

‘MICH IN VARIATIONEN ERZÄHLEN’: GÜNTER GRASS AND THE ETHICS OF AUTOBIOGRAPHY

When, in August 2006, it became public knowledge that Günter Grass had served for a short time in the Waffen-SS at the end of the Second World War and had finally admitted to this in his new autobiography, *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel*, the story unfolded not just in the German but also in the world media. Not only were the basic facts echoed in short press releases across the globe; consideration of the way Grass had related to this incriminating aspect of his biography throughout his subsequent career ensured that the story continued to run in the world media for several months. Whether the angle taken was to revisit the moral issues of joining the Waffen-SS in the first place (this proved particularly popular with older members of the German public and with foreign newspapers) or to question Grass's legitimacy as a self-made 'moralische Instanz' in post-war Germany (a line largely followed by his critics, many of whom collaborated on a lengthy cover story for *Der Spiegel*), ethical questions of 'right' and 'wrong' behaviour were once again at the centre of public debate in and about Germany.¹

Some of this media reaction has been discussed in a recent article by Stuart Taberner, who briefly contextualizes the public response precisely within the wider recent history of ethically informed political debates in Germany and suggests that 'the debate related as much to the political battles of the moment as to the biography of the writer under scrutiny'.² However, Taberner then sidesteps further consideration of how either Grass's public persona or German political battles may provide a historically evolving interpretative framework that would help assess the autobiography's wider social significance, and elects instead to focus on the author's literary technique and possible political intent in composing the piece. Anne Fuchs equally reads the text in isolation. While she writes very thoughtfully on the text as an 'Alterswerk' that thematizes 'the deficit of a merely literary encounter with the past' by enacting 'a final gesture of owning-up', and embeds all this in a consideration of public 'memory contests', she too stops short of considering the text in relation to the rest of Grass's work, much of which is in fact highly illuminating when it comes to understanding the author's manipulation of autobiographical material. In both cases, discussion of how Grass engages with autobiography as a particular genre remains necessarily limited to the specific example of *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel*, while public reaction to Grass's self-presentation is largely relegated to the realm of the anecdotal. As a result, while the articles engage well with Grass's specific strategies of self-presentation in *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel*, they miss out on the opportunity to consider the wider issue of the implicit but highly influential moral code that accompanies Grass's history of overtly complex literary self-presentation in the public domain.

¹ See Dirk Kubjuweit and others, 'Fehlbar und verstrickt', *Der Spiegel*, 21 August 2006, pp. 46–66.

² Stuart Taberner, 'Private Failings and Public Virtues: Günter Grass's *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel* and the Exemplary Use of Authorial Autobiography', *MLR*, 103 (2008), 143–54 (p. 144).

By contrast, this article explicitly addresses ethical issues of public self-presentation and reception. 'Ethics', understood in line with the *Oxford English Dictionary's* definition as 'a branch of knowledge that deals with the principles of human duty or the logic of moral discourse', as well as 'the rules of conduct recognized in a particular profession or area of life', is a useful term through which to approach the sense of public accountability that has accompanied both scholarly and journalistic discussion of Grass in particular and of German post-war writing in general.³ Contractual categories such as 'principles of human duty' or discourse-specific 'rules of conduct' not only allow us to conceptualize the textual significance of Grass's complex relationship with his German readers in non-emotive, non-judgemental terms; they also help situate the specific example of Grass within a wider consideration of German autobiography as a genre that is largely defined by an implicit moral code not invoked for other forms of artistic expression. This in turn raises questions about the role of autobiographical writing in the modern world.

Grass's repeatedly self-conscious negotiation of his own public image, as I shall demonstrate, has created a body of work that can be understood as a kind of loosely autobiographical project. While this oeuvre demands to be read on its own terms, it also knowingly engages with an implicit ethics of public self-presentation. As such, it may be read as symptomatic for the position of contemporary autobiography, which treads an equally fine line between solipsism and self-awareness. The autobiographical mode has long been synonymous with reflection on one's public duties, and if Grass's official autobiography, *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel*, in many ways only reiterates an aesthetic strategy of self-presentation that the author began to develop as early as 1972 in *Aus dem Tagebuch einer Schnecke* (as I shall argue below), then this is entirely in keeping with a mode that allows the subject to revisit important ethical issues that have shaped his or her public persona. In fact, the real revelation afforded by Grass's autobiography is the very way in which the debates it generated finally made explicit a moral code of self-presentation that has determined how high-profile intellectual figures such as Grass have existed in the German public domain over the past half century. As Fuchs comments: 'the public discussion of when Grass should have made [his] confession [. . .] was underpinned by the idea that the moral and political authority of post-war German intellectuals depends not so much on the quality of their argument but on the public transparency of their inner selves'.⁴

Such a belief places strong ethical demands on well-known figures and poses a particular challenge to an author such as Grass who frequently draws on autobiographical material in his writing. Repeatedly addressing the issue of the author's identity and deliberately drawing attention to the various ways in which it is constructed, Grass's work may be read as a self-conscious textual response to this challenge. It highlights the choices made by a public figure in

³ Dennis Tate, *Shifting Perspectives: East German Autobiographical Narratives before and after the End of the GDR* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2007), conveys these expectations well with respect to East German writers.

⁴ Anne Fuchs, "'Ehrlich, du lügst wie gedruckt': Günter Grass's Autobiographical Confession and the Changing Territory of Germany's Memory Culture", *German Life and Letters*, 60 (2007), 261–75 (pp. 266–67).

presenting himself or herself to the world and provides an intriguing case study of how authors and their readers draw, whether consciously or not, on what I term a ‘narrative ethics’ peculiar to autobiographical writing: a sense of mutual obligation to relate to one another in good faith above and beyond the obvious game-playing of literary writing. By reconnecting textual analysis of Grass’s autobiographical strategies in *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel* to recurrent questions of readerly and writerly public responsibilities throughout both Grass’s oeuvre and the genre of autobiography as a whole, this piece offers a first approach to teasing out this narrative ethics.

The Rule of Genre: Theorizing Ethical Considerations in Autobiography

Grass’s response to the question in 2003 of whether he would ever write an autobiography provides a useful point of departure when analysing the ethical considerations that accompany literary self-presentation:

Es ist immer die Frage, in welcher Form man am besten lügen kann. Ich habe ein ziemliches Misstrauen gegenüber Autobiografien. Wenn ich eine Möglichkeit sähe, mich gewissermaßen in Variationen zu erzählen—das wäre vielleicht reizvoll. Aber eigentlich mag ich Autobiografisches in der verschlüsselten Form der Fiktion, des Romans, lieber.⁵

Grass’s invocation of deliberately ‘lying’ to his reader, coupled with the idea of creating ‘variations’ on the autobiographical self and a fictional ‘encoding’ of one’s life, reveals a very finely balanced understanding of author–reader relations in the literary text. Cheating, a concept implied by the reference to lying, necessarily implies rules that stake out the greater interpretative framework within which author and reader operate. This framework can be found in the idea of genre (‘Form’), in which the author ‘trusts’ even as he sets about deliberately misleading the reader, who will in turn have to work hard if he or she is to break through the author’s complex ‘variations’ on his persona and ‘decode’ the text in order to reach a reliable authorial image at its heart. Behind this strategy of bluff and counter-bluff, however, successful authorial self-presentation and readerly interpretation remain the aim of the game: the author’s deceitful tactics coupled with the reader’s shrewd detective work are presented as self-understood elements within the rules of play for both parties who knowingly engage with the genre of literary autobiography.

Indeed, the importance of these rules of play becomes nowhere more apparent than where they are transgressed. *Dummer August* (2007), a collection of poems and drawings produced as a direct response to the public attacks on Grass’s persona in the wake of the Waffen-SS controversy, suffers precisely from the lyric subject’s lack of encoding.⁶ Without wishing to become embroiled in the question of what constitutes ‘literature’, it seems fair to observe that poems such as ‘Zeitvergleich’, ‘An jenem Montag’, ‘Guter Rat’, ‘Nach fünf Jahrzehnten oder Elf Runden’, ‘Am Pranger’, and ‘Dummer August’ distinctly lack the degree of considered reflection generally associated with literary auto-

⁵ Günter Grass in interview with *Der Spiegel*, ‘Siegen macht dumm’, *Der Spiegel*, 25 August 2003, p. 140.

⁶ Günter Grass, *Dummer August* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2007).

biography; they convey very little more than a howl of injustice from a clearly vulnerable Günter Grass, who makes no attempt at literary encoding. Such personal poems may have a function to perform in the extended public discourse about the author—and Grass's decision to dedicate the volume to Christa Wolf supports this notion, as he draws a clear parallel between her experience at the hands of the press in the 1990s and his in 2006—but they do not make good (auto)biographical literature in any of the senses explored by Ann Jefferson in her study of the genre.⁷ Likewise, Grass's earlier prose-based autobiographical 'Werkstattberichte', *Vierjahrzehnte* (1991) and *Fünfjahrzehnte* (2001), provide straightforward, factual accounts of his literary and artistic genesis, but in so doing they effectively exclude themselves from the status of literature: they are 'reports', put together, one suspects, with considerable input from the named editor, G. Fritze Margull, and sold as coffee-table collectables.⁸ While all three of these volumes contain clear autobiographical material, this material does not, for the most part, require any form of specifically literary reading.⁹

A similar conception of the autobiographically informed literary text as a site of necessarily complex negotiation between author and reader has informed much of the theory of autobiography to date. In 1979, for example, Paul de Man famously theorized the self-conscious textual construction of an authorial subject in the most radical of terms. According to him, the author of an autobiography constructs a coherent subject (a 'face') within the text precisely in order to hide the autobiographical self's actual dissolution into language. The reader looking for the author will actually find only a ghostly linguistic construct. More recently Paul Eakin and James Olney have written at length on autobiography as a complex site of cross-over between fiction and non-fiction that is instinctively treated by readers in a special and distinct way.¹⁰

For my purposes, however, the work of the French theoretician Philippe Lejeune remains an important and hitherto surprisingly underdeveloped point of reference. For all his centrality to the historiography of autobiography studies, Lejeune has mostly been invoked by subsequent theorists in a superficial manner, with attention tending to focus only on the catchword of his 'autobiographical pact' as a means of classifying texts rather than understanding either their composition or their significance. Yet in stating '[l]'autobiographie] est un mode de lecture autant qu'un type d'écriture, c'est un effet contractuel historiquement variable', Lejeune specifically highlights practical issues of literary

⁷ Ann Jefferson, *Biography and the Question of Literature in France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

⁸ Günter Grass, *Vier Jahrzehnte: Ein Werkstattbericht*, ed. by G. Fritze Margull (Göttingen: Steidl, 1991); *Fünf Jahrzehnte: Ein Werkstattbericht*, ed. by G. Fritze Margull (Göttingen: Welttag, 2001).

⁹ A small number of the poems in *Dummer August* do fit quite clearly into Grass's corpus of literary symbols (e.g. 'Im Gehen' and the idea of multiple selves; 'Was im Laub raschelt', 'Rote Beete', 'Irdische Freude', 'Dorsch Frisch vom Kutter', 'Vorfreude' and the significance of food) and thus point beyond themselves and the volume to a more measured and, in my terms, deliberately 'encoded' self-perception.

¹⁰ Paul de Man, 'Autobiography as De-facement', *MLN*, 94 (1979), 919–30; Paul John Eakin, *Fictions in Autobiography: Studies in the Art of Self-Invention* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985) and *Touching the World: Reference in Autobiography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992); James Olney, *Memory and Narrative: The Weave of Life-Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

production and reception.¹¹ His focus on the idea of a historically conditioned ‘contractual effect’ introduces to our conception of autobiography genuine responsibilities for both the real-life reader and author that echo the ‘principles of human duty’ and ‘rules of conduct’ invoked with reference to ethics earlier. This in turn offers the scope for a theoretically informed analysis of the considerations that accompany literary self-presentation in our ethically complex world. Where Lejeune’s ‘autobiographical pact’ describes a literary convention that functions as a basic prerequisite for the purposes of genre classification, the ‘contractual effect’ he discerns within this pact sows the seeds for a far more wide-reaching analysis of the actual significance of both autobiographical writing in general and an individual author’s decision to employ it at any particular moment. The overt and self-confessedly humourless attempt to defend his persona against public humiliation in the autobiographical poetry of *Dummer August*, for example, contrasts starkly with the self-consciously playful nature of Grass’s multiple ‘variations’ on the autobiographical self in his literary prose.

Autobiography and ‘Skinning’ for Truth

Die Zwiebel hat viele Häute. Es gibt sie in Mehrzahl. Kaum gehäutet, erneuert sie sich. Gehackt treibt sie Tränen. Erst beim Häuten spricht sie wahr.¹²

Grass’s understanding of the public-use value of his own biography developed at a very early point in his career. Indeed, Katharina Hall not only notes that ‘his private memories of the Nazi era [. . .] significantly shaped his literary output from the start of his writing career’, but also suggests that the way his earlier texts repeatedly thematize the tendency to misremember and to fail to face up to one’s past actually points to the truth of the author’s personal circumstances all along; the late autobiography reveals the earlier fiction to be an unexpected ‘literary confession’.¹³ Certainly, Grass’s literary output displays a clear conception of the individual’s biography as layered and uncomfortable to dissect, and one may map this onto how he problematizes his own biography in *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel*. Complicating this neat reading, however, is the ambiguity inherent in the central metaphor of the onion. This ambiguity, to be developed below, draws out a tension which has existed throughout Grass’s career between the moralizing public figure who claims to be seeking wider social truths and the literary author who repeatedly draws attention to his lack of any quintessential or ‘true’ self. In fact, Grass repeatedly questions the creative artist’s public responsibilities throughout his oeuvre by employing a recurrent lexis of onions, skinning, layers, and truth long before the autobiography brings these terms explicitly to the fore.

In the first instance, the parallels Grass draws between ‘skinning’ an onion and the attempt to reveal some kind of truth concerning the past clearly resonate

¹¹ Philippe Lejeune, *Le Pacte autobiographique*, 2nd, enlarged edn (Paris: Seuil, 1996), p. 45.

¹² Günter Grass, *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2006), p. 10. Subsequent references appear in the text.

¹³ Katharina Hall, *Günter Grass’s ‘Danzig Quintet’: Explorations in the Memory and History of the Nazi Era from ‘Die Blechtrommel’ to ‘Im Krebsgang’* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2007), pp. 19, 20.

with much of his socio-political activity. As far back as *Die Blechtrommel* he explored the symbolic significance of publicly chopping onions as an attempt to engage with a difficult personal past in the extended scene at the so-called 'onion cellar' ('Zwiebelkeller'). Here, well-to-do members of society follow the lead of Oskar the artist figure and chop onions to rhythmic drumbeats, gradually giving themselves over to those emotions which are usually suppressed during the course of everyday life. The scene is a clear satire on immediate post-war society, which is in effect completely unable to face up to its past. The tears released by the onion are here closer to crocodile tears than anything else, and hardly represent any kind of personal development or revelation. Nevertheless, these and similar scenes that took German society to task went on to shape public discourse about the author and his moral responsibilities.¹⁴ When Grass took to direct social criticism in the course of his 1965 political campaigning, for example, he was characterized by the press as trying to whip up emotions by 'drumming' ('werbetrommeln') for the SPD.¹⁵ Whether his actions were conveyed in terms of rowdy political activism or a more subtle pricking of the German collective conscience, Grass, the one-time satirist, very quickly came to be associated with a high-profile public position that promised some kind of uncomfortable but necessary moral guidance for the nation. This was certainly what another writer and journalist, Horst Krüger, implied when in 1969 he referred to Grass as a 'hervorragendes Markenartikelzeichen' endowed with 'nationale Repräsentanz'.¹⁶

The belief that Grass represents a rather overblown, sanctimonious, and yet highly marketable 'brand' of responsible public authorship has persisted to the present day, and this has been encouraged not least by Grass himself. In the 'Frankfurter Poetikvorlesung' of 1990, 'Schreiben nach Auschwitz', for example, Grass, again invoking the onion metaphor, explains how public reaction to *Die Blechtrommel* made him realize 'daß [. . .] der profanen epischen Zwiebel Haut nach Haut abgezogen werden müsse und daß ich von solchem Unterfangen nicht Urlaub nehmen dürfe'.¹⁷ This kind of morally motivated concern with delving into German history in literature is linked to an act of self-revelation carried out by the author on behalf of the collective German populace, a process which, Grass argues, must be repeatedly re-enacted if the human race is to retain its fundamental moral values. Rousing concluding: 'dem Schreiben nach Auschwitz kann kein Ende versprochen werden, es sei denn, das Menschengeschlecht gäbe sich auf', Grass makes the author duti-

¹⁴ Schade also points out the link made between the pungent smell of onions and National Socialist Germany in *Katz und Maus*. See Richard E. Schade, 'Layers of Meaning, War, Art: Grass's *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel*', *German Quarterly*, 80 (2007), 279–301 (pp. 285–86).

¹⁵ See Hans Bertram Bock, 'Günter Grass auf Es-Pe-De-Wahlturnee in Würzburg und Nürnberg trommelte für Willy', *Abendzeitung*, 15 July 1965, in *Günter Grass: Dokumente zur politischen Wirkung*, ed. by Heinz Ludwig Arnold and Franz Josef Görtz (Munich: text + kritik, 1971), pp. 32–35 (p. 34).

¹⁶ Horst Krüger, 'Das Wappentier der Republik: Augenblicke mit Günter Grass', *Der Spiegel*, 25 April 1969, quoted in Franz Josef Görtz, *Zur Pathogenese eines Markenbilds* (Meisenheim am Glan: Hain, 1978), p. 51.

¹⁷ Günter Grass, 'Schreiben nach Auschwitz', in Günter Grass, *Werkausgabe*, ed. by Volker Neuhaus and Daniela Hermes, 16 vols (Göttingen: Steidl, 1997), xvi, ed. by Daniela Hermes, pp. 235–56 (pp. 248–49).

fully writing in the shadow of Auschwitz into the key champion of society's humanitarian foundation, and he does this through his own particular lexis that links literature to onion-peeling. His ethical responsibilities are pinned to real historical circumstances and, within this contingency and with the aid of his idiosyncratic terminology, understood in the most absolute terms.

At the same time, however, Grass has also developed a very different understanding of his persona in his literary writing. The quasi-autobiographical piece from 1972, *Aus dem Tagebuch einer Schnecke*, represents a first prolonged examination of his public persona and writing self, and in many ways it sets the scene for much of the author's later literary output. The work is conceived as a diary that recounts time spent on the road during the 1969 general election campaign and periods spent at home trying to catch up with his children. This is interleaved with a fictional tale developed by Grass's authorial persona that draws on the expulsion of the Jews from Danzig and explains his current political motivation to the next generation. It of course lends itself to interpretations that see Grass once again performing his difficult dissections on German society and foregrounding the moral necessity of engaging with the past. There is, however, much in the text to question such a straightforward reading of its authorial subject and his motivations in introducing explicitly autobiographical material into his writing.

Even as Grass duly sets about peeling back the layers of history in order to explain his political motivation to his children, he applies a similar technique to himself—but with a markedly different effect. Pushed by his children to provide biographical information about his own persona, he begins to ponder underlying questions about the integrity of the autobiographical subject. The key point is autobiographical truthfulness: “Erzähl mal von dir. Über dich. Wie du bist.” “Aber ehrlich und nicht erfunden”, his children demand.¹⁸ This leads the author to meditate on the process of self-revelation traditionally associated with autobiography in the tradition of Rousseau, asking ‘Wo beginnt die *Enthüllung* einer Person? Wo sitzt der Zapfen, der die Bekenntnisse unter Verschluss hält?’ (p. 78, emphasis added). The imagery he uses here invokes violent metaphors that for the first time link the idea of self-revelation to a metaphorical process of skinning and confer on the whole lexis of skinning or peeling away layers a markedly more personal note than in the previous examples. Not only does this shift attention away from the dominant understanding of Grass as a public figure who doggedly cuts into the past in order to expose uncomfortable truths; the way Grass ironically questions the integrity of his autobiographical subject also entails a direct challenge to the understanding of autobiography developed throughout the 1960s as a serious kind of ‘truth-telling endeavour’, focusing on the ‘uniqueness of the self’.¹⁹ Apparently trying to locate the de-

¹⁸ Günter Grass, *Aus dem Tagebuch einer Schnecke*, in Grass, *Werkausgabe*, VII, ed. by Volker Neuhaus, p. 77. Subsequent references appear in the text.

¹⁹ In his essay from 1956 Georges Gusdorf, for example, describes autobiographical narrative as ‘offer[ing] us the testimony of a man about himself, the contest of a being in dialogue with itself, seeking its innermost fidelity’ (‘Conditions and Limits of Autobiography’, in *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, ed. by James Olney (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), pp. 28–48 (p. 43)). See Suzanne Nalbantian, *Aesthetic Autobiography: From Life to Art in Marcel Proust, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf and Anais Nin* (Basingstoke: Macmillan; New York: St Martin's Press,

vice that will initiate the act of self-revelation requested by his children, Grass shows the process to be innately artificial, a kind of knowing literary striptease that panders to a popular conception of the public author shielding a vulnerable and anguished private individual inside.²⁰

Grass's response to his children is formulated in correspondingly ironic terms. Following his announcement in stern tones 'ich bekenne, schmerzempfindlich zu sein' (p. 78), his confession amounts to nothing more than confirming that, like the 'Nacktschnecke' to which he compares himself, he has a nervous system. 'Wo bin ich jetzt?' (p. 78), he asks, and locates himself solely through external objects—shreds of tobacco and marks on white paper—before declaring himself missing entirely: 'Ich gucke raus, um den Lärm zu bestimmen; dabei bin ich es, der lärmt und woanders ist' (p. 79). He then offers his children a potted biography, which, far from providing an overarching narrative of the author's life, is characterized by an utter lack of causality. The distance that he takes from his famous public persona appears as the final stage in what is effectively a systematic destruction of the authorial subject. Personalizing his literary fame as 'der Ruhm als Untermieter', he claims of this individual:

Nur weil er so faul und meinen Schreibtisch belagernd unnütz ist, habe ich ihn in die Politik mitgenommen und als Begrüßgustav beschäftigt: das kann er. Überall wird er ernst genommen, auch von meinen Gegnern und Feinden [. . .] Schon beginnt er, sich selbst zu zitieren. [. . .] Er läßt sich gerne fotografieren, fälscht meisterlich meine Unterschrift und liest, was ich kaum anlese: Rezensionen. (p. 82)

The famous public persona is nothing more than an image that has grown out of the coverage he receives across the public sphere. The hollowness of this image is underlined by its lack of substance—it feeds off untruths and self-citation—and its obsession with public perception (eagerly encouraging photographs and reviews). In effect, it shows how layers of secondary discourse gather around an empty core to produce the author's public image.

The issue of 'Enthäutung', explicitly addressed for the first time in this text, consequently turns out to be a red herring because the author consists of nothing but 'skin'; there is no central core to be revealed. This point is brought across strongly at the end of Chapter 26, when the author expresses the wish, 'Sich häuten können. Außer sich sein. Klebrig neu', only to be addressed by an old school friend with the greeting 'Na, alte Haut!' (p. 270). The wish remains hypothetical because there is no way 'out of himself'. Instead, the author is manifestly produced by the discourses in which he takes part. Acting like a façade, he stands for a certain political position in public discourse, while he represents a certain textual standpoint within his writing, as much of the self-conscious play between the author and his fictional characters throughout the rest of the text makes evident. This would appear to be the unavoidable condition of the author compelled to reproduce himself in fiction as in the public sphere, and the lesson will be repeated only a few years later when

1997), for a useful discussion of the historiography of autobiography. I have taken on her terms from p. 27.

²⁰ For more discussion on this point, see Stuart Taberner, *Distorted Reflections: The Public and Private Faces of the Author in the Work of Uwe Johnson, Günter Grass and Martin Walser, 1965–1975* (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi, 1998).

the narrator of *Der Butt* depicts himself as forced to 'shed his skin' ('muß ich mich häuten') in an autobiographical confessional text, only to produce an epic narrative populated by seemingly endless self-images.²¹ The image takes on particularly grotesque connotations in the poem 'Vergleichsweise' from the *Dummer August* collection, where Grass, clearly responding to the attacks on his public persona in the wake of the Waffen-SS revelations, describes how he is thrown into the frying pan and eaten by 'mißliebige Gäste' just as a rabbit is skinned and cooked 'naked'.

At this point, we would seem to have come a long way indeed from ethical issues of authorial responsibility towards the public. Grass's literary self-representation repeatedly undermines the concept of autobiographical self-revelation, or 'skinning' for truth, focusing instead on revealing the process by which layers of an overtly constructed public self are produced by the discourses in which the author is placed. This conception of autobiography ultimately seems far closer to de Man's concept of de-facement than to any kind of serious truth-telling exercise. Grass invokes the autobiographical mode precisely in order to complicate public understanding of his authorial persona and draw attention to its constructed, textual nature.

Autobiography and Fiction

Using the terms suggested by Grass's much later official autobiography, we can come to the following interim conclusion about his first quasi-autobiographical piece: alongside the dominant public image of Grass as a morally motivated onion-peeler, the author places a self-image of an onion. He is composed entirely of layers that at best reflect their circumstances of composition and certainly do not shield any accessible, essential core. This anticipates by some thirty-five years the dual self-conception which will lie at the heart of *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel*. Here he overtly develops both metaphors (the authorial self as an onion-peeler, the authorial self as an onion) in parallel, as demonstrated in the following passage:

Die Erinnerung fußt auf Erinnerungen, die wiederum um Erinnerungen bemüht sind. So gleicht sie der Zwiebel, die mit jeder wegfallenden Haut längst Vergessenes offenlegt, bis hin zu den Milchzähnen frühester Kindheit; dann aber verhilft ihr Messerschärfe zu anderem Zweck: Haut nach Haut gehackt, treibt sie Tränen, die den Blick trüben. (p. 305)

As a moral onion-peeler, Grass the writer of his own autobiography wields the knife that cuts into the onion, himself as autobiographical subject. His action of 'cutting' into the past causes distress, this time for the author himself, as it is his personal past that is under examination. The reference to 'milk teeth' indicates the complications such an examination will entail, as throughout Grass's work teeth have symbolized feelings of guilt and personal distress (notably in *Katz und Maus* (1961), *Hundejahre* (1963), and *örtlich betäubt* (1969), as well as in

²¹ Günter Grass, *Der Butt*, in Grass, *Werkausgabe*, VIII, ed. by Claudia Mayer-Iswandy, p. 52. For detailed discussion of authorial self-presentation in both *Der Butt* and *Aus dem Tagebuch einer Schnecke* see my study *Constructing Authorship in the Work of Günter Grass* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

the play *zweiunddreißig Zähne* (1958)). Following immediately on from this, the personal discomfort caused by the author's implication in his own story is openly stated: the text is threatened by a lack of clarity as the author's tears well up to blind his legendary vision. Furthermore, these tears and the resulting lack of clarity are presented as Grass's calculated aim ('Zweck') in wielding the knife in the first place, an action that was initially rejected as counter-productive to the spirit of peeling: 'Gehackt treibt sie Tränen. Erst beim Häuten spricht sie wahr' (p. 10). While on the one hand overtly trying to live up to his own high morals as relentless examiner of the past and seeker of hidden truths, he finds himself on the other hand emitting false tears that both mislead his audience (who may mistake a purely physical reaction to onion-peeling for genuine emotional repentance) and provide distracting cover for the author who will never get to the bottom of his younger misdemeanours. Through intertextual association, direct authorial statement, and clever manipulation of metaphor, the reader has been warned that Grass is unlikely to apply to himself the same kind of clear moral judgement of others with which he has become associated. Rather, like the visitors to the 'Zwiebelkeller', the whole process may turn out to be nothing more than an empty, self-indulgent routine.

It seems telling, then, that the autobiographical subject places himself in the same uncomfortable textual position as his famous fictional protagonists and begins to adopt for himself their guilty and deceptive manoeuvres. By aligning himself with Pilenz, Matern, and Starusch, Grass draws attention to the difficulties, still present over forty years on, of writing as one of the perpetrator generation. His official autobiography may have begun as an apparently long overdue acknowledgment of his moral responsibilities towards the public in line with his absolute statement regarding the Holocaust, and its readers may therefore expect it to facilitate a fuller understanding of both him and his perpetrator generation. However, such a project quickly meets with what one may term the author's literary limitations: fiction's prioritization of deception and game-playing. Even as he tries to honour Lejeune's contract by making the name on the book and that of the first-person narrator and problematic autobiographical subject one and the same, he subverts his own responsible stance through overt recourse to the tricks of fiction.

Unsurprisingly, the image of soft onion skins falling gently away to reveal the autobiographical subject's 'milk teeth' is nowhere realized by the text. Instead, in a similar manner to Oskar, Pilenz, Matern and Starusch, Grass the Elder repeatedly does battle with Grass the Younger, unable to peel back the layers of his own persona to open it up to the public gaze: 'Ich versuche, ihn zu beruhigen, und bitte ihn, mir beim Häuten der Zwiebel zu helfen, aber er verweigert Auskünfte, will sich nicht als mein frühes Selbstbild ausbeuten lassen' (p. 37), he complains. Rebuffed by this younger, hermetically sealed self (his lack of co-operation is discussed in the chapter entitled 'Was sich verkapselt hat'), the author is forced to turn to a kind of self-reconstruction which borders on self-invention: 'Die Zwiebel verweigert sich. [. . .] mich selbst sehe ich nur als eine von vielen Skizzen, entfernt ähnlich dem Original' (p. 340). Throughout the text he underlines his distance from 'der grimassierende Junge oder mein behauptetes, doch immer wieder im fiktionalen Gestrüpp verschwindendes

Ich' (p. 39) and repeatedly draws attention to the difficulty, if not outright impossibility, of writing about the self without recourse to fiction. This is a realization that he first communicated to his readership some forty years earlier through his fictional characters.

In fact, the idea that Grass may be realigning himself with his literary creations is made quite explicit. The autobiographer Grass makes numerous references throughout to his mother's tendency to call him Peer Gynt, finally noting with obvious resonance for himself that this fictional character's 'Lebenszwiebel am Ende, nachdem Haut auf Haut geschält war, keinen sinnstiftenden Kern barg' (p. 433). The parallels do not stop here, however. Just as his Danzig narrators are all morally discredited by their whimsical texts and have made their way into literary history as prime examples of 'unreliable narrators', Grass too becomes a character from whom the reading public can no longer expect to hear the truth. This is surely one of the main lessons—and arguably achievements—of his text. Failing to get any closer to his younger self and to reveal with any certainty the 'wann, wo, wie, wie lange, warum' demanded by his *Spiegel* reviewers,²² Grass builds on the subversive play of *Aus dem Tagebuch einer Schnecke* and succeeds in toppling the dominant, and by this stage surely rather overbearing, public image of his authorial persona as the self-elected moral guide for the nation. This in turn, however, raises urgent questions about the wider ethics of self-representation in contemporary autobiography. Even if Grass maintains Lejeune's autobiographical pact, has his elaborate use of metaphor and self-fictionalization not seriously cheated the reader who turns to autobiography to access a socially significant past, to which this author holds one of the few remaining keys? And speaking again with Lejeune, to what extent do the author's dissimulating tendencies preclude the possibility of an ethically satisfactory 'mode de lecture' on the part of his reader?²³

Reading, Writing, and Contractual Obligations

In order to answer these questions, it is necessary to step aside briefly into some of Grass's earlier thoughts on dominant contemporary reading practices. These thoughts are by no means confined to the autobiographical mode. His fictional work in general revolves around questions of authorial self-presentation within both the text and the world, and it manipulates clearly recognizable images of Grass during the course of these considerations.²⁴ Pieces from the early 1990s onwards, however, show a particular awareness of the reader's role in fashioning the author's popular public image, and they begin to question the social desirability of these reading practices. This can be seen particularly clearly in the 1995 novel *Ein weites Feld*, an epic narrative drawn together by an overarching consideration of the nature and effects of celebrity authorship. By moving away from a sole focus on issues of self-representation from an autobiographical, authorial perspective and examining instead the effect of readers' responses on the author as both a social construct and a real human being, Grass is able to add

²² Kubjuweit and others, 'Fehlbar und verstrickt', p. 60.

²³ Lejeune, *Le Pacte autobiographique*, p. 45.

²⁴ See Braun, *Constructing Authorship*.

qualifications to his absolute, post-Holocaust authorial self-understanding. The reader too is asked to behave in an ethically responsible manner with regard to his or her treatment of the author in the contemporary public sphere if literature is to retain its credibility.

Even in its very conception, *Ein weites Feld* addresses the question of how to read celebrity authors responsibly. The tale runs to such length not least because it traces the attempts made by the anonymous archivists from the Fontane archive exhaustively to document Theo Wuttke's, alias Fonty's, attempts to re-enact large segments of the famous nineteenth-century author Theodor Fontane's life in present-day Berlin. Fonty's disappearance at the end of the novel secures his position of authority within the archivists' star-struck text, as his iconoclastic figure, largely created by these archivists in his absence, demands interpretation. Just as Wuttke lived his life in thrall to Fontane, the archivists now construct their text in thrall to Fonty. The negative effects of such readerly fetishization are not just evident in the macro-structure of the text, as their clumsy attempts to stalk Fonty's every move yields an awkward and at times tedious documentary style, but are also directly thematized in one striking extended scene: Fonty is brought by his critical friend, Hoftaller, to look at the statue of Fontane in Neuruppin.

Following Hoftaller's instructions, Fonty, prized by the archivists for his mortal rendering of the immortal hero, literally measures himself against the public's idealized image of the famous author by seating himself in a gap next to the larger-than-life figure on the monument. His archivist fans are forced to concede that in the physical comparison he unquestionably loses out: 'zwar mangelte es nicht an Ähnlichkeit, doch wirkte die verkleinerte Ausgabe wie ein geschrumpftes Modell'.²⁵ The scene is then turned into a kind of *mise en abyme* by the text's real author, Grass, for the wider issues of how real, living authors relate to society's idealized image of them. A series of famous authors traipse around the monument: easily recognizable images of Grass, Uwe Johnson, and Theodor Fontane himself are brought into the text. All four mortal figures come off badly. While Fonty is 'geschrumpft', Grass is 'ein wenig vorgestrig' (p. 591), Johnson is 'in erbärmlichem Zustand' (p. 604), and it is strongly suggested that even Fontane does not measure up to his own image, which was in fact based on one of his sons: 'wennleich überlebensgroß abgebildet, stellte sich dennoch die Frage: Ist er das wirklich?' (p. 583). Meanwhile, the Fontane statue is described as 'der sitzende Unsterbliche' (p. 583), characterized by 'das Überlebensgroße' (p. 590). It is an incredible cast ('toller Guß!', p. 591) that completely overshadows all mortal authors who attempt comparison. The archivists are forced to concede 'Neben [Fonty] dominierte das Original' (p. 590), Johnson and Fonty symbolically sit to one side of the domineering monument, while Grass merely shuffles around at its feet.

The effect of this procession of all too human author figures past the immortalized public ideal of authorship is to emphasize the godlike status that the famous author's image can acquire: he is an ideal to which the ordinary mortal citizens-turned-authors all aspire, and functions as an absolute stan-

²⁵ Günter Grass, *Ein weites Feld*, in Grass, *Werkausgabe*, XIII, ed. by Daniela Hermes, p. 590. Subsequent references appear in the text.

dard against which they measure themselves. The problems that this can cause are illustrated with particular reference to Uwe Johnson, who is described as desperately trying to live up to the strict moral ideals he has set himself as a public author figure, and physically suffering under the strain. As Fonty writes to his daughter afterwards:

wie ausgestoßen er dasaß, wie sehr um Haltung bemüht. Schwitzend der massige Schädel, dem kein Haar mehr erlaubt war. Ach hätte ich doch einen Lorbeer zur Hand gehabt! [. . .] wie er, in seiner Strenge gefangen, neben mir saß, war er nur zu bedauern. (p. 608)

For Johnson, his existence, both literary and private, is to be defined by ‘Haltung’ of the moral kind, and yet the direct result is that his physical ‘Haltung’ is sagging under the strain. His moral rigour transforms into a head on which no more hair is ‘allowed’; only a laurel wreath would prove acceptable. The real physical image of the man has been sacrificed to the lofty ideals he propounds. Where the fate of Fontane shows how a great author can be turned by his readers into a larger-than-life figure, Johnson, acting in line with his own preconceived ideals of authorship, actually sets up this process himself, acting in extremes that elevate the famous author to an idealized position that ultimately distances him from both his readership and his own body.

What all three authors, Fontane, Grass, and Johnson, demonstrate in this text is how an author’s public image can become so overburdened as to splinter away entirely from the real-life man or woman behind it, placing impossible demands on ordinary mortal writers. Throughout his literary work Grass has shown himself aware of this precisely in his concern to undermine the notion of any one, essential self and bring to the fore instead issues of image construction in both the text and the world. In *Ein weites Feld* he devotes an unprecedented amount of space to considering not just the author’s but also the reader’s involvement in this construction process. When Fonty, following his physical humiliation next to the Fontane monument, retaliates by relating his own version of the Fontane essay ‘Die gesellschaftliche Stellung der Schriftsteller’ and links his critical observations to the heavy-handed way in which well-known contemporary authors were discredited during the *Literaturstreit*, a wider concern with the reader’s obligation to read responsibly and treat authors as ordinary (fallible) mortals becomes particularly evident.

Within the context of my argument, such a textual plea may be understood as Grass’s own ethical stance on public constructions of authorship. Returning to his official autobiography in the light of these long-standing considerations about not just the author’s but also the reader’s responsibilities, we can come to our second interim conclusion: Grass’s ‘meaningless’ autobiography that reveals no ‘sinnstiftende[r] Kern’ is the logical conclusion to a career that has been acutely aware of the power of the author’s constructed media image. If readers feel cheated by this, perhaps they only have themselves and dominant contemporary reading practices to blame, for, as Grass has pointed out elsewhere with regard to media discussion of Thomas Mann’s diaries, the belief that an author can be reduced to an accessible, essential core has led to one of the

greatest failings of our media age: all too often, authors are discussed without being read and their life work judged on a minimum of reliable information:

Am Ende war Thomas Mann ertappt, in seinem Wesenskern gedeutet und auf den Punkt gebracht. Frech konnte eine sekundäre Findung zur Erkenntnis aufgeblasen und als Sichtblende vor das Werk des Urhebers gestellt werden. [. . .] [Er] meinte, als Autor hinter dem Werk verschwinden zu dürfen. Aber nun haben wir ihn doch noch heimgeholt nach langer Emigration. Jetzt ist er unser. Wir kennen ihn durch und durch. Wir müssen ihn nicht mehr lesen.²⁶

Grass's decision in writing *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel* can consequently be understood as a decision to force readers to engage with him personally as a complex author who defies reductionism. The text combines a popular form (autobiographies are famously good sellers) and entertaining, accessible anecdotes that enhance its readability with a clear and self-conscious insistence on the impossibility of uncovering any absolute truth or meaningful essence to the autobiographical subject. In the same vein as much of his literary fiction and as a logical culmination to this oeuvre, the autobiography ultimately demands a complex, multi-layered approach from its readers, but sweetens the pill by pandering to their curiosity for biographical detail to a greater extent than any of his previous literary fiction. This may be read as a deliberate and considered response to the dangerously simplifying reading practices that Grass has discerned over the course of his career, and it interprets Grass's claim to have written the text 'weil ich das letzte Wort haben will' (p. 8) in quite a different manner from the popular notion that he is somehow trying to save his public image from posthumous disgrace.²⁷

Conclusion: An Ethics of Autobiography in the Contemporary World

Moving outwards from this specific textual analysis, we may draw wider conclusions, both about Grass's approach to literary self-representation and about the ethical issues inherent in Lejeune's contractual pact. Grass's concern with issues of self-representation throughout his career has been closely linked to his personal experience of authorship within the public realm. Received as an iconic figure and aware of the power of his public image right from the start, he has not only been able to capitalize on media interest in his biographical persona by using it to construct an image of responsible public authorship that has gone on to have all the power of a well-known brand name; he has also been moved time and again to reflect on issues of authorship in his literary writing. The tenacity with which Grass returns to and varies authorial self-representation within literature encourages us to see much of his work as part of a loose autobiographical project and to make a direct link between the in-

²⁶ Günter Grass, 'Über das Sekundäre aus primärer Sicht' (1994), in Grass, *Werkausgabe*, xvi, ed. by Daniela Hermes, pp. 405–11, 408–09.

²⁷ The belief that incriminating archival evidence was about to be disclosed and that Grass's autobiography was a hasty reaction to this gained considerable currency in the 2006 media debates. See *Ein Buch, Ein Bekenntnis: Die Debatte um Günter Grass' 'Beim Häuten der Zwiebel'*, ed. by Martin Kölbel (Göttingen: Steidl, 2007), for a full documentation of the media coverage. That Grass is ultimately trying to reassert an exemplary socio-political role for himself is also the main thrust of Stuart Taberner's article 'Private Failings and Public Virtues'.

creasingly image-conscious, media-driven public sphere to which his career is indebted and developments in autobiographical writing in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

In the first instance, autobiography, understood in its widest sense as recognizable, deliberate, and sustained authorial self-representation in writing, empowers the author to counter media appropriations of his image with his own self-constructions, however fictive and conflicting these may be. For Grass, it would appear that this kind of autobiographical writing provides the necessary space to reflect on his existence within the public sphere, as demonstrated by his first quasi-autobiographical piece, *Aus dem Tagebuch einer Schnecke*. Secondly, the extent to which he acknowledges the role of fiction in this literary self-representation not only reveals Grass to be clearly in step with wider understandings of autobiography as displayed by critics from the 1980s onwards such as James Olney and Paul Eakin; it also reflects back on the public discourse on authorship with which Grass is engaging. Overtly drawing on elements of uncertainty, duplicity, and fundamental unreliability, Grass's literary self-representation embraces the author's human weaknesses and writes them into his own self-conception. This creates an alternative, markedly more human image of authorship that, while always advertising its own artifice in the text—and Grass's writing is nothing if not self-conscious—also points to the constructed nature of its political counterpart in dominant German media discourse. This in itself may be understood as a deliberately ethical statement on the part of the author, as he challenges how the media and his own readers (mis)construct the author in his public role in such a manner as to harm his fiction, his own public standing, and that of authors more widely.

Finally, the extent to which Grass instrumentalizes autobiography in order to negotiate his own public image flags up the need for challenging and self-reflexive reading and writing processes in the postmodern era. Despite his claim to be seeking some kind of essential truth about his character in *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel*, the real truth that Grass's official autobiography reveals is that the author needs the licence of fiction if he is to make any significant refining contribution to the inevitably simplified public constructions of his authorial identity, and this is a belief that can be found throughout Grass's oeuvre. Critics, such as the *Spiegel* commentators who demanded to be supplied with the 'truth' ('nichts als die Wahrheit') and bare facts ('wann, wo, wie, wie lange, warum'), have missed the point.²⁸ Grass could only have constructed a satisfactory image of himself in these terms by simplifying his self-conception in line with this dominant public discourse that remains obstinately stuck in the moralizing drive of the 1960s (this latter point being amply borne out in the media debate that accompanied the autobiography's publication). To do so, however, would have entailed betraying the subtle understanding that he has come to during the course of the wider autobiographical project embodied by his work: the self is a multi-layered product of constantly changing and often contradictory times. There is no one essential core of meaning that can be invoked to make sense of the subject and his actions. The idea that there might be is perhaps the

²⁸ Dirk Kubjuweit and others, 'Fehlbar und verstrickt', pp. 58, 60.

biggest falsehood propagated by a media discourse that feeds off the power of image and is at least as ethically questionable as his own recourse to fictional strategies of self-representation. Overtly refusing to play by these rules and instead applying to himself the lessons from his fiction is perhaps Grass's greatest ethical achievement yet. In this sense, it may also be regarded as his most sincere attempt at fulfilling the contractual obligations of autobiography without running the danger of compromising his literary principles.

UNIVERSITY OF LIVERPOOL

REBECCA BRAUN