“Vnd jm jrem tot sach sỳ fill liblicher, dan do sỳ noch daz leben hett.” (In her death she looked much sweeter than when she was still alive.)¹ With these words, Albrecht Dürer, the Renaissance artist from Nuremberg, concluded an entry on the final months of his mother, Barbara—an account beginning with the morning of April 26, 1513, when her chamber had to be broken into and the emaciated woman was brought into a downstairs room in Dürer’s house, and ending with her death on May 16, 1514. In fact, Dürer brought his description to an end more than once. Before finalizing his account, he offered the following supplication: “vnd daz vns der allmechtig got daz ewig leben geb. Amen.” (And may God Almighty give unto us eternal life. Amen.)² Using a “different quill and ink,” Dürer then supplemented this concluding phrase with the note quoted above on the peaceful expression of the departed: “In her death she looked much sweeter than when she was still alive.”³ In this final twist, painlessness in death takes the place of the agony Dürer had described in such great detail before.

The account of Barbara Dürer’s last year stems from the so-called memorial book or “Gedenkbuch,” a folio with writings and one illustration in Dürer’s hand (see figs. 17 and 18).⁴ The paper leaf must have been part of a larger omnibus, though no other folios survive.⁵ The

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³ Dürer, “Gedenkbuch,” 37. Other critics have agreed with the editor’s reading of the evidence.

⁴ Dürer, “Gedenkbuch,” 35–38. Conway (Writings) usually refers to it as the “other book,” using the term Dürer himself used in his family chronicle to refer to other writings he kept on himself that have usually been seen as the “Gedenkbuch.”

⁵ Berlin, Kupferstichkabinett, Cim. 32 (311 × 215 mm), last published in Michael
fragment is something of an assemblage. Its pieces, among which the
account of his mother’s death is but one (though the most comprehen-
sive by far), do not make up a coherent whole. First, the two pages we
have address a variety of themes that are loosely connected rather than
tightly sewn together; second, the text’s scaffold, once erected, invited
later additions and extensions. Such “incoherence” is not unique. The
structure of Dürer’s memorial folio is comparable to early modern
texts described by their modern editors as “autobiographical.” Not
only did such texts frequently accommodate a variety of information;
on occasion, they were also the product of a layered writing process,
as is the case here. In sum, the memorial book represents a themat-
temporal composite, lacking the stringency and boundedness associ-
ated with the term text in common parlance. It functioned as ledger
and archive.

Roth, Dürers Mutter: Schönheit, Alter und Tod im Bild der Renaissance (Berlin:
Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, 2006), 26–29 (with illustrations of both pages). See also
Fedja Anzelewsky, “Kreuztragung aus dem Gedenkbuch,” in Dürer Holbein Grünewald:
Meisterzeichnungen der deutschen Renaissance aus Berlin und Basel (Ostfildern-Ruit:
Gerd Hatje, 1998), 132–33. The assumption that this folio leaf must have been part of
a larger bundle rests on the observation that the first page of what we have starts in
the middle of a sentence and on several pagination marks. Heike Sahm has pointed
out that a scrap with accounting data is attached to the leaf, suggesting that this com-
memoration unfolded in the context of an account book, as is quite common for
this type of record (“Vom Sterben berichten: Aufzeichnungen Albrecht Dürers im
Kontext der spätmittelalterlichen Autobiographie und der ars moriendi,” in Roth,
Dürers Mutter, 45).

6 For an analysis, see Heike Sahm, Dürers kleinere Texte: Konventionen als Spielraum
für Individualität (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 2002). For a general discussion of early
modern texts within their contexts, see Jan-Dirk Müller’s discussion of a published
text, Sebastian Brant’s Ship of Fools (“Literarischer Text und kultureller Text in der
Frühen Neuzeit am Beispiel des ‘Narrenschiffs’ von Sebastian Brant,” in Zwischen den
Disziplinen: Perspektiven der Frühneuzeitforschung, ed. Helmut Puff and Christopher

7 The literature on the history of early modern autobiographies is vast and grow-
ing. The following volumes help to contextualize my reading: Stephan Pastenaci,
Erzählformen und Persönlichkeitsdarstellung in deutschsprachigen Autobiographien des 16.
Jahrhunderts: Ein Beitrag zur historischen Psychologie (Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag
Trier, 1993); Winfried Schulze, ed., Ego-Dokumente: Annäherung an den Menschen
in der Geschichte (Berlin: Akademie, 1996); Klaus Arnold, Sabine Schmolinsky, and
Urs Martin Zahnd, eds., Das dargestellte Ich: Studien zu Selbstzeugnissen des späteren
Mittalters und der frühen Neuzeit (Bochum: Winkler, 1999); Kaspar von Greyerz,
Hans Medick, and Patrick Veit, eds., Von der dargestellten Person zum erinner-
ten Ich: Europäische Selbstzeugnisse als historische Quellen (1500–1850) (Cologne:
Böhlau, 2001); Gabriele Jancke, Autobiographie als soziale Praxis: Beziehungskonzepte
(Cologne: Böhlau, 2002); Helga Meise, Das archivierte Ich: Schreibkalender und höfi-
sche Repräsentation in Hessen-Darmstadt, 1624–1700 (Darmstadt: Hessische Historische
Kommission, 2002).