms of silence and the unrepresentable constitutes “negative sacralization,” which substitutes mythical for historical understanding and blurs the boundaries in postwar memory culture between victims and others.⁸

By focusing on how different writers commemorate the Holocaust by placing themselves in a noble and masculine cultural lineage, *Born under Auschwitz* opens up a middle ground between the positions outlined by Dunker and LaCapra, emphasizing the creativity of postwar German writing as well as its embeddedness in established cultural and intellectual traditions. This is not to deny the idea of caesura and the problem of representation after the Holocaust. Indeed, the idea of melancholy as performative, which I develop in the next section, allows for the kind of “modernist” or deconstructionist strategies of signification that Dunker identifies in commemorative aesthetics after Auschwitz.⁹ Rather, the focus in this study on dynamic engagement with tradition illuminates the ways in which the writers featured self-consciously imagine themselves as creative artists whose melancholy pedigree, simultaneously verbose and inarticulate, is the signature of their postwar literary commemoration.

The idea that art after the Holocaust must be anti-redemptory and non-representational has been attributed to Frankfurt School intellectual Theodor W. Adorno’s famous “dictum” that to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.¹⁰ Adorno’s dictum, written in 1949 and first published in 1951, was not intended to establish a prohibition on artistic representation.¹¹ Rather than asserting that the impossibility of representation was a problem immanent to the postwar work of art and therefore inescapable, Adorno addressed the “unknowability” of the Holocaust as an *epistemological* problem that post-Auschwitz literary writing should aporetically reflect.¹² In other words, the language of the postwar text should thematize its limitations.

Jens’s and Hildesheimer’s dialogue about literary melancholy in the postwar context is an example of this kind of creative engagement. Their use of time-honored European melancholy traditions that are often anchored in optimistic humanist periods, such as the Renaissance, suggests that aesthetic practice, in order to be ethical, must not exhaustively showcase caesura and destruction. They do not suppress the idea of the unspeakable (*HM*, 139); however, their invention of a melancholy postwar personality in the character Herr Meister both confirms and questions the intellectual paradigm that renders language insufficient in the face of traumatic historical events deemed to exceed representation. This paradigm announces, to paraphrase historian Dan Diner, a “Zivilisationsbruch” (rupture in civilization), a radical break with the pre-Holocaust world and

its culture, and it insists that language must reinvent itself in order to address the legacy of Auschwitz.¹³

Challenging this idea of rupture, Jens and Hildesheimer return to established melancholy traditions in order to conceptualize Herr Meister, a German scholar whose eye-witness account provides the postwar reader with a window on the era of National Socialism, as an embodiment of the remorse that, a few years later, Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich would claim was missing from the “autistic” West German collective.¹⁴ The text is thus not only a phenomenon of the shift, in the 1960s, toward the acknowledgement of Jewish victim experience.¹⁵ It is also a belated product of the immediate postwar period, when Karl Jaspers produced his famous text on the question of German guilt.¹⁶ Hildesheimer’s revival of Hamlet as a kind of detective who, obsessed with finding out the truth, returns to the scene of the crime, acknowledges Jaspers’s earlier mobilization of the same character as an ethical role model for the postwar German collective. Shortly after the war Jaspers suggested this melancholy investigator of the past as the ideal embodiment of the ethical memory necessary for a collective that acknowledges its crimes.¹⁷ Hildesheimer’s intertextual reference to Jaspers in the early 1960s revives the schematic outlines of a self-reflexive perpetrator consciousness that had retreated behind the “war stories” of German suffering that dominated West German society in the 1950s.¹⁸ Crucially, his creative use of Hamlet to convey this key idea demonstrates the ethical possibilities of cultural traditions after 1945, not their bankruptcy.

A kind of witness-genius whose melancholy perspicacity enables him to investigate the past, Herr Meister is the modern incarnation of melancholy traditions that go back to Renaissance humanism. Accompanying the image of the pained witness who is committed to the ethical memory of the dead Holocaust victims is his simultaneous glorification under the sign of Saturn, the planet that during the Renaissance came to be associated with the creative brilliance of artists and thinkers (*HM*, 53).¹⁹ Through references to Albrecht Dürer’s famous engraving *Melencolia I* (1514), the authors codify Herr Meister as a noble melancholy type who, consistent with the idea of German remorse, is also a *Beichtkind* (a penitent, *HM*, 63). Yet shimmering through the earnestness of one who testifies to historical atrocity is also the mannered specter of the dandy (*HM*, 85). While highly gifted, Herr Meister is vain, lazy, and a hypochondriac, features that cast doubt on his ability to remain focused on the victim other and that suggest that any effort on his part to remember the suffering of others will of necessity take a long time to come to fruition (*HM*, 88–89).²⁰ Far from perfect, this particular *homo melancholicus* of the early 1960s is a quirky, mixed creation whose composite parts occasionally expose him to parody and the absurd (*HM*, 27). His iconic pedigree renders him a kind of “genius” of literary *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, clad in

the noble apparel of tradition that in its very pomp risks ridicule. In this way, Jens and Hildesheimer creatively allude to the ongoing effort that must be invested in remembering the Holocaust dead: the ethical effort to think past the self in order to empathize with the other. Moreover, his very iconicity means that Herr Meister challenges the assumption, influenced by Sigmund Freud's famous essay of 1917, that melancholy signifies a pathological, even unethical, response to the crimes of National Socialism and the Holocaust, a point that receives attention in the final section of this introduction.²¹ Like Jens and Hildesheimer, in *Born under Auschwitz* I approach melancholy discourse as a *performative* system of signs and icons and not primarily as a disturbing pathology of the individual or collective psyche. Viewed as a performative discourse, melancholy offers the postwar German writer concerned with ethical memory many possibilities for creating a varied and self-reflexive literary language of remembrance.

Melancholy as Performative

A hybrid of different melancholy icons, Herr Meister expresses in typological fashion a universal sadness about the Holocaust. Yet this means that he also *performs* this sadness, which is to say that Jens and Hildesheimer, in creating him, cite established melancholy traditions.

The concept of “performativity” or “the performative” has had a complex history since the English philosopher J. L. Austin began to theorize it in the 1950s.²² Austin argued that our utterances are performative; that is, they are not merely the linguistic descriptions of events in the non-linguistic world. Rather, utterances such as bets, promises, and threats, for example, constitute actions that are “performed.” As James Loxley puts it, these utterances, “are actions *in themselves*, actions of a distinctively linguistic kind.”²³ Viewed from this angle, language does not just reflect our world; it also helps to create it. Austin argued further that performative utterances are conventional—ritual or ceremonial—in nature. This means that they are both inherently repeatable and, perhaps somewhat counter-intuitively, creative linguistic acts. In his deconstructionist treatment of the performative, Jacques Derrida emphasizes Austin's insistence on the conventional character of performative utterances. He develops the idea of conventionality further, however, to encompass the deconstructionist view of language as characterized by a constitutive lack or absence. For Derrida, the conventionality and citationality of the performative, what he terms its “iterability,” continually evokes this fundamental condition of language.²⁴ From a deconstructionist angle, literary language that uses established melancholy tradition points to its own deficits and it does this through the very conventionality of melancholy discourses. To take this one step further: melancholy understood as performative in

the deconstructionist sense offers a stylized expression of the problems of lack, deferral, and surplus that deconstruction asserts as central problems of language and signification.

Derrida's view of the performative is thus interesting for my discussion. In the case of Herr Meister, who is a medley of melancholy icons, we can observe the performative at work. Jens and Hildesheimer cite established melancholy types, which is a form of repetition as well as a creative act. Creativity is evident in the combination of the old with the new, namely their citation of pre-twentieth century traditions in the new post-Holocaust context. The iconic plenitude of melancholy discourses, which hark back to pre-Holocaust epochs, subtly thematizes the limitations of language and representation since 1945. These limitations come to the fore when we consider, for example, that melancholy to some degree should symbolize mood and affect. And yet, as Thomas Pfau argues, melancholy as performative "unravels the project of an authentically expressive poetics," which points to the gap between signifier and signified and suggests that distance constitutes the representation of sadness.²⁵ While this performative aspect to melancholy discourse means that it has often been regarded as inauthentic, *Born under Auschwitz* seeks to introduce a more differentiated view.²⁶ The objective is to show, through the analysis of an exemplary set of texts, how melancholy discourses help develop a literary language of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* in this period.

Derrida's theory of iterability is founded on the repeatability of all linguistic signs within language. He argues that the same sign can be repeated in different contexts, which underscores both its sameness and its difference. This in turn suggests that a sign is never quite identical with itself: it is permanently iterable or repeatable. In his study of performativity, Loxley reasons as follows:

Insofar as a mark is iterable, it cannot be said to belong ultimately or originally in any particular context. If it is essentially repeatable, it can be extracted from any set of linguistic or social circumstances and grafted onto another, remaining in some way the same as it is repeated. It can, in other words, be redeployed, quoted, or cited, in principle ad infinitum. And this capability also ensures that its use in any particular context carries the trace of the other contexts in which it features: the examples of quoting and citing reveal this particularly starkly.²⁷

One prominent example of a melancholy icon that displays this kind of iterability is Dürer's engraving *Melencolia I*. While the writers who engage with this image in the current study follow art historian Erwin Panofsky's influential humanist interpretation of Dürer, reviving *Melencolia I* in a positive way as a kind of "Renaissance episteme" that functions in the postwar context as short-hand for ethical memory, other writers of this

period, such as Wolfgang Koeppen and the Austro-Jewish Holocaust survivor Jean Améry, were inclined to see in the image evidence of Germany's demonic pact with National Socialism.²⁸ Améry and Koeppen follow a line of interpretation that Thomas Mann advanced in his postwar novel *Doktor Faustus* (1947), which tells the story of artist Adrian Leverkühn's pact with the devil, an allegory for Germany's descent into National Socialism.²⁹ Instead of stressing Dürer's humanist background, Mann associates the artist "with the Gothic, backward, diabolical sphere," a negative reassessment, as Martin A. Ruehl points out, "that may have been conditioned by [Mann's] awareness of the artist's positive reception in the Third Reich."³⁰ In his hybrid text *Aus dem Tagebuch einer Schnecke* (From the diary of a snail, 1972), Grass reverses this trend. In an effort to recast the postwar German artist as a politically engaged democrat who feels remorse for the Nazi past, he endorses Panofsky's reading of Dürer's image as the eloquent expression of Renaissance humanism, and states that he is "putting in a good word for melancholy."³¹

These examples show how the same image may be cited in different contexts by different writers, who invest it with very different meanings.³² The polarization between, for instance, Renaissance and Gothic interpretations of Dürer destabilizes the idea that humanism constitutes the original meaning of *Melencolia I*. We might view this from a deconstructionist angle in terms of the performative that indicates a lack of original, unitary meaning at the heart of the icon.³³ The heterogeneity of meaning that emerges in this space of ambivalence is the general condition of language, according to Derrida.³⁴ The broad term "melancholy" signifies not only different and often contradictory cultural traditions but also loosely names an obscure mood and emotion; this points to ambivalence as a fundamental condition of language: the discontinuity between signifier and signified that characterizes the performative. Interestingly, this kind of obscurity also informs medical accounts of melancholy.³⁵ As distinct from other kinds of sadness that can boast a clear trigger, melancholy is usually described as sadness with insufficient or no cause: the subject struggles to identify and name the lost object that caused her/his sadness.³⁶ Some theories propose that in melancholy the subject laments not so much the loss of a specific object as a far greater constitutive absence, "the real that does not lend itself to signification," in Julia Kristeva's words.³⁷ As Pfau suggests, "the language of melancholy thus bespeaks the subject's grasp of a permanent insufficiency in . . . the signifier."³⁸ From this viewpoint, the rich arsenal of motifs and icons in melancholy traditions testify, in their efforts to express the cause of melancholy, to the insufficiency of signification. The epistemological problem that surfaces in this quest to understand the nature of sadness leads Hartmut Böhme to conclude that Dürer's *Melencolia I* is the allegory of an allegory that tautologically signifies the overdetermined quality of the melancholy signifier.³⁹ Similarly,

Pfau argues that this performative quality of the “damaged” melancholy signifier characterizes much of the historical writing on melancholy:⁴⁰

As early as [Robert] Burton’s *Anatomy of Melancholy*, melancholy is understood as thoroughly rhetorical in its constitution and as a conscious articulation of that very fact. Thus it unfolds as a recurrent, monotonous, indeed, serial, reenactment of the *vanitas* or futility not only of symbolic signification but of the very creation that the symbolic seeks to capture and, by that very means, redeem.⁴¹

This body of writing, in its efforts to name an absence, is peculiarly verbose. Burton’s famous early modern tome with its deference, through extensive citation, to the scholastic fathers of the medieval period and the intellectuals of antiquity is another good example of the performative quality of writing on melancholy.⁴² He cites the established authorities *ad nauseum* and produces endless lists of causes, symptoms, and remedies, but arguably this does not bring him any closer to solving the mystery of melancholy.

The self-reflexive focus on the limitations of language in discourses on and about melancholy suggests a certain structural kinship between the age-old task of writing about melancholy and the more recent task of writing about the Holocaust. In both cases, the effort to find words that capture the object without distorting it raises the issues of knowing and representation and determines that these are the central concerns of the signifying process.

In the works featured in this study, the historical event of the Holocaust is a prominent cause of the melancholy depicted. However, the writers use the longstanding ambiguity around what causes melancholy to point up the insufficiency of language and rational explanation after the Holocaust. The very performativity of melancholy—the fact that conventional icons appear in very different works—plays an important role in this endeavor. Grass and Hildesheimer, for example, cite the “Renaissance episteme” of melancholy genius in their respective works on Holocaust memory, *Aus dem Tagebuch einer Schnecke*, and *Tynset* and *Masante*. Yet Grass belongs to the German perpetrator collective, while Hildesheimer is a member of the Jewish victim collective. Both adapt the humanist melancholy icon to address the legacy of Auschwitz, but the contexts into which they transfer this icon—the moral worlds of the perpetrator and the victim—vary significantly. Consequently, they encode the “Renaissance episteme” differently, as chapters 1 and 2 demonstrate. While Grass insists that the remorseful German is by definition a melancholy genius, Hildesheimer’s novels document survivor guilt as the ruinous slide from genial nobility into the sin of sloth. Self-congratulation is the dominant tone in Grass, while self-recrimination permeates Hildesheimer’s poetics. This comparison highlights the ethical effects of the performative quality

of the image of melancholy genius. That the central protagonists of two morally very different worlds may be channeled through this common “mark” points to the impersonal, insufficient, and—worse still—perhaps even inauthentic nature of language—to quote Loxley “the disturbing thought that something technical or mechanical haunts our purposes and meanings at their origins.”⁴³ In the context of postwar German literature, this issue is particularly acute, as Adorno’s dictum showed. To expose the conventional quality of language, however, is also to expose its struggle to say anything meaningful about atrocity and its aftermath. And yet this struggle, borne of catastrophe, may blaze a creative trail. The performativity of melancholy traditions in the post-Holocaust literary text goes right to the heart of this matter, demonstrating the inventive potential of any conventional structure, including those deemed insufficient. The revival of melancholy traditions in the post-1945 German literary context is a moment of inventiveness in this sense. Against the one-dimensional notion of melancholy as a pathological affliction of the psyche, understanding melancholy discourse as performative illuminates how writers navigate their way through a new moral universe by citing and combining established icons to create a literary language of remembrance.

Herr Meister demonstrates this performative quality of melancholy discourse in the post-Holocaust world. To be melancholy in *Herr Meister* is not only to lay bare the suffering of the damaged psyche. It is just as much to perform penitence, to strike a pose, according to literary and cultural conventions. To subvert what Hamlet says to his mother, Gertrude, who complains that he wears too much black: to be melancholy is not just to suffer the internal crisis of the soul. It is also to don the trappings and the suits of woe.⁴⁴ Rather than being merely a naïve expression of emotion, then, melancholy discourse enables critical investigation of cultural norms and values and offers an arsenal of motifs and figures of shifting import that transmit the effort to grasp what exceeds ordinary understanding.

Terminology

The word “melancholy” can describe very different emotional and psychological states. In one sense, it denotes the experience of sadness that might linger for an indefinite period and that may or may not have a clear cause. Since the late nineteenth century this condition has been referred to as “depression,” a medical term that does not connote the rich cultural and intellectual legacy of melancholy from antiquity to the present.⁴⁵ For “melancholy” also describes a state of cultural attainment. Within the body of writing on melancholy, images of illness and despair thus alternate with the image of heroic, genial melancholy or *melancholia generosa* that originated with Aristotle, came to prominence in the Florentine

Neoplatonism of the Renaissance, and made an emphatic reappearance during Romanticism.⁴⁶ In recognition of such rich traditions, “melancholy” is understood here as a shifting cultural representation that reflects historical changes in the evaluation of sadness and not as an anthropological constant. In this spirit, *Born under Auschwitz* acknowledges the breadth and diversity of melancholy in some cultural discourses as “good” sadness, a creative blessing, and in others as “bad” sadness, a debilitating condition. Important to note is that both variants are cultural constructs that may have little resonance with any individual’s experience of sadness.

The term “sadness” is more general than the term “melancholy,” which has an established, if varied, cultural legacy. “Sadness” is a broad enough category to encompass both “melancholy” and “depression,” although these nouns do not always describe the same phenomenon. I occasionally use the term “sadness,” usually qualified as a “good” kind (genial melancholy, for example) or “bad” kind (spiritual sloth), as a synonym for melancholy. In this study “melancholy” and “sadness” refer to a contemplative response to recent history that is embedded in the ancient cultural traditions of writing about and depicting the universal human experience of sorrow.⁴⁷ In the interest of clarity, I avoid the alternative term “melancholia”; while it was a synonym for “melancholy” during the Renaissance, its application, in other epochs, has often been restricted to descriptions of disease.⁴⁸

Title, Authors, and Gender

The title *Born under Auschwitz* is inspired by Rudolf and Margot Wittkower’s iconological work, *Born under Saturn* (1963), which examines the self-stylization and popular image of the artist as an eccentric, noble genius from antiquity to the French Revolution. The Saturn of their title references the recasting, during the Renaissance, of this planet as the astral mentor of the gifted intellectual and is thus a positive marker of identity. By contrast, the intertextual reference to astrology in *Born under Auschwitz* is nominal only and is not intended to convey astrological fatalism in the face of major historical events. Rather, it signals the coming of age after 1945 of literary authors who use melancholy as a means of crafting an ethical discourse of literary commemoration. New readings of literary texts that were published in the period since the 1960s, the decade in which the concept of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* was critically expanded to include the perspective of Jewish victims, highlight how the writers engage with diverse melancholy traditions to convey a particular interpretation of the past.⁴⁹ Establishing the literary effect of each author’s efforts to combine the old with the new—how they create a literary language for the present that embeds the legacy of the Holocaust in a particular intellectual tradition—the treatment of each writer looks

back to earlier centuries at the same time that it considers postwar literary discourses on memory.

While there are other postwar German writers whose works could be considered melancholy, the writers featured in this study have in common the explicit engagement, as a means of addressing the Nazi past, with melancholy traditions since antiquity.⁵⁰ *Born under Auschwitz* examines four male writers and one female writer, which raises the question of gender. As Julia Schiesari argues, melancholy is a predominantly masculine discourse that, from Aristotle to Giorgio Agamben, has been expressed, diagnosed, and described mainly by male thinkers.⁵¹ Ever since the thinker referred to as “pseudo-Aristotle”—one of Aristotle’s pupils whose thoughts on melancholy were published under Aristotle’s name—asked why it was that all great *male* heroes suffered from melancholy, women have largely been excluded from the image of the manic-melancholy creative genius.⁵² According to this perspective, great melancholics are men, and their pathological sense of loss has, in the Western canon, acquired a cultural status denied to woman’s more mundane experience of sadness. Freud exemplifies this exclusion of women from the great melancholy canon when he refers to Hamlet—one of the male stars of Renaissance humanism—as melancholic.⁵³ Sad women Freud dismisses as “mere hysterics” or “just depressed.”⁵⁴ According to Schiesari, Kristeva also assigns an essentially depressive status to women, separating out “some superior, implicitly male, aesthetic or cultural possibility” from the more “prosaic grief” of the sick woman.⁵⁵

Clark Lawlor argues, however, that women writers have contributed more to the cultural genesis of melancholy than they are given credit for historically.⁵⁶ In the postwar German context, Ingeborg Bachmann, for example, could be regarded in this light.⁵⁷ An analysis of the ways in which women writers appropriate an explicitly masculine tradition of melancholy, while intrinsically worthwhile, would exceed the objective of this book, which is, broadly speaking, to trace the rise and decline of a *masculine* type in the context of postwar German literature. *Born under Auschwitz* thus examines how male writers engage with melancholy discourses, illuminating how they position themselves in a noble and overwhelmingly masculine European lineage. The inclusion of Hanika, the only female author in this study, is not intended to address a gender imbalance in the selection of authors. Her deeply satirical novel, *Das Eigentliche* (Authenticity, 2010) offers a pithy counterpoint to the other writers featured here: she announces the death of the male melancholy genius of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* and the end of Holocaust memory in the Berlin Republic. Peter Weiss is the only other writer in this study who ponders in a critical way the question of melancholy, gender, and postwar ethical memory.

By contrast, the texts by Grass, Hildesheimer, and Sebald use the patriarchal tradition of melancholy, which marks male loss as singularly worthwhile, to lend a sense of moral greatness to the task of working through the past. This reinforces the sense that serious memory work and ethically endowed “Trauerarbeit” (mourning work) are the business of perspicacious menfolk. Gisela Ecker argues that, historically speaking, mourning work, in the gendered division of cultural labor, has always been a second-rate task assigned to women.⁵⁸ However, the exceptional German situation after 1945 demonstrates how in some historical epochs the public expression of loss has a high cultural and ethical value that recodifies mourning and melancholy as legitimate *masculine* tasks. Thus in investigating how the texts in this study establish the male genius of *Ver-gangenheitsbewältigung*, we must take into consideration gender and the abject status of women in discourses about melancholy. Jennifer Radden points out that historically “the category of genius had no more place for women than had the category of melancholy,” even though women in Renaissance and baroque representations of melancholy often embodied a female figure known as Dame Melancholy.⁵⁹ When feminized, the melancholy figure was often deemed to have lost its positive Aristotelian attributes, becoming old, deadly, and contaminating (*SM*, 329).

Melancholy: The Field of Research

Contemporary scholarly sources on melancholy feature in the personal archives and libraries of the individual authors of the texts under scrutiny here, revealing the authors’ knowledge of melancholy traditions and suggesting their awareness of what I term melancholy as performative. In *Herr Meister* one of the letters mentions how Jens has sent Hildesheimer a parcel containing reading material, including Panofsky’s and Fritz Saxl’s groundbreaking iconological study of Dürer’s engraving (*HM*, 102). Grass also mentions this source in *Aus dem Tagebuch einer Schnecke* and in the archival material for the diary. Weiss’s archive contains a clipping of *Melencolia I*, which is reproduced in his notebooks. Sebald refers to the same image in *Die Ringe des Saturn* (The Rings of Saturn, 1997), and notes he made in his copy of Walter Benjamin’s work on baroque tragic drama reveal close engagement with Benjamin’s interpretation of the engraving.⁶⁰ Alongside the thematization of melancholy as a vessel for ethical Holocaust memory, the authors’ engagement with this rich phenomenon is intriguing in another respect. The earlier works by Grass, Hildesheimer, and Jens coincide with a wave of scholarly output on the topic of melancholy in the 1960s. Studies from many different disciplines were published throughout the decade, many of which still belong to the canon of scholarly works on melancholy today.⁶¹ Together they provide

sources and inspiration for subsequent literary treatments of melancholy within the field of German Studies.⁶²

When one reviews this field of scholarly research, two questions arise: first, why melancholy enjoyed such prominence in the early 1960s; second, how this scholarship was absorbed by German writers with an interest in the literary representation of the Holocaust and the Nazi past.

It is beyond the scope of the present study to answer the first question exhaustively. Indeed, one would need to embed such an investigation within an intellectual history of the 1960s. However, one feature of melancholy as a subject of academic enquiry is difficult to overlook when considering its popularity at this time: its interdisciplinarity within the context of the burgeoning field of Cultural Studies.⁶³ The versatility of melancholy as an object of study makes it an attractive topic for scholars interested in intellectual milieus beyond their immediate field. No single study on melancholy exemplifies this principle as convincingly as the ground-breaking work by Klibansky, Panofsky, and Saxl. Arguably still the most influential study on melancholy within the Humanities, *Saturn und Melancholie* (Saturn and Melancholy, 1964) is a product of the Aby Warburg school of thought, which developed the iconological method for research in art history, an approach that examines artworks by looking at them in their iconographic, historical, and cultural context and that transcends the high-low divide in the interpretation of visual culture.⁶⁴

This masterful study places *Melencolia I* in its historical and iconographical context, illuminating what was new about the engraving at the dawn of the early modern period. The authors demonstrate how Dürer combined different melancholy traditions, such as those based on ancient Greek medicine, medieval astrology, and the Neoplatonic division of the soul, to articulate a new, modern subjectivity that recognized the epistemological limitations of the mind in the face of the growing complexity of the world. As well as providing the reader with a detailed overview of several melancholy discourses, this study also drives home the message of melancholic artistic genius, for the whole work propels its impressive scholarship toward the concluding section, where Dürer's startling originality as a unique intellectual of his time, as well as an outstanding painter, is revealed in irresistible splendor. It is this image of melancholy genius that exerts such magnetic influence on the male writers under examination here.

The impact of *Saturn und Melancholie* and the interdisciplinary approach to literary studies is palpable.⁶⁵ Unsurprisingly, there is no firm consensus on the question of where to establish disciplinary boundaries in the study of melancholy. Were one to write an intellectual history of melancholy in the twentieth century from a predominantly Humanities perspective, its medical reconceptualization as depression since the end of the nineteenth century would have to be traced, and beyond this, one

would have to uncover the impact of this medicalization on the study of melancholy in Humanities subjects.⁶⁶ In this vein, Burkhard Meyer-Sickendieck's recent study on brooding attempts to straddle the divide between literary-cultural analysis and neuroscientific research.⁶⁷ By contrast, Martina Wagner-Egelhaaf resurpects disciplinary boundaries by dismissing the description and classification of diseases from literary scholarship.⁶⁸ These two positions reveal the difficulty of deciding where to set limits on the melancholy object of scholarly enquiry.

This is an issue affecting the present study. Rather than providing a history of the concept in its various guises across different disciplines, however, an endeavor that would swell to encyclopedic proportions, I take the literary text as a point of departure and establish, on the basis of close readings, the kind of melancholy the individual authors use in their quest to create a poetics of remembrance. This approach identifies the epochal and thematic preferences of the different authors. Often they use similar imagery; however, the melancholy "object" as it appears in the various texts can be encoded very differently, depending on what the author wishes to say about the legacy of the Nazi past and, more often than not, depending on whether the author belongs to the victim (Hildesheimer, Weiss) or perpetrator (Grass, Sebald, Hanika) collective. In this way, each chapter includes only those aspects of specific melancholy traditions that are relevant for the discussion of the texts at hand. Certain key images from the history of melancholy, such as Dürer's engraving, recur across these texts.

Despite the many studies on literary melancholy since the 1960s, melancholy as a discourse under the sign of Auschwitz has yet to be identified as a trend in postwar German literature. This oversight arises, to some degree, from the scholarly association of German melancholy traditions predominantly with the early modern period, the baroque period, Romanticism, and also the crisis of modernity, and it is perpetuated in postwar publications on melancholy in German literature, most of which stop their analysis before the twentieth century. An exception is Günter Blamberger's study, which examines the postwar German novel.⁶⁹ However, Blamberger is concerned more with the role melancholy plays in the crisis of the novel during existentialism than with its potential as a memory discourse after Auschwitz. The gap in research can also be explained through the narrowing of the term "melancholy" in psychoanalytical discourses on German memory since the 1960s. In these, melancholy demarcates an obscure, psychopathological state, while its performative potential as a literary discourse of memory is neglected.

Yet beyond psychoanalysis, traditions of melancholy have had a sustained literary afterlife in the latter half of the twentieth century. Especially prominent in post-Auschwitz literary melancholy are the figure of the Renaissance genius and the Christian view of melancholy as a

sin. It is useful, therefore, to provide a brief overview of these key phases in the intellectual history of melancholy. Together they can be grouped into a “good” kind of melancholy and a “bad” kind. The German writers featured here use both “good” and “bad” images to articulate their views on the legacy of the recent past. More often than not, the images they select already contain a statement on this past, because their choices carry value judgments on the complex phenomenon of sadness that colors contemporary discussions about how to commemorate the past. To return to the question of how these writers engage with melancholy in a post-Auschwitz context, the provisional answer is: dramatically, ostentatiously, and with a flair for the performative. Nobility is a key marker of the brilliant melancholy type, so to be presented as evidently melancholy in this particular sense is to possess dignified, perhaps even ethical, post-war credentials.

“Good” and “Bad” Melancholy: An Overview

Melancholy has had many different faces throughout the millennia and also at any one period. A perplexing phenomenon, it has always been divisive, whether it is understood as the pathological disease of clinical enquiry, as an everyday transitory mood that afflicts many, as a sign of demonic possession, or as a fashionable marker of artistic creativity. In history, melancholy has been intimately connected to major upheaval and epochal intellectual shifts, such as the humanist debates of the Renaissance, the theological conflicts of the Reformation, and the emergence of modernity and with it a sense of historical crisis. In observers it has inspired a wide range of strong reactions, perhaps because no single version of melancholy exists that can harmonize its internal ambivalences and intrinsic dialectical vitality.⁷⁰ Designating a limitless terrain between illness and empowerment, the different mood states described by the term “melancholy” swing, at least since pseudo-Aristotle’s association of melancholy with extraordinary ability, between the darkness of a pathological condition and the dazzling heights of genius.⁷¹ These two poles mark out the dialectical tension that is germane to melancholy. On the one hand, it is an anthropological-medical phenomenon that describes a pathological condition or a disease. On the other, it circumscribes the nobility of the tragic outlook.

The Medical View

The dichotomy of “good” and “bad” melancholy is structured around this split between mental illness and gifted state. Both accounts of the condition have proved tenacious. As early as the fifth century B.C. the