

Introduction

The Idea of Melancholy

In the prologue to his book on the German sorrow-plays, the *Trauerspiel*, Walter Benjamin argues for the inherent relation between truth and language. One interesting example of his claim appears when he describes the vocation of philosophy as a struggle for the presentation of words: “Philosophy is—and rightly so—a struggle for the presentation [*Darstellung*] of a limited number of words which always remain the same—a struggle for the presentation of ideas” (*TS*, 37).¹

Ignoring the history of accepted philosophical terminologies for the purpose of their refinement inherently implies disregard of the burden of memory and the load of meaning they have so far carried. Yet what does Benjamin intend by the use of the word *struggle* in this quest? In what way is Benjamin aiming toward a practice different from that of Nietzsche’s antiquarian, who, while knowledgeable of the art of preserving the past, fails to master the generation of new life? Benjamin’s suggestion here is not permeated with the antiquarian’s passion for nostalgia or with any type of conservativeness; its perception of the past is not meaningful for its own sake, nor does it originate in any kind of romantic homesickness. His suggestion is, rather, directed at our grasping the past’s “afterlife” together with the present’s experience of that past.

Following Benjamin’s description of the vocation of philosophy, I take “philosophy’s struggle” to be a linguistic undertaking involving the

re-presentation of the inner life of those few terms that continue to serve as philosophy's cornerstones: truth, justice, and reason, among others. This inner life has a dynamic of its own, and it is precisely this dynamic that prevents the struggle for words from being strictly nostalgic and turns it into a philosophically meaningful practice: the transformation of mere words into ideas.

One pristine example of the philosophical struggle for presentation is *melancholy*, a word whose presence can be traced to the inauguration of thought. Melancholy's meanings extend from the personal to the collective, from body to soul, and from pathology to inclination.² Melancholy has always been marked by acute contradictions in its depiction, invoking an expansive array of meanings: it encompasses positive, creative facets—such as depth, creativity, and bursts of genius—as well as negative qualities—including gloominess, despondency, and isolation. The history of the term is saturated with different and at times conflicting articulations that, paradoxically, seem to consistently point to more or less the same set of features. Notions of closure, contemplation, loss, passivity, sloth, and genius have always been linked to melancholy in one version or another,³ referring to body or soul and vice versa.⁴

In the fluctuating movement of its internal history melancholy has been described as a somatic condition (a humeral imbalance resulting in the excess of black bile) brought on by the melancholic's sins (sloth or *acedia*, in the religious context of the Middle Ages); an inclination or mood (in the Renaissance); the consequence of demonic undertakings or witchcraft (in the seventeenth century); a desirable state inducing productivity and genius; and, finally, a pathology (in the nineteenth century). This plethora of interpretations invites queries as to their tentative complementarity rather than to their overt opposition, opening up the possibility to enrich our understanding of the idea of melancholy.

This complementary structure of melancholy's meanings invokes another famous image conjured up by Benjamin when he discusses his conception of history: the image of the whirlpool, which supplants the developmental understanding of history as a riverbed (*Flußbett*). Here, as in many other instances, the image of the whirlpool cuts through his philosophical convictions. That is, thinking of the history of melancholy as resembling the movement of a whirlpool unfetters that history from any evolutionary

concept of its development. Melancholy's conceptualization as a whirlpool, as a repetitive historical movement in which "the prehistory and posthistory of an event, or, better, of a status, swirl around it" (*SW*, 2:502), transforms melancholy into a field of gravity, quite different from a teleologically structured narrative. Understood in this way, melancholy's somatic sense is not replaced by an alternative theological or psychological denotation but is, rather, supplemented by them. This internal anatomy enables Benjamin to turn melancholy from a mere word into a philosophical "idea."

Melancholy, weighted down with the intricacies of its historical burden, can likewise be thought of as what Benjamin calls "a worn-out word" (*SW*, 2:503), a word that has become a ragbag for endless states and implications (what Robert Burton called a "Babylonian tower of symptoms"),⁵ a word that has been so repeatedly reproduced that it has become worn-out. Such a word, writes Benjamin, "can evoke an entire period" (*SW*, 2:503). His phrase implies the stress that Benjamin places on the historical contextualization of language in its entirety, with melancholy serving as the major case in point. That is, according to Benjamin, exploration of the term's diverse, rich history and the internal motion of its historical "load" is, surprisingly, precisely what provides it with stability.

Dürer's famous engraving *Melancholia I*, which so accurately captures the manifold nature of melancholy, especially its affinity for scholars, is sensitively described by Klibansky, Panofsky, and Saxl as overcoming the diverse peculiarities within this complex state of mind to unite "in a single whole, full of emotional life, the phenomena which the set notions of temperament and disease had robbed of their vitality." They add that Dürer "conceived the melancholy of intellectual men as an indivisible destiny in which the differences of melancholy temperament, disease and mood fade into nothing, and brooding sorrow no less than creative enthusiasm are but the extremes of one and the same disposition."⁶ The acuity of this depiction lies in its revelation of melancholy's transcendence beyond all internal discords and conflicting currents; it points to melancholy's fascinating inner stability, which lies beyond any comparison between health and disease, creativity and paralysis.

Despite the remarkable nature of the term's internal history, all these interpretations center on the subjective, psychological, and somatic nature of the individual overcome by melancholy. This tendency

runs through the history of melancholy, be it in the medical descriptions of its source in excessive bile, its association with a punishment for sins committed, or the more recent psychoanalytic designation of melancholy as pathology. The strength of the psychoanalytic bent has transformed melancholy into a privileged private state, overshadowing the more far-reaching meanings the term encompasses. However, even in the psychoanalytic framework, we can still detect the traces of the historical association between melancholy and genius. One striking example is Freud's provocative admission that the melancholic patient has a "keener eye for the truth" (*SE*, 14:246).

Even when dealt with in philosophical contexts, where one could expect to find a more structural, systematic, and analytic point of view, melancholy has also been frequently explicated as the philosophical state of mind, the gloomy mood accompanied by deep abstract thought and dismal temperament believed to mark philosophers as men of genius. In all these cases melancholy is conceptualized as inherent in the nature of the "true" philosopher, a prerequisite for his distinctive status, as well as his most profound flaw; seldom, however, has it been attributed to philosophy. Even Hume, well known for the correspondence he imputed between his philosophical work and melancholy, treats melancholy as a subjective, psychological state rather than a structural, philosophical one. His intriguing account of the deep divide between his "philosophical melancholy and delirium" and his mundane and social engagements is always poignant: "I dine, I play a game of backgammon, I converse, and am merry with my friends; and when after three or four hours' amusement, I would return to these [philosophical] speculations, they appear so cold, and strained, and ridiculous, that I cannot find [it] in my heart to enter into them any farther."⁷

From this perspective the history of melancholy can be viewed as parallel to, albeit not directly associated with, the history of philosophy. Philosophers' affinity for melancholy has become a cliché, that of the glum, pensive thinker, struggling with the bottomless depths of his desolation. Yet the more decisive question regarding the *prima facie* connection of melancholy to philosophy—but not to the philosopher—is rarely tackled. Such a question requires an almost counterintuitive detachment from the allure of psychological, pathological, anthropological, and other versions

of the subjective forms of melancholy and a rethinking of the term from a philosophical and structural perspective.

The struggle for the presentation of melancholy sometimes takes the form of a struggle aimed at challenging its invisibility within the structure of philosophical systems. Prospects for revealing this important presence lie, first and foremost, in releasing melancholy from the grip of its subjective, psychological, and pathological thrust and, second, in reestablishing its correspondence with mood.

Heidegger's Discussion of Moods

One of the most compelling accounts of moods in philosophy no doubt belongs to Heidegger. Although Heidegger does not dwell on melancholy (for him, anxiety and boredom are the dominant states of mind), he does teach us how to think of moods philosophically. Considered more radically, Heidegger's work demonstrates that any scrutiny of the history of philosophy and the structure of philosophical thought requires consideration of the pivotal role moods play in it. In *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* Heidegger writes that his aim is to awaken mood (*Stimmung*) and attunement so as to make their presence felt in the act of philosophizing itself while reconsidering their presence in the history of philosophy: "Thus we shall not speak at all of 'ascertaining' [*Fest Stellen*] a fundamental attunement . . . but of awakening it. Awakening means making something wakeful, letting whatever is sleeping become wakeful."⁸ Heidegger's idea of "awakening" indicates that his objective is not to bring mood back into philosophical activity but to disclose its presence as what is always already there.

Mood, for Heidegger, offers an opening toward conceiving an alternative to the predominance of the subject-object divide in the history of philosophy. Heidegger proffers mood not only as a substitute for the reign of epistemology that has come to prevail in philosophy but also as what undermines the preeminence of the thinking subject, exemplified in modern philosophy in Cartesian or Kantian thought. Mood makes its first appearance in Heidegger's 1925 lecture course at the University of Marburg and remains central to his understanding of philosophy and Being up until his 1966 Zollikon Seminars.⁹

Heidegger's discussion of mood is important, first, in his provision of a philosophical methodology for the examination of moods. This model considers moods not as possessing subjective, psychological, or personal attributes but, alternatively, as evincing an ontological structure. This crucial shift emerges from the structure of *Dasein*, in which the subject-object antithesis is challenged: mood, therefore, does not belong to the subject nor to the world but stands exactly at their intersection. With this structure Heidegger undermines the epistemological constitution of modern philosophy. In fact, not only does it undermine the predominance of the thinking subject, but it is also presented as what conditions epistemology in the first place. His understanding of Being as always already a "Being-in-the-world" proffers mood as what is constitutive to the ontological structure of Being and not merely one of its contingent attributes.

Second, Heidegger points to the disclosive nature of moods; he writes that "mood is a primordial kind of Being for Dasein, in which Dasein is disclosed to itself prior to all cognition and volition, and beyond their range of disclosure" (*BT*, 175 [136]).¹⁰ Elsewhere he states, "The possibilities of disclosure that belong to cognition reach far too short a way compared with the primordial disclosure belonging to moods, in which Dasein is brought before its Being as 'there'" (*BT*, 173 [134]). With these claims Heidegger departs from the traditional conception of affect and sensuous states that are secondary to the "higher" cognitive faculties of reason and will.¹¹ He perceives mood as revealing the fundamental qualities of our Being-in-the-world, preceding and thus conditioning any "cognitive" disclosure undertaken with the faculty of reason.¹²

Put differently, and in non-Heideggerian terms, mood or attunement is the way the world discloses and unfolds itself—how we find ourselves in it and how it matters to us. "The fact that this sort of thing can 'matter' to it [Being-in as such] is grounded in one's state-of-mind; and as a state-of-mind it has already disclosed the world" (*BT*, 176 [137]). Mood discloses the world as meaningful. Yet this meaningfulness does not have a structure resembling that of desire, in which a certain object passionately grabs our attention. Mood is configured as an all-encompassing mode, as totality. In that sense mood is necessary for the disclosure and appearance of the world in its entirety as hopeful, boring, or anxious. The world, in

other words, is not “colored” or veiled by a certain mood; on the contrary, the world is constituted of, and made intelligible by, mood.

Mood, however, does not disclose separate objects in the world but the totality of the world itself, in an act of absorption that could not be farther away from the intentionality of cognitive comprehension or emotive passion. Heidegger adds that no thought exists without mood’s providing the initial conditions of its possibility; hence, “understanding always has its mood” (*BT*, 182 [143]). What Heidegger offers here is a novel perspective from which to account for the relationship between mood and philosophy or, more precisely, the *only* possible structure in which, according to his perspective, the relationship of philosophy to the world can be conceived.¹³

As a constituent of Being-in-the-world, mood does not determine our experience of a specific object or situation within the world; rather, it provides the conditions permitting the very experience itself. In this sense mood does not reveal a specific object but the totality of the world itself. In anxiety, to take Heidegger’s exemplary mood, it is precisely the fundamental lack of an object or occurrence in the world that anxiety discloses. Being bereft of any possibility of responding to this missing object generates anxiety, a mood that transmits what Being-in-the-world as such is about. Through his elaboration of the structure of anxiety, Heidegger fleshes out the precise way in which mood provides a point of entry into the world’s totality, rather than grounding the intentional grasping of a specific object in that world.

In consolidating Benjamin with Heidegger, I do not mean to suggest that the former is by any means “Heideggerian,” although some of the two philosophers’ thoughts on history can be fruitfully aligned. Rather, I take Heidegger’s claims as a conceptual structure that finds an interesting realization in Benjamin’s writings. Considered from this perspective, Heidegger will provide the structural imperative of this book’s conceptual framework. I find Heidegger’s claims regarding mood’s crucial role for philosophic work—how it discloses rather than conceals the world—to be decisive to the understanding of melancholy’s place in Benjamin’s thought. There, too, the melancholic mood rests at the foundation of the philosophical structure and determines its constitution.

As I have shown more extensively elsewhere, both thinkers are pre-occupied with the possibility of offering an alternative to the dominance

of the subjective element of knowledge and experience as expressed in modern philosophy. The aim to dismantle this underlying structure built on subjectivity, therefore, constitutes a mutual philosophical determination of their writings and lies at the crux of their shared (albeit separately explicated) interests. Mood is one of the important notions with which each of them approaches this problem, and each, having a distinct point of view and emphases, offers a different way in which mood can overturn the prevailing subjective/objective relationships between human beings and the world.¹⁴ This reciprocity also reveals what in the last few years has been proven beyond doubt: Benjamin's oeuvre is more philosophically articulate, and bears deeper, more rigorous philosophical markings, than some would admit.

Melancholy in Benjamin

This book adopts Heidegger's framework and proposes to establish melancholy as a fundamental mood of philosophical disclosure. In setting aside the attraction to the more subjective nature of melancholy, it scrutinizes the hidden traces of the melancholic mood in the structure of metaphysics and ontology. It attempts to unpack the concept of melancholy outside its customary usage and to think of it as a philosophical, structural edifice—as one of the states of mind governing philosophy itself. Despite the far-reaching span of these concerns, the book restricts itself to one particular case: that of Walter Benjamin. In tackling the relationship between melancholy and philosophy in Benjamin's early writings, the book confronts some of the aforementioned major challenges of philosophical inquiry.

First, there is the natural, almost instinctive, attraction to Benjamin's own melancholic disposition (to date, most of the scholarly work exploring this "melancholic connection" has been preoccupied with this aspect). Scholem wrote that Benjamin was marked by a "profound sadness," while Adorno dwelt on his denial of any form of devotion to happiness, which is, in turn, "won only through regretful sorrow . . . which is as rare in the history of philosophy as the utopia of cloudless days."¹⁵ In her thoughtful article for the *New York Review of Books* Susan Sontag wrote that Benjamin was what the French call *un triste* and cites him as having said that "solitude appears to me as the only fit state of man." Even

Benjamin himself testified that he “was born under the sign of Saturn,” a remark having endless historical connotations in reference to gloominess, despondency, and genius. This interpretive stance has also, and perhaps understandably, dealt with the unhappy circumstances of Benjamin’s own fate: the rejection of his habilitation work, his constant struggle for funding, the grave political situation in Europe of the 1930s, and, inevitably, the tragic circumstances of his suicide.

Second, the search for a connection between Benjamin’s subject matter and his own melancholy is unavoidable. His writings on the sorrow-plays, Baudelaire and modernity, Kafka, Proust, and, above all, history, all point to their deep bearing on the role of melancholy and its reverberations in Benjamin’s writings. The “angel of history,” perhaps his most famous image, encompasses all that melancholy is about: loss, memory, helplessness to the point of paralysis, together with deep sadness and despondency. However, most discussions of the angel of history specifically allude to the *figure* of the angel—they, again, concentrate on the subjective nature of melancholy. It is through the angel’s own eyes and wings, by way of his subjective glance on the mounting debris, that history becomes melancholic.

These tendencies are all legitimate. Benjamin was indeed gloomy, and the circumstances of his life closely correlate with his disposition. It would also be accurate to say that his choice of subjects has always echoed this relationship. Were we to delve into these associations, we might arrive at a portrait of the close affinity between the conduct of Benjamin’s life and the idea of melancholy. The question remains, however: Is it possible to approach the notion of melancholy within the context of Benjamin’s writings differently? Can we plausibly set aside established ideas of melancholy as related to Benjamin’s pathological mental state, or as emblematic of thinking about photography and history, and examine this mood from a philosophical perspective?

My aim in this book is to show that melancholy has a far deeper affinity for Benjamin’s philosophy than has yet been articulated—that beyond being a personal trait or choice of subject, melancholy represents a cornerstone of his epistemological and metaphysical claims. In this sense we deem the power of melancholy over Benjamin to go beyond his personal mood to permeate the deepest underpinnings of his thought.

Instead of following melancholy's historical narrative, I offer an analysis into the depth of melancholy in order to reveal the diversity of its internal configuration. This means, in effect, that this work is not another link in the chain of the evolution of thinking about melancholy but, rather, an attempt to expose the structure of its innermost form. The history of melancholy thus opens before us a vertical rather than horizontal direction of investigation, from which alone an exposure of its inner- and afterlife can be made possible. Because of the term's complex and diverse history, pulling in all possible directions, I find it necessary to construct a rigorous and exhaustive conceptual scheme of this concept.

This structural view of melancholy and its history concentrates on the different ways in which the melancholic state of mind determines the relationship between a subject and the world, demonstrates the forceful transgression of the boundaries between the internal and external, and challenges the stark demarcation separating life from death. I introduce this configuration through the following categories: loss, commitment, absence of intentionality, work, and the transgression between inside and outside, between life and death. These concepts can be found in the various accounts of melancholy throughout its history. They are also found, in a very distinctive form, at the foundations of Benjamin's early philosophy.

Accordingly, philosophy's aforementioned struggle for the presentation of a limited number of words entails yet another endeavor: that of understanding philosophy's own affinity for a reduced set of words. Following Benjamin, we can claim that a philosophical inquiry should strive to understand the special way in which philosophy itself is saturated with melancholy. Melancholy is thus more than a word or idea crucial to Benjamin the person; it is intimately and eminently connected to the foundations of what philosophy itself means to him.

In this book I focus on Benjamin's early writings, specifically those written between the years 1916 and 1925. This time frame appears in the dedication to Benjamin's *The Origin of the German Trauerspiel*,¹⁶ which he notes as having been "conceived" in 1916 and written in 1925. Benjamin's study of the *Trauerspiel* bears heavily on several other unpublished fragments written during 1916, most notably, "*Trauerspiel* and Tragedy," "The Role of Language in *Trauerspiel* and Tragedy," and "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man."¹⁷ The *Trauerspiel* study, together with these

fragments, forms the corpus of my exploration. Through these works I establish a philosophical portrait of the melancholic mood and then examine melancholy's role for Benjamin's metaphysical and epistemological contentions.

Benjamin probably wrote the *Trauerspiel* book between May 1924 and April 1925.¹⁸ The book's importance for substantiating my argument regarding the kinship between melancholy and Benjamin's early thought is grounded in two of its features. First, the book centers on the baroque *Trauerspiel*, the sorrow-plays, and is thus directly concerned with the mournful and melancholic features of these plays, while connecting them to the baroque's melancholic state of mind. Second, and more crucially, even when Benjamin does not directly discuss the melancholic nature of the plays, melancholy is evident and all the more present in his own philosophical methodology in the book. The book is, therefore, saturated with Benjamin's understanding of melancholy; furthermore, it clearly demonstrates how this conception of melancholy had found its way into his philosophical undertaking.

The *Trauerspiel* book was written as his *Habilitationsschrift* (habilitation work), a required qualification when applying for a professorial position in the German academic system. In a long and arduous process the manuscript was rejected from the Department of Literary History at the University of Frankfurt and transferred to the Department of General Aesthetics. At this point Benjamin's friends (including Gershom Scholem) advised him to withdraw his habilitation work in order to avoid the humiliation involved in its public rejection.¹⁹ It is commonly known that this repudiation left an indelible mark on Benjamin's scholarly life, dooming him to eternal exile within his own practice of writing. More important, however, is the intimate connection between Benjamin's treatment of his book's subject matter—the German baroque *Trauerspiel*—and the handling of his own work in academia. One of Benjamin's most pronounced motivations for entering into this work was the *Trauerspiel's* historical neglect, misinterpretation, and lack of appreciation as a genre in theater and literary criticism. In fact, it is precisely the term *genre* that preoccupies Benjamin so extensively in the book's prologue, where he proposes that the *Trauerspiel's* underestimation rests on its being virtually unable to fit into any given genre.

Drawing on Konrad Burdach and Benedetto Croce, Benjamin criticizes art history's recurring attempts to assemble series of works of art according to their common features, what he calls "the average." Such a methodology, so fundamental to art history, can only present works of art as a collection of historical or stylistic genres instead of critically establishing each work's essential qualities. According to Benjamin the main reason for the *Trauerspiel's* underestimation lies in the application of Aristotelian criteria of the tragic to its text. The *Trauerspiel* is consequently thought of as a caricature of tragedy, a play taking on "the appearance of an incompetent renaissance of tragedy" (*TS*, 50). Notwithstanding his fierce critique of what he considers erroneous, even detrimental, criteria, Benjamin argues that it is "inconceivable that the philosophy of art will ever divest itself of some of its most fruitful ideas, such as the tragic or the comic" (*TS*, 44).

Benjamin's alternative, fully explicated in his book, is located in a compelling yet at times impenetrable position, in which the "tragic" and "comic" function in a highly divergent way. These are not genres but what Benjamin calls "ideas": "In the sense in which it is treated in the philosophy of art, the *Trauerspiel* is an idea" (*TS*, 38). Benjamin's project, realized in the book, is to present the idea of the *Trauerspiel*; that is, he commits himself to identifying the exemplary features, "even if this exemplary character can be admitted only in respect of the merest fragment," and to viewing his own work of criticism as what is shaped immanently, that is, in the inner development of the language of the work itself, bringing out "its content at the expense of its effect" (*TS*, 44). The affinity to Benjamin's own habilitation, and the smothered call to a chimerical reader, is evident. To unfold these ideas and their fruitful intersection, we must draw out their inner anatomy.

This book's first chapter is devoted to unfastening the almost intuitive connection between melancholy and psychoanalysis—specifically, Freud's account of melancholic pathology. By interlacing Freud with Benjamin, I demonstrate the ways in which Benjamin's conception of melancholy diverges from that of Freud's, a differentiation emerging, among other things, from Benjamin's challenge to Freud's clear distinction between melancholy and mourning and between the pathological and the normative. By avoiding any such clear-cut divergence, Benjamin is able

to develop a much more complex examination of the melancholic state, which he invokes in his accounts of the seventeenth-century baroque *Trauerspiel*. By understanding melancholy as socially normative and not as psychologically pathological, Benjamin opens before us the prospect of scrutinizing melancholy as a philosophical mood. This chapter thus invokes the basic structural categories through which I read melancholy within Freud's psychological framework, as well as Benjamin's account of the baroque. The first three categories I use—loss, commitment, and non-intentionality—refer to the special relationship the melancholic maintains with the lost object. These categories offer an analysis of the reaction to loss, the endless commitment to loss, and finally, the specific structure of melancholia, in which loss is undetermined by being deprived of an intentional structure. The last structural category, that of work, alludes to the way in which Benjamin opens up the possibility of viewing melancholy as a productive rather than a passive and paralyzing mood.

The psychoanalytic terminology governing the first chapter will show that one of the prominent causes for the understanding of melancholy as pathological has to do with its inability to differentiate between the internal and the external or between life and death. Chapter 2 focuses on these two categories within the framework of the *Trauerspiel's* content and examines a similar blurring of boundaries in relation to the plays' figures and figurations. The fundamental adumbrating of the boundary between the internal and the external is introduced in relation to the notion of pain, referred to in both its mental and physical framework. In the *Trauerspiel* the figure of the martyr embodies this specific transgression. The martyr epitomizes the state of extreme physical pain, on the one hand, while obscuring the boundary between the internal feeling of pain and its external manifestations, on the other. The second category of adumbrated borders, that between life and death, is represented through the recurring figure of the ghost in the *Trauerspiel* plays, a figure likewise marked by the repeating acts of transgression between life and death that are so fundamental to its nature, together with the ethical implications associated with such acts.

According to Benjamin language is the cornerstone of philosophical truth, yet it is always permeated by melancholy and loss. The essential relationship constructed here, that between language and melancholy, rests

at the heart of the third chapter. In presenting this connection, I claim that Benjamin's theory of language is thoroughly imbued with a sense of language's own inherent loss. The problems discussed in Chapter 2 reenter the scene through Benjamin's early essays on language, albeit in a different context. The relationship between subtle, inner pain and its bombastic, superfluous expression is all the more present in Benjamin's early texts on language, although in a much more theoretical form. The relationship between loss (of the ability to express) and proliferation (that which would compensate for such loss) is found here not so much in the theatrical context but in the more general framework of expression; the categorical structure of the analysis, however, remains fundamentally the same. This chapter thus deals with the role and structure of lament, commitment, and history in the context of Benjamin's philosophy of language.

Chapter 4 introduces a more explicitly philosophical model of melancholy through the reconstruction of the conceptual encounter between Benjamin and Leibniz. In the prologue to the *Trauerspiel* book Benjamin briefly refers to Leibniz's monad and presents it as a model for his own thinking about "the idea." I argue here that irrespective of the limited number of paragraphs in which Leibniz is directly addressed, his presence can be felt throughout Benjamin's book, especially in relation to melancholy. The essentially enclosed, solipsistic structure of the monad corresponds, as I show, to the structural categories I establish in the earlier chapters. The special form of the monad's encounter—or disencounter—with the world calls for concretization of the relationship between melancholy and philosophy in Benjamin's work.

Stimmung, German for "harmony," is a term that can be variously conceived. Not only is it related to musical harmony; it also alludes to attunement and mood. The turn to mood allows me to position the discussion of melancholy in a sphere that is not merely psychological or subjective but also objective. This structure is central for establishing the connection between melancholy and philosophy and, following Heidegger, the way in which mood determines philosophy's encounter with the world.²⁰ In this configuration mood serves as a (Heideggerian) opening and passage to the encounter with and expression of the world rather than, as sometimes conceived, as a contribution to the paralyzing closure from that world.²¹ This book, therefore, claims to present Benjamin's work as

exemplifying this relationship between closure and melancholy, on the one hand, and between philosophy and expression, on the other. Benjamin writes that it is in the constant return to the same set of words that historical and philosophical objectivity is established. This is the objectivity I hope to imbue with melancholy.