

Childhood Bonds—

Günter Grass, Martin Walser and Christa Wolf as Writers of the
Hitler Youth Generation in Post-1945 and Post-1989 Germany

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ABSTRACT

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Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, public discourse in German society has been repeatedly riven by debates prompted by three leading figures of the literary scene: Günter Grass, Martin Walser, and Christa Wolf. The tremendously emotional controversies regarding Wolf's purported cowardice as a GDR-writer, Walser's alleged anti-Semitism, and Grass's membership in the *Waffen-SS* served to confirm the significance of these writers, which, I argue, stems not only from their literary merits, but also from their status as former members of the Hitler Youth. Building upon Sigrid Weigel's claim that generations in post-war Germany act as symbols of the country's relationship to the Nazi past, my dissertation elucidates the process by which Grass, Walser, and Wolf were adopted—and adopted *themselves*—as proxies for a “better Germany.” The biographies of these three writers, I argue, came to represent the overarching political goal of both post-war German states: the successful transition from an intimate association with the Nazi regime – in the authors' case, their associations with the Hitler Youth – to a full embrace of democratic values. The conflation of the writers' biographies with national identity explains their authority and popularity in both German societies. It also explains why the process of detachment from these writers as political figures began after 1990 as national identity changed after reunification.

With the waning of the Hitler Youth generation's dominance in the public sphere, a re-evaluation of the writers' political and literary work, set against the backdrop of their generational identity, is long overdue. In four chapters, this dissertation examines key moments in the careers of Grass, Walser, and Wolf. I emphasize the striking similarities between the generational discourse of the two West-German writers and the East-German writer, while pointing out where their shared generational background led to distinct political agendas. I show that the literary output, self-understanding, and public reception of arguably the three most significant writers in the post-war Germanies cannot be understood without a consideration of this mutual historical-biographical legacy. My dissertation thus rewrites an important part of post-1945 and post-1989 cultural history.

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New York, April 2012

Julia Nordmann

To my parents.

Vielleicht wird unser Beitrag zur Literatur darin bestehen müssen, daß wir den Mut finden, unseren eigenen Lebensstoff schonungslos und wahrheitsgetreu zu erzählen.

—Christa Wolf, *Gegenwart und Zukunft*, 1970

Chapter One:

***Gruppe 47* and the two “First Generations” of Post-War German Authors**

1. The Hitler Youth generation and the Privilege of Late Birth

Introduction

During his visit to Israel in 1984, the former German Chancellor Helmut Kohl repeatedly emphasized that he came as a representative of a new Germany. While Kohl at no point denied the particular historical responsibility that derived from Germany’s role in the Holocaust and World War II, he did not miss any opportunity to mention that he was the first chancellor to embody a “post-war” generation of Germans, no longer biographically attached to the war. By stressing that the generation of the perpetrators was vanishing and that sixty percent of Germany’s population was born after the war, Kohl seemed to suggest that Germany’s relations with Israel could enter a new stage in which the dialogue could be more “normal,” less biased, less burdened by the past. Although the Chancellor himself was born in 1930, he made sure to include himself in the collective of Germans who, in his view, no longer shared the guilt of the Nazi era.

Kohl’s speech before the Knesset began with the words: “Ich rede vor Ihnen als einer, der in der Nazizeit nicht in Schuld geraten konnte, weil er die Gnade der späten

Geburt und das Glück eines besonderen Elternhauses gehabt hat.”¹ His use of the expression “die Gnade der späten Geburt,” which quickly became a catchphrase, provoked much disapproval. It was considered highly inappropriate for the chancellor of Germany to begin a speech to the Israeli Parliament with the assurance that he was not personally culpable for the crimes of Hitler’s Germany. The phrase only highlighted the problematic notion that underlay Kohl’s visit throughout, namely that historical responsibility and guilt could be rejected on the basis of age. Among the harshest critics was the journalist Günter Gaus, who had used the phrase “grace of late birth” a year before Kohl in order to underline that if his generation had been widely spared having to make difficult decisions during the years between 1933 and 1945, it was only due to their young age and thus by total coincidence and not as a result of their own merit.² In a book published in 1986, Gaus again clarified that the exculpatory undertones that the expression carried in the context of Kohl’s speech were contrary to the meaning he originally intended:

Helmut Kohl [...] hatte in Israel seinen Geburtsjahrgang und alle jüngeren mit dem entwendeten Wort freisprechen wollen von deutscher Schuld: die Geburtsurkunde als Persilschein, biologische Fakten, wenn’s denn dem Ansehen dient, als Sieger über historische Identität. Ich dagegen habe den Begriff stets auf Kohls und meine Halbgeneration, die Altersgruppe um das Jahr 1930, bezogen, um deutlich zu machen, wie zerbrechlich die Barriere immer ist, die uns damals, gnädig, vom Dienst an der Rampe in Auschwitz bewahrt hat. [...] Ich wollte *unsere Nähe zur Schuld*, das Unverdiente, nichts Beweisende *unsere Schuldlosigkeit* ins Bewußtsein heben [...].³

¹ Cited in: Monika Köpke, “Helmut Kohl trifft in Israel ein und spricht von der ‘Gnade der späten Geburt’.” Kalenderblatt, Vor 20 Jahren,” Deutschlandradio 24 January 2004, <http://www.dradio.de/dlr/sendungen/kalender/227514/>.

² In his book *Die Welt der Westdeutschen*, Gaus claims that he had used the phrase before Kohl, namely in 1983 in a speech at the *Münchener Kammerspiele*, in the context of a lecture series called *Reden über das eigene Land – Deutschland*. See Günter Gaus, *Die Welt der Westdeutschen: Kritische Betrachtungen* (Cologne: Kiepenhauer & Witsch, 1986).

³ Gaus, *Die Welt der Westdeutschen*, Ibid., 75 (emphasis added).

Whether or not the Chancellor intended to exempt an entire generation from *historical* guilt, as Gaus suggests, Kohl certainly used the phrase “die Gnade der späten Geburt“ to underscore that his birth year prevented him from carrying any *personal* guilt; he spoke, as he said, as someone who could no longer be entangled in guilt. Gaus, on the other hand, had meant to stress the randomness and contingency of the year of birth—the idea that only a few years separated his generation from the collective of the perpetrators. In an article from 2001, he wrote: “Wer wollte die Hand dafür ins Feuer legen, wie sie [his generation] sich verhalten hätten, wären sie zehn Jahre früher geboren?”⁴

The metaphor of late birth leads directly into the center of the discourse surrounding Kohl’s and Gaus’ generation, the so-called “Hitler Youth generation”. The fact that Gaus characterizes his generation as innocent (“unsere Schuldlosigkeit”) while at the same time emphasizing its proximity to guilt (“unsere Nähe zur Schuld”) is paradigmatic of this discourse, which can be described as a continuous struggle to define and assess this generation’s relationship towards Germany’s National-Socialist past.

The Hitler Youth generation and its place in post-war history

Kohl and Gaus belong to the Hitler Youth generation, comprised of the cohorts born in the late 1920s and early 1930s. What distinguishes this generation from those before and after it is that their entire socialization took place in Nazi-Germany: they were children during the rise and rule of National Socialism and adolescents during its defeat.

When the war ended in 1945, this age group had no other experiences other than those under the National-Socialist regime. From the age of ten, when membership in one of the Nazi youth organizations became mandatory, they had been systematically

⁴ Günter Gaus, “Wer den Mund zu voll nimmt. Die 45er und die 68er verbindet nur eins: Beide Generationen beanspruchen das Recht auf eigene Irrtümer,” *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, March 9, 2001.

indoctrinated into fascist ideology and prepared for their role as Hitler's "Garanten der Zukunft."⁵ Deeply effected by the Nazi education during their adolescence, they often became the fiercest believers in the *Führer* and the idea of Germany's final victory, even in the last years of the war when the downfall of the Third Reich was readily apparent to many Germans. For the Hitler Youth, then, the experience of both the end of the war and the end of the fascist regime in 1945 thus meant the total collapse of the world as they had known it. Accordingly, the central question in the discourse about German youth in the immediate post-war years was whether this generation would be able to leave their Nazi socialization behind, to "learn" democracy and to participate in the rebuilding of a democratic Germany.

In the first sociological study of the Hitler Youth generation, *Die skeptische Generation* (1957), Helmut Schelsky had argued that while this generation transitioned from fascism to democracy with ease, their Nazi socialization and the traumatic experience of 1945 had led to their withdrawal from the political into the private sphere.⁶ Schelsky portrayed this generation as skeptical of all ideologies, unwilling to engage with societal and political issues and as interested mostly in consumption, professional success and family life.⁷ But this early assessment of the Hitler Youth generation did not hold true for its intellectuals. Many of the "young Nazis" in fact turned out to be the country's leading intellectuals in the post-war era. Recent studies in the field of intellectual and cultural history have emphasized the significant role that intellectuals of the Hitler Youth

⁵ During the Nazi regime, the Hitler Youth was commonly referred to as "Garant der Zukunft". See for example Arno Klönne, *Jugend im Dritten Reich: Die Hitler-Jugend und ihre Gegner: Dokumente und Analysen* (Düsseldorf: Diederichs, 1982).

⁶ Helmut Schelsky, *Die skeptische Generation: Eine Soziologie der deutschen Jugend* (Dusseldorf and Cologne: Diederich, 1957).

⁷ See Schelsky, especially the conclusion of his book, 380-389.

generation have played in the Federal Republic. Jan-Werner Müller's book *Another Country: German Intellectuals, Unification and National Identity*, for example, a study of intellectuals in the Federal Republic and their approaches to German nationhood and unification after 1945 as well as after 1989, focuses strongly on the "skeptical generation." "Arguably," he writes, "a generation, on which politics had intruded so forcefully so early, could not be truly 'apolitical' ever again."⁸ Members of this generation, Müller argues, "participated in almost every major debate touching on the political self-understanding of West Germany, and especially questions of 'national identity'."⁹ In his book *German Intellectuals and the Nazi Past* (2007), the historian Dirk Moses has correspondingly underscored the influence of this generation on the academic discourse. His thesis is that the "historians, philosophers, sociologists, political scientists, and educationalists" of this generation, "many of whom made decisive interventions in the public sphere, served as ministers and political advisers, and liberalized German intellectual life,"¹⁰ have themselves been driven by political emotions that result from their personal experience of the Nazi past. From the beginning of the 1960s they became the dominant forces in the cultural and political discourse on both sides of the Berlin Wall, in spite of their early indoctrination into Nazism, or, rather, because of it. As Moses points out, it was "[p]aradoxically, [...] the true believers [...] who made the cleanest break with the regime after 1945 because the collapse of their world demanded systematic, critical reflections on their prior commitments."¹¹

⁸ Jan-Werner Müller, *Another Country: German Intellectuals, Unification and National Identity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).

⁹ Müller, *Another Country* 8-9.

¹⁰ A. Dirk Moses, *German Intellectuals and the Nazi Past* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

¹¹ A. Dirk Moses, "The Forty-Fivers: A Generation Between Fascism and Democracy," *German Politics and Society* 17.1 (1999): 94-126.

Aleida Assmann has similarly highlighted the academic contributions of Hitler Youth intellectuals. Against the common opinion that the intellectual renewal of West-Germany resulted from the generation of 1968, she argues that it was mostly the forty-fiver generation that instigated what she calls a general overhaul of various academic disciplines at the end of the fifties: “Sie machten ein Ende mit der Restauration der 50er Jahre und den damit verbundenen muffig gewordenen Sprach- und Denktraditionen, sie begründeten neue Diskurse und ermöglichten damit einen international anschlussfähigen geistigen Neubeginn.”¹² The list of prominent academics of the Hitler Youth generation who made a significant contribution to their respective disciplines includes the sociologists Niklas Luhmann (1927), Jürgen Habermas (1929) and Ralf Dahrendorf (1929), the literary scholar Wolfgang Iser (1926), the psychoanalyst Helm Stierlin (1926), the historians Martin Broszat (1926) and Joachim Fest (1926), the cultural historian Hermann Glaser (1928), the philosopher Hermann Lübbe, and the political scientist Kurt Sontheimer (1928). Other influential members of this generation, who became famous outside the academic context and even internationally, include the politicians Helmut Kohl (1930) and Hans-Dietrich Genscher (1927) as well as Pope Benedict XVI (1927).¹³

But it is particularly the writers of this generation who became highly influential figures in the public sphere. Authors such as Günter Grass (1927), Martin Walser (1927), Siegfried Lenz (1926), and Hans Magnus Enzensberger (1929) in the West, and Christa Wolf (1929), Uwe Johnson (1933), and Heiner Müller (1927) in the East, all gained reputations not only as writers but also as commentators on political and cultural issues

¹²Aleida Assmann, *Geschichte im Gedächtnis: Von der individuellen Erfahrung zur öffentlichen Inszenierung* (Munich: Verlag C.H. Beck, 2007).

¹³ For a similar list see Assmann, *Geschichte im Gedächtnis*, 37.

that went far beyond the field of literature. Soon after they entered the cultural scene between the mid-fifties and early sixties, they became well respected and cherished in their role as “the prime advocates of a critical engagement with Germany’s National Socialist past, criticizing, in particular, the political continuities in the post-war period.”¹⁴ The Hitler Youth generation’s critical perspective as well as their drive to explore new forms of literature had been missing from Germany’s cultural scene during the era of restoration in the fifties. A zero hour never existed in Germany’s literary scene. “Das war eine absurde Hoffnung,” Heinrich Vormweg writes about the idea that literature could simply bracket twelve years of Nazi-rule and move forward into the direction of innovation, renewal, and a critical dealing with the past. “Es war nur die Stunde äußersten physischen und ideologischen Elends, die Stunde der Unfähigkeit zu kritischem Denken, die Stunde der Anfälligkeit für die geringsten Tröstungen. Es konnte sich in ihr weder eine neue Gesellschaft noch eine neue Literatur konstituieren.”¹⁵ With this new generation of writers, seemingly exculpated from the historical guilt because they had experienced the war as children and adolescents, there seemed to be the chance for both: a new society and a new literature; or rather, two new societies and two new literatures seemed to emerge, as East and West continued to grow apart during these years. In the East, the emergence of a new generation of writers (Christa Wolf, Uwe Johnson, Heiner Müller) did not make as much noise as in the West. Older writers such as Anna Seghers, Bertolt Brecht, Arnold Zweig, and Johannes R. Becher, who had been forced into exile during the Third Reich due to their communist beliefs or Jewish origins,

¹⁴ Anne Fuchs, *Phantoms of War in Contemporary German Literature, Films and Discourse: The Politics of Memory* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

¹⁵ Heinrich Vormweg: “Deutsche Literatur 1945-1960: Keine Stunde Null,” in *Deutsche Gegenwartsliteratur. Ausgangspositionen und aktuelle Entwicklungen*, ed. Manfred Durzak, (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1981), 14-31, here 15.

had reassumed important positions in literature upon their return. Their moral authority was not in question. In the West, however, the popular writers of the era of restoration in the late forties and fifties were writers of the “inner emigration,” like Hans Carossa, Ernst Wiechert, Werner Bergengruen, Ricarda Huch, or Reinhold Schneider. They had spent the Nazi years in Germany without publicly declaring their opposition against the Nazis, and for the most part they continued to refrain from any societal involvement after the war. Continuities marked their literature as well. Their aesthetic development stalled during the Nazi years, but even after the war, writers of the late forties and fifties did not produce innovative literature, pick up modernist impulses from abroad, or break with aesthetic traditions. Klaus Scherpe describes the immediate postwar literary scene in the following way: “Wer unverdrossen Sonette schreibt, den Helden des Bildungsromans ohne Ironie wiederaufleben läßt oder den poetischen Realismus des 19. Jahrhunderts zum Hort eines wahren Lebens erklärt, ignoriert die ebenso innovative wie destruktive Moderne.”¹⁶ In other words, post-war writers of the forties and fifties ignored the modernist avantgarde that had already been present in Germany before World War II. With regard to a critical reflection of the Nazi years, the deficit was even greater. The great societal task of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* still lay ahead.

Thus, it has become commonplace to consider the year 1959 as the year of innovation when German literature finally caught up with the rest of the world, as writers began to address the difficult past and the difficult presence, and found new stylistic forms to write about both. Three 1959 publications marked the beginning of this new literary era, Günter Grass’s *Die Blechtrommel*, Uwe Johnson’s *Mutmaßungen über*

¹⁶ Klaus R. Scherpe, introduction to *Die rekonstruierte Moderne. Studien zur deutschen Literatur nach 1945* (Vienna, Cologne, Weimar: Böhlau, 1992), VII-XX, here XI.

Jakob—two members of the Hitler Youth generation, Johnson from the East, Grass from the West—as well as the novel *Billiard um halb zehn* by the slightly older author Heinrich Böll. The writer Hans-Erich Nossack described the symbolic meaning of “Die Blechtrommel” in his diary: “Es kommt nicht darauf an, ob es mir gefällt oder nicht: eines scheint mir festzustehen, daß es das erste Buch der Generation nach 1945 ist, das internationalen und überzeitlichen Rang hat.”¹⁷ Other pivotal works by writers of the Hitler Youth generation followed, for instance the novels *Halbzeit* (1960) by Martin Walser, *Deutschstunde* (1968) by Siegfried Lenz, *Der geteilte Himmel* and *Nachdenken über Christa T.* by Christa Wolf, and the play *Der Stellvertreter* (1963) by Rolf Hochhuth. The Hitler Youth generation began to dominate the cultural scene, and more so, they became increasingly influential in moral-political matters.

The Hitler Youth generation today

In his 2005 essay “Warum die Alten an der Macht bleiben”, the literary critic Fritz J. Raddatz described it as “sensationell” and perhaps even “einmalig in der deutschen Kulturgeschichte” that those writers, now nearing their eighties, still dominate the public sphere:

Die Alten bestimmen den öffentlichen Diskurs. Entgegen aller Prognosen – immer noch. Ob es um direkte Einrede zur Politik geht, ob um historische Zusammenhänge oder philosophisch-theoretische Auseinandersetzungen – es sind allemal Schriftstellerinnen, Autoren, Theoretiker der älteren Generation [...], die ‚den Ton angeben‘. Christa Wolf oder Günter Grass, Martin Walser, Walter Kempowski, Jürgen Habermas, Rolf Hochhuth oder Hans Magnus Enzensberger: Deren Wort zählt, sei es ein Essay, ein Interview, ein Buch, auch nur ein Artikel.¹⁸

¹⁷ Hans-Erich Nossack, *Die Tagebücher 1943-1977*, ed. Gabriele Söhling, (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp 1997), Volume 1, 393.

¹⁸Fritz J. Raddatz, “Warum die Alten an der Macht bleiben,” *Cicero – Magazin für politische Kultur*, Sept 28, 2005, http://www.cicero.de/97.php?ress_id=4&item=844.

While I argue that the moral authority that Raddatz attributes to the intellectuals of this generation in this article had already begun to wane by 2005, I share his view that they maintained the prominent position they had assumed in the sixties for an astonishingly long time. Why is it that this generation was able to hold so much sway over the public sphere? My thesis is simple: they came to represent the overarching political goal of both post-war German states—the successful transition from an intimate association with the Nazi regime to a full embrace of new values. These writers had achieved what the country needed to achieve. They had been corrupted by Nazi ideology as children and adolescents but had then left this affiliation behind. They put all their energy into rebuilding the new German states advocating new values. As they embodied national identity, they were able to maintain their prominent role in society, both self-assigned and assigned to them by society, for decades. However, since the fall of the Berlin Wall, a number of heated literary debates surrounding the works of Christa Wolf, Günter Grass and Martin Walser—the first three on Raddatz’ list—had seriously damaged their reputation and turned these former role models into controversial figures.

Christa Wolf was the first to become the subject of fiery discussions with her novel *Was bleibt* (1979/1989), in which she depicts a writer being observed by the *Stasi*. In an article on this book, published in 1990 in *Die Zeit*, Ulrich Greiner accused Wolf of presenting herself as a victim of the repressive GDR regime, despite the fact that she had supported the regime and had decided to stay in the GDR when other intellectuals had long since emigrated. The article triggered the so-called “Deutsch-Deutscher Literaturstreit,” lasting over a year. The book review turned into a controversial exchange about the relation between literature and politics, a rerun of the debate about the role of

intellectuals in totalitarian regimes that had occupied the cultural scene already after 1945.¹⁹ Wolf was attacked again when Stasi records found in 1993 showed that she had worked as an informant (*Inoffizieller Mitarbeiter*) during the years 1959-61.²⁰ The overarching reproach made against the writer in both debates was that she had not lived up to the promise of her public image as a critical force courageously standing up against the East-German regime. The Stasi files were seen as a last proof of Wolf's biographical and personal failure. Christa Wolf seemed to be a politically corrupted writer after all.

While Christa Wolf was criticized for her lack of distance towards the East-German state, Günter Grass and Martin Walser have raised other suspicions with their recent interventions in the memory discourse. Walser stirred a highly emotional debate with his provocative acceptance speech for the Frankfurt Book Fair's *Friedenspreis des Deutschen Buchhandels* in 1998, in which he denounced the inflationary use of the Holocaust in public discourse. He spoke of Auschwitz as a "Moralkeule" and "Einschüchterungsmittel" and pleaded that the memory of the Nazi era not be prescribed by a normative public discourse but instead be considered a private matter.²¹ The attacks on Walser multiplied after the publication of his 2002 novel *Tod eines Kritikers*,²² which included an allegedly anti-Semitic caricature of the Jewish literary critic Marcel Reich-Ranicki.²³ The Nobel laureate Grass, on the other hand, was accused of portraying

¹⁹ For documentation and analysis of the debate, see Karl Deiritz and Hannes Krauss, *Der Deutsch-deutsche Literaturstreit, oder "Freunde, es spricht sich schlecht mit gebundener Zunge": Analysen und Materialien* (Hamburg: Luchterhand, 1991), and Thomas Anz, *"Es geht nicht um Christa Wolf": Der Literaturstreit im vereinten Deutschland* (Munich: Edition Spangenberg, 1991).

²⁰ For a discussion of Wolf's Stasi past, see Peter Graves, "The treachery of St. Joan: Christa Wolf and the Stasi," in *Christa Wolf in Perspective*, ed. Ian Wallace (Amsterdam; Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 1994).

²¹ For Walser's speech and an extensive documentation of the debate surrounding it see Frank Schirmacher, *Die Walser-Bubis-Debatte: Eine Dokumentation* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1999).

²² Martin Walser, *Tod eines Kritikers*, (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2002).

²³ See for example Dieter Borchmeyer, *Der Ernstfall: Martin Walsers Tod eines Kritikers* (Hamburg: Hoffmann und Campe, 2003).

Germans as innocent victims of World War II. In his 2002 novel *Im Krebsgang*,²⁴ he explored the sufferings inflicted on East Prussian Germans who fled or were driven from their homeland in 1945.²⁵ In 2006, Grass caused a major debate when in an interview preceding the publication of his memoir *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel* he admitted to having joined the Waffen SS as a seventeen-year-old during the last months of the war—a biographical detail that he had hidden throughout his career and had finally decided to reveal in his new book.²⁶

The revelation took Grass biographers, literary scholars and the German public completely by surprise. Why had Grass, who had always criticized the country's superficial reckoning with the Nazi past, taken so long to speak about his own entanglement? And why was it not discovered earlier? Suddenly, the biographies of other members of the Hitler Youth generation were under siege as well: membership cards for the Nazi-party were found for writers Martin Walser and Siegfried Lenz, for the popular political comedian Dieter Hildebrandt and for Martin Broszat, historian and longtime director of the *Institut für Zeitgeschichte*. An article in the journal *Cicero*, which brought up Jürgen Habermas' affiliation with the *Hitlerjugend*, led to a front page with the title "Vergesst Habermas!"²⁷

²⁴ Günter Grass, *Im Krebsgang: Eine Novelle* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2002).

²⁵ For an overview of the critical reception of *Im Krebsgang* and an insightful analysis of the debate about German victims linked to it, see Robert G. Moeller: "Sinking Ships, the Lost Heimat and Broken Taboos: Günter Grass and the Politics of Memory in Contemporary Germany," *Contemporary European History*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (May, 2003): 147-181.

²⁶ Günter Grass, *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2006). For documentation of the debate, see Martin Kölbl, *Ein Buch, ein Bekenntnis: Die Debatte um Günter Grass "Beim Häuten der Zwiebel"* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2007).

²⁷ The article presents a number of younger philosophers who are described as the new generation of German philosophy. See Jürgen Busche, "Hat Habermas die Wahrheit verschluckt?," *Cicero – Magazin für politische Kultur*, October 26, 2006, <http://www.netzeitung.de/voiceofgermany/448936.html>. For a summary of the events during the summer of 2006, see Assmann 38.

The events of the summer of 2006 underline the enormous significance of intellectuals of the Hitler Youth generation for public discourse. The Grass affair also revealed a phenomenon that had already become visible during the Christa Wolf debate sixteen years earlier. While the writers themselves had reflected upon their biographies in their literary and non-literary work, the media discourse about these authors mostly chose not to pick up on this self-reflexion. This is understandable in the case of Walser, because it requires some interpretative work to understand that Walser's discourse on Germany is closely tied to his generational identity. But whereas Grass had kept his SS membership a secret, he had never concealed that he was a fierce admirer of the *Führer* during his adolescent years. In fact, like many other intellectuals of the Hitler Youth generation, he had repeatedly expressed the idea that his work was to a large part motivated by his experiences during the Nazi era—in explicitly generational terms. Similarly, Christa Wolf had never hidden that her (and her generation's) relationship to the GDR proved to be continually conflicted due to her upbringing in Hitler-Germany. Thus, in the case of Grass and Wolf, the public obliviousness to their Hitler Youth past is striking. Wolf's and Walser's positive roles as representatives of society had come under serious scrutiny during the nineties. But only in 2006, when this generation's biggest "hero" was kicked, or kicked himself, off the pedestal with his Waffen SS confession, did the media bring the generational subject to the forefront and put an end to the Hitler Youth generation's dominance. It was as though over the course of the summer of 2006 a whole nation became aware of the fact that this generation, "die lange Zeit das Über-Ich der Gesellschaft in Form von moralischer Instanz und Meinungsbildung verkörpert hatte,"²⁸ had grown up under Hitler's swastika.

²⁸Assmann, *Geschichte im Gedächtnis*, 39-40.

A new vantage point

Aleida Assmann has pointed out that the Grass debate might serve as a vantage point for a re-examination of the generational identity of the Hitler Youth. She said: “Ein Spalt hat sich geöffnet zwischen Lebensleistung und Biographie, der einen neuen Blick auf die Generationsidentität der 45er freigibt.”²⁹ In my dissertation, I want to adopt this vantage point in order to examine the aesthetics and politics of arguably the most prominent writers of this generation. I argue that the works of Günter Grass, Martin Walser and Christa Wolf reveal traces of a distinct generational identity, which separate them from other generations of writers and shed light on their canonical work from an angle that has thus far been mostly overlooked. After the post-reunification debates have stressed yet again the enormous significance of Grass, Walser, and Wolf—paradoxically at the very moment their authority began to wane—a re-evaluation of these writers’ political and literary work, set against the backdrop of their generational identity, is long overdue.

Only few scholars have taken on this task so far. To my knowledge, there are two scholarly pieces, a book chapter by Anne Fuchs and an article by Stuart Parkes, which do not only draw a direct connection between the works of these three writers but also take their common generational affiliation into consideration. Anne Fuchs includes a chapter on “Hitler Youth biographies” in her book *Phantoms of War*.³⁰ She examines the “management of the process of autobiographical recall”³¹ in Grass’ *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel* compared to another Hitler Youth autobiography that appeared in 2006, the book *Ich nicht. Erinnerungen an eine Kindheit und Jugend* by the conservative historian

²⁹ Ibid., 38.

³⁰ Anne Fuchs, *Phantoms of War in Contemporary German Literature, Films and Discourse: The Politics of Memory* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

³¹ Ibid., 167.

Joachim Fest.³² Fuchs also mentions Wolf and Walser in her essay on Grass and Fest (as well as the less well-known writer Ludwig Harig) and points to the differences in their treatment of the subject of guilt. However, since she primarily focuses on Grass and Fest, the other autobiographies are mentioned only in passing. Due to her concentration on autobiographical texts, Fuchs's chapter also misses a comparison of Grass, Walser, and Wolf from the perspective of the post-unification debates as well as a consideration of their earlier works.³³

Stuart Parkes, by comparison, does address the debates and points out many characteristics that writers of the Hitler Youth generation have in common. His article, "Günter Grass and his contemporaries in East and West," published in 2009 in *The Cambridge Companion to Günter Grass*,³⁴ presents an innovative piece of scholarship, because it draws connections between the GDR authors of this generation (Christa Wolf, Heiner Müller, Hermann Kant, etc.) and the West-German authors (Günter Grass, Martin Walser, Hans-Magnus Enzensberger, Siegfried Lenz, etc.), taking into consideration the different political discourses. Parkes states:

A quick glance at the works of Grass and his contemporaries reveals a number of common themes related to the times they have experienced. These include childhood and adolescence under National Socialist rule, German identity, particularly in the aftermath of National Socialism, the division of the country and the nature of the societies created in the new postwar Germany.³⁵

He then touches upon some of these issues and compares and contrasts the authors's different stances, for example Grass's, Walser's and Wolf's views on Germany's reunification—Walser being decidedly in favor and Grass and Wolf against it. However,

³² See *ibid.*, 168-199.

³³ For her discussion of the autobiographies by Walser, Harig and Wolf, see *ibid.*, 164-167.

³⁴ Stuart Parkes, "Günter Grass and his contemporaries in East and West," in *The Cambridge Companion to Günter Grass*, ed. Stuart Taberner, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 211.

with regard to this and other topic such as the authors' autobiographical dealings with their childhood during the Nazi period, strangely the particularity of the Hitler Youth generation does not become clear. Parkes highlights the common themes Grass and his contemporaries share. He references the debates mentioned above. But whereas he points out that there are similarities between the writers' literary work and their role as public intellectuals, he does not spell out exactly how they are connected with the shared generational identity. Rather, he assesses the overall intellectual achievement of Grass and other writers of the Hitler Youth generation and comes to the rather broad conclusion that the history of post-war German literature would look differently without them. How their achievements are related to their generational discourse and their experience of the Nazi period as adolescents remains blurry.

In fact, Parkes seems hesitant to present the generational approach as the "correct" analytic lens when at the beginning of the article he says that "[d]espite the popularity of this generation-based view of society, it is still necessary to consider if date of birth remains a more significant factor in the biographies of the people in question than, for example, gender, social class, or, given the postwar division of Germany, citizenship of two ideologically opposed states."³⁶ This is an important point. That gender and ideological differences distinguish the authors and need to be considered in any comparative analysis goes without saying. Nevertheless, the premise for this dissertation is that the generational perspective presents the most crucial category in a re-evaluation of Grass's, Walser's, and Wolf's contribution to post-war German culture. The fact that Wolf has often been considered only as a GDR writer, or alternatively as a feminist writer, has veiled that, as Parkes points out, she addresses themes strikingly similar to

³⁶ Ibid., 210.

Grass and Walser based on the generational background the three writers share. Questions of gender and “citizenship” in the Federal Republic or GDR must be considered. However, in the case of the trio of writers in question I argue that they should be considered as factors that have led to different figurations of a similar generational discourse.

Haunted by a Nazi Childhood—Generational Reflections in essays by Günter Grass, Martin Walser and Christa Wolf

While Parkes considers the category of “generation” important to understanding the Grass generation, he does not mention in his article that many writers themselves have thought about the relevance of this category. To show that such a discourse on the Hitler Youth generation exists—explicitly and implicitly—in the work and reception of Grass, Walser, and Wolf, that one can find a self-reflective discourse on their generational identity in some of their key texts, will be the overarching goal in the following three chapters. Just a quick glance at the authors’ essayistic work, mainly from the sixties and seventies, suffices to demonstrate that all three seem to have experienced strong feelings of being haunted by their childhood and adolescent experience of Hitler-Germany.

Günter Grass has raised the subject of “generation” in his essayistic work with striking regularity. He has used it in three different contexts: in texts about the Holocaust, in his campaign speeches for the Social Democratic Party in the sixties, and with regard to aesthetic questions. Long before Gaus and Kohl, Grass expressed the idea of the “Gnade der späten Geburt.” Grass’s version of it, however, lacks any notion of relief. Instead, it unveils a tortured notion that it was mere contingency that prevented him from being entangled in the Nazi’s crimes against humanity. In a speech in Danzig, he spoke about being a “Hitlerjunge” during the war and a soldier towards its end—an

autobiography that allowed him to convey to his own children that he was young enough not to carry any direct responsibility for Nazi crimes. He said, however, the sense of having just barely escaped great guilt because of his birth date caused him nightmares:

Relativ leicht fiel es, meine Biografie, die eines Hitlerjungen, der bei Kriegsende siebzehn Jahre alt war und mit letztem Aufgebot noch Soldat wurde, deutlich zu machen: Ich war zu jung, um schuldig zu werden. Doch schon die Frage: Wenn du aber älter gewesen wärest? ließ keine eindeutige Antwort zu. Ich konnte für mich nicht garantieren. [...] Es war mir nicht möglich, mich, wäre ich nur lächerliche fünf oder sieben Jahre älter gewesen, von der Teilnahme an dem großen Verbrechen auszuschließen, zumal mich (mit wachsender zeitlicher Distanz immer häufiger) Angstträume belasteten, in denen ich mich versagend, schuldig erlebte. Die Grenzen zwischen tatsächlicher und möglicher Tat verwischten sich. Das fragwürdige Glück, dem ‚richtigen Jahrgang‘ anzugehören, äußerte sich in Stotter­sätzen, die hinter den Fragen der Kinder mein Tagebuch füllten.³⁷

What if he had been born five or seven or ten years earlier? In which ways would he have been implicated in the genocide of the Jews if he had been only slightly older? The question of contingency becomes even more urgent now that Grass's membership in the Waffen SS is known. It is not surprising that for Grass the year of birth is intrinsically tied to the question of guilt. If he had been older and had joined the Waffen SS earlier, a direct participation in the Holocaust would not only have been possible, but even likely, as he could have easily been drafted into the so-called *Totenkopfverbände*, the subdivision of the Waffen SS responsible for administering the concentration camps. Grass formulates for his entire cohort: if his generation appeared untainted with regard to

³⁷ This essay was Grass's contribution to the 1979 catalogue for the exhibit of the Danzig Synagogue's Treasures in New York. In this essay, he speaks about German guilt, particularly in relation to the persecution of the Danzig Jews, a topic which, as he explains, he had just researched for his latest novel *Aus dem Tagebuch einer Schnecke*. Many of the thoughts expressed in the essay also appear in the novel. Günter Grass, "Wie sagen wir es den Kindern: Beitrag zum Katalog der Ausstellung des Danziger Synagogenschatzes in New York," in Günter Grass, *Essays, Reden, Briefe, Kommentare*, vol. IX of *Werkausgabe in zehn Bänden*, ed. Volker Neuhaus, (Darmstadt: Luchterhand, 1987), 755-769, 765 (emphasis added).

the Nazi crimes, they did not earn it. The Hitler Youth generation was “ohne Verdienst unbelastet, womöglich nur zufällig ohne Schuld.”³⁸

Wolf is haunted by the past in a different way. Her generational reflections mirror the author’s struggle with the taboos of the GDR’s memory discourse. In a speech given to the GDR writers’ congress in 1973, she describes her feeling that her generation has shaken off the fascist legacy all too fast that was implanted in them via their education. She writes: “wir haben die Problematik zu früh für ‘erledigt’ gehalten.”³⁹ But now in the seventies, Wolf claims, their Nazi adolescence creeps up on them:

Für meine Generation, die am Ende des Krieges verhältnismäßig jung war, fünfzehn bis sechzehn Jahre alt, aber nicht jung genug, um noch ohne Bewußtsein zu sein [...] kommen Kindheit und Jugend noch einmal mit voller Wucht zurück. Es ist, als käme die Vergangenheit in Wellen über uns.⁴⁰

In her speech, Wolf expresses her opinion that some patterns of behavior learned during the Nazi period persist in the GDR, for example an unconditional belief in authority. She argues that since the problem of her generation’s Nazi education cannot be simply cast off, denied, or delegated to West-Germany—as, she alludes, has been common practice—it must be critically addressed, if only for the sake of future generations:

Es ist nicht so einfach, eine Kindheit abzuschütteln, die einen zum Beispiel einen tiefen Autoritätsglauben eingefressen hat. Es ist nicht so einfach, eine Kindheit abzuwerfen, die nicht von Wissen, sondern von bedingungsloser Gläubigkeit geprägt war und von einer Reihe anderer Faktoren, die hier wahrscheinlich jeder kennt. Jeder wird wissen, wovon ich spreche. Aber merkwürdigerweise wissen es unsere Kinder nicht. Warum nicht? Weil wir es ihnen nicht sagen können. Wir haben es auch bis jetzt nicht geschrieben. Warum, ist klar: weil es unerhört schwer ist. Weil man da auf eine solche Fülle innerer Tabus—auch äußerer Tabus—stößt, wie ich es zum Beispiel, die ich mir des Problems all die Zeit über scharf

³⁸ Günter Grass, “Rede gegen die Gewöhnung,” in *ibid.*, 562-570, 563.

³⁹ Christa Wolf, “Diskussionsbeitrag zum VII. Schriftstellerkongreß der DDR 1973,” in Christa Wolf, *Essays, Gespräche, Reden, Briefe 1959-1974*, vol. 4 of *Werke*, ed. Sonja Hilzinger, vol. 4. (Munich: Luchterhand, 1999), 452-55, 453. (Since the vol. 4 of Wolf’s collected works is the first of two volumes comprising Wolf’s essayistic work, I will refer to it henceforth as *Essays I.*)

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

bewußt gewesen bin, es nicht für möglich gehalten hätte.⁴¹

In the clearest terms, Wolf admits to the inner resistance of confronting the remnants of her (and her generation's) Nazi education here. This passage also elucidates the particular political framework of the Hitler Youth generation's discourse in the GDR, which I will address in later chapters: In addition to the personal taboos, there were political taboos that prevented this generation from admitting to these continuities of fascism in the East-German state. The anti-fascist myth upon which the GDR was founded turned the idea that the Nazi past lived on in an entire generation of GDR citizens into a taboo.

Walser explicitly speaks about being haunted by his Nazi adolescence only in the essay "Händedruck mit Gespenstern" from 1979. Here he admits to having persistent conflicted feelings about having been influenced by his upbringing during the Nazi era, knowing that he should have left them behind long ago. This is expressed in form of an image, in which demons of the past lurk behind every door and window and come to haunt him:

Er hat die Teufel vor seinen Fenstern und Türen und Schlüssellöchern und Türritzen doch immer gesehen, hat sie immer bekämpft, abgewehrt. Aber er hat nie erwähnt, daß sie ihn belagern, bedrohen. Er hat getan, als sei er schon fein heraus! Als enthalte er nicht selber noch alle Übel, die er bekämpft. Er wollte ein Posten des Fortschritts sein, der Annäherung an Humanität. Er lebte im gespannten Zustand. Zwischen niederziehenden Atavismen und dem zeitgenössischen Bedürfnis, das schlimme Erb- und Traditionszeug loszuwerden. Jetzt, müde und kapitulierend, wäre er im Handumdrehen besetzt von jener Barbarei der Vergangenheit? Der Handschlag mit Gespenstern fände statt? Jetzt sagt er sich schon – und nennt das, um sich zu verführen, ein Geständnis –, er sei nie frei gewesen von den Vergangenheitsbelastungen; er habe nur weiterkommen *wollen*, aber er sei eben nicht weiter gekommen; das sei doch nicht seine Schuld.⁴²

⁴¹ Ibid, 453-54.

⁴² Martin Walser, "Händedruck mit Gespenstern," in Martin Walser, *Ansichten, Einsichten. Aufsätze zur Zeitgeschichte*, vol IX of *Werke in zwölf Bänden*, eds. Helmuth Kiesel and Frank Barsch (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1997), 617-630, 622.

Walser describes this fight with his inner demons in the context of trying to define his stance towards Germany. What exactly he implies with this imagery and what it means that he presents his generational identity as more important for defining his politics than the political labels such as left and right, I will examine in detail in the next chapter. For now, it suffices to show that Walser clearly relates his contradictory political emotions to his generational identity:

Ich würde gern beweisen, wenigstens behaupten, daß mein gestörtes Verhältnis zur Realität etwas damit zu tun habe, daß ich Deutscher bin und 1927 geboren worden bin. Ich glaube nicht, daß man als Deutscher meines Jahrgangs ein ungestörtes Verhältnis zur Realität haben kann.⁴³

By necessity, he claims in this passage, the German cohort of 1927 connects with reality in a highly conflicted way. It is haunted by the past.

Christa Wolf once said about the socialist writers of her generation: “Vielleicht wird unser Beitrag zur Literatur darin bestehen müssen, daß wir den Mut finden, unseren eigenen Lebensstoff schonungslos und wahrheitsgetreu zu erzählen.”⁴⁴ I believe that the “Lebensstoff”—witnessing the transition from the Nazi regime to the post-war states as young adults—has influenced all three writers, Grass and Walser as well. Wulf Kansteiner claimed that, as a result, the Hitler Youth Generation “will always remain the age cohort—situated between the generation of the Nazi perpetrators and bystanders and the postwar generations—that has made the most conflicted, self-reflexive, and idiosyncratic contribution to the task of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*.”⁴⁵ I will describe what exactly this contribution looks like in order to assess their great significance for post-war literature and culture from a generational perspective. First, I will examine first

⁴³ Ibid., 14.

⁴⁴ Wolf, “Gegenwart und Zukunft,” in Wolf, *Essays I*, 337-340, 338.

⁴⁵ Wulf Kansteiner, *In Pursuit Of German Memory: History, Television, And Politics After Auschwitz* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2006), 80.

how their generational background has shaped their political-societal role, second how they look back onto their childhood, and third how their societal responsibility was affected after Germany's reunification, both in their own perception and in the eyes of the public. In the following three chapters, I will thus examine key moments in the careers of Grass, Walser, and Wolf, stressing both their shared generational background but also the three writers' distinct political agendas.

In the remaining parts of this introductory chapter, I lay some conceptional and theoretical groundwork before moving on to the analysis of the authors' texts in the following three chapters. I will first explain my use of "generation" as a concept and of the term "Hitler Youth Generation." I will then present Sigrid Weigel's pivotal reflections on the implications of the generational discourse in post-war Germany, where, not only in the case of the Hitler Youth, questions of origin and birth date were for the longest time linked to either the association or disassociation with historical guilt. The last part of this chapter will be to critique Weigel's generational approach to the post-war literary scene. She convincingly points out that the memory discourse of non-Jewish writers of the post-war era is influenced by their own generational-biographical legacy. I, however, will demonstrate that she does not differentiate enough between the Hitler Youth generation and their older colleagues, former Wehrmacht soldiers. Weigel, like other scholars, considers the entire group of writers affiliated with *Gruppe 47* as the "first generation" of West-German writers after the war, and she assigns to all of them a type of dominant *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* that entailed the exclusion of Jewish intellectuals. I argue that the similarities in the generational discourse between West-German writers like Grass and Walser and East-German writers like Wolf have long been overlooked

precisely because of such an approach. I attempt to show the flaws in Weigel's argumentation in order to introduce my own thesis about the autonomy of the Hitler Youth generation, which, I argue, needs to be seen independently from "Gruppe 47."

2. "Generation" and "Hitler Youth Generation"—Conceptual, Terminological, and Historical Considerations

Karl Mannheim's Das Problem der Generationen

The term "generation" was introduced as a socio-historical category by the sociologist Karl Mannheim in his pivotal 1928 article "Das Problem der Generationen."⁴⁶ In Mannheim's essay, which is to this day considered a groundbreaking theoretical work on the topic of "generation", Mannheim established the term as an analytic category for sociological studies in opposition to the evolutionary theories of generation that were popular in the 1920s. While these theories understood the concept of "generation" in its diachronic or genealogical sense, for instance as it is used in the formula "from generation to generation," Mannheim primarily considered its synchronic meaning: "generation" as a concept to describe collectives that are bound together by age and common experiences. The "generation", he argues, is a socio-historical phenomenon similar to that of the "class": we cannot choose to abandon the "generation," to which we belong, as we cannot choose to abandon our "class." Born at a certain time and in a certain environment, we are embedded in what Mannheim calls "*Generationslagerung*". This "*Generationslagerung*", the fact that we belong to a certain age group, however, does not necessarily relate us to other members of this group. What establishes a

⁴⁶ Karl Mannheim, "Das Problem der Generationen," in Karl Mannheim, *Wissenssoziologie: Auswahl aus dem Werk*, (Neuwied: Luchterhand, 1964).

connection between us, or in Mannheim's words, what creates the "Generationszusammenhang", is that we participate in the same historical events and life conditions.⁴⁷ The youth in the city, for instance, and the youth in the country, while being part of the same "Generationslagerung", do not necessarily belong to the same "Generationszusammenhang", since they might live under entirely different conditions.

Mannheim further specifies that a "Generationszusammenhang" can contain different subgroups, the so-called "Generationseinheiten". A "Generationseinheit" comprises those who are not only born around the same time and have collectively experienced the same life circumstances and historical events, but who in addition *react* to these preconditions in a similar way, for example by having similar views on politics and society.⁴⁸ As Bude has pointed out, the hermeneutical "work" in dealing with a generation consists in revealing the relationship between "Generationszusammenhang" and "Generationseinheit":

Mit dieser Differenzierung hat Mannheim m.E. die zentrale Schwierigkeit für das Verständnis einer Generationengestalt aufgeworfen. Denn es dürfte in der Regel so sein, daß innerhalb des Kontextes einer Generation verschiedene Bezugsgruppen koexistieren, die unterschiedliche Lehren aus dem gezogen haben, was ihnen widerfahren ist oder was sie hervorgerufen haben. Die Arbeit des Interpreten besteht nun darin, unterhalb der Ebene sich widersprechender oder gar sich bekämpfender Auffassungen von verschiedenen Gruppierungen die Schicht des ihnen gleichwohl gemeinsamen Lebensgefühls freizulegen. Aus den diversen Selbstdeutungen einer Generation gilt es, die sic einigenden Deutungsbedürfnisse herauszulesen. Das meint Mannheim mit dem gemeinsamen Generationszusammenhang, der die verschiedenen Generationseinheiten zusammenfügt.⁴⁹

As such, it might be useful to keep Mannheim's distinction in mind when dealing with the trio of writers in the center of this study. Walser, Wolf and Grass certainly belong to

⁴⁷ Ibid, 536.

⁴⁸ See *ibid*, 541-555.

⁴⁹ Heinz Bude, *Deutsche Karrieren: Lebenskonstruktionen sozialer Aufsteiger aus der Flakhelfer-Generation* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1987).

the same “*Generationszusammenhang*”: They were born only a couple of years apart, they grew up in the socio-historical climate of the Third Reich, and they most likely experienced the breakdown of Nazi-Germany in 1945 as a formative event in their lives. But as I will show in the course of this study, their reactions to this generational experience vary significantly depending on different ideological stances in the post-war era, so that in Mannheim’s understanding they would *not* be part of the same “*Generationseinheit*”. In fact, it is precisely their different responses in East and West to the same socio-historical events that make an examination of their work with regard to the generational question so compelling.

The analytic tools that Mannheim has provided with his 1928 essay thus turn out to be surprisingly applicable to an investigation of the Hitler Youth generation. In today’s discourse on generations, however, Mannheim’s unwieldy distinction between “*Generationslagerung*”, “*Generationszusammenhang*” and “*Generationseinheit*” is no longer in use. Mostly, the term “generation” is implicitly understood as what he termed the “*Generationszusammenhang*”. Weigel summarizes this commonplace definition of generation succinctly when she writes “[D]ie Generation [ist] verstanden als jahrgangsverwandte Kohorte, deren Biographie in einer bestimmten Phase durch den gemeinsamen Bezugspunkt eines einschneidenden historischen Ereignisses geprägt wurde, das zumeist einen katastrophischen Charakter besitzt”.⁵⁰

In the case of the Hitler Youth generation, one can more precisely speak of a “political generation” as defined by Helmut Fogt, who has developed a theory of “political generations” for the 20th century. For him, a political generation comprises

⁵⁰ Sigrud Weigel, *Genea-Logik: Generation, Tradition und Evolution zwischen Kultur- und Naturwissenschaften* (Munich: W. Fink, 2006).

diejenigen Mitglieder einer Altersgruppe oder Kohorte, die—mit bestimmten Schlüsselereignissen konfrontiert—zu einer gleichgesinnten bewußten Auseinandersetzung mit den Leitideen und Werten der politischen Ordnung gelangten, in der sie aufwuchsen. Diese Auseinandersetzung pflegt in einer politisch formativen Lebensphase der politischen ‘Normalbiografie’ der Generationszugehörigen stattzufinden und diese zu einer langfristigen und stabilen Neuorientierung ihrer politischen Grundhaltungen zu bewegen. Politische Generationen weisen einen Grundbestand gemeinsamer Einstellungen, Verhaltensdispositionen und Handlungspotentiale auf, von Normen und Werten, die politisch von Relevanz und Einfluß sind.⁵¹

While Fogt discerns eleven political generations in the 20th century, Ulrich Herbert has demonstrated convincingly that the Hitler Youth generation is one of only three generations which was not only described as such but whose members also considered *themselves* as a distinct generation.⁵² Furthermore, their generational identity was not—as opposed to other generations—based on transitory phenomena such as a shared linguistic idiom or shared preferences in music or fashion. Their particular generational experiences presented a “zentrale politische Prägung, die sich auf das ganze Leben auswirkt.”⁵³ In my analysis of the works by writers of the Hitler Youth generation, I will use the term “generation” in this sense.⁵⁴

Both Mannheim and Fogt emphasize that historical events only become formative generational experiences when they are experienced in youth. Mannheim argues that, depending on whether historical events are experienced at a young age or later in life,

⁵¹ Helmut Fogt, *Politische Generationen: Empirische Bedeutung und theoretisches Modell*, (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1982).

⁵² The three generations that Herbert identifies in this context are (1) the “Kriegsjugendgeneration”, born between 1900 and 1910, (2) the “skeptische Generation” or “Generation der Hitler-Jugend, which he defines as born between 1925 and 1935, and (3) the “68er Generation”, born in the 1940s. See Ulrich Herbert, “Drei politische Generationen im 20. Jahrhundert,” *Generationalität und Lebensgeschichte im 20. Jahrhundert*, ed. Jürgen Reulecke (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2003).

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 95-114.

⁵⁴ For an astute introduction to the concept of generation and an insightful overview of different theoretical approaches, see the introduction to a recently published volume on the topic by Ulrike Jureit and Michael Wildt: “Generationen,” in *Generationen: Zur Relevanz eines wissenschaftlichen Grundbegriffs*, eds. Ulrike Jureit and Michael Wildt (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2005).

“Erfahrung” can become “*Generationenerlebnis*”. As he writes, “es ist ganz entscheidend für ein und dieselbe “Erfahrung” und deren Relevanz und Formierung, ob sie von einem Individuum erlebt wird, das sie als einen entscheidenden Jugendeindruck, oder von einem anderen, das sie als “Späterlebnis” verarbeitet.”⁵⁵ In other words, experiences in our childhood and youth are formative for our world view and shape our identity more than experiences later in life.⁵⁶

Flakhelfer, 45er, skeptische Generation?

This idea forms the common basis for any treatment of the Hitler Youth generation. In the historical and sociological research on this generation, the cohorts born in the twenties and thirties have been given many names, each describing slightly different age groups and emphasizing different aspects in their biographical experience. But whether it is called “Flakhelfer-Generation,”⁵⁷ “skeptische Generation,”⁵⁸ “betrogene Generation,”⁵⁹ “45er Generation,”⁶⁰ or “Hitlerjugend-Generation,”⁶¹ all of these studies agree that

⁵⁵ Mannheim, “Das Problem der Generationen,” 536.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ See for example Bude’s study *Deutsche Karrieren* on the post-war development of the “Flakhelfergeneration”, by which he understands the male cohorts born between 1926-1929, or Rolf Schörken, who considers those born between 1928 and 1930 part of the “Flakhelfergeneration.” See Rolf Schörken, *Luftwaffenhelfer und das Dritte Reich. Die Entstehung eines politischen Bewußtseins* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1984).

⁵⁸ Helmut Schelsky’s “*skeptische Generation*” comprises “die in dem Jahrzehnt zwischen 1945 and 1955 in die Jugendphase tretende Generation” (76). Müller broadly defines all those born “in the late 1920s and early 1930s” (7) as the skeptical generation, but includes a differentiation among those cohorts that is taken over from Rolf Schörken’s book *Jugend 1945*: those born before 1927 who could still become soldiers, the Flakhelfer born between 1927 and 1929 and the so-called “*weiße Jahrgänge*” born in and after 1930 “who were largely deemed to be entirely innocent” (7). See Schelsky, *Die skeptische Generation*, Müller, Another Country, and Rolf Schörken, *Jugend 1945: Politisches Denken und Lebensgeschichte*, (Opladen: Leske + Budrich, 1990).

⁵⁹ See Matthias von Hellfeld and Arno Klönne, *Die betrogene Generation: Jugend in Deutschland unter dem Faschismus*, (Cologne: Pahl-Rugenstein, 1985).

⁶⁰ Dirk Moses defines the “Forty-fivers” as “those born roughly between 1922 and 1933”, maintaining that although members of these cohorts might have made very different experiences during WW II, they still constitute an *intellectual* generation. See Moses, *German Intellectuals and the Nazi Past*, 56.

⁶¹ Sibylle Hübner-Funk defines the “Hitlerjugendgeneration” as broadly as born between 1918 and 1933. Sibylle Hübner-Funk, “Die ‘Hitlerjugend Generation’: Umstrittenes Objekt und streitbares Subjekt der deutschen Zeitgeschichte,” *Prokla* 20.9 (1990): 84–98.

childhood and youth experiences have shaped the biographies of members of this generation. The common understanding is that the socialization under Hitler and the adolescent experience of the end of the war present the conditions that make this generation a generation.

Recent studies in cultural and intellectual history seem to have settled on the term “45er” or “Forty-fivers”, foregrounding the significance of the year 1945.⁶² These studies argue that the defeat of Nazi Germany in 1945 forms a point of intellectual re-orientation for this generation. Assmann writes for example:

Die 45er Generation (Schelskys ‘skeptische Generation’, auch Flakhelfer-Generation genannt), umfasst die Jahrgänge von ca. 1926-1929, die in der Weimarer Republik geboren und im Nationalsozialismus als Kinder und Jugendliche in der Hitler-Jugend, in Napola-Schulen und als Flakhelfer sozialisiert worden sind. Sie wurden, wie das Beispiel Grass zeigt, bis zuletzt zurückgestellt und kamen erst in den letzten Kriegsjahren und -monaten zum Einsatz. Nach Rolf Schörken, selbst ehemaliger Flakhelfer bestimmt die Niederlage des Krieges ihre Generationenerfahrung. Das Kriegsende bot dieser Generation allerdings auch die Chance eines radikalen Neubeginns; sofern sie physisch und psychisch überlebt hatten, war ihnen vergönnt, ihr Leben 1945 noch einmal zu beginnen und sich eine neue Identität aufzubauen.⁶³

There are some advantages to the term “Forty-Fivers”, most importantly that it is the most neutral of all denominations, but also that it facilitates the comparison with the so-called “Sixty-Eighters”. From my perspective, however, the great emphasis on 1945 in the characterization of this generation might be slightly misleading. While the “Sixty-Eighters” actively participated in the events of 1968 and made this year their generational “moment,” members of the Hitler Youth generation experienced the historical caesura of 1945 mainly as passive recipients. This year may have certainly presented a turning point

⁶² See Assmann, *Geschichte im Gedächtnis*, Moses, *German Intellectuals and the Nazi Past*, as well as Christina von Hodenberg, “Politische Generationen und massenmediale Öffentlichkeit. Die ‘45er’ in der Bundesrepublik,” in *Generationen: Zur Relevanz eines wissenschaftlichen Grundbegriffs*, eds. Ulrike Jureit and Michael Wildt, (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2005).

⁶³ Assmann, *Geschichte im Gedächtnis*, 61.

in their biographies, but it was not a generational event, or, in other words, a moment in which generational identity was created or affirmed by means of a collective appearance *as a generation* in the public discourse. It is in fact questionable whether intellectuals of the Hitler Youth generation ever had a generational event like the Sixty-Eighters. From the moment that intellectuals of the Hitler Youth generation began to think about their upbringing in the Nazi-era in the 1960s—many years after the end of the war in 1945—their generational discourse was characterized by a struggle with this past. Unlike the Sixty-Eighters, they did not enter the stage with a self-confident and loudly pronounced “we”. Their self-conscious generational identity must rather be reconstructed by a careful reading of their texts. For my examination of Walser, Grass, and Wolf, the term “Hitler Youth generation” is thus a more appropriate designation as it foregrounds the scarring biographical experience of having grown up as Hitler’s Youth.

“Hitler Youth” is understood in a broader sense here, referring to both Nazi youth institutions, the *Hitlerjugend* for boys and the *Bund Deutscher Mädel* for girls. The Hitler Youth generation, by my definition, includes all those who were in either one of these organizations at the end of the war, not just the male cohorts. This comprises the age group born between 1927 and 1931, those who were between fourteen and eighteen in 1945. On the one hand, this age group was too young to fully participate in the war, but its members, on the other, were no longer children in 1945 and experienced the end of the war as teenagers. What distinguishes the Hitler Youth generation from other generations is that its members were exposed to National-Socialist ideologies throughout their childhood and adolescence. The Nazi machinery took hold of them already at the age of ten, when they were required to become members either of the *Deutsches Jungvolk* (for

males between ten and fourteen) or the *Jungmädelbund* (for females of the same age). At the age of fourteen, they transitioned to the *Hitlerjugend* (for males between fourteen and eighteen) and the *Bund Deutscher Mädel* (for females of the same age).⁶⁴

The sociologist Arno Klönne underlines the great influence of these youth organizations in his book *Jugend im Dritten Reich*, calling the Hitler Youth “[f]ür etliche Millionen Jungen und Mädchen zwischen 1933 und 1945 [. . .] neben Familie und Schule die entscheidende Sozialisations-Instanz.”⁶⁵ As Klönne emphasizes, the educational purpose of these organizations was not simply to entertain the German youth but to systematically indoctrinate them into the National-Socialist belief system:

[F]ür den nationalsozialistischen Staat galt diese Jugendorganisation als ‚Garant der Zukunft‘, das heißt der Herrschaftserhaltung. Der Dienst in der Hitler-Jugend sollte die nachwachsende Generation möglichst restlos an die Leitbilder des NS-Systems binden und jene Verhaltensweisen eintrainieren, deren es für den faschistischen Alltag bedurfte.⁶⁶

Besides this early indoctrination, the Hitler Youth generation differs from the previous generation mostly with regard to their experiences in the war. In comparison to older age groups, members of the Hitler Youth generation either did not at all participate in the war or did so only for a short time. While women born in and before 1926 were often employed to support the war industry in various secretarial positions, younger women born after 1926 were generally not recruited for the *Kriegshilfsdienst* anymore. For men, the situation was more complex. Unlike the age groups born in and before 1926, members of the Hitler Youth generation were generally not drafted into the *Wehrmacht*. However, the men born in 1927 and 1928—thus including Grass and Walser—were

⁶⁴ See Klönne, *Die betrogene Generation*, 36.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.* “Hitler-Jugend” is understood as an umbrella term here, including all Nazi youth organizations mentioned above.

enlisted as so-called *Flakhelfer* to staff the anti-aircraft defense in the last years of the war. Those born in 1929 were not drafted into the anti-aircraft units but called up for other “minor” duties at the *Heimatfront*. Members of the Hitler Youth generation born between 1927 and 1929 thus did come in close contact with the military and the war as *Flakhelfer*, serving in the *Kriegshilfsdienst*, or in the case of the cohort of 1927, occasionally even in the *Wehrmacht* or, as in the case of Günter Grass, the SS. On the whole, they experienced the greater part of the war “at home” and did not share the same experiences as those who fought at the Eastern or Western fronts in World War II from 1939 on.⁶⁷

Generational misconceptions in post-war German literature

In the realm of literature, these different experiences of the Nazi years, I argue, constitute two separate generations of post-war German writers with distinct memory discourses and political agendas. Yet, in the scholarship on memory and post-war German literature the particular discourse of writers of the Hitler Youth generation remains widely unexplored. The little scholarly literature one can find on the topic of memory, literature and generations focuses only on the West-German authors and almost always links Grass and Walser with the memory politics of *Gruppe 47*. Without differentiation authors belonging to cohorts as far apart as 1914 and 1927 are often described as part of the “first generation of post-war writers.” This scholarship, of which I will present a number of examples in this chapter, overlooks Grass, Walser’s and Wolf’s *self-understanding* as writers of this generation. The idea to belong to the Hitler Youth generation, who experienced the war and the rupture of 1945 in a particular way, namely as adolescents, shaped these writers’ work, and at least in the case of Grass and Wolf we can find

⁶⁷ For a distinction between the different cohorts and their duties in the military, see Schörken, *Jugend 1945*, 14.

numerous texts, in which this is made explicit. As a literary scholar, I am thus interested in the question of the generation not exclusively as a descriptive category in the sense Mannheim and other sociologists employ it. Rather, I ask in which ways the three authors themselves use the concept of generation, or better: how they struggle with their generational identity. It is their self-reflexivity and the public display of their struggle to be part of the Hitler Youth generation has never been sufficiently examined, although these are precisely the features, visible both in the three authors' literary as well as in their political works, that distinguish them from other post-war writers. The generational discourse of writers of the Hitler Youth generation remains hidden if they are understood as "first generation of post-war writers" along with older writers of *Gruppe 47*, for whom generational identity was either of little significance or to be avoided because it would have revealed uncanny connections to the Nazi period.

Sigrid Weigel's scholarship on the symbolic nature of generations in the specific historical context of post-war Germany presents an important framework for my dissertation. The following part will deal both with some of her conceptual claims but will also identify Weigel's critique of the Hitler Youth generation as an example of the merging of two generations that I try to "undo." The insufficient acknowledgment of writers of the Hitler Youth generation serves as the starting point for my generational analysis of key works by Grass, Walser, and Wolf.

3. Dominance and Marginalization in the “First Generation” of Post-War German Authors—A Correction

Generations and the post-1945 German memory discourse

In her 2006 book *Genea-Logik*, the cultural historian and literary scholar Sigrid Weigel points out that the concept of generation contains two dimensions: the first being synchronic, when “generation” is used to describe the affiliation to a certain age group and defines a common collective identity for this group, and the second diachronic or genealogical, when it denotes the succession of, or the relationship between, generations. Thus combining Mannheimian and pre-Mannheimian approaches to the concept of “generation,” Weigel points out: “Insofern verbirgt sich im Begriff der Generation immer schon ein komplexes Zusammenspiel zwischen Herkunft und Gedächtnis.”⁶⁸ By considering ourselves as part of a specific generation, we describe our position in a certain historical context and delineate our origin.

Therefore, the generational discourse in Germany after 1945 has always inherently been a discourse about memory politics, Weigel argues. After World War II and the Holocaust, generational affiliations defined the relationship to the Nazi past. During the second half of the twentieth century, the further a generation could distance itself from the guilt of the past, the more political and moral power it could attain:

[The discourse on generations] ist einer jener Schauplätze, auf denen die Verhandlungen über die politische Macht und die moralische Definitionsmacht ausgetragen werden. Das Selbstverständnis, Vertreter oder Angehöriger einer bestimmten Generation zu sein, ersetzt und überlagert nämlich durchweg das Paradigma von Opfern und (Mit-)Tätern. Insofern stellt sich der Generationendiskurs nicht selten als ein verdeckter nationaler Diskurs dar, in dem sich Schuldabwehr und Reinheitsbegehren artikulieren. [...] Die Generation

⁶⁸ Weigel, *Genea-Logik*, 95.

funktioniert als Medium der Gedächtnispolitik.⁶⁹

In a pivotal article, “Generation’ as a Symbolic Form,” published in English in 2002, Weigel had already addressed the close ties between generational discourse and memory politics.⁷⁰ In this essay, she analyzes the concept of “generation” “as a cultural pattern for constructing history” and sheds light on the implicit distortions of the generational discourse in post-1945 Germany. Both on the side of the Jewish survivors and on that of the German perpetrators, the events of World War II defined a break in the historical continuum, from which a new genealogy emerged. We are counting the first, the second, and the third generation, with the first generation representing the perpetrators and victims, the second their children, and the third their grandchildren. On the side of the perpetrators, Weigel argues, “the fact that the part of a first generation’s discourse is not occupied is easily explained: in this case the position of the historical actors coalesced with that of the perpetrators of incomparable crimes.”⁷¹

The counting of generations in Germany thus started with the second generation, the generation of 1968. She argues that the silence of the first generation and their refusal of guilt triggered the generational conflict of 1968, in which the second generation revolted against their parents. In her view, the most striking aspect in the Sixty-Eighters’ generational discourse is their self-understanding in opposition to the collective of perpetrators: the Sixty-Eighters, she argues, defined themselves in opposition to their guilty fathers. Their desire not to belong to the “perpetrator” side of history can be seen

⁶⁹ Ibid., 97.

⁷⁰ Sigrid Weigel, “‘Generation’ as a Symbolic Form: On the Genealogical Discourse of Memory since 1945,” *Germanic Review* 77.4 (2002): 264-77. For the German publication see Sigrid Weigel, “Die ‘Generation’ als symbolische Form. Zum genealogischen Diskurs im Gedächtnis nach 1945,” *figurationen: gender, literatur, kultur* 0 (2000): 158-173.

⁷¹ Ibid., 268.

particularly clearly in the literary genre of so-called “*Väterliteratur*”, autobiographical texts written by members of the generation of 1968 that are crammed with accusations against perpetrator-fathers (*Täter-Väter*).⁷² This discourse, she writes, “had the precarious effect that the children described themselves as victims, and thus assumed the role of the historical victims, who to a large extent had been forgotten in the discourse.”⁷³ For Weigel this repression of the Jewish perspective presents the main distortion of the second generation’s discourse.

Sigrid Weigel on the Hitler Youth Generation as “concealed first generation”

Weigel convincingly demonstrates that in the conflict between the Sixty-Eighters and their fathers—staged as a debate between the accusers and the accused, between the innocent and the guilty, between the victims and the perpetrators—the Hitler Youth generation remained widely absent. While they distanced themselves from the generation of perpetrators and expressed their general support with the generation of 1968, their own biographical ties with the Nazi-past made it impossible for them to side with the Sixty-Eighters in their accusations against the first generation. Weigel argues that it is due to their absence in the generational battle of 1968 that the Hitler Youth generation is typically not represented in the genealogy of post-war generations, i.e. it is omitted in the counting of the first, the second generation (the Sixty-Eighters) and the third generation (their children). Nevertheless, she writes, the Hitler Youth generation has attained a significantly powerful position in the post-war era: “it established itself after the war as

⁷² For a description and a critique of the genre “*Väterliteratur*”, see chapter three (“Autobiographical Novels: Generational discord”) in Ernestine Schlant, *The language of silence: West German Literature and the Holocaust* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

⁷³ Weigel, “Generation as a Symbolic Form,” 268.

the first authority in questions of politics, truth and morality” and can thus be called “the concealed first generation.”⁷⁴

She argues that the “concealed first generation” assumed this authoritative position by turning their biographical ties to Nazi Germany to their advantage. Unlike the Sixty-Eighters, born after the war, members of the “concealed first generation” could not easily distance themselves from the Nazi period. They had experienced it first-hand as children and adolescents. But by creating a self-image presenting them as innocent witnesses of the years 1933-1945, she claims, intellectuals of this generation could function in their role as moral authorities in post-war German society despite being, at least biographically, implicated in this Nazi regime. Weigel argues that this image gave them control over the memory discourse, and that in having “authentic” access to the Nazi era without being considered the perpetrators, the “concealed first generation” put forth their “hegemonic claim for the image of history,”⁷⁵ which, as she attempts to show, has led to the exclusion of other forms of memory, specifically Jewish ones.

Distortions—A critical assessment of Weigel’s argument

To support her thesis that the discourse of the “concealed first generation” inherently contains a hegemonic claim to the memory of Nazism, Weigel mainly presents two examples, one from the field of historiography and the other from the field of literary criticism. It is worth considering briefly the texts from which she draws her argument about the Hitler Youth generations’s memorial hegemony—an exchange of letters in the case of the first example, and an essay on post-war poetry in the case of the second

⁷⁴ Ibid., 272.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 274.

example. In my view, both examples are less clear-cut than they than they are made to seem in Weigel's presentation.

The first example is a text taken from a historiographical debate between historians Martin Broszat and Saul Friedländer in 1988 in the wake of the *Historikerstreit*. Broszat, born in 1926, belongs to the Hitler Youth generation, while Friedländer, born in Prague in 1932 to a family of German-speaking Jews, survived the Holocaust by posing as a gentile, while his parents were gassed in Auschwitz. The catalyst for this exchange was Broszat's 1986 article "Plädoyer für eine Historisierung des National-Sozialismus" published in *Merkur*, in which, as the title suggests, he had insisted on the need to consider the Nazi era from a sober historical distance. Friedländer published a critical response to Broszat in 1987, in which he spoke about the dangers of Broszat's plea for historicization. Broszat, in turn, felt the need to clarify his position, and the two historians entered a dialogue in the form of an open exchange of letters, which was published in the *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* in 1988.⁷⁶

Weigel takes issue with a passage from the opening letter of this exchange, in which Broszat further elucidates his concept of historicization in order to defend it against Friedländer's reproaches. Friedländer considered it dangerous to approach National-Socialism with a merely neutral and scientific lens without the possibility of moral judgments; the crimes seemed too atrocious to apply a perspective from which

⁷⁶ For the two articles, see Martin Broszat, "Plädoyer für eine Historisierung des Nationalsozialismus," *Merkur* 39.5 (May 1986) and Saul Friedländer, "Überlegungen zur Historisierung des Nationalsozialismus," in *Ist der Nationalsozialismus Geschichte? Zu Historisierung und Historikerstreit*, eds. Dan Diner and Wolfgang Benz (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1987). For the exchange of letters, see Martin Broszat and Saul Friedländer, "Um die 'Historisierung des Nationalsozialismus': Ein Briefwechsel," *Vierteljahresschrift für Zeitgeschichte* 36 (1988): 339-372. For the English translation of this controversy that includes an excellent introduction, see Martin Broszat and Saul Friedländer, "A Controversy about the Historicization of National Socialism," *New German Critique* 44: Special Issue on the Historikerstreit (1988): 85-126.

everything could be understood by means of reasoning because the next logical step would then be to excuse them. Broszat tried to clarify that this was not what he had intended to say.⁷⁷ Naturally, he stated, a scholarly approach to the Nazi era did not need to exclude the possibility of critique, and of course, the history of National Socialism was neither a solely German affair, nor was the scholarly approach the only approach to history. Scholars would have to realize that they were dealing with the memory of a time period “besetzt von den schmerzlichen Empfindungen vieler vor allem auch jüdischer Menschen, die auf einer mythischen Form dieses Erinnerns beharren.”⁷⁸ Broszat suggests that historiography ought to make room for this type of memory. Historians ought to be sensitive to the pain of the Nazi’s victims who saw “history” from a different, personal angle:

Deutsche Historiker und Geschichtsstudenten, das möchte ich meinem *Plädoyer* expressis verbis hinzufügen, müssen verstehen, daß es von Opfern der NS-Verfolgung und ihren Hinterbliebenen sogar als eine Einbuße ihres Anrechts auf ihre Form der Erinnerung empfunden werden kann, wenn eine nur noch wissenschaftlich operierende Zeitgeschichtsforschung mit akademischer Arroganz das Frage- und Begriffsmonopol in bezug auf die NS-Zeit beansprucht. Der Respekt vor den Opfern der Naziverbrechen gebietet, dieser mythischen Erinnerung Raum zu lassen.⁷⁹

Weigel points to the juxtaposition of “rational” German historical scholarship and Jewish “mythical” memory that Broszat allegedly evokes here, playing on century-old (as she suggests anti-Semitic) stereotypes. She is bothered especially by the next sentence, in which Broszat speaks explicitly of the “Nebeneinander von wissenschaftlicher Einsicht und mythischer Erinnerung” expressing his hopes that this coalition might generate a tension fruitful and productive for the investigation of the Nazi era.

⁷⁷ Martin Broszat and Saul Friedländer, “Um die ‘Historisierung des Nationalsozialismus’: Ein Briefwechsel,” *Vierteljahresschrift für Zeitgeschichte* 36 (1988) 340.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 342-343.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

I agree with Weigel that in this formulation, which also becomes a point of discussion in the subsequent exchange with Friedländer, it sounds as though Broszat distinguishes the Jewish from the German approach when speaking about the mythical versus the scientific-scholarly perspective of this time. In one of the following letters, however, Broszat assures Friedländer that this was not the distinction he had meant to set up. He said he wanted to express “daß es neben der wissenschaftlich-akademischen Rekonstruktion der NS-Zeit (durch deutsche und nicht-deutsche Historiker) einen legitimen Anspruch auch anderer, etwa mythischer Formen der Geschichtserinnerung durch die Opfer gibt, und ‘kein Vorrecht der einen oder anderen Seite’.”⁸⁰

Thus, while Broszat’s choice of words is certainly vague and perhaps even a little careless, Weigel incorrectly represents his overall argument when she claims that Broszat “excluded this form of memory (Weigel means the Jewish memory) from the historical model.”⁸¹ For Broszat’s point is precisely to criticize the “nur noch wissenschaftlich operierende Zeitgeschichtsforschung [, die] mit akademischer Arroganz das Frage- und Begriffsmonopol in bezug auf die NS-Zeit beansprucht.”⁸² He argued for the integration of the victims’ memory, not for its exclusion.

In her essay, Weigel further suggests that Broszat’s alleged disqualification of memories of Nazi victims corresponds to a particularly high estimation of the memory of German war participants, especially of his own generation, the Hitler Youth generation. To back up this claim she quotes a passage in which Broszat reflects on the particularities of the Hitler Youth generation. He does this in response to Friedländer, who had warned about the danger of overestimating the possibilities of an objective scholarly-scientific

⁸⁰ Ibid., 362.

⁸¹ Weigel, “Generation as a Symbolic Form,” 272.

⁸² Broszat and Friedländer, “Um die Historisierung,” 342 (emphasis added).

treatment of the Nazi period. Both Jewish and German historians, Friedländer had argued, could not ignore their personal ties to this period, which could well be seen in the fact that some of the most reactionary German historians involved in the *Historikerstreit*—the highly emotional debate that had just caused great turmoil in the field of historiography—were members of the Hitler Youth generation. The following quote from Broszat’s response includes the passage that is cited in Weigel:

Ganz persönlich gesprochen: Hätte ich nicht dieser HJ-Generation angehört und ihre spezifischen Erfahrungen gemacht, wäre es für mich nach 1945 wahrscheinlich nicht ein solches Bedürfnis gewesen, mich so kritisch und, wie wir damals empfanden, zugleich mit “heiliger Nüchternheit” mit der NS-Vergangenheit auseinanderzusetzen. Als Angehöriger dieser Generation hatte man das Glück, in politisches Handeln und in Verantwortung noch nicht oder nur marginal hineingezogen zu werden, aber man war alt genug, um emotional und geistig hochgradig betroffen zu werden von der moral- und gefühlsvirrenden Suggestivität, zu der das NS-Regime, zumal im Bereich der Jugenderziehung [...] Zwar betroffen, aber kaum belastet, war die HJ-Generation freier als ältere Jahrgänge und motivierter als jüngere, sich dem Lernprozeß dieser Jahre voll hinzugeben. Aus der persönlichen Kenntnis vieler Altersgenossen weiß ich, und aus den Lebensläufen vieler anderen bestätigt sich meines Erachtens, daß sich die Mehrheit dieser HJ-Generation nach 1945 die einst von den Nazis denunzierten Werte mit Verve zu eigen machte. Aus dieser Generation sind besonders viele engagierte Demokraten hervorgegangen, und sie ist in der politisch-kulturellen Prominenz der Bundesrepublik überproportional vertreten.⁸³

Weigel claims that Broszat presents the Hitler Youth generation “as the only one that can provide the possibility of an objective record of history.”⁸⁴ It could be argued, however, that this passage is descriptive rather than normative: it does not favor the memory of members of the Hitler Youth generation to the memory of Jewish victims, as Weigel claims. The strongest reproach one could make against Broszat on the basis of this passage is that he overemphasizes his generation’s as well as his own anti-Nazi

⁸³ Ibid., 361.

⁸⁴ Weigel, “Generation as a Symbolic Form,” 272.

credentials, which, however, is a point with which several scholars, myself included, would agree.

I devote such detail in my analysis of Weigel's treatment of Broszat because Weigel sees a pattern in his argumentation that she considers typical for the discourse of the Hitler Youth generation: "[T]he privileged position of the Hitler youth as witness", she writes, "functions through the paradoxical construct of knowledge without guilt."⁸⁵ This idea that the Hitler Youth generation has apologetically created the status of the innocent witness of the Nazi era to seek dominance over the memory discourse has influenced the scholarship on writers of this generation. Therefore, I consider it important to demonstrate the distortions in Weigel's essay. As the passage quoted above shows, Broszat does regard his generation as privileged when he speaks of a learning process to which his generation committed more freely than the older and the younger generations: "[D]ie HJ-Generation [war] freier als ältere Jahrgänge und motivierter als jüngere, sich dem Lernprozeß dieser Jahre voll hinzugeben."⁸⁶ He does not, however, privilege his generation's view of the past to that of the Jewish victims, as Weigel suggests—at least, this is not evident from the text.

The second example Weigel presents in order to reveal the Hitler Youth's claim to discursive power is taken from the realm of literature. Analyzing Peter Rühmkorf's 1962 essay "Das lyrische Bild der Nachkriegsdeutschen,"⁸⁷ she argues that Rühmkorf, born in 1929 and himself a member of the Hitler Youth generation, disqualifies Paul Celan's poetry while propagating the style of writers of his own generation, specifically

⁸⁵ Ibid., 272.

⁸⁶ Broszat and Friedländer, "Um die Historisierung," 361 (see quote above).

⁸⁷ Peter Rühmkorf, "Das lyrische Bild der Nachkriegsdeutschen," in *Bestandsaufnahme: eine deutsche Bilanz 1962*, ed. Hans Werner Richter (Munich: K. Desch, 1962).

that of Günter Grass (born in 1927) and Hans-Magnus Enzensberger (born in 1929) as the ideal for modern poetry. The problem with Weigel's argument is that again she proceeds in a very selective way. By focusing only on a few phrases of Rühmkorf's essay, she leaves her readers with the impression that he directly juxtaposes Celan's poetry with that of Grass and Enzensberger, clearly favoring the latter. The essay, however, provides an overview of Germany's poetic movements since 1945—an overview suggesting that only at the beginning of the sixties poets had found a truly innovative style.

In his guided tour through contemporary German poetry, Rühmkorf presents Celan as only one in a series of writers whose poetry do not meet his number one criterium: stylistic innovation. Poetry written between 1945 and 1947 merely produced “die perfekte Mittelmäßigkeit.” Instead of marking “Wandlung oder Neubeginn,” poets sought “Halt am Herkömmlichen”.⁸⁸ Similarly, the so-called “Naturlyrik” of the years 1948-1950 led poets “in die ästhetische Provinz [...], wo sie am Ende alle die gleichen Blumen für sich in Anspruch nahmen.”⁸⁹ For example, Gottfried Benn's *Statische Gedichte* (1948), while fresh and original, only gave rise to a wave of poor imitations. Rühmkorf sums up: “Eine schöpferische Revision des deutschen Expressionismus und eine Besinnung auf die eigenen modernen Traditionen, die an allem Anfang hätten stehen sollen, ließen weiter auf sich warten.”⁹⁰

Against the backdrop of these early post-war movements, Rühmkorf initially portrays Celan in a positive light, namely as one of three poets who entered the literary scene in 1952 with new forms of writings. These “neue Jahrgänge”—apart from Celan, Rühmkorf mentions Walter Höllerer, Ingeborg Bachmann and Paul Riegel—shared not

⁸⁸ Ibid., 447-449.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 452.

⁹⁰ Ibid. 458-459.

only “eine neue dichterische Intensität,” but also “ein seltsam verqueres, gespanntes und dennoch leidenschaftliches Verhältnis zu Welt und Wirklichkeit.”⁹¹ In the poetry of these young writers, Rühmkorf states, one could finally see the long-awaited “Wandel im Ausdruckswillen“ and a critical stance towards reality.⁹²

What bothers Rühmkorf primarily about Celan’s poetry is, “daß Celan [...] mit vorgegebenen Symbolen arbeitet, Symbolen, die seit Mallarmé eingeführt, seit Benn und Trakl kommun sind und die durch allzu häufigen Gebrauch schon lange an Ausdruckskraft verloren haben. [...] so gesellt sich denn dem kühlen Entzücken an manchem einsfarbenen Bilde und der kunstvollen Tonlosigkeit der Sprachmelodie immer wieder der Ärger über den altbekannten Chiffrenreigen.”⁹³ Celan, then, does not provide the radically new impulses Rühmkorf is looking for. In fact, he does not find them in post-war poetry as a whole up until the year 1955/57 when Grass and Enzensberger published their first volumes of poetry. The vocabulary of these two poets, Rühmkorf argues, was finally no longer taken “aus der poetischen Requisitenkammer“ but from every-day language, “dem täglichen, dem Umgangs- und Gebrauchsfundus.”⁹⁴ Rühmkorf connects this stylistic change with a different life attitude resulting from the generational experience of these authors. The following quotation is also cited in Weigel:

Sie [the new metaphorical language] ist mit allen möglichen anderen Artikulationsveränderungen aufs innigste verzahnt und ist wie diese auf ein gründlich verändertes Lebensgefühl zurückzuführen. Ich spreche vom Lebensgefühl jener Jahrgänge, für die Faschismus, Krieg und Diktatur gerade noch bewußtseinsprägend geworden waren, bei denen der Neubeginn dann just

⁹¹ Ibid., 461.

⁹² Rühmkorf writes: “Vorbei sind die Jahre des Sichkleinmachens und des Augenverschließens, vorbei die Jahre einer trostlosen Trostliteratur und der geblühten Superlative—statt dessen konnte man jetzt am ehesten von einem seltsamen, einer aus der Art geschlagenen Heroismus sprechen, einem Heroismus, der auch sein eigenen Pathos entwickelte: die leidenschaftliche Lästerversuade Riegels, die hochgespannt-kaltblütige Didaktik der besten Verse Bachmanns, das pasteurisierte Pathos Celans.” Ibid., 464.

⁹³ Ibid., 465.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 472.

mit einer altersbedingten Umbruchsituation zusammengefallen war, und die den Aufstieg aus dem Nichts zu nichts als Gütervermehrung bei schwindendem Idealismus und erwachender Kritizität erlebt hatten. Eine Generation, im Überschlag, die ohne Fehl, aber nicht ohne Erfahrung war, die ohne Signale war, aber dennoch nicht resignieren wollte, die die Welt in ihren naturalen und sozialen Gegebenheiten akzeptierte: als Reibungswiderstand.⁹⁵

Thus, while there were several new poetic movements since 1945, Rühmkorf does not acknowledge either the poetry of the early post-war years (1945-47), or the “Naturlyrik” of the subsequent two years (1948-1950), or the poetry of Celan and other young authors between 1952 and 1954 as truly novel forms of poetic writing. Only with the poetry of Grass and Enzensberger does he see a significant change in style and expression—a change, which, as he argues, is based on the particular experiences of this generation.

From today’s perspective this assessment of, and emphasis on Grass and Enzensberger’s poetry seems peculiar. Bachmann and Celan are usually considered by far the more innovative and influential writers of post-war poetry. I also agree with Weigel’s critique that Rühmkorf, like other critics of Celan in the fifties and sixties, widely ignore “the fact that Celan’s poetry is based on the experiences of a Jew who escaped from the NS death program.”⁹⁶ She is right to point out that Rühmkorf does not acknowledge either the biographical or the historical-philosophical aspects of Celan’s poetry, i.e. its direct relation to the Shoah. Indeed, Rühmkorf does not seem to notice the poetological basis of Celan’s poetry: “[t]he significance of language as a memorial for murdered, graveless parents and, more generally, the significance of poetry for the genealogy of memories.”⁹⁷ But in 1962 Celan was not the famous iconic figure that he is today, and Rühmkorf’s ignorant treatment of his Jewish background reflects a widespread tendency

⁹⁵ Ibid., 473-474. See also Weigel, “Generation as a Symbolic Form,” 274.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 273.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

not to speak openly about the Jewish victims' fate. In other words, Weigel does not historicize Rühmkorf's essay but takes the current state of the memory discourse for granted. From the perspective of 1962, one could even read Rühmkorf's failure to mention Celan's Jewish identity as an attempt to avoid labeling him as "a Jew." Celan naturally appears as a writer of German poetry in his catalogue of poets.

Therefore, as questionable as it is from an aesthetic standpoint that Rühmkorf praises Enzensberger and Grass based on their biographical background while ignoring Celan's and dismissing his poetry as not innovative enough, I cannot see the link between the two evaluations, as Weigel does. One cannot derive from this essay the conclusion that "[w]ithin the notion of "generation" in postwar literature there is the hidden, the implicit national (German), gender-specific (masculine) matrix of this norm."⁹⁸ Even though Rühmkorf stresses the merit of writers of his own generation for advancing poetry he critiques about thirty poets and does *not* specifically exclude the Jewish or the female perspective.

Broszat's designation of the memory of Holocaust survivors as "mythic" remains equivocal, and Rühmkorf's interpretation of Celan can be considered mistaken. But it should be clear that the two cases on which Weigel bases her critique of the "concealed first generation" are not nearly as clear-cut as they appear to be in her presentation. Broszat does not exclude Jewish memory from the historical discourse but promotes a form of historical research that allows for the incorporation of other "non-academic" memories of the Holocaust. Rühmkorf, likewise, does not criticize Celan based on his Jewishness but on aesthetic criteria. That both of them underline that the particular role of their generation in their respective fields does not yet establish a hierarchical order

⁹⁸ Ibid., 274.

necessarily tied to mechanisms of exclusion. In fact, their claims about the Hitler Youth generation are worth considering. I would agree with Broszat's claim that this generation's relationship to the Nazi past was more critical and more intense than that of older generations of Germans. And Rühmkorf's assumption that generational experiences of writers of the Hitler Youth generation have left an impact on the post-1945 history of literature will serve as the starting point of my second chapter, in which I examine a number of early prose texts by Grass, Walser, and Wolf.

The discourse of the "young generation" in the early post-war years

Weigel focuses exclusively on non-literary texts in her essay, which is all the more surprising given her focus on post-war German literature. That her criticism of the "concealed first generation" is directed particularly against the literary realm becomes clear again in the next and last step of her argument, when she looks at the generational discourses prevalent in the beginnings of *Gruppe 47*.

After suggesting that the "concealed first generation" was able to dominate the memory discourse by portraying itself as privileged due to its innocent experience of the Nazi years, Weigel goes on to argue that this paradigm emerged in the early post-war years, in the discourse of the so-called "*junge Generation*".⁹⁹ Focusing on the journal *Der Ruf: Unabhängige Blätter für die junge Generation*, Weigel convincingly illustrates that there is a distinct political agenda behind this particular generational discourse. She shows that the editors of *Der Ruf* take great pains to portray the "young generation" as both free from guilt and rich in experience. As she further demonstrates, by systematically cutting this generation's ties to Nazi-Germany, the "young generation"

⁹⁹ Weigel, "Generation as a Symbolic Form," 274-275. See also Weigel, *Genea-Logik*, 97-101.

and their representatives attempt to emphasize their qualification to take over elite positions in culture and politics of the post-war German state.

In her critique, Weigel focuses mainly on two programmatic essays, both published in the first issue of *Der Ruf* in 1946 and both written by one of *Der Ruf*'s editors, Alfred Andersch. She stresses three aspects in the presentation of the “young generation.” First, she shows that the program of the “young generation” is connected with a radical denial of a genealogical origin.¹⁰⁰ Cutting all of its relations to the Nazi past, Andersch imagines the “young generation” as originating from a type of immaculate birth in the midst of destruction. Weigel quotes from Andersch’s article “*Das junge Europa formt sein Gesicht*”: “Der auf die äußerste Spitze getriebenen Vernichtung entsprang, wie einst dem Haupt des Jupiter die Athene, ein neuer, jugendfrischer, jungfräulich-athenischer Geist.”¹⁰¹ This image of the “young Germany” born out of catastrophe, Weigel argues, has neither origin nor history and, as a result, carries no responsibility for the past.

The second passage she highlights from *Das junge Europa* reveals Andersch’s humanistic vision of a Europe unified by its youthful generations. He argues that what connects young Germans with other young Europeans is their existential experience of the war:

Uns scheint, trotz aller Verbrechen einer Minderheit, der Brückenschlag zwischen den alliierten Soldaten, den Männern des europäischen Widerstands und den deutschen Frontsoldaten, zwischen den politischen KZ-Häftlingen und den

¹⁰⁰ She writes: “In der Zeit unmittelbar nach dem Ende des Zweiten Weltkriegs wurde der kulturpolitische Diskurs durch das Programm einer ‘jungen Generation’ geprägt, das mit einer radikalen Verweigerung von Herkunft verbunden war.” In *ibid.*, 97-98.

¹⁰¹ Alfred Andersch, “Das junge Europa formt sein Gesicht,” *Gesammelte Werke in zehn Bänden: Kommentierte Ausgabe*, ed. Dieter Lamping, vol. 8: Essayistische Schriften I (Zurich: Diogenes, 2004). See also Weigel, “Generation as a Symbolic Form,” 274, and *Genea-Logik*, 98.

ehemaligen ‚Hitlerjungen‘ (sie sind es schon längst nicht mehr!) durchaus möglich.¹⁰²

Weigel stresses that Andersch not only assigns the responsibility for the Nazi crimes to “a minority.” In his imagination of a “Brückenschlag,” she argues, “only the Jewish survivors are excluded.”¹⁰³ Indeed, whether Andersch represses Jewish victims or considers reconciliation impossible at this point, he explicitly mentions resistance fighters, Allied soldiers, and *political* inmates of concentrations camps without so much as a reference to the Holocaust.

Third, Weigel demonstrates how unambiguously Andersch sets up a divide between guilt and innocence along the lines of ‘young’ and ‘old’. She quotes from his essay “*Notwendige Aussage über Nürnberg*,” an article about the Nuremberg trials:

Die erstaunlichen Waffentaten junger Deutscher in diesem Kriege und die ‚Taten‘ etwas älterer Deutscher, die gegenseitig in Nürnberg verhandelt werden, stehen in keinem Zusammenhang. Die Kämpfer von Stalingrad, El Alamein und Cassino, denen auch von ihren Gegnern jede Achtung entgegengebracht wurde, sind unschuldig an den Verbrechen von Dachau und Buchenwald.¹⁰⁴

According to Andersch’s logic, members of the “young generation” were soldiers. Thus, they had nothing to do with the Holocaust. Quite the opposite, their “Waffentaten” were so astonishing that even their adversaries could not help but admire them. As Weigel writes, this passage illustrates particularly well “how a heroic soldier collective tries to escape from historical responsibility for Nazism.”¹⁰⁵

I do not take issue with Weigel’s brief examination of Andersch’s articles, which is both compelling and persuasive. Not only *Der Ruf* but various other publications

¹⁰² Alfred Andersch, *Das junge Europa*, *Werke* 8, see also Weigel, “Generation as a Symbolic Form,” 275 and *Genea-Logik*, 98.

¹⁰³ Weigel, “Generation as a Symbolic Form,” 275.

¹⁰⁴ Alfred Andersch, “Notwendige Aussage zum Nürnberger Prozeß,” *Werke* 8, 25-28. See also Weigel, Weigel, “Generation as a Symbolic Form,” 275 and *Genea-Logik*, 100.

¹⁰⁵ Weigel, Weigel, “Generation as a Symbolic Form,” 275.

between 1945 and 1947 focused intensely on the notion of youth in general and the “young generation” in particular. As Stephen Brockmann points out in his book *German Literary Culture and the Zero Hour*: “Given the apparent moral bankruptcy of several generations of German leaders culminating in the cultural, political, military and economic disaster of the Third Reich, it was only natural that the end of the Second World War saw a widespread interest in the search for a younger generation untainted by association with Nazi crimes.”¹⁰⁶ This interest is visible for instance in the various journals that catered specifically to the “young generation” such as *Start: Illustriertes Blatt der jungen Generation* (1946-1949), *Benjamin: Zeitschrift für junge Menschen* (1947-1948), *Ende und Anfang: Zeitung der jungen Generation* (1946-1949), *Ja: Zeitschrift der jungen Generation* (1946-1948), *Wir: Ein Blatt der Jugend* (1946-1948), and *Die Zukunft: Unabhängige Zeitschrift junger Menschen* (1946-1948).¹⁰⁷

Ohad Parnes has called attention to the fact that discussions of the so-called “*Schuldfrage*” are prevalent in many of these publications. Expanding Weigel’s argument, he writes that in response to the debate about German guilt, the spokesmen of the young generation established the “Topos der unschuldigen Erfahrung.”¹⁰⁸ Their involvement in the war is reframed both as tragic and as enriching experience: they were ‘dragged’ into the war despite their young age, but at the same time this experience qualified them to be the future elite. Thus, Parnes writes with regard to Andersch’s

¹⁰⁶ Stephen Brockmann, *German Literary Culture at the Zero Hour* (Rochester: Camden House, 2004).

¹⁰⁷ Other journals targeting the young generation were: *Horizont. Halbmonatsschrift für junge Menschen* (1945-1948), *Junge Generation. Zeitschrift für Fragen der Jugendbewegung* (1947-1989), *Die Kommenden. Zeitschrift der jungen Generation* (46-52), *Das Neue. Auswahl zeitgemäßer Stimmen* (46-48) and *Neues Leben. Zeitschrift der Freien Deutschen Jugend* (45-50). See Ohad Parnes, Ulrike Vedder, and Stefan Willer, *Das Konzept der Generation: eine Wissenschafts- und Kulturgeschichte* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2008).

¹⁰⁸ Parnes et. al., *Das Konzept der Generation*, 286.

Nuremberg article in which the latter speaks of the astounding “Waffentaten” of the young generation:

Die Anerkennung militärischer Leistungen sogar durch ‘den Feind’ als Beleg soldatischer Unschuld anzuführen ist eine Strategie, die zum entstehenden Mythologem der ‘sauberen Wehrmacht’ entscheidend beitragen wird. Diese Strategie nutzt Andersch hier für die Legitimation seines Anspruchs, Teil der neuen kulturellen Elite [...] zu sein. Denn die Kriegserfahrung lässt sich nicht nur biografisch nicht abstreifen, im Gegenteil: Sie gilt gerade als jener Erfahrungshorizont, der es allererst erlaubt, an den künftigen Machtpositionen im kulturellen Feld zu partizipieren.¹⁰⁹

Parnes characterizes the discourse of the “young generation” quite accurately when he writes: “Kind *und* Stalingradkämpfer, d.h. unschuldig *und* erfahrungsgesättigt zu sein, das soll diese Generation auszeichnen, die sich damit von den ‚Schuldigen‘ sowie von den ‚Unerfahrenen‘ abgrenzt.”¹¹⁰ In the center of this discourse is the young, exonerated and virtuous *Wehrmacht* soldier.

My criticism of this last part of Weigel’s essay is not directed at her analysis of Andersch’s self-exonerating presentation of the “young generation”. Rather, I am concerned with her thesis that this discourse in the years 1945-1947 marks the beginning of an apologetic discourse that would be perpetuated by the Hitler Youth generation throughout the post-war era.

4. The Two “First Generations” of Post-War German Literature: Different Generations—Different Discourses

It is no coincidence that Weigel’s argument focuses on Alfred Andersch and *Der Ruf*.

This journal is considered the intellectual forum from which *Gruppe 47* emerged, that is

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 286.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 287.

the very origin of the group of intellectuals who were highly influential in West Germany's cultural sphere during the next decades. The group formed spontaneously in 1947. Alfred Andersch and Hans-Werner Richter had to step down as the editors of *Der Ruf* because the Allied forces in the West considered their writing too far on the Left. When Andersch and Richter attempted to develop a new publication (*Der Skorpion*), meeting of the future editorial staff of this new magazine turned into a reading of literary texts—and *Gruppe 47* was born.¹¹¹ In *Genea-Logik*, Weigel accordingly refers to *Der Ruf* as “die Gründungsurkunde der deutschen Nachkriegsliteratur und *Gruppe 47*,”¹¹² a phrase which suggests that the apologetic tendencies in Andersch's articles were carried over into post-war literature as a whole.

That she sees continuities between the exculpatory discourse of the “young generation” and the discourse of the Hitler Youth generation particularly in the literary realm, becomes clear when, after speaking about Broszat and Rühmkorf, she mentions the names of Martin Walser and Günter Grass. About Walser, she writes: “He owes his literary upbringing to a group that at once shifted the responsibility of history onto ‘somewhat older Germans’ and defended themselves as the ‘young Germany’.”¹¹³

To claim such continuity is problematic: first of all, it is misleading to write that Walser's and Grass' generation, in establishing their self-image as innocent witnesses, “received support from the discourse of a group of intellectuals about half a generation older that established itself as spokesmen of the youth.”¹¹⁴ The young generation, which Andersch attempts to exonerate in *Der Ruf*, is not identical with the Hitler Youth

¹¹¹ For a description of how the end of *Der Ruf* constituted the beginning of *Gruppe 47*, see Heinz Ludwig Arnold, *Die Gruppe 47: Ein kritischer Grundriss* (Munich: Edition Text + Kritik, 1987), 67-79.

¹¹² Weigel, *Genea-Logik*, 98.

¹¹³ Weigel, “Generation as a Symbolic Form,” 275.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 274 (emphasis added).

generation. In *Das junge Europa*, he defines the young generation as “diese junge deutsche Generation, die Männer und Frauen zwischen 18 und 35 Jahren, getrennt von den Älteren durch ihre Nicht-Verantwortlichkeit, von den Jüngeren durch das Front- und Gefangenschaftserlebnis, durch das eingesetzte Leben also.”¹¹⁵ The generation to which Andersch refers is thus undoubtedly characterized by its military experiences. As Ohad Parned has also pointed out, Andersch considers the young generation “als männlich-soldatische”.¹¹⁶ When Andersch speaks of their “Waffentaten” and their “Front- und Gefangenschaftserlebnis”, these are experiences, which members of the Hitler Youth generation, even those in the anti-air-raid units, did not share with older age groups.

That the editors of *Der Ruf* did not regard the Hitler Youth as part of the young generation becomes clear also from another passage, found in a rarely studied document called *Redaktionelle Prinzipien des Ruf*. In this document the editors delineate the political program of the journal and define the ‘young Germany’ as

die Jahrgänge, die entweder nur noch die Depressionsjahre der Weimarer Republik kennengelernt haben oder aber vollständig von Nationalsozialismus und Krieg (Front- und Gefangenschaftserlebnis) geistig geprägt wurden. Es sind die Jahrgänge, welche die stärksten Blutopfer gebracht haben, die durch die geschichtliche Entwicklung aus den beruflichen und familiären Zusammenhängen am schärfsten herausgerissen wurden, die den Neubau ihrer geistigen und wirtschaftlichen Existenz leisten müssen, ohne in der Lage gewesen zu sein, sich das Rüstzeug anzueignen, wie es das Leben in einer friedlichen Welt bedingt. So grenzen diese Jahrgänge sich scharf gegen die Gruppe der Älteren, die in der Weimarer Republik großgeworden sind, und der eigentlichen Jugend ab, die heute unter veränderten Bedingungen ihr Leben beginnen kann.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁵ Andersch, *Das junge Europa*, 22.

¹¹⁶ See Parnes et al., *Das Konzept der Generation*, 286. That Andersch focuses exclusively on men is obvious from his discussion of their “Fronterlebnis” despite the fact that he speaks of “die Männer und Frauen zwischen 18 und 35 Jahren.” Andersch, *Das junge Europa*, 22.

¹¹⁷ “Redaktionelle Prinzipien des Ruf” reprinted in Jérôme Vaillant, *Der Ruf: Unabhängige Blätter der jungen Generation (1945-1949): Eine Zeitschrift zwischen Illusion und Anpassung* (Munich, New York, Paris: Saur, 1978).

This passage clarifies once more that the Hitler Youth generation is seen as separate from the “young generation.” Unlike the “young generation,” members of the Hitler Youth generation neither experienced the depression in the twenties, nor did the war interrupt their professional lives, nor did the majority of them die in World War II—they do not belong, in other words, to the group of men who Andersch and Richter call “die Jahrgänge, welche die stärksten Blutopfer gebracht haben.” Clearly, the two of them speak of the generation of *Wehrmacht* soldiers. One could claim with Ohad Parnes that this marks the beginning of the discourse about the honorable *Wehrmacht*, which was prevalent in West Germany until the nineties.¹¹⁸ Weigel’s suggestion, however, that Andersch and Richter’s apologetic presentation of the young generation gave way to the discourse of the “concealed first generation” or Hitler Youth generation is historically imprecise, because it conflates differences both in terms of birth dates and in terms of war experiences resulting from the affiliation to different age groups.

In the last quotation, the editors of *Der Ruf* themselves strangely distinguish the “young generation” from the “die *eigentliche* Jugend”.¹¹⁹ This description sheds light on another aspect of the cultural-political program in the journal that speaks against a blurring of the “young” and the “concealed first generation.” As Weigel and others have observed, Andersch and Richter, while belonging to the group of *Wehrmacht* soldiers, were not quite young anymore when they founded *Der Ruf* in 1946. They certainly did

¹¹⁸See Parnes et al., *Das Konzept der Generation*, 286.

¹¹⁹Vaillant, *Der Ruf*, 194, see quote above (emphasis added).

not belong to the *actual* youth. The adjective “young” was thus used in a fairly flexible way.¹²⁰

In her essay, Weigel acknowledges this fact by writing that the Hitler Youth generation’s apologetic discourse was initiated by “a group of intellectuals about half a generation older that established itself as *spokesmen* of the youth.”¹²¹ In *Genea-Logik*, she addresses the age difference between the editors of *Der Ruf* and the “young generation” (which, as we have seen, she falsely identifies with the Hitler Youth generation in the following quote):

Sprechen die Herausgeber der Unabhängige(n) Blätter für die junge Generation im Namen einer Generation, die im historischen Sinne als HJ- oder Flakhelfer-Generation bezeichnet werden muß [...] so ist allerdings eine eklatante Diskrepanz zwischen ihrem Sprechort als Stellvertreter einer jungen, ‘schuldlosen’ Generation und den Jahrgängen der federführenden Herausgeber zu verzeichnen. Denn Hans-Werner Richter (Jg. 1908, d.h. bei Kriegsbeginn bereits 31 und 1946 bereits 38 Jahre zählend) und Alfred Andersch (Jg. 1914, bei Kriegsbeginn also bereits 25 und 1946 immerhin 32 Jahre alt) gehörten selbst zu der nicht mehr ganz so jungen Generation.¹²²

Thus, when Andersch and Richter turn themselves into the representatives of the young Germany despite this age gap, and when they declare in their program that “*Der Ruf* ist keine Publikation ‘für’ die junge Generation, geschrieben von der älteren, sondern ein Blatt ‘der’ jungen Generation für sich selbst,”¹²³ we are no longer dealing with a generation’s *self*-understanding but with the appropriation of a generational discourse. It was very much in Andersch’s and Richter’s interest to form part of the group of younger

¹²⁰ Heinz Ludwig Arnold, for example, points out that the “young generation” roughly comprises the cohorts born between 1914 and 1925. He writes that the editors, however, were all in their 30s and 40s. See Arnold 19.

¹²¹ Weigel, “‘Generation’” 274 (emphasis added)

¹²² Weigel *Genea-Logik* 99.

¹²³ Vaillant, *Der Ruf*, 194.

Germans they themselves had described as innocent, heroic and predestined to lead the future German state.

In a radio feature from 1974 called *Was war und wie entstand die Gruppe 47*, Richter implicitly admits to this appropriation. Recapitulating the beginnings of *Der Ruf*, he unmistakably formulates that he and Andersch wrote *in the name* of the “young generation”:

Aber gehöre ich noch zur jungen Generation? Ich bin achtunddreißig Jahre alt, Andersch immerhin auch schon dreiunddreißig, unsere Jugend liegt unter den Jahren des Dritten Reiches und des Krieges begraben. Doch wir fangen ganz von vorn an. Jetzt, meinen wir, sind wir die junge Generation. So beginnen wir unbekümmert für jene zu schreiben, die jünger sind als wir, eine Generation, die dezimiert und verschlagen von den Schlachtfeldern des zweiten Weltkrieges zurückgekehrt ist. Diese Generation ist unsere Hoffnung.¹²⁴

In this statement, Richter confirms yet again that differences in age and biographical experiences did not play an important role in *Der Ruf*'s notion of youth. Weigel criticizes this elision strongly. Only by brushing away these differences, she argues, youth could be so easily identified with innocence. In the discourse of the “young generation,” she writes

werden alle Differenzen der historischen Herkunft und die gegensätzlichsten Orte in der jüngstvergangenen Katastrophe offensiv aus dem Weg geräumt. Zur Formierung einer alle Differenzen einebnenden Einheit wird eine andere Opposition absolut gesetzt: der Gegensatz zwischen junger und älterer Generation. Insofern ist die *Junge Generation* der Deckname für eine entlang der Demarkationslinie von Schuld geteilte Erinnerung, mit der ein heroisches soldatisches Kollektiv sich aus der historischen Verantwortung des Nazismus herauszulösen anschickt.¹²⁵

But does Weigel herself not brush away the differences in age and biographical experience in her claim that Andersch, Richter, Walser, and Grass share in the same generational discourse? Does she herself not neglect the different historical positions of

¹²⁴ Hans Werner Richter, *Was war und wie entstand die Gruppe 47*, ed. Hans A. Neunzig (Munich: Nymphenburger, 1979).

¹²⁵ Weigel, *Genea-Logik*, 99-100.

the former *Wehrmacht* soldiers and the Hitler Youth by claiming that in both cases youth is utilized to defy guilt and guarantee innocence? To agree with her argument that the apologetic discourse of the “young generation” is programmatic of the way in which the Hitler Youth generation presented itself, we would have to grant Andersch and Richter the role of the spokesmen for the youth. We would have to tacitly accept a conflation between them and the generations of younger Germans—a conflation that they themselves had set up to their own benefit. Ultimately, we would have to reproduce the distortion prevalent in this particular generational discourse.

At the beginning of her article Weigel states that she is not concerned with the concept of generation in a socio-historical sense, but rather with discursive strategies within the generational discourse in Germany after 1945.¹²⁶ However, in order to examine the ways in which the concept of generation is used as a “cultural pattern to construct history,”¹²⁷—that is, as a type of narrative in the post-war discourse on memory—we have to acknowledge each generation’s particular relationship to the Nazi past. In order to unveil the distortions in this discourse, we have to first deal with each generation “im historischen Sinne,”¹²⁸ in Weigel’s words. For an examination of the literary sphere, at which Weigel directs most of her criticism, this requires distinguishing between writers who experienced the years 1939-1945 as *Wehrmacht* soldiers in combat, and writers who spent most of these years in Nazi Youth organizations.

¹²⁶ Weigel writes: “I will treat the historico-theoretical significance of the term ‘generation’ and the problem of dividing collective memory after 1945 into particular time periods. I will not cover ‘generation’ in sociological terms, which has been much discussed in this century, at least since Karl Mannheim’s writings about the effect of milieu. Instead I will analyze the concept and narrative of ‘generation’ as a symbolic form, that is, as a cultural pattern for constructing history.” Weigel, “Generation as a Symbolic Form,” 265.

¹²⁷ Ibid 265.

¹²⁸ Weigel, *Genea-Logik*, 99.

If Broszat as a member of the Hitler Youth generation speaks of “das Glück in politisches Handeln und in Verantwortung noch nicht oder nur marginal hineingezogen zu werden,”¹²⁹ this cannot be considered an exonerative depiction of his generation, because it is largely based on historical facts. While biographically attached to the Nazi era and for the most part “*Mitläufer*” of the Nazi regime, the Hitler Youth generation does not carry the same set of moral and legal responsibilities that the perpetrator generation of Germans does. “Youth” was in their case not a metaphor used to defy guilt, but in fact the reason why they were not politically involved in the majority of Nazi crimes. Aleida Assman concludes succinctly: “Als ‘Täter’ kommen diese jungen Menschen, auch wenn sie sich wie Grass freiwillig und mit Enthusiasmus auf die Ziele des Nationalsozialismus verpflichteten, nicht in Frage.”¹³⁰

Their different level of legal responsibility did not prevent writers of the Hitler Youth generation from reflecting on their adolescent belief in the Nazi ideology and the responsibility as writers and public intellectuals resulting from this experience. In fact, it is precisely the idiosyncratic debate on guilt and innocence and a continuous struggle to come to terms with an upbringing in Nazi Germany that distinguishes this generation of writers from their older and younger colleagues. Their work is shaped by an astute awareness of belonging to the generation that experienced the “Gnade der späten Geburt.” This should have become evident merely from the few passages quoted from the three writers’ essays above. From these passages, in which all three writers display strong feelings of being haunted by their childhood under Hitler, one can suspect that the writers of the Hitler Youth generation are not primarily concerned with exoneration, as is

¹²⁹ Broszat and Friedländer, “Um die Historisierung,” 361.

¹³⁰ Assmann, *Geschichte im Gedächtnis*, 46.

undoubtedly the case with Andersch and Richter. Instead of glossing over their ties to their Nazi past and of denying their origin, they make their particular relationship to the Nazi past an important subject of their writing. This is not always done entirely without apologetic tendencies or, as I will show, questionable conclusions, but it is nevertheless done in a decidedly more self-reflective mode than that of Andersch and Richter.

Hitler Youth Generation & Gruppe 47

I have dedicated a good portion of this chapter to Weigel's critique of the concealed first generation and their alleged spokesmen because I consider her conflation of two different discourses—that of the Hitler Youth generation with that of the war generation—symptomatic of a broader trend in scholarship on post-war German literature. Günter Grass, Martin Walser, and other writers of the Hitler Youth generation are often seen in conjunction with Andersch, Richter and other writers of *Gruppe 47* such as Heinrich Böll, especially in the field of memory studies. The group's bonds are considered so strong that the affiliation to *Gruppe 47* is frequently superimposed on generational affiliations, sometimes even replacing them entirely. Paradigmatically, Amir Eshel thus refers to the key figures of *Gruppe 47*—"Alfred Andersch, Heinrich Böll, Siegfried Lenz, Günter Grass, Martin Walser und andere"—as "'erste Generation' deutscher Nachkriegsliteratur".¹³¹

This amalgamation of (mostly West German) writers who began their literary careers in the 1940s, '50s, and '60s, has long been standard in the study of so-called *Gegenwartsliteratur*. Notwithstanding the fact that *Gruppe 47* writers belonged to

¹³¹ Amir Eshel, "Die Grammatik des Verlusts: Verlorene Kinder, verlorene Zeit in Barbara Honigmanns 'Soharas Reise' und in Hans-Ulrich Treichels 'Der Verlorene'," in *Deutsch-jüdische Literatur der neunziger Jahre: Die Generation nach der Shoah*, eds. Hartmut Steinecke and Sander Gilman (Berlin: Erich Schmidt, 2002).

different generations, they seemed to be unified in their role as critical forces behind the great societal project of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, continually writing about Nazi Germany and its aftermath in the post-war era. From this perspective, it was possible to consider their dominant role in the literary sphere in a positive light, as seen for example in Jochen Vogt's book *'Erinnerung ist unsere Aufgabe': Über Literatur, Moral und Politik 1945-1990*. He writes:

Die deutschsprachige und speziell die westdeutsche Nachkriegsliteratur hat von ihren Anfängen bis in die achtziger Jahre hinein den Nationalsozialismus in all seinen Dimensionen, von Weltkrieg und Holocaust bis zum alltäglichen und familiären Faschismus, sowie sein Nachleben in der westdeutschen Restauration, zu ihrem wichtigsten Thema gemacht. Sie leistet damit Erinnerungs- und Trauerarbeit stellvertretend für eine Gesellschaft, die solche Arbeit in ihrer Mehrheit und ihren repräsentativen Institutionen abgewehrt hat. Unter dem Begriff Nachkriegsliteratur fasse ich, wie Böll schon 1963, in erster Linie diejenigen Autorinnen und Autoren, die nach 1945 zu schreiben beginnen, die sich in den fünfziger Jahren als ‚nonkonformistisch‘ definieren, zunächst noch im Schatten der sogenannten Inneren Emigration stehen, dann aber – im lockeren Zusammenschluß als *Gruppe 47* – das literarische Leben der Bundesrepublik zunehmend dominieren.¹³²

It is precisely this positive assessment of post-1945 writers as promoters of an earnest working through of the past that has recently been challenged by scholars who, at the meeting point of literary, cultural and memory studies, have begun to critically seek out the “blind spots” in the project of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. This critical scholarship works with the same broad conception of post-1945 writers as the previous more traditional scholarship did. Writers of the Hitler Youth generation are seen as part of the collective of writers who were “members” of *Gruppe 47*, with the difference that their dominance in the literary sphere, particularly in post-war memory discourse, is now strongly criticized. Similarly to Weigel, several studies thus argue that the authoritative

¹³² Jochen Vogt, *Erinnerung ist unsere Aufgabe: Über Literatur, Moral und Politik 1945-1990*, (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1991).

role of Hitler Youth/*Gruppe 47* in the memory discourse has worked to exclude other forms of memory, such as that of women or of Jewish writers as well as of the following generations who did not witness the Nazi period themselves.

In her study *Genea-Logik*, Weigel claims that, in Germany after 1945, “[d]as Selbstverständnis, Vertreter oder Angehöriger einer bestimmten Generation zu sein, ersetzt und überlagert [...] durchweg das Paradigma von Opfern und (Mit-)Tätern.”¹³³ As I have already suggested—and as I will clarify in the literary analyses in the following chapters—the self-understanding of writers of the Hitler Youth generation is much more complicated and, as a result, does not fit into this paradigm. However, in the discourse *about* this generation there seems to be an undercurrent operating strongly along the divide between perpetrators and victims. In research that sheds light on mechanisms of marginalization and repression in the post-war German memory discourse—undeniably a highly important endeavor—Hitler Youth writers, seen in alliance with older writers of *Gruppe 47*, often become the usual suspects, while younger writers seem to be exempt from all reproaches. The argumentation then quickly becomes imprecise, the tone moralizing, and above all, the writers are considered in isolation from their literature.

The most extreme example of such heavy-handed categorization is Klaus Briegleb’s *Missachtung und Tabu. Eine Streitschrift über die Frage: ‘Wie antisemitisch war die Gruppe 47?’*¹³⁴ In this book, Briegleb, who happens to also be Sigrid Weigel’s husband and, born in 1932, is part of the Hitler Youth generation himself, attempts to draw a connection between the latest debates caused by writers of this generation and the memory discourse of the early post-war years, arguing that there is a thread of anti-

¹³³ Weigel, *Genea-Logik*, 97.

¹³⁴ Klaus Briegleb, *Missachtung und Tabu: eine Streitschrift zur Frage: ‘Wie antisemitisch war die Gruppe 47?’* (Berlin: Philo, 2003).

Semitism and marginalization of Jewish memory leading from the beginnings of *Gruppe 47* to the recent debates surrounding Martin Walser and Günter Grass. Referring mostly to the debates surrounding Walser's *Friedenspreis* speech (1998), his novel *Tod eines Kritikers* (2001), and Grass' novella *Im Krebsgang* (2001), Briegleb argues that the anti-Semitism and German nationalism allegedly expressed by Walser and Grass only followed *Gruppe 47*'s true ideological lines: "Sie [Grass and Walser] erbrachten dabei den lebenden Beweis, daß die Vergangenheit dieses westdeutschen literarischen Vorzeige-Ensembles in Gestalt seiner verdrängten 'reindeutschen' Prämissen wiederzukehren im Begriffe war."¹³⁵ He claims that while the group had succeeded in maintaining their positive image for a long time—"Antifaschismus, Opposition gegen den Adenauerstaat, Vergangenheitsbewältigung sind die Schlagworte"¹³⁶—anti-Semitism and nationalism had always been prevalent in *Gruppe 47*. This is visible in the discourse in *Der Ruf*: "Feststeht, daß die *Wiege* der Gruppe 47 das Grab schon war. Es trägt den Namen 'Der Ruf. Unabhängige Blätter für die junge Generation.'"¹³⁷ The discourse formulated by Andersch and Richter immediately after the war, Briegleb argues, persisted during the years of *Gruppe 47*'s existence between the years 1947-1967, and ultimately was unleashed in the debates surrounding Walser and Grass.¹³⁸ The authors most frequently mentioned in his book—Andersch, Richter, Walser and Grass—are coarsely categorized as "deutsche Schriftsteller '1947er Herkunft.'"¹³⁹

¹³⁵ Ibid., 31.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 29.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 83.

¹³⁸ He writes: "Feststeht, daß die *Wiege* der Gruppe 47 das Grab schon war. Es trägt den Namen 'Der Ruf. Unabhängige Blätter für die junge Generation' (August 1946 bis März 1947). Hier wurde die Sprache literarisch manifest, die auf den Nationalsozialismus mit einem Neonationalismus reagiert, den schon Heinrich Heine beschrieben hat." Ibid., 83.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 30.

In his 2005 article “Im Schatten der ‘gebrannten Kinder,’” Stephan Braese, who was Briegleb’s doctoral student at the University of Hamburg, attacks the writers of the Hitler Youth generation from a different angle than does Briegleb’s polemical and willfully controversial book.¹⁴⁰ Braese expands on Weigel’s argument about the “concealed first generation,” claiming that post-war literature has for the longest time been overshadowed by the influence of a group of canonical German authors, still evident “in den herausragenden literarischen events noch von 1998 oder 2001 – Martin Walsers Frankfurter Friedenspreisrede, Günter Grass’ *Im Krebsgang* sowie Walsers *Tod eines Kritikers*.”¹⁴¹ He first identifies these authors as members of the “HJ-Generation”¹⁴² or “Luftwaffenhelfer-Generation,”¹⁴³ recapitulating Weigel’s thesis that they successfully legitimized their hegemonic position in post-war memory discourse by means of their “authentic” experience of the war. In the remainder of his article, however, he speaks about the “first generation” of German authors. This latter term is used in reference to different writers of *Gruppe 47*. For example, he speaks about “die Werke von Heinrich Böll, Günter Grass, Alfred Andersch, Siegfried Lenz”¹⁴⁴, and identifies “Böll, Grass and Walser”¹⁴⁵ (and at another place “Andersch, Richter, Grass und die anderen”¹⁴⁶) as the first generation of post-war writers.

With regard to these authors, Braese establishes three specific points of criticism. First, he claims that the hegemonic position of the so-called first generation has silenced writers of the second generation. When the Hitler Youth generation entered the literary

¹⁴⁰ Stephan Braese, “Im Schatten der ‘gebrannten Kinder,’” in *Chiffre 2000 – Neue Paradigmen der Gegenwartsliteratur*, eds. Corina Caduff & Ulrike Vedder (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2005).

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 89.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 90.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 89.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 98.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 90.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 94.

scene in the late 1950s and 60s, Braese claims, they modernized and re-energized the group of older writers, so that the phalanx of first-generation writers was able to interrupt the alternation of generations and to overpower the second generation, which no longer shared the personal experience of the Nazi era.¹⁴⁷ As he writes: “Wer später geboren war, authentische Erinnerungen an die Jahre des Dritten Reiches nicht mehr teilte, dem kam hier [in der *Gruppe 47*] allenfalls eingeschränktes Rederecht [...] zu.”¹⁴⁸ Even as late as the 1990s, younger writers—W. G. Sebald serves as Braese’s primary example—struggled to make their voices heard:

Noch wer in den 90er Jahren als Schriftsteller deutscher Sprache zu Nationalsozialismus und Holocaust schrieb, der schrieb notwendig *an* - nicht nur gegen das kaum erschütterliche Prestige der einschlägigen, teilweise ikonisierten Werke von Böll, Grass und Walser; nicht nur gegen die unverringerte Aktivität der noch Verbliebenen der ersten Generation in Literaturbetrieb und -politik; sondern vor allem gegen das Gewicht der Tatsache, dass die generationelle Ablösung der HJ-Generation noch zu ihren Lebzeiten zu *einer kulturellen Erfahrung nie geworden war*. Es ist dieses Datum, von dem deutschsprachiges Schreiben über Nationalsozialismus und Holocaust auch nach 1989 notwendig seinen Ausgang nimmt.¹⁴⁹

The first generation’s dominant position in the literary discourse about Nazi Germany and the Holocaust is in Braese’s eyes particularly precarious, because those writers had taken on the project of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* for the wrong reasons in the first place.

¹⁴⁷ Braese writes: “Ihre (the first generation’s) generationelle Ablösung in den 70er Jahren blieb aus. Die antiautoritäre Bewegung, mehr noch die sie einleitenden zeitgeschichtlichen Ereignisse hatten den Fond einer historischen, auch: historisch zwangsläufigen Kritik an der Literatur der ersten Generation, wie sie sich insbesondere im Rahmen der Gruppe 47 einflussreich verwirklicht hatte, geliefert; doch die unterschiedlichen Interventionsversuche vom Ende der 60er Jahre (Enzensberger) bis Anfang der 80er Jahre (Sebald) blieben ohne weiterreichende Folgen. Die ‚Selbstmodernisierung‘ der ersten Generation in den siebziger Jahren, paradigmatisch vollzogen und in ihrem Spektrum markiert durch Günter Grass (,durchgehaltene Loyalität zur deutschen Sozialdemokratie) und Martin Walser (DKP-Nähe, Propaganda für die ‚Literatur der Arbeitswelt‘, Verdikt gegen die europäische Moderne) erlaubt die zeitliche Verlängerung ihres ‚Hegemonialanspruchs für die Nachkriegsliteratur‘ um zwei weitere Jahrzehnte, zu Lasten der zweiten, der Generation ‚ohne Erfahrung‘.” Ibid., 105.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 90.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 90.

Braese's second point of criticism is that their motivation to deal with this problematic part of German history was not rooted in moral awareness but in a utilitarian understanding that this was the only condition under which literature could make its way back to the ranks of world literature:

[D]er westdeutsche Kulturbetrieb der Nachkriegsjahrzehnte [rezipierte] die poetische Reflexion der Massenverbrechen nicht als Gebot der Geschichte [...], sondern als im Grunde akzidentielle, 'moralische' Zulassungsbedingung der Siegermächte zur Weltliteratur.¹⁵⁰

For the first generation, working through the past was an obligation, a sheer

“Pflichtübung,”¹⁵¹ as Braese calls it.

The third reproach against this generation of post-war writers relates to the previous ones. Braese argues that not only did these writers only reluctantly deal with the history of National Socialism, but they also found a way to avoid dealing with the Jewish victims of Nazism in their literature. Since the first generation was so influential, they were able to constitute a memory discourse at their discretion—one that, as he argues, focused exclusively on the historical role of the German perpetrator. In their critical investigation of Nazi Germany, writers of the first generation were thus able to avoid reflection on the role of the victim. Braese speaks of the “heimliche Programmatik [...], über die Täter zu reden *zu dem Zweck, nicht über die Opfer reden zu müssen*.”¹⁵² Under the pretext of a self-critical examination, claims Braese, the Jewish perspective was excluded.

Both Briegleb and Braese paint their pictures with fairly broad strokes when they juxtapose the so-called “first generation” of German writers with the Jewish victims of

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 88.

¹⁵¹ The title of the section in which Braese lays out this argument is “Pflichtübungen der HJ-Generation,” *ibid.*, 86.

¹⁵² Ibid., 94.

the Holocaust. In this context, Thomas Anz in his review of Briegleb's book has as spoken of a "Hermeneutik des Verdachtes und der Unterstellung"¹⁵³ that often replaces a thorough literary analysis. This type of questionable hermeneutics can be found, though to a lesser extent, in Braese's essay. It is noteworthy that both authors have published similarly critical works on the memory politics of the West German *Literaturbetrieb*, in which the analysis is more thorough and the argumentation more convincing. This is the case in Briegleb's 1999 essay "'Neuanfang' in der westdeutschen Nachkriegsliteratur" on the nationalist rhetoric prevalent in Gruppe 47 between the years 1947 and 1951, and also in Braese's voluminous study *Die andere Erinnerung- Jüdische Autoren in der westdeutschen Nachkriegsliteratur* from 2001. In this latter book, Braese considers the reception of works by Grete Weil, Edgar Hilsenrath, and Wolfgang Hildesheimer and demonstrates in an impressive way that Jewish writers were repeatedly excluded from literary discourse in post-war Germany through feelings of "Erinnerungsdifferenz" and "Erinnerungskonkurrenz" predominant on the German side.¹⁵⁴

Interestingly, Grass and Walser are either marginally or not at all mentioned in these two works.¹⁵⁵ Instead, Briegleb and Braese find traces of oppression in works by Richter, Andersch, Böll, and—in Braese's study—in the writing of a number of literary critics. It seems that both Briegleb and Braese have begun to engage a generational discourse only after the recent literary debates surrounding writers of the Hitler Youth,

¹⁵³ Thomas Anz, "Intellektueller gegen Intellektuelle. Klaus Briegleb's Streitschrift zum angeblichen Antisemitismus der Gruppe 47," *literaturkritik.de* 5 (2003), http://www.literaturkritik.de/public/rezension.php?rez_id=6015&ausgabe=200305.

¹⁵⁴ Klaus Briegleb, "'Neuanfang' in der westdeutschen Nachkriegsliteratur: Die Gruppe 47 in den Jahren 1947-1951," in *Bestandsaufnahme: Studien zur Gruppe 47*, ed. Stephan Braese (Berlin: Erich Schmidt Verlag, 1999). And Stephan Braese, *Die andere Erinnerung: Jüdische Autoren in der westdeutschen Nachkriegsliteratur* (Berlin: Philo, 2001).

¹⁵⁵ Braese briefly refers to an essay by Walser in the chapter on Hildesheimer's reception in Germany. In this essay, Walser outlines a form of writing that Braese considers diametrically opposed to that of Hildesheimer. See Braese, *Die andere Erinnerung*, 383-386.

especially Grass and Walser. Only in a “*Nachbemerkung*,” added to a later edition of his book *Die andere Erinnerung*, Braese identifies the Walser-Bubis debate as the most recent example of a memory “competition.” Only there, he uses generational terminology speaking of “Deutsche und Juden der ersten Generation” and the “Generation der Täter”.¹⁵⁶ While writers of the second generation seem to be exempt from the accusations, while they sometimes even rank among the repressed victims, one can sense a deep mistrust towards writers of the so-called “first generation” in these words, towards those writers with personal ties to the Nazi period.

As a result of the amalgamation of generations and a biased approach to the post-war literary sphere, the generational discourse of writers of the Hitler Youth generation—and with it, a very specific memory discourse—has become lost. In the following three chapters, I will attempt to make it visible again. I will show that the literary output, self-understanding, and public reception of Günter Grass, Martin Walser, and Christa Wolf, arguably the three most significant writers in the post-war Germanies, cannot be understood without a consideration of their mutual historical-biographical legacy. While I claim that the collective experience of the years 1933-1945 has shaped the aesthetic and political thinking of all three writers in strikingly similar ways, I am interested also in the different manifestations of the generational discourse in their literature and in the distinct agendas that emerged from it with regard to their views on Germany.

In his book “German Intellectuals and the Nazi Past,” Dirk Moses suggests to avoid the categories of “left” and “right” in descriptions of the politics of this generation. Instead, he argues, we can find “German Germans” and “non-German Germans” on both

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 565.

the Left and the Right: those who positively identified with national culture and insisted that “[t]he group self has not been polluted by the Nazi deeds, nor ought it be stigmatized,”¹⁵⁷ and those who claimed the opposite. He considers Walser a “German German” leftist of his generation, who “thought that the nation was redeemable.”¹⁵⁸ If we apply Moses’s categorization to Grass, we would have to describe him as a “non-German German.” Grass has revealed tendencies to see the German nation as forever stigmatized by the Nazi years, especially in his stance on the GDR. He presupposed that after Auschwitz Germany carried a burden that could never to be redeemed and was symbolically represented in the country’s division. Walser—the archetypical “German-German,” and Grass—the “non-German German” par excellence?

Moses’s categories were designed to describe the positive and negative nationalism of *West* German thinkers of this generation; they do not seem to be suitable to characterize Christa Wolf’s belief in a socialist Germany. Nevertheless, Moses’s focus on the different reactions that can be found in this generation vis-à-vis the stigma of the Nazi past proves to be helpful in the case of Grass, Walser, and Wolf. The three writers’ political stances toward Germany can be understood as “redemptive projects,” resulting from a shared generational experience. As Moses highlights, Walser wanted to salvage the German “Volk” and overcome its stigma. Grass continually evoked the stigma by speaking about Germany’s historical guilt and the responsibility derived from it. Wolf’s redemptive project was socialism itself, an anti-fascist state representing the “better Germany.”

¹⁵⁷ A. Dirk Moses, *German Intellectuals and the Nazi Past*, 254.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

From Weigel's depiction one could assume that the discourse of the Hitler Youth generation was an oppressive West German discourse of male writers of *Gruppe 47*. By highlighting the urgency with which the three writers follow their respective projects of redemptions, each in their own way, their generational discourse will become visible as something else entirely: a self-reflexive struggle for identity—their own identity and that of the nation, the two being closely intertwined. This is what connects the three authors across the Berlin Wall as well as across the gender-divide.

*Vor allen anderen Blumen gefällt mir die hellgraue, das ganze Jahr über
blühende Skepsis.
—Günter Grass, Aus dem Tagebuch einer Schnecke, 1979*

Chapter Two:

Taking the Stage—Generational Thinking in the Early Political and Literary Work of Grass, Wolf, and Walser (1963-1979)

Introduction

On December 1, 2011, Christa Wolf died at the age of 82. Shortly thereafter, Günter Grass delivered a eulogy at a memorial gathering at the Berlin Academy of Arts, which began with the assertion that he and the East German writer belonged to the same generation:

Christa Wolf gehörte einer Generation an, zu der auch ich mich zähle. Die Zeit des Nationalsozialismus und die späte, zu späte Erkenntnis aller im Verlauf von nur zwölf Jahren von Deutschen begangenen Verbrechen haben uns geprägt. Schreiben verlangt seitdem, aus Spuren zu lesen. Dem entspricht eines ihrer Bücher unter dem Titel „Kindheitsmuster“, denn ideologische Wechselbäder bestimmten nach der braunen Diktatur die Doktrinen des Stalinismus ihrer jungen Jahre.

Gläubig eingeschlagene Irrwege, aufkommender Zweifel und Widerstand gegen verordnete Zwänge, mehr noch, die Einsicht in eigene Teilhabe innerhalb eines die sozialistische Utopie nivellierenden Systems, sind bezeichnend für ihren im Verlauf von fünf Jahrzehnten bewiesenen literarischen Rang: vom „Geteilten Himmel“ bis zur letzten Reise, die uns in die „Stadt der Engel“ führt, Buch nach Buch; Bücher, die geblieben sind.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁹ Günter Grass, “Was bleibt. Trauerrede,” *Berliner Zeitung*, December 14, 2011, <http://www.berliner-zeitung.de/kultur/abschied-von-christa-wolf-was-bleibt--trauerrede-von-guenter-grass,10809150,11302844.html>.

This is an astute summary of Wolf's career, and it is no coincidence that it is presented within a generational framework. From the author's breakthrough novel *Nachdenken über Christa T.* to her last one *Stadt der Engel*, her books reveal the strong influence that the childhood and adolescence during the Nazi era had on her writing. The embrace of the socialist utopia, Wolf's errors in following this path such as her short-term collaboration with the GDR's secret police, her doubts and her resistance, and ultimately her late recognition that the "GDR project" had failed—Grass is right in pointing out that for Wolf writing meant "Spuren lesen": following the traces of a Nazi childhood in her later political life.

What is most interesting about this eulogy is the almost self-evident way in which Grass creates a bond between himself and Wolf based on a shared generational identity. From today's perspective, it is indeed not difficult to see the similarities between Grass and Wolf. When they first took the stage as young writers in the fifties and sixties, they then appeared as a new generation bringing fresh air to the stuffy German literary scene by approaching the still recent Nazi past in a different way. Grass and Wolf in particular—he in the West and she in the East—were both willing to approach Hitler Germany not only from a very personal angle but also in a self-critical and self-reflective manner, talking openly about their generation's particular experience of this time. Their biographies became public, and while the rest of the country was busy looking forward, these two authors looked back and relentlessly revisited their Nazi childhood and their belief in the Führer's *Tausendjähriges Reich*. Grass lacked the accusatory tone of the sixty-eighters, who were born after the war and held their parents responsible for it, as well as the apologetic tone of the founding members of *Gruppe 47*, most of them older

writers of the inner emigration entangled with the regime in one way or other. Wolf differed in her approach to the GDR because her biographical experiences were much unlike the communists of the first hour, whose socialist ideas emerged before World War II and who had to endure Nazi persecution. There was a searching mode in their literature, a certain caution, and a tone of self-doubt that had never been there before. This attitude that they themselves related to their upbringing influenced not only their literature but also their politics. The continuity with which both writers publicly related their own biographies lend them moral credibility and eventually turned them into moral guide-posts in the East and in the West.

This narrative about Grass, Walser and Wolf as a collective can emerge only from a certain distance to the first decades of Germany's post-war intellectual history, more precisely from a post-reunification perspective. In the sixties and seventies, Grass and Wolf could not have denied being part of the same generation, and it seems to be that the generational theme constantly accompanied their work. But their generational thinking went in very different directions and developed almost in opposition to each other. Thus, while my dissertation as a whole seeks to show the benefits of a synthesis of Grass, Walser and Wolf as representing one and the same generation of writers, this chapter will focus on how their generational discourses diverge. More precisely, I will show that each writer approaches his or her generational background at a time when the division between East and West Germany still existed in an idiosyncratic way.

In my first chapter, I argued that the generational discourse of writers of the Hitler Youth generation has often been overlooked, both by those scholars who categorically praised the merits of all post-war writers dedicated to the task of

“Vergangenheitsbewältigung” and by those highly critical of that generation. In this chapter, I address this failure to acknowledge this distinct generational discourse, in order to highlight the ways in which such an acknowledgement is central to an understanding of the works of these writers. In three sections, each focusing on one of the three authors, I hope to underscore the significance of this generational discourse for each writer’s work. Emphasizing their different attitudes toward Nazi upbringing in this early phase of their careers will be crucial for my reading of the development of these three writers after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

In the first part on Günter Grass, I begin with a consideration of W. G. Sebald’s critique of the autobiographically inspired work *Aus dem Tagebuch einer Schnecke* (1979), which identifies in the text the same apologetic tendencies found in the works of older German writers. I take issue with this critique, arguing that he misreads large parts of the text, since he seems so unfamiliar with two themes Grass develops in his early work based explicitly on his generational experiences—ideological skepticism and guilt. In a brief reading of *Aus dem Tagebuch einer Schnecke* and a longer reading of *Hundejahre* I will demonstrate how Grass relates these themes to a Hitler Youth discourse. In the second part on Christa Wolf, I will show that for the East-German writer, the generational subject was perhaps even more important, even though she was forced to address it in more careful terms than her West German colleague. While Wolf’s most pivotal work on her generation is without a doubt the novel *Kindheitsmuster* (1979), which I discuss in the next chapter, here I contend that the critical turn in Wolf’s early work, usually linked with her novel *Nachdenken über Christa T.* (1968) was prompted by a shift in perspective regarding her generation’s path from fascism to socialism. In the

mid-sixties, Wolf develops a more critical stance towards the German Democratic Republic, a stance based on a form of generational discourse, which paradoxically, as I will show, leads to her continuing support of the socialist utopia.

At first glance, Martin Walser's early work seems to lack the generational theme entirely, and there is little material to be found that would show a continual thinking about his generational origins with the same urgency visible in Grass and Wolf. However, as I argue in my third section, this lack is itself meaningful. If we see Walser against the foil of these two writers, it becomes obvious that he seems to have avoided publicly speaking and writing about his Hitler Youth past. I relate this avoidance to Walser's detachment from the left-liberal discourse that first emerges at the end of the seventies, which he later so heavily critiques. The most crucial text in this context is the 1979 essay "Händedruck mit Gespenstern", where he explains that because of his increasingly nationalist political stance he cannot be seen as a leftist intellectual any longer. The essay also reveals Walser's struggle to form a political opinion on the right while being haunted by his Hitler Youth past, and thus offers a way to understand his refusal to explicitly include his biography in his writing and politics, asserting that this kind of generational discourse of the Hitler Youth generation is already occupied and dominated by the political left.

1. Ten Years Make a Difference—

Generations in *Aus dem Tagebuch einer Schnecke* (1972) and *Hundejahre* (1963) by Günter Grass

Wunschfiguren

In his essay “Konstruktionen der Trauer,” W. G. Sebald compares the theme of mourning in two texts by post-war German writers, Günter Grass’s diary text *Tagebuch einer Schnecke* and Wolfgang Hildesheimer’s novel *Tynset*.¹⁶⁰ Mary Cosgrove criticizes Sebald’s biased approach in pitting the two writers against each other favoring the Jewish-German writer Hildesheimer, with whom he seems to identify more strongly. The comparison becomes a kind of “melancholy competition,” as Cosgrove calls it,¹⁶¹ over which is the more authentic discourse of mourning, specifically of mourning over the Jewish victims of the Holocaust. She points out that Sebald, under the guise of analyzing the texts based on literary criteria, operates as though there were a normative standard for authentic mourning while ignoring the authors’ different registers and their ethnic and generational affiliations. The essay, Cosgrove writes, “seems to suggest that Grass is faking it, that his melancholy ode plays in a flat key and that his focus on matters German compromises him in his search for a commemorative discourse on the Jews.”¹⁶² Sebald does not acknowledge that Grass and Hildesheimer come from opposite historical perspectives, the former from the collective of perpetrators, the latter from the collective of victims.

¹⁶⁰ W. G. Sebald, “Konstruktionen der Trauer. Günter Grass und Wolfgang Hildesheimer,” in *Campo Santo* (Munich: Hanser, 2003), 101-27.

¹⁶¹ Mary Cosgrove, “Melancholy Competitions: W.G. Sebald Reads Günter Grass and Wolfgang Hildesheimer,” *German Life and Letters* 59.2 (2006): 217-232.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 231.

Cosgrove interprets Sebald's strong favoritism of Hildesheimer in relation to his affiliation with the generation of 1968, arguing that it reveals "the idealizing perspective of the West German intellectual of the student generation."¹⁶³ This post-war generation, she claims, identifies strongly with the Jewish victims of history and grew up in opposition to all those Germans biographically connected to the Nazi era. For her, Sebald carries this generational bias over into his writings on post-war German literature:

Sebald's critical attitude towards postwar Germany is well known; here, as in his vehement essay on Alfred Andersch, it is once again the postwar German writer [Cosgrove speaks of Günter Grass here], who was old enough to have played an active role in the Nazi war effort, who functions as the target for a scathing attack. The conflict between the German postwar first and second generations comes to the fore in Sebald's treatment of Grass, for the problem of the legacy of guilt and responsibility is precisely what makes it impossible for even the 'Nachgeborene' to conceive of self in terms not shaped by this past.¹⁶⁴

Sebald's commitment to the memory of the Jewish victims and his skepticism toward both Andersch and Grass—she counts both writers among the first generation of post-war Germans—can thus be explained, she thinks, by Sebald's affiliation to the sixty-eighters.

Cosgrove's reading of the bias underlying Sebald's essay seems convincing, but her tacit acceptance of his definition of the first generation of post-war authors leads to a degree of imprecision when it comes to identifying where exactly Sebald's argument goes wrong. I would argue that Sebald is not simply expressing the bias of a second-generation German writer against a first-generation one, but rather the bias of a second-generation writer who falsely assumes that his target—Günter Grass—follows the same patterns as all the other first-generation writers. Sebald misreads the *Tagebuch*, I argue, because he

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid. This quote refers to Sebald's controversial essay on Alfred Andersch published in 1990, in which he portrayed the older writer as an opportunist, who divorced his "half-Jewish" wife Angelika in 1934 for career reasons, only to use this marriage later in order to free himself from the suspicion of anti-Semitism in front of the American Allies. See W.G. Sebald: "Der Schriftsteller Alfred Andersch," in W.G. Sebald, *Luftkrieg und Literatur*, (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer 2001), 111-147.

does not take Grass's generational discourse into consideration. Like Weigel, Briegleb, and Braese, he attacks a group of German writers with a moral argument based on their biographies. But he also problematically merges the first generation of post-war writers with the Hitler Youth generation—as it is often the case in the scholarship on memory and post-war literature—arguing that in the *Tagebuch*, Grass simply continues the repression and apologetic distortions of 1950s literature.

Sebald's argument hinges on his reading of the character of Hermann Ott, also called Zweifel, as yet another apologetic representation of the “good German.” At the beginning of his essay, he claims that in the early post-war period “die Mehrzahl der repräsentativen Autoren der neuen Republik (wie etwa Richter, Andersch und Böll)”¹⁶⁵ were busy creating the myth of the good German, writing stories involving, for example, a German soldier, whose humanity stands out among the inhumane crime surrounding him. This literature, instead of addressing the conflicts Jewish survivors had to fight during these years, kept depicting “good Germans” who, as Sebald sarcastically puts it, endured the Nazi rule in “passivem Widerstand.”¹⁶⁶ This supposed “resistance” was often expressed by way of a love story between a German (soldier) and a Polish or Jewish girl—German men interested in “the other.” Literature by writers such as Andersch, Richter, and Böll, he summarizes, was populated by “schlecht schraffierte[...] Wunschfiguren der Unschuld.”¹⁶⁷ The same phenomenon of creating the good and innocent German retrospectively, he claims, can be seen in Grass's *Tagebuch* in the fictional character of the school teacher Hermann Ott.

¹⁶⁵ Sebald, “Konstruktionen der Trauer,” 105.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 105.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 106.

What does Grass tell us about this character? In 1924, Ott returns to Danzig from studying philosophy and biology in Berlin in order to take a vacation job in a Jewish emigrants' camp. This is where he is first called "Zweifel" or "Dr. Zweifel," "weil der Student Hermann Ott mit dem Wort Zweifel so gebräuchlich umgeht, als hantiere er mit Messer und Gabel."¹⁶⁸ He keeps this nickname, highlighting his categorical questioning of the things around him, when he begins to work as a teacher at the local high school. His ability to doubt makes him immune to National Socialism when the movement reaches the city. He proves to be a clear-sighted and critical observer of the rising anti-Semitism and the beginning persecutions of the Jewish people of Danzig. When a Jewish acquaintance, the editor of a Zionist newspaper, has to flee the city, for example, Zweifel lends him his bicycle, while also revealing his understanding of this incident as societally symptomatic: "Ich bezweifle," he says "daß es bei dieser vereinzelt Flucht bleiben wird."¹⁶⁹ Zweifel also speaks up in front of the whole school when a seventeen-year old Jewish boy commits suicide after being harassed by his classmates about being circumcised. When the bullies are expelled, Zweifel comments: "Ich bezweifle, daß der Verweis von Schülern irgend etwas bewirkt, solange es einige Lehrkräfte für richtig halten, verallgemeinernde Aussagen – wie etwa: 'Die Juden sind unser Unglück' – zum Aufsatzthema zu erheben."¹⁷⁰ Some time after this incident, the school administration suggests that he leave and he begins to work at a Jewish private school. When restrictions against Jews become ever more unbearable and life in Danzig a dangerous enterprise, Zweifel encourages students and their families to emigrate. Violence is all around, and

¹⁶⁸ Günter Grass, *Hundejahre* (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1993), 23.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 3

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 30.

shortly after 1939, Zweifel himself has to flee the Gestapo. He pays a farmer outside of Danzig for hiding him in the basement where he survives the war.

The fictional story about the exceptional teacher Dr. Zweifel represents only one of the book's many narrative threads. The diary, published in 1972, first and foremost centers around Grass's diary notes from his 1969 campaign for the candidate of the Social Democratic Party Willy Brandt. Interwoven with these notes from the campaign trail are other important narratives such as the writer's conversations with his children, his encounter with someone who commits suicide shortly after talking to Grass, his essayistic reflections about the engraving "Melencolia I" by the Renaissance master Albrecht Dürer, and a historical account of the expulsion of the Jewish people of Danzig/Gdansk.¹⁷¹ The fact that most of these other narrative threads are non-fictional is central to Sebald's critique, as he considers the inclusion of the Zweifel story among all the documentary pieces to be a strategy to create the illusion that this "good German" actually existed:

Im Gegensatz zu den dokumentarischen Passagen über den Auszug der Juden und über den Wahlkampf, zu den Berichten aus dem Familienleben des Schreibers

¹⁷¹ The montage of these narrative pieces appears arbitrary at times. As Mavis Gallant wrote in his 1973 review of the book: "These accounts, recitals, pieces of fiction and reportage have been sliced like a loaf of bread and reassembled in an order that seems random, but was probably carefully planned. Whatever the intention, one has the feeling of reading a number of short and incomplete magazine pieces, with the page turns gone mad." See Mavis Gallant, "How to Cook Cow's Udder," *New York Times*, September 30, 1973, <http://www.nytimes.com/books/99/12/19/specials/grass-diary.html>. But Grass discloses at several points in the text that the chaotic organization of the narrative thread is a purposeful rejection of linear storytelling, in that it mimics the genre of the so-called "Sudelbuch," a business notebook used originally by merchants to quickly scribble down numbers. Together with the metaphor of the snail with its connotations of slowness and intricateness, the organization of the narrative as "Sudelbuch" emphasizes Grass's questioning of the ideas of linearity and progress, which he relates directly to his Hitler Youth past: "Bei der Hitlerjugend wurde gesungen, habe ich mitgesungen: 'Vorwärts, vorwärts, schmettern die hellen Fanfaren...' Ein dummes Wort, das oft genug den Rückschritt beschleunigt hat. Ein geblähtes, deshalb rasch abschläffendes Wort, dem die Begeisterung als Luft und der Glaube als Pumpe dienen. Ein über Gräber und Massengräber springendes, in alle Sprachen übersetztes, jedem Lautsprecher geläufiges Fingerzeigwort, das erst im nachhinein (Flüchtlingsgespräche) geprüft wird. Mal sehen, ob vorwärts schon hinter uns liegt. (...) Mitten im Fortschritt ertappen wir uns im Stillstand." Günter Grass, *Aus dem Tagebuch einer Schnecke* (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1998), 32-33.

und zu den essayistischen Exkursen ist sie, obschon alles sonst auf sie Bezug hat, bloß erfunden. Das wird freilich durch den wiederholten Hinweis, es handle sich hier in etwa um die Erlebnisse des Marcel Reich-Ranicki, zunächst vertuscht. Hermann Ott alias Zweifel, von Berufs wegen Studienassessor und Skeptiker, der—seit den jüdischen Kindern Danzigs die staatlichen Schulen verschlossen sind—auf der Rosenbaumschen Privatschule unterrichtet und noch bei jüdischen Händlern seinen Salat einkauft, als ihm die Marktfrauen dafür schon ‚Pfui Deibel‘ zurufen, dieser Hermann Ott ist eine retrospektive Wunschfigur des Autors [...]. Die Implikation ist hier wie bei allem, was wir über Hermann Ott erfahren, daß es den besseren Deutschen tatsächlich gegeben hat, eine These, die durch die Verbindung der Fiktion mit dem dokumentarischen Material den Anspruch eines hohen Grads von Wahrscheinlichkeit sich erborgt.¹⁷²

It is this last part of Sebald's argument that is unconvincing. The simple fact that Grass combines the Zweifel story with documentary material does not necessarily detract from its fictional nature.¹⁷³ His reading of Zweifel as an expression of wishful thinking about the past needs to be taken seriously, without the necessarily considering it a paradigmatic heroic tale of the “good German”. Rather, I argue that Grass very consciously presents Zweifel as a “retrospektive Wunschfigur”—however *without* the intention of apologetically glossing over Nazi history.

Sebald reads the character of Zweifel as one of many stories representing “die guten und unschuldigen Deutschen, die in unserer Nachkriegsliteratur ihr stilles Heldenleben führen.”¹⁷⁴ He implies that Grass sells the book as a text about mourning—mourning the loss of the Danzig Jews—but that he fails with this intention because the story of Zweifel overpowers the story of the Danzig Jews. Sebald goes even further by suggesting that Grass repeats the historical marginalization of the Jews in his text: “Die Kunstfigur des Zweifel genannten Schullehrers, die Grass für die Entwicklung seiner

¹⁷² Sebald, “Konstruktionen der Trauer,” 113.

¹⁷³ One should note that it is particularly strange that Sebald of all writers would make such a claim, as he himself constantly mixes in pictures and other documentary material in his stories, precisely in order to question the line between reality and fiction.

¹⁷⁴ Sebald, “Konstruktionen der Trauer,” 114.

Schneckenmelancholie ermöglicht, wirkt [...] wie ein der programmatischen Intention der Trauer entgegenstehendes Alibi über das die realen Aspekte der Geschichte der Danziger Juden [...] nochmals zu kurz kommen.”¹⁷⁵ But Sebald’s marginalization argument only works if one assumes that Grass’s overall intention was to mourn the lost lives of the Danzig Jews. Even without providing a close analysis of the Grass’s text, one can assume that this was likely *not* his primary focus. Rather, in the *Tagebuch*, Grass reveals that the motivation for his anti-ideological politics, his support of Willy Brandt, and his work in the German provinces during the campaign trail lies in his Hitler Youth past. The story about the teacher Zweifel, then, does not appear as an apologetic attempt to insert the figure of the good German into Nazi history, but as a story about the lost chances in Grass’s own biography.

In a speech given at the end of the nineties in the context of a debate about the reform of the German high school system, Grass says that he wishes he had experienced a teacher like Dr. Zweifel:

Ich habe ihn nicht oder nur andeutungsweise erlebt. Dabei hätte ich Hermann Ott, genannt Zweifel, gerne zum Lehrer gehabt. Ersatzweise ist er mir aus Bruchstücken und Wünschen entstanden. Jemand, dem Erkenntnis nur aus langwieriger Erfahrung und geduldigem Anschauen erwuchs. Jemand, der mich in Zeiten dumpfer Gläubigkeit gelehrt hätte, aus Prinzip zu zweifeln.

He then speaks about one teacher who taught his students to doubt at least to some extent:

Oder gab es Lehrer, die in meinen Hitlerjugendjahren den Mut hatten, Zweifel anzumelden, und sei es auch nur in Nebensätzen? Ich erinnere mich an einen von allen Schülern gefürchteten, trocken konservativen Studienrat, der uns Geschichte einpaukte, indem er dozierend auf und ab schritt, dabei die Wirrnisse des Dreißigjährigen Krieges um weitere Verknotungen bereicherte, wobei er mit Wendungen wie “Wir haben allen Grund, zu bezweifeln ...” oder “Abermals besteht Anlaß für Zweifel” nicht sparte, um plötzlich mit dem Satz: “Das deutsche Volk ist eine Hammelherde bis ins Oberkommando der Wehrmacht hinauf” in die Gegenwart kurz vor oder nach Stalingrad zu springen und uns in unserem

¹⁷⁵ Günter Grass, *Tagebuch einer Schnecke*, 114.

Halbschlaf aufzustören. Später, als er von einem Tag auf den anderen verschwunden war – und alle ahnten, wohin – hieß es, kurz vor ihrem Kriegabitur hätten ihn Obersekundaner denunziert.

Es wird wohl so sein, daß dieser Studienrat, auf den ich nicht hören wollte, mich dennoch zwei Jahrzehnte später angestiftet hat, den Lehrer Hermann Ott, genannt Dr. Zweifel, ins literarische Spiel zu bringen. Mehr noch: Ihm ist zu verdanken, daß ich, wo und wann immer Glauben zum Marktangebot gehörte, das “Prinzip Zweifel” allen anderen Prinzipien, auch dem “Prinzip Hoffnung”, übergeordnet habe.¹⁷⁶

This vague memory of a teacher, who, Grass admits, might have been “aus Bruchstücken und Wünschen entstanden” served as inspiration for the literary figure of Dr. Zweifel. But as in the diary it becomes clear that Grass’s emphasis does not lie on Zweifel, the model German or Zweifel, the philosemite. Rather, he presents this character as the teacher he himself never had or the teacher to whom he did not listen. At some point in the diary, the autobiographical figure of Grass says to his children, “Erst jetzt, Kinder, kann Zweifel aufkommen, überwiegen, bestehen bleiben, die Stimmung trüben, Hoffnung ansäuern, sich mutig und lustig betragen, unter Verbot stehen, kann endlich von Hermann Ott die Rede sein.”¹⁷⁷ This statement must be read biographically. It is only now, in 1972, that Grass can invent a character who embodies this type of critical thinking with which he himself only became familiar a long time after the end of the war. With the figure of Zweifel, he projects back into the past the ability he wishes he had possessed already during between 1933 and 1945.

That Grass relates his aversion to ideologies and utopias and his preference for the “Prinzip Zweifel” to his biographical experiences is already clear in a 1965 campaign speech for Willy Brandt entitled “Ich klage an.” In this speech, he describes his experiences as a *Hitlerjunge* and a witness to the Nazi era as the origins of his ideological

¹⁷⁶ Grass, “Der lernende Lehrer. Warum ich bei Hermann Ott, genannt Dr. Zweifel, gern in die Schule gegangen wäre,” *Die Zeit*, June 20, 1999, http://www.zeit.de/1999/21/199921.lehrer_.xml.

¹⁷⁷ Grass, *Tagebuch einer Schnecke*, 23.

skepticism and support of the SPD. He states that in the early post-war years when many intellectuals were drawn to communism, he was drawn to a pragmatic social democracy precisely because the socialist utopia awoke uncomfortable memories of his Hitler Youth past:

Noch hatte ich die Morgenfeiern der Hitlerjugend im Ohr, diese allsonntäglichen Vereidigungen auf die Fahne, aufs Blut und auf den Boden natürlich, und schon lockten die Kommunisten mit ähnlich verstaubten Requisiten aus den Rumpelkammern ihrer Ideologie. Als gebranntes Kind hielt ich mich vorsorglich an meine wortkargen Sozialdemokraten, die weder vom Tausendjährigen Reich noch von der Weltrevolution faselten.¹⁷⁸

Later in the speech, he expands on this idea, claiming that doubt and skepticism are characteristic features of his entire generation: “In gefärbten Uniformstücken standen wir frühreif zwischen Trümmern. Wir waren skeptisch und fortan bereit, jedes Wort zu prüfen und nicht mehr blindlings zu glauben. Jede Ideologie prallte an uns ab.”¹⁷⁹ It was only chance that prevented them from being part of the “guilty generation” of Germans and gave them the opportunity to become the “skeptical generation.” But the majority of his generation, Grass claims, did not take advantage of this historical opportunity, and was instead corrupted by the materialism of the economic miracle years, withdrawing from political life, a withdrawal he harshly criticizes. “Ich klage an” continues with a strong rebuke of his generation’s devolution from “healthy” skepticism to political fatigue and consumerism:

Meine Generation klage ich an. Sie konnte unter Hitler nicht schuldig werden. Wir waren zu jung. Wir hatten den richtigen Jahrgang. Doch der Jahrgang ist kein Verdienst. Vor zwanzig Jahren waren wir 14, 16 oder auch 20 Jahre alt. In gefärbten Uniformstücken standen wir frühreif zwischen Trümmern. Wir waren skeptisch und fortan bereit, jedes Wort zu prüfen und nicht mehr blindlings zu glauben. Jede Ideologie prallte an uns ab. Es kam darauf an, sich den Frieden und seine Möglichkeiten nicht aus der Hand nehmen zu lassen. Aber wir haben uns

¹⁷⁸ Günter Grass, “Ich klage an,” in Grass, *Essays*, 126-135, 127.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 134.

korrumpieren lassen. Wir haben es geduldet, daß dieser Frieden in geistlosem Wohlstand erstickt wurde, während unsere Landleute, die wir schamlos Brüder und Schwestern nennen, die Zeche bezahlen mußten. Dieser Wohlstand riecht nach Bestechung! Jeder Zweifel an der Richtigkeit dieser Politik wurde mit dem Hinweis auf den vollen Eisschrank beschwichtigt. Schaut Euch an, Ihr dreißigjährigen Familienväter: abgesichert, angepaßt und mürrisch vor Fernsehschirme gepflanzt. So billig hat meine Generation sich einkaufen lassen! Die Väter wurden schuldig unter Zwang; jedes Schuldkonto jedoch, das heute eröffnet wird, türmt sich freiwillig.¹⁸⁰

This description of the Hitler Youth generation as skeptical, apolitical and materialistic clearly echoes Schelsky's 1957 book *Die skeptische Generation*, but Grass gives this rather descriptive study a normative twist by demanding political engagement. Being skeptical of ideologies, Grass argues, should not result in an apolitical stance. Instead of being interested just in filling up the refrigerator, the men of his generation, the "dreißigjährigen Familienväter," ought to be preoccupied with Germany's recent division by the Berlin Wall, an important topic on Brandt's political agenda.

Later in his career, Grass applied this idea of ideological skepticism more specifically to the realm of literature. In retrospect he describes the idea of skepticism as the driving force for writers of his generation. In "Schreiben nach Auschwitz," his 1990 Frankfurt lecture on poetics, he speaks about his generation's crucial role for post-war German literature, highlighting precisely the categories of doubt and skepticism: "Es galt den absoluten Größen, dem ideologischen Weiß und Schwarz abzuschwören, dem Glauben Platzverweis zu erteilen und nur noch auf Zweifel zu setzen, der alles und selbst den Regenbogen graustichig werden ließ."¹⁸¹ In his 1999 Nobel Prize lecture, Grass

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ Günter Grass, "Schreiben nach Auschwitz. Frankfurter Poetik-Vorlesung," in Günter Grass, *Der Autor als fragwürdiger Zeuge*, ed. Daniela Hermes (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1997), 195-222, here 203-204.

expresses this idea again, recycling the color imagery and some of the phrasing of the earlier speech:

Uns, den gebrannten Kindern, kam es darauf an, den absoluten Größen, dem ideologischen Weiß oder Schwarz abzuschwören. Zweifel und Skepsis standen Pate; die Vielzahl der Grauwerte reichten sie uns als Geschenk. Nur so konnte das Schreiben nach Auschwitz – ob Gedicht oder Prosa – fortgesetzt werden.¹⁸²

Grass thus claims that writers of the skeptical generation—those who had learned their lesson about ideologies after blindly following the Nazis as children and adolescents—helped to clear the German language of National Socialist ballast and thus established one of the preconditions for the continuation of German literature after Auschwitz.

The generational context becomes even clearer in his Nobel Prize speech. For writers of his generation, he argues, it was always crucial “daß wir zwar nicht als Täter, doch im Lager der Täter zur Auschwitz-Generation gehörten, daß also unserer Biographie, inmitten der üblichen Daten, das Datum der Wannsee-Konferenz eingeschrieben war; aber auch soviel war uns gewiß, daß das Adorno-Gebot—wenn überhaupt—nur schreibend zu widerlegen war.”¹⁸³

This particular understanding of the authorial self as being part of the perpetrator collective without actually having been perpetrators generated a memory discourse that, as I argued in the previous chapter, must be distinguished from the Wehrmacht generation and the literary generation of the Gruppe 47 founders Alfred Andersch and Hans-Werner Richter. Grass makes this distinction very explicit in an early text, the 1963 novel *Hundejahre*. In the following section, I will show that at first glance, Grass assigns fairly simple historical roles to these two generations. He appears to depict the older

¹⁸² Günter Grass, “Fortsetzung folgt...,” Nobel Lecture - Literature 1999,” http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1999/lecture-g.html>.

¹⁸³ Grass, “Schreiben nach Auschwitz,” 203-204.

generation as perpetrators and his own generation as witnesses. I argue, however, that Grass simultaneously questions these historical roles and that he precisely does *not* evoke the idea of the “*innocent witness*” for which Sigrid Weigel critiques writers of the Hitler Youth generation.

Innocent witnesses?

One of the main subjects of Grass’s second novel *Hundejahre* (1963) is the difference between the Wehrmacht and Hitler Youth generations. Published four years after Grass’ breakthrough with *Die Blechtrommel*, this novel tells the story of the friendship between Walter Matern and his friend Eddi Amsel, both born in 1917, and thus representative of the cohort Grass describes in his 1979 essay “Kein Schlusswort.” The text traces the lives of these two protagonists from the mid-twenties until the early sixties. They are sixteen when Hitler comes to power, twenty-two when the war begins, and twenty-eight when it ends. Thus, unlike the Hitler Youth generation, they experience Hitler’s rule not as children but as adolescents, and the war as adults. Matern and Amsel also occupy the positions of perpetrator and victim: Amsel’s father is Jewish (his fate unknown after the war) and Matern sympathizes with the Nazis and becomes the prototypical German unreflectively following the promises of the new ideology.

Matern and Amsel grow up in a village near Danzig. When Matern spontaneously protects the chubby Amsel—the outsider who is bullied by the other children because of his peculiar artistic ambitions (he feverishly builds scarecrows)—one day at school, the nine-year-old boys become best friends. They begin to spend all their time together and share everything, including a language only the two of them are able to understand. But the carefree years of childhood do not endure through the Nazi rise to power. Matern,

increasingly drawn toward the fascist ideology, enters the SA, and their friendship ends abruptly when Amsel is assaulted by a group of SA men who knock all his teeth out and leave him bleeding in the snow. Matern, in his uniform and with a mask covering his face, is barely recognizable, but Amsel nevertheless identifies his friend among the attackers. Shattered by the violence of the attack and by his friend's betrayal, he leaves the village forever. Under various false names and pursuing different professions, Amsel survives the war and eventually becomes a successful businessman and owner of a mine in central Germany.

The complicated narrative structure of *Hundejahre* was one of the most criticized features of the book after its publication. Grass structures the work through a type of “Herausgeberfiktion”: as the plot unfolds, Amsel—or rather Brauxel, as he calls himself in 1961—becomes visible as the planner, commissioner, and editor of the novel. Amsel/Brauxel hires an “Autorenkollektiv” in order to trace the years of his friendship with Matern and their lives apart after the betrayal. This collective consists of Amsel/Brauxel himself, the young writer Harry Liebenau, and finally Walter Matern (who does not recognize his old friend Amsel). Brauxel's novel, identical with the text presented to the reader as *Hundejahre*, is thus divided into three parts, which follow Amsel's and Matern's biographies in chronological order: In “Frühschichten”, the first part of the novel, Amsel/Brauxel takes on the task of depicting the years before the rise of National Socialism. The second part, told by Liebenau, is called “Liebesbriefe” and describes the years during the National Socialist reign. Finally, Walter Matern is responsible for the third part of the book, the so-called “Materniaden,” that focuses on the post-war years.

In his 1967 review of the novel, Marcel Reich-Ranicki argues that the use of the three different narrators is superficial and mechanical, because the viewpoint never changes; it remains that of Grass: “Es bleibt [...] offen, wozu Grass überhaupt drei verschiedene Ich-Erzähler gebraucht hat,” he writes, adding that “Stil, Blickwinkel und Betrachtungsweise der drei Chronisten unterscheiden sich voneinander überhaupt nicht oder bloß unerheblich, die Erzählerstafette ergibt nichts.”¹⁸⁴ Ranicki is correct in his assessment that the voices of the narrators do not differ significantly from each other, and that Grass’ idiosyncratic voice prevails throughout the novel. However, the three writers of the “Autorenkollektiv” do write from exceedingly different historical vantage points. Grass juxtaposes a German and a Jewish perspective in the first and the third part of the novel, but more importantly, *Hundejahre* also contains a juxtaposition of two generational perspectives: the first generation represented by Amsel and Matern (born in 1917), and the Hitler Youth generation, Grass’ own, represented by Harry Liebenau (born in 1927), the narrator of the second book.

Albrecht Goetze has argued that the three narrators represent three different relationships to the Nazi past: while Amsel embodies the victim and Matern the perpetrator, Liebenau’s role is that of the witness.¹⁸⁵ A passage at the end of “Frühschichten” supports this reading, revealing that Amsel/Brauxel appoints Liebenau precisely to serve this function. Although the young man comes with impeccable references as a writer, he is hired only after a long examination:

Wie war es, als der junge Harry Liebenau zu uns kam und sich um die Autorschaft des zweiten Buches bewarb? Brauxel examinierte ihn. [...]

¹⁸⁴ Marcel Reich-Ranicki: “Bilderbogen mit Marionetten und Vogelscheuchen,” in Marcel Reich-Ranicki, *Unser Grass* (Munich: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 2003), 48-49.

¹⁸⁵ Albrecht Goetze, *Pression und Deformation. Zehn Thesen zum Roman ‘Hundejahre’ von Günter Graß* (sic) (Göppingen: Kümmerle, 1972), 28.

Brauchsel fragte ihn zuerst über Danzig aus: ‚Wie, junger Freund, hießen die Verbindungsgassen zwischen der Hopfengasse und der neuen Mottlau?‘ Harry Liebenau schnurrte sie herunter: ‚Kiebitzgasse, Stützengasse, Mausegasse, Brandgasse, Adebargasse, Münchengasse, Judengasse, Milchkannengasse, Schleifengasse, Turmgasse und Leitergasse.‘

‚Wie, junger Mann‘, wollte Brauchsel wissen, ‚wollen Sie uns erklären, wie die Portechaisengasse zu ihrem hübschen Namen gekommen ist?‘ [...] ‚Wer war, junger Freund - Sie werden sich kaum erinnern -, der letzte Vorsitzende der Zentrumsparterie in Danzig?‘ [...] Mir fielen noch eine Menge kniffliger Fragen ein. Den Verlauf des Strießbaches, die Namen aller Langfuhrer Schokoladenfabriken, die Höhe des Erbsberges im Jäschkentaler Wald wollte ich wissen und bekam zufriedenstellende Antworten. Als Harry Liebenau auf die Frage: Welche bekannten Schauspieler begannen ihre Karriere im Danziger Stadttheater? sofort die frühverstorbene Renate Müller und den Filmiebling Hans Söhnker nannte, gab ich in meinem Lehnstuhl zu erkennen, daß die Prüfung beendet und bestanden sei.¹⁸⁶

It becomes clear that Amsel/Brauxel is not only seeking a good writer but someone with an intimate knowledge of Danzig and its past and present history, entrusting him with the job only after checking if Liebenau knows a great number of geographical and historical facts about the city. The young writer, then, becomes the mediator of the events during the Nazi years because of his apparent ability to objectively record history.

One could argue that by casting Liebenau—a member of the Hitler Youth generation—in the role of the historical witness, Grass reinforces the stereotype that his generation has a particularly authentic access to Nazi history, which Weigel would argue almost always entails an attempt at exculpation. This is a delicate issue if we consider the fact that the historical witness in the novel, the character Harry Liebenau, is quite clearly an alter ego of Grass, a young writer who was born in 1927 in Langfuhr, a suburb of Danzig.¹⁸⁷ In his memoir, Grass describes the description of Harry Liebenau in

¹⁸⁶ Grass, *Hundejahre*, 144-45.

¹⁸⁷ Many details in Harry’s fictional curriculum vitae are taken directly from Grass’ own biography, as a quick comparison of *Hundejahre* with his memoir *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel* shows: like Grass, Harry is deployed as a student to help the German airforce (“Luftwaffenhelfer”) at the age of sixteen, he is based at a casern by the name “Kaisershafen,” before being transferred to a bigger division called “Großbatterie

Hundejahre as “mein erster Versuch, die Wirrnis im Kopf eines jungen Soldaten, dessen zu geräumiger Stahlhelm ständig rutschte, zu sortieren und auf blankweißes Papier zu bringen.”¹⁸⁸ A superficial reading of the autobiographical parallels would then suggest that Grass is doing exactly what Weigel argues he would do: evoking his own innocence based on his young age. My own reading suggests, by contrast, that by including another figure, Harry’s teenage friend Tulla Prokriefke, Grass precisely complicates the Hitler Youth generation’s role of the innocent witness.

Even a quick glance at the second part reveals how much space Tulla takes up in Harry’s descriptions. Hired as a witness to give a report of the relationship between Amsel and Matern during the Nazi years, Liebenau is not doing a particularly good job. Most of his writing is dedicated to his cousin Tulla. Consequently, the second part of *Hundejahre*, supposedly a witness report, is called “Liebesbriefe.” Paragraphs are introduced with salutations such as “Liebe Tulla,”¹⁸⁹ “Liebe Cousine,”¹⁹⁰ “Liebe Cousine Tulla,”¹⁹¹ or phrases that evoke a conversation with Tulla, such as “O Tulla,”¹⁹² “Und du, Tulla,”¹⁹³ “Hör zu, Tulla,”¹⁹⁴ or “Du und ich.”¹⁹⁵ Harry himself addresses this problematic balance: “Meine Cousine Tulla, von der ich schreibe, an die ich schreibe,

Brösen-Glettkau,” and finally he volunteers for the military and cannot wait for his conscription order to arrive, regarding it as a way to escape his petty-bourgeois life. The overall image Grass paints of Liebenau in *Hundejahre* is similar to the depiction he gives of himself as an adolescent in his memoir: oblivious and naïve, Harry follows the various ideologies presented to him, fascinated by the idea of joining the military and anxious to leave the narrow-minded world in which he lives.

¹⁸⁸ See Grass, *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel*, 134-35.

¹⁸⁹ Grass, *Hundejahre*, 151, 177.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 151, 153, 202, 172, and 218.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 151, 152 and 208.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, 163.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, 166.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 160, 231, 234.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 205.

obgleich ich, wenn es nach Brauxel ginge, immer nur über Eddi Amsel schreiben müßte.“¹⁹⁶

Reich-Ranicki dismissed the peculiar structure of the second part as a compositional failure. Neither here nor in the rest of the novel, he argued, did Grass succeed in having a clear and consistent narrative.¹⁹⁷ But his narrative becomes more consistent if we read the Tulla character as an embodiment of the Hitler Youth’s guilt. By literally addressing Tulla, Harry metaphorically addresses his own and his generation’s guilt. He realizes at the beginning that there is no true dialogue since Tulla of course never responds:

Liebe Cousine Tulla,
man rät mir, Dich und Deinen Rufnamen an den Anfang zu setzen, Dich, da Du überall Stoff warst, bist und sein wirst, formlos anzusprechen, als beginne ein Brief. Dabei erzähle ich mir, nur und unheilbar mir; oder erzähle ich etwa Dir, daß ich mir erzähle?¹⁹⁸

Both Tulla and Harry are guilty witnesses:

Tulla und ich waren dabei“¹⁹⁹
Tulla und ich sahen“²⁰⁰
Tulla und ich wußten“²⁰¹

On the one hand, Harry and Tulla merely enter puberty when the war begins, busy eating ice cream and discovering their sexuality, but Tulla on the other hand, Tulla is shown as an someone who has internalized the Nazi ideologies: an expert in discrimination and persecution. Harry characterizes his cousin as “immer schuldig oder mitschuldig.“²⁰² He recalls, for example, how the young girl expels Eddi Amsel from her family’s property by

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 248.

¹⁹⁷ See Reich-Ranicki, “Bilderbogen,” 50.

¹⁹⁸ Grass, *Hundejahre* 151.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., 250.

²⁰⁰ Ibid., 260.

²⁰¹ Ibid., 268.

²⁰² Ibid., 230.

loudly and repeatedly calling him “Itzich”, an antisemitic expression for Jew,²⁰³ knowing that this denunciation could cause him harm. Tulla is also responsible for the arrest of their non-conformist teacher Brunies, who is brought to the concentration camp Stutthof. Harry, meanwhile, remains in the role of the observer but he becomes complicit through his admiration for Tulla.

Grass compares Wehrmacht and Hitler Youth generation with regard to violence and oppression most clearly in the relationship between Tulla and Jenny. Jenny, a girl slightly younger than Tulla and Harry, was found and adopted by teacher Brunies after being left by her “Gypsy” parents. With her Roma heritage, she represents a group persecuted by the Nazis, in the same way the “half-Jewish” Amsel does. Like Amsel, Jenny becomes the victim of Nazi persecution, even if Grass initially shows it to be a “childish” type of persecution, for example when Tulla spits in Jenny’s stroller and makes her eat jellyfish. However, that Grass does not represent these acts simply as innocent teasing among children, becomes clear in the scene of the great betrayal. In a masterfully narrated episode, Grass parallels the guilt of both generations when he shows how Matern and his SA friends assault Amsel at the same time as Tulla torments Jenny in a nearby park. This scene does not juxtapose an innocent with a guilty generation but rather the persecuted, Jenny and Amsel, and the persecutors, Tulla and Matern. As such, Grass highlights both generations’ inhumane behavior.

Harry’s role is that of the intelligent observer. He reports what happens at the two locations: while Tulla forces the overweight Jenny to dance in the snow until she falls and cannot get up anymore, Matern pounds his friend until he lies on the ground unconscious. Neither Tulla nor Matern stop the violence when their victim is on the

²⁰³ Ibid., 216-17.

ground, and both Amsel and Jenny are rolled up in a carpet of snow at the end. They are being turned into snowmen:

Jenny wollte nicht mehr. Nach dem zweiten und dritten Sturz kroch sie uns wimmernd, ein Schneeball, entgegen. Aber Tulla war noch nicht satt. [...] Und wenn Jenny hochwollte, stieß Tulla sie zurück. [...] Tulla lachte meckernd mit Echo über die Lichtung und winkte uns heran. Wir blieben unter den Buchen, während Jenny im Schnee gerollt wurde. Ganz still war sie und wurde immer dicker. [...]

Tulla hatte mit Jenny leichtes Spiel; aber Eddi Amsel [...] muß mit der Faust geantwortet werden, solange er Fragen stellt. Alle Fäuste, die ihm antworten, bleiben stumm, bis auf eine. [...] Mehrmals rammt sie, von oben nach unten, den rotsprudelnden Mund. Womöglich will er immer noch die Frage Bistdues? formen, aber er fördert nur kleine wohlgeformte Perlzähne: warmes Blut im kalten Schnee, Kindertrommeln, Polen, Kirschen mit Schlagsahne: Blut im Schnee. Jetzt rollen sie ihn, wie Tulla das Mädchen Jenny rollte.

Aber Tulla war mit ihrem Schneemann zuerst fertig. Mit flachen Händen klopfte sie ihn rundum fest, stellte ihn aufrecht, gab ihm eine mit raschen Griffen geformte Nase, fand, um sich blickend, Jennys Wollmützchen, spannte die Mütze über den kurbisrunden Kopf des Schneemannes, kratzte mit Schuhspitzen im Schnee, bis sie auf Laub, taube Bucheckern und dürre Äste stieß, spießte dem Schneemann links rechts zwei Äste, pflanzte dem Schneemann Bucheckernaugen und ging dann hinter sich: Sie nahm von ihrem Werk Abstand.

Tulla hätte Vergleiche anstellen können, denn hinterm Erbsberg, in Amsels Garten steht auch ein Schneemann. [...] Der Schneemann in Amsels Garten hat keine Nase. Niemand hat ihm aus Bucheckern Augen gesetzt. Kein Wollmützchen spannt über seinen Kopf. Nicht kann er mit Reisigarmen grüßen winken verzweifeln. Dafür hat er einen roten immer größer werdenden Mund.²⁰⁴

With this central passage of the second part of *Hundejahre*, Grass implies that acts of violence—whether physical or not—have taken place in both generations. Moreover, through the imagery of snow as a kind of whitewashing, he emphasizes that both generations have covered up their wrongdoings. Tulla *could* have compared her own snowman to the other snowman (“Tulla hätte Vergleiche anstellen können”), but she quickly turns away from her “work” (“Sie nahm von ihrem Werk Abstand.”).

²⁰⁴ Ibid 278-280. For the entire passage, see 269-89.

As a writer, Grass does the opposite: he compares the role of his generation, normally considered too young to be entangled in the Nazi crimes, to that of the perpetrator generation, dismissing the idea that childhood guarantees innocence. This becomes most explicit in a passage that needs to be quoted in its entirety, for it is not only central to the generational theme of the novel but also to Grass's poetics in general²⁰⁵:

Es war einmal ein Mädchen, das hieß Tulla und hatte eine reine Kinderstirn. Aber nichts ist rein. Auch der Schnee ist nicht rein. Keine Jungfrau ist rein. Selbst das Schwein ist nicht rein. Der Teufel nie ganz rein. Kein Tönchen steigt rein. Jede Geige weiß es. Jeder Stern klirrt es. Jedes Messer schält es: Auch die Kartoffel ist nicht rein: Sie hat Augen, die müssen gestochen werden.

Aber das Salz? Salz ist rein! Nichts, auch das Salz ist nicht rein. Nur auf Tüten steht: Salz ist rein. Lagert doch ab. Was lagert mit? Wird doch gewaschen. Nichts wäscht sich rein. Doch die Grundstoffe: rein? Sind steril, doch nicht rein. Die Idee, die bleibt rein? Selbst anfangs nicht rein. Jesus Christus nicht rein. Marx Engels nicht rein. Die Asche nicht rein und die Hostie nicht rein. Kein Gedanke hält rein. Auch die Kunst blüht nicht rein. Und die Sonne hat Flecken. Alle Genien menstruieren. Auf dem Schmerz schwimmt Gelächter. Tief im Brüllen hockt Schweigen. In den Ecken lehnen Zirkel. Doch der Kreis, der ist rein!²⁰⁶

Kein Kreis schließt sich rein. Denn wenn der Kreis rein ist, dann ist auch der Schnee rein, ist die Jungfrau, sind die Schweine, Jesus Christus, Marx und Engels, leichte Asche, alle Schmerzen, das Gelächter, links das Brüllen, rechts das Schweigen, die Gedanken makellose, die Oblaten nicht mehr Bluter und die Genien ohne Ausfluß, alle Ecken reine Ecken, gläubig Zirkel schlügen Kreise: rein und menschlich, schweinisch, salzig, teuflisch, christlich und marxistisch, lachend, brüllend, wiederkäuend, schweigend, heilig, rund rein eckig. Und die Knochen, weiße Berge, die geschichtet wurden neulich, wüchsen reinlich ohne Krähen: Pyramidenherrlichkeit. Doch die Krähen, die nicht rein sind, knarnten ungeölt schon gestern: Nichts ist rein, kein Kreis, kein Knochen. Und die Berge, hergestellte, um die Reinlichkeit zu türmen, werden schmelzen kochen sieden, damit Seife, rein und billig; doch selbst Seife wäscht nicht rein.²⁰⁷

²⁰⁵ As can be seen from the fact that Grass refers to it in his Frankfurt poetics lecture, where he identifies this passage as one strongly influenced by Paul Celan: "Ich verdanke Paul Celan viel: Anregung, Widerspruch, den Begriff von Einsamkeit, aber auch die Erkenntnis, daß Auschwitz kein Ende hat. Seine Hilfe kam nie direkt, sondern verschenkte sich in Nebensätzen, etwa auf Spaziergängen in Parkanlagen. Mehr als auf die 'Blechtrommel' hat sich Paul Celans Zuspruch und Dreinreden auf den Roman 'Hundejahre' ausgewirkt, etwa zu Beginn des Schlußmärchens vor Ende des zweiten Teils, sobald sich neben der Flakbatterie Kaiserhafen in Knochenberg türmt, den das bei Danzig gelegene Konzentrationslager Stutthof speist." Grass, "Schreiben nach Auschwitz," 212-213)

²⁰⁶ Grass, *Hundejahre* 388.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 388-389.

This passage highlights why Grass became an icon of the process of “Vergangenheitsbewältigung” in post-war Germany in the sixties, and it shows the poetic fervor that the author once possessed. The omnipresent guilt, he insists, affects everything. As a result, nothing is pure—no political utopia, no religion, no art. Children are not innocent. Nature is not innocent. The base materials of things—the “Grundstoffe”—are not innocent. Whitewashing cannot hide the guilt: “Nichts wäscht sich rein.” Not even the perfectly pure geometric circle is pure. If it were, one could begin to believe in the idea of innocence again, and Grass shows the bitter consequences: “gläubig Zirkel schlügen Kreise: rein und menschlich, schweinish, salzig, teuflisch, christlich und marxistisch, lachend, brüllend, wiederkäuend, schweigend, heilig, rund rein eckig. Und die Knochen, weiße Berge, die geschichtet wurden neulich, wüchsen reinlich ohne Krähen: Pyramidenherrlichkeit.”

The whitewashing of the past would thus continue in a country built upon mountains of bones, but “doch selbst Seife wäscht nicht rein”. If Grass combines the soap and bones here, he not only evokes the idea of whitewashing but also the so-called “Danzig Soap Case,” an urban legend—spread during and after the war that Grass likely took as an authentic, gruel fact about the Holocaust—about an institution near Danzig that allegedly made soap out of the Jews killed in the Stutthof concentration camp.²⁰⁸ Whether Grass believed in the soap legend in the sixties or only imagined Tulla’s and Harry’s adolescent fascination with it (or whether he remembers his own), he distinctly links it with the idea of childhood innocence. A few pages later, he writes:

Nichts ist rein. Und so war auch der Berg seitlich der Batterie Kaiserhafen bei aller Weiße nicht rein, sondern ein Knochenberg, dessen Bestandteile nach

²⁰⁸ Joachim Neander: “The Danzig Soap Case: Facts and Legends around ‘Professor Spanner’ and the Danzig Anatomic Institute 1944-1945,” *German Studies Review*, Vol. 29, No. 1 (Feb 2006): 63-86.

fabrikmäßiger Präparation immer noch bewachsen waren mit Rückständen; denn die Krähen konnten nicht aufhören, auf ihnen zu wohnen, unruhig schwarz. So kam es, daß ein Geruch [...] in jeder, auch in Harrys Mundhöhle einen Geschmack verbreitete, der selbst nach übermäßigem Genuß saurer Drops nichts von seiner schweren Süße verlor.

Niemand sprach von dem Knochenberg. Aber alle sahen rochen schmeckten ihn. Wer Baracken verließ, deren Türen sich nach Süden hin öffneten, hatte den Berg als Kegel im Auge. Wer, wie Harry, als K6 erhöht dem Geschütz daneben saß [...] wurde immer wieder, als hielten Kommandogerät und Knochenberg Zwiesprache, vor ein Bild geschwenkt, das einen weißlichen Berg mit qualmender Fabrik [...] darstellte.²⁰⁹

Grass thus presents both Harry and Tulla, the representatives of his generation, without “reine Kinderstirn.”²¹⁰ Even if they did not know about the crimes committed in their vicinity, they were aware of them. They saw them and tasted them, as Grass expresses it, and they became complicit the moment they tuned in to the widespread silence during the post-war era.

The second part of the novel ends with what can be read as a summarizing statement about the Hitler Youth generation after the war:

Neu beginnen wollen alle mit dem Leben, mit dem Sparen, mit dem Briefeschreiben, auf Kirchenstühlen, vor Klavieren, in Karteikästen und Eigenheimen.

Vergessen wollen alle die Knochenberge und Massengräber, die Fahnenhalter und Parteibücher, die Schulden und die Schuld.²¹¹

To be sure, Grass portrays his generation as witnesses of the crimes, not as perpetrators, but it should have become clear that he does not portray them as innocent witnesses but precisely challenges this type of apologetic approach to the past by never losing sight of their implication.

²⁰⁹ Grass, *Hundejahre* 401-02.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 388.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, 466.

Not in the position to judge

One of the most compelling passages about the Hitler Youth generation in *Hundejahre* reveals Grass' stance on their authority in judging the complicity of others: the phantasmagorical episode about the "Wunderbrillen" in the third part of the novel. In 1955, "im Jahr fünffünf, als alle im Friedensjahr vierfünf geborenen Kinder zehn Jahre alt werden,"²¹² the so-called "Wunderbrillen" appear all over Germany, targeted to German youth between the ages of seven and twenty-one, but with no clear provenance. The cheap object becomes such a best seller that the concerned governments of several Bundesländer launch investigations, and discover that a factory near Hildesheim—"Firma Brauxel & Co"—produced the glasses; in other words, that Eddi Amsel is behind the mass product. But nothing dangerous can be found in the material, and while it remains unclear why the glasses have become so popular despite the fact that they do not correct people's vision, they are ultimately considered harmless toys.

Yet, the glasses *do* correct the vision of Germany's youth. University students call them "Erkenntnisbrillen," "Vatererkennungsbrillen" and "Muttererkennungsbrillen" or "Familientlarver."²¹³

Die Wunderbrille zeigt jugendlichen Brillenträgern die Vergangenheit der Eltern in wechselnden Bildern, oft genug und bei einiger Geduld in chronologischer Folge. Episoden, die aus diesen oder jenen Gründen den heranwachsenden Kindern verschwiegen wurden, werden greifbar deutlich. [...] [es] wiederholen sich im doppelten Rund der Vatererkennungsbrillen Gewalttaten, verübt geduldet veranlaßt vor elf zwölf dreizehn Jahren: Mord, oft hundertfacher. Beihilfe zum. Zigarettenrauchen und Zusehen, während. Bewährte dekorierte umjubelte Mörder. Mordmotive werden zu Leitmotiven. Mit Mördern an einem Tisch, im gleichen Boot, Bett und Kasino. Trinksprüche. Einsatzbefehle. Aktenvermerke. Stempel anhauchen. Manchmal sind es nur Unterschriften und Papierkörbe. Viele Wege führen zum. Worte und Schweigen können. Jeder Vater hat wenigstens einen zu verbergen. Viele bleiben so gut wie ungeschehen, verschüttet verhängt

²¹² Ibid., 595.

²¹³ Ibid., 597-98.

eingemietet, bis im elften Nachkriegsjahr die Wunderbrillen auf den Markt kommen und Täter zur Schau stellen.²¹⁴

When Walter Matern, the representative of the perpetrator generation, buys wonder glasses for his daughter Walli on the Düsseldorf Christmas market, she drops her gingerbread, screams and runs away after putting them on and seeing the truth about her father's war experiences, which the reader never learns about.

This episode addresses, and to some extent predicts, the conflict between the generation that would later be called the "generation of 1968" and their parents, the perpetrator generation. In the novel, the recognition of parents' crimes has almost no consequences: "[E]s kommt nicht zum Aufstand der Kinder gegen die Eltern. Familiensinn, Selbsterhaltungstrieb, nüchterne Spekulation wie blinde Liebe zu den Bloßgestellten verhindern eine Revolution, die unserem Jahrhundert einige Schlagzeilen geliefert hätte."²¹⁵ This presents a snapshot of 1955, when the generational conflict had only begun to manifest itself. In 1963, the idea of a generational revolt might not have appeared completely unrealistic anymore, but it is doubtful that Grass would have predicted that the children of the perpetrators would initiate a significant change of German society only a few years later.

At first glance, the Hitler Youth generation does not seem to be included in this episode. However, one has to carefully consider the numerical indicators offered in this passage. He describes the miracle glasses as being "für die Jugend vom siebenten bis zum einundzwanzigsten Lebensjahr bestimmt,"²¹⁶ and clarifies that they reveal things only about those Germans who are over thirty. About his own generation he says: "Nur wer im

²¹⁴ Ibid., 600-601.

²¹⁵ Ibid., 601.

²¹⁶ Ibid., 595.

Jahre fünffünf noch nicht dreißig Jahre zählt oder älter als einundzwanzig ist, bleibt indifferent und kann weder entlarven noch von jüngeren Geschwistern entlarvt werden”²¹⁷ The most interesting aspect in this episode is that the cohorts between 1925 and 1934—which of course include Grass’s own cohort of 1927—are excluded from the conflict between the perpetrators and their children. Grass’s generation can neither be accused for their deeds during the Nazi period, nor can they themselves accuse the perpetrator generation.

One possible reading of this passage is that it mocks Helmut Schelsky’s theory about the skeptical generation, who Grass refers to by another term here: “die Indifferenten.” Following the passage quoted above, he comments on the divisions between the different generations, and in particular on the role of the skeptical generation: “Sollen mit solch pauschalen Rechenkunststückchen Generationsprobleme gelöst werden? Sind die Indifferenten, neun vollständige Jahrgänge, abgeschrieben und unfähig primärer Erkenntnis?”²¹⁸ Grass could be seen to criticize Schelsky for presuming (and being unconcerned with the fact) that the skeptical generation will not play any decisive role in memory politics when he writes: “Der Skeptische mag bei seinem Kopfwiegen bleiben; denn welche Gründe auch mitspielten als beschlossen wurde, Wunderbrillen zu produzieren und zu vertreiben, der Erfolg dieses Saisonschlagers ist eindeutig und veränderte die westdeutsche Gesellschaftsstruktur wesentlich, gleichgültig, ob dieser Struktur- oder Konsumentenwandel, wie Schelsky sagt, beabsichtigt wurde oder nicht.”²¹⁹ However, whether his critique is directed at Schelsky, at his own “indifferent” generation, or at both, Grass portrays his own generation as the “generation in between,”

²¹⁷ Ibid., 598.

²¹⁸ Ibid.

²¹⁹ Ibid.

as the generation which can be found neither on the side of the perpetrators nor on the side of their children.²²⁰

Grass is keenly aware of his generation's ambiguous historical position, but unlike Schelsky he is concerned about its apolitical behavior and is not shy in his public accusations of its members, as I showed in my analysis of the Brandt speech "Ich klage an." But it is, in fact, difficult to find texts in which Grass accuses the perpetrator generation *without* at the same time speaking about his generation's guilt, or its proximity to it. Grass always vacillates between his insight that as a former *Hitlerjunge* he is not in the position to judge other (older) Germans for their incorrect behavior during the Nazi period and a strongly felt responsibility as a public intellectual to do precisely that.

No conclusion

Grass's ambiguity vis-à-vis the perpetrator generation, moreover vis-à-vis the writers of this generation, is manifest in the 1979 essay "Kein Schlußwort," published in *Die Zeit*.²²¹ This essay appeared during a debate about writers of a slightly older generation who withdrew from political writing during the Third Reich in order to avoid conflict with the Nazi regime. Grass explains that it is not his place to judge these writers, because as someone whose writing career only began in the fifties, he himself had not been "tested." An adolescent during the Third Reich, he did not have to take a stance as an intellectual, or declare his opposition to the Nazi regime. He is aware, however, that he was spared moral probation merely because of his late birth, and to illustrate that it was contingency and not merit that saved him from being seriously entangled with

²²⁰ Aleida Assmann describes the benefits of the widely indifferent position of the skeptical generation with regard to politics succinctly when she writes: "(E)s war der mangelnde Zorn der skeptischen Generation, der den Zorn der 68er vorbereitet hat." Assmann, *Geschichte im Gedächtnis*, 45.

²²¹ Günter Grass, "Kein Schlußwort," in Grass, *Essays*, 770-774, 772.

German guilt, he imagines how his biography could have taken a different turn if he had been born only ten years earlier:

Ich, Jahrgang, siebzehn. 1933 wäre ich 16 und nicht sechs Jahre alt, bei Kriegsbeginn 22 und nicht zwölf alt gewesen. Da sogleich wehrpflichtig, hätte ich, wie die meisten dieses Jahrgangs, kaum den Krieg überlebt. Doch abgesehen von dieser Wahrscheinlichkeit, spricht nichts (oder nur Gewünschtes) gegen meine zielstrebige Entwicklung zum überzeugten Nationalsozialisten. [...] Mit meiner Mitgift, dem rigorosen Schreibtalent, wäre mir zu den Ereignissen der Bewegung (Machtergreifung, Erntedankfest, Führers Geburtstag usw.) und später zum Kriegsverlauf Gereimtes und Hymnisches eingefallen, zumal die Poetik der Hitlerjugend (siehe Anacker, Schirach, Baumann, Menzel) spätexpressionistische Wortballungen und gestische Metaphern erlaubte. Oder es hätte mich, dank der Anstöße feinsinniger Lehrer, naturbeflissene Innerlichkeit lammfromm gemacht und auf Carossas oder, noch stiller, auf Wilhelm Lehmanns Spuren geleitet. [...] Wahrscheinlich wäre mir ab Stalingrad—jetzt sechsundzwanzig Jahre alt—ein Licht aufgegangen. Verwickelt möglicherweise in Partisanenerschießungen, Vergeltungsschläge, als Augenzeuge unübersehbarer Judendeportationen hätte ich meiner spätexpressionistischen Reimkunst oder meiner verinnerlichten Beschwörung der Schachtelhalme neue Töne, ortlose Trauer, verzweifelte Wortwahl, Dunkles Vieldeutiges beigemengt. Und in dieser Stillage, die vierundvierzig noch einen Verleger gefunden hätte, hätte ich (soldatisches Überleben vorausgesetzt) zwanglos die Kapitulation, die angebliche Stunde Null überbrücken und mich der neuen, kargen, kalorienarmen, der pazifistischen bis antifaschistischen Inhalte annehmen können; wie es geschehen ist laut tausend und mehr Biographien.²²²

His response is clear: ten years would have made a significant difference in his development as a writer. Grass suspects that like many other writers, he would have written affirmatively about the Nazi movement from the moment of their rise to power in 1933. If he had not supported Nazi ideology, he would have avoided any form of political expression writing poetry about nature. From 1939 on, he would have fought in Hitler's army. Perhaps, Grass speculates, he would have lost his initial fascination with Nazi ideology at the front, Stalingrad being an ultimate reason to doubt Hitler. On the Eastern front, he may have become involved in war crimes, and marked by these experiences, his writing would have turned darker towards the end of the war. Unlike for the actual

²²² Ibid.

Günter Grass, Germany's defeat in 1945 would not have represented an earth-shattering event for him. During the first postwar years, the other Grass would have readily welcomed new ideologies such as pacifism and anti-fascism and would have instantly incorporated them into his writing, as it happened "laut tausend und mehr Biographien."²²³

Should there still have been any doubt, his thought experiment expresses with great clarity the aesthetic distance Grass feels toward writers who were merely ten years older than him as a writer of the Hitler Youth generation. He implies that it makes a big difference whether a writer experienced the war as a soldier in Hitler's *Wehrmacht*—he mentions, among others, the names of Heinrich Böll (born in 1917) and Alfred Andersch (born in 1914)—or whether they made their first attempts at writing being in the Hitler Youth like him and began their career long after the war.²²⁴ But in addition to clarifying on a basic level that Grass sees his writing and that of other post-war German writers as strongly dependent on generational experiences, it also reveals the mode of self-doubt and self-reflection with which Grass approaches his own biography. "Ich will nicht urteilen," he writes. "Ein fragwürdiger Glücksfall, mein Jahrgang 1927, verbietet mir letzte, den Stab brechende Worte."²²⁵ Not being able to guarantee his own behavior had it not been for his later birth date, he avoids making a concluding statement about the alleged Nazi past of writers of the inner emigration, thus making good on the essay's title, "Kein Schlusswort."

²²³ Grass writes: "Und in dieser Stillage, die vierundvierzig noch einen Verleger gefunden hätte, hätte ich (soldatisches Überleben vorausgesetzt) zwanglos die Kapitulation, die angebliche Stunde Null überbrücken und annehmen können; wie es geschehen ist laut tausend und mehr Biographien." Ibid., 772-73.

²²⁴ Grass mentions that he participated in a writing competition organized by the Hitler Youth as a thirteen-year old. Although he tells this anecdote to underline his own implication ("und doch hängt es mir an," 772), the disparity between his experiences as a teenage 'writer' and the other writers' experiences in the war becomes immediately clear.

²²⁵ Ibid., 772.

Grass's criticism comes across nevertheless. When he speaks of the older writers' transition from fascism to anti-fascism, from life as soldier to life as pacifist, one can sense the critical undertone, the fact that Grass considers this transition all-too-smooth. Even if he says "Ich will nicht urteilen," he does so regardless through his ironic tone and his suggestion that these older writers took an easy road. However, by including himself in the criticism, by assuring his readers that he would have probably done the same, ensures that no one could accuse him of sitting on a moral high horse. It is precisely this mixture of muted accusation with references to his own not-entirely-uncomplicated biography, I would argue, that was the reason for the moral authority that writers like Grass enjoyed in post-war German society. The honesty with which he admits to the contingencies of his personal innocence must have evoked admiration, as much as it must have seemed appealing because it meant that guilt could also be seen as contingent on the one's year of birth.

However, the essay reads differently from today's perspective. Singling out Wolfgang Weyrauch (born 1904) as the only writer who has openly talked about his Nazi past is especially problematic.²²⁶ He writes: "Ein einziger, soweit mir bekannt, Wolfgang Weyrauch, hat die Offenheit gewagt, sich zu solch einer Biographie zu bekennen. Ich datiere mich, die schlimmeren Varianten auslassend, um zehn Jahre zurück und hole es hiermit versuchsweise nach."²²⁷ Grass thus presents himself as someone who follows Weyrauch's example. Although he talks about his Hitler Youth past openly, this celebration of Weyrauch's and his own honesty seems hypocritical considering that Grass

²²⁶ Wolfgang Weyrauch became famous for coining the term "Kahlschlagsliteratur" in his programmatic anthology *Tausend Gramm*, with which he sought to induce a radical new beginning for German literature.

²²⁷ Grass, "Kein Schlußwort," 773.

admissions about his SS membership only about thirty years later in 2006. His self-doubt was certainly justified, one must conclude, but it certainly wasn't completely honest.

2. Re-thinking a Generation's Embrace of Socialism— Christa Wolf's *Nachdenken über Christa T.* (1968)

Both Günter Grass and Christa Wolf have touched upon the question of contingency in their reflections on their biographies. While Grass thought about the random nature of his birth year 1927 that distanced him from the perpetrator generation, Christa Wolf wondered about contingency in geographical terms. In her 2010 novel *Stadt der Engel*, she raises the question what her life would have looked like if she and her family had managed to cross the river Elbe on their flight from the Red Army in 1945? What if they had left what became the Soviet Occupation Zone, and later the GDR? Would she have become a different person in the West, innocent of the political corruption of which she was accused after 1989? “WÄRE ICH UNTER DEN ANDEREN, DEN RICHTIGEN VERHÄLTNISSEN EIN ANDERER MENSCH GEWORDEN? KLÜGER, BESSER, OHNE SCHULD?”²²⁸ Instead of speculating about answers to these questions, she interrupts herself in this thought, declaring that she still does not regret to have “landed” on the Eastern side: “WARUM KANN ICH IMMER NOCH NICHT WÜNSCHEN, MEIN LEBEN ZU TAUSCHEN GEGEN JENES LEICHTERE, BESSERE?”²²⁹ Twenty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, in the autobiographical novel that deals with her Stasi corruption, shortly before her death, despite all the difficulties she faced as an

²²⁸ Christa Wolf, *Stadt der Engel oder The Overcoat of Dr. Freud* (Suhrkamp: Berlin 2010, 71). Wolf uses the capital letters in the original. See my analysis of *Stadt der Engel* in Chapter 4 for an explanation.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*, 71.

author criticizing the regime, it seems that Wolf's strong avowal to socialism remains unbroken.

Wolf's strong identification with the idea of a socialist German state cannot be understood without considering the roots of her anti-fascism, which lie in her Hitler Youth past—a connection that has often been made for writers of her generation. In 1990, for example, Frank Schirrmacher shed light onto the GDR's literary scene from a generational angle. Wolf's generation, he claimed, became enthusiastic supporters of the GDR regime out of bad conscience, and their authoritarian upbringing under Hitler made them forever blind for the state's repression.²³⁰ Have these East-German writers not learned anything from growing up in a dictatorship? Could they not have known better? “Angesichts ihrer (Wolf's) Biographie,” Schirrmacher notes, “stellt sich ein zweites Mal in der Geschichte dieses Jahrhunderts die Frage, wie blind Denken und Tat, Literatur und Welt füreinander sein könnten.”²³¹

Wolfgang Emmerich lacks this moralizing and overly simplistic approach to East-German writers of the Hitler Youth generation in his survey of GDR literature, published in Metzler's *Deutsche Literaturgeschichte*. Nevertheless, culpability and responsibility are categories in his survey. In his presentation, Wolf's generation went into ideological overdrive when they adopted socialism and anti-fascism, the founding myths of both GDR and GDR literature, which were carried in a more credible way “von den Autoren der ersten, älteren Generation [...], die wie Johannes R. Becher, Anna Seghers, Arnold

²³⁰ See Frank Schirrmacher, “Dem Druck des härteren, strengeren Lebens standhalten. Auch eine Studie über den autoritären Charakter: Christa Wolfs Aufsätze, Reden und ihre jüngste Erzählung *Was bleibt*,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (June 2, 1990), in “*Es geht nicht um Christa Wolf*”: *Der Literaturstreit im vereinten Deutschland*, ed. Thomas Anz (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1995), 77–89, especially 81–82.

²³¹ *Ibid.*, 85.

Zweig oder Bertolt Brecht im Exil gewesen waren.“²³² Emmerich sees this generation as the stabilizing force of the dictatorial regime of the GDR:

Der Antifaschismus wurde nun aber auch zur – geborgten – weltanschaulichen Basis für die literarische Arbeit der zweiten, jüngeren Autorengeneration, deren Angehörige das NS-Regime und den Krieg als Hitlerjungen und BDM-Mädel, SA-Leute und Soldaten selbst erlebt hatten, in der Regel als naiv Begeisterte oder als Mitläufer. Die Autoren, zumeist erst in den 20er Jahren geboren, ersetzten jetzt einen Glauben, ein ‘totales’ Weltbild, durch einen neuen Glauben, die neue, totalisierende Weltanschauung des Marxismus. Der aus dem schlechten politischen Gewissen geborene Antifaschismus wurde zur ideologischen Klammer, die Autoren wie Erwin Strittmatter, Franz Fühmann, Erich Loest, Hermann Kant, Christa Wolf, Heiner Müller, Erik Neutsch oder Dieter Noll untereinander und mit den Älteren (den beglaubigten) Antifaschisten verband.²³³

He describes the anti-fascist consensus among this younger generation of GDR writers as “verhängnisvoll,” because it resulted in the paradoxical situation

dass eine Vielzahl gutwilliger und begabter junger Autoren das System des ‚realen Sozialismus‘ geradezu bedingungslos unterstützte (und eine dementsprechende Literatur schrieb), eben weil sie das Trauma der Nazi-Diktatur ohne Rest abschütteln und mit dem menschenfeindlichen System von vordem brechen wollte. Dass der vermeintliche Bruch vor allem Kontinuitäten beförderte—autoritäre, gesellschaftliche und politische Strukturen und damit Untertanenmentalität, geheimdienstliche Observation und Terror, Militarismus, Fremdbestimmung in vielen Bereichen—, sahen die Autoren erst spät, manche zu spät (und manche verweigern sich dieser Einsicht bis heute). Aus diesem tief sitzenden Widerspruch zwischen ehrlich geglaubtem, emphatischem Antifaschismus und einer—näheren oder ferneren—Komplizenschaft mit dem Repressionssystem des ‚realen Sozialismus‘ muss die DDR-Literatur [...] verstanden werden.²³⁴

I agree that any consideration of GDR intellectuals of Wolf’s generation has to underscore that their anti-fascism led to a state with oppressive tendencies. But I would object to Emmerich’s notion that their support of the socialist utopia was unconditional. The generational approach to writers like Wolf reveals that their upbringing not only

²³² Wolfgang Emmerich, “Die Literatur der DDR,” in *Deutsche Literaturgeschichte. Von den Anfängen zur Gegenwart*, ed. Wolfgang Beutin et al. (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2008), 511-579.

²³³ *Ibid.*, 520.

²³⁴ *Ibid.*

resulted in a misguided anti-fascism and enthusiastic support of the GDR but simultaneously, or perhaps contradictorily, also in a heightened awareness for signs of dictatorial repression. In the case of Wolf, one can very clearly trace how her generational background presented the driving force for *both* her affirmation *and* her critique of the regime. The “never again”-imperative resulted in her identification with the GDR while at the same time motivating her continuous thinking about its errors.

It is true that Wolf’s political protest always remained vague and mostly limited to the poetic realm, and in my fourth chapter, I will consider the heated dispute that evolved around this very question in 1990. Critics and supporters of the author fought about the question whether Wolf’s allegiance to the GDR should be evaluated as a failure, a question that became even more urgent when it was revealed that Wolf worked as *inoffizielle Mitarbeiterin* for the Stasi from 1959 to 1962. In this chapter, however, I would like to put these complicated moral questions aside, and instead want to consider Wolf and other GDR writers of her generation in their double-edged function as “at once the creators of a new audience and a variant of the official voice,”²³⁵ in the words of David Bathrick, who emphasizes that these writers could only become “spokespeople and representatives for a struggle to enlarge and enhance the freedoms of speech,”²³⁶ when they were allowed to participate in the socialist public sphere by those in power in the first place. He focuses on the complicity of East German writers to the GDR, and their simultaneous distance to it:

The fact that some of them had been censored, hunted, questioned, and ridiculed does not belie the fact that they were also—and sometimes even simultaneously—privileged, nurtured, courted, and coddled. In a very fundamental, if complicated,

²³⁵ David Bathrick, *The Powers of Speech: The Politics of Culture in the GDR* (Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 11.

²³⁶ *Ibid.*

way, those writers who continued to publish and speak within the official socialist public sphere ended up functioning, perhaps oxymoronicly, as reform-dedicated *Staatsdichter*. [...] [I]t was precisely their function on both sides of the power divide, as official and nonofficial voices within the whole that defined a particular kind of intellectual in the GDR.²³⁷

This notion of GDR writers as “reform-dedicated *Staatsdichter*” should precede every treatment of Wolf’s literature, as this is precisely how the writer saw herself. Equally important is Bathrick’s rejection of a moralizing evaluation of GDR literature and his plea for a historical perspective:

One can, of course, fault them for this at the level of personal intentions and behaviors: for not speaking out on this or that issue, for losing a sense of the society at large, for failing to grasp the real issues of power and freedom, for chasing a utopian dream. But one can also understand them historically. Here we have a generation of intellectuals who were socialized within the highly dichotomized cold war culture and who found in the mutilated forms of a Stalinist antifascism what they saw as the only chance to start something new in a postwar Germany.²³⁸

He correctly points out the influential Cold War socialization of writers of the Hitler Youth generation, who were encouraged to see the West as “sozialistischer Klassenfeind.” I would add that it is not only their socialization within the Cold War culture after 1945 but also their indoctrination into Nazi culture before this date that shaped the politics of this generation of writers. In what follows, I will highlight both these influences in Wolf’s essays and her work, in order to clarify how Wolf differs from a West German writer like Grass as a representative of her generation in the East.

Moments of Doubt

There is a consensus in Wolf criticism that *Nachdenken über Christa T.* (1968) is her first mature work, the work in which she showed that she had freed herself from the aesthetic

²³⁷ Ibid.

²³⁸ Ibid.

and political prescriptions of the SED. Her first published work, *Moskauer Novelle* (1961), a love story between a woman from East Berlin and a Russian translator, was rejected by Wolf herself as a formulaic piece of writing, almost a treatise, that tried to comply with the doctrine of socialist realism.²³⁹ Her first novel, *Der geteilte Himmel* (1963), a highly successful publication, represented Wolf's attempt to follow the cultural program of the *Bitterfelder Weg*, the attempt to break the rigidity of socialist realism by bringing literature closer to the socialist worker. The novel tells the story of the young factory worker Rita, who falls in love with a man who leaves the GDR and tries to convince Rita to come with him. The socialist heroine, however, sacrifices her love for her country.

Nachdenken über Christa T., by comparison, displays a new tone. The novel reveals a more modern, more poetic, and more complex aesthetic quality, further away from the prescriptions of socialist realism than any of the texts published in East Germany at the time. Politically, too, the novel shows a great distance to the naïve enthusiasm for socialism displayed in the earlier two texts.²⁴⁰ It is hard to pinpoint what caused Wolf's increased critical awareness, but the Eleventh Plenum of the SED's

²³⁹ See Sonja Hilzinger, *Christa Wolf* (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler, 1986), 12-13.

²⁴⁰ As we now know, these two earlier texts were published around the time when the young author was also an informant for the Stasi. As Georgina Paul has pointed out, "(i)t is no coincidence that the ten years that separated her first work, the socialist realist fiction *Moskauer Novelle* (1959), from her classic novel of subjective authenticity, *Nachdenken über Christa T.* (1968), are the same ten years that saw her transformation from *inoffizielle Mitarbeiterin* for the Stasi from 1959 to 1962 to the subject of a surveillance operation [...] from February 1969 onward." *Nachdenken über Christa T.* presents the first work, in which, however carefully, she expresses doubt vis-à-vis the GDR. Wolf's embrace of the new socialist state was no longer unconditional. See Georgina Paul: "'Ich, Seherin, gehörte zum Palast': Christa Wolf's Literary Treatment of the Stasi in the Context of her Poetics of Self-Analysis," in *East German Writers and the Politics of Culture: Dealing with the Stasi*, Paul Cooke, Paul, and Andrew Plowman, eds. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 87-106, 88. Note: Georgina Paul uses the date when Wolf finished "Moskauer Novelle" in 1959 instead of its book publication.

Central Committee in 1965 seems to have been a crucial experience in that regard.²⁴¹ In 2009, Wolf wrote about the Plenum in an article in *Die Zeit*: “Es hat in meinem Leben eine einschneidende Rolle gespielt.”²⁴² It was the first time she experienced censorship first hand, right in front of her eyes: “Es gibt eine einfache Rechnung,” Erich Honecker had said at the Plenum,

Wollen wir Arbeitsproduktivität und damit den Lebensstandard weiter erhöhen, woran doch alle Bürger der DDR interessiert sind, dann kann man nicht nihilistische, ausweglose und moralzersetzende Philosophien in Literatur, Film, Theater, Fernsehen und in Zeitschriften verbreiten. Skeptizismus und steigender Lebensstandard beim umfassenden Aufbau des Sozialismus schließen einander aus.²⁴³

The SED, putting greater emphasis on economic growth, was on the hunt for books and films that stood in the way of this goal, and thus any cultural product that spread insecurity and skepticism in the Party’s eyes was to be forbidden. When it was decided that a Werner Bräunig novel would not be published for being “anti-sozialistisch,” Wolf decided to speak up: “Das kann ich mit meinem Gewissen nicht vereinbaren.”²⁴⁴ Her protest was in vain, but the event had a strong impact on her. As Angela Drescher points out in her book with documentary material about *Nachdenken über Christa T.*: “Was Christa Wolf auf diesem Plenum erlebte und wogegen sie vergeblich Einspruch zu erheben suchte, wurde zur traumatischen Erfahrung für sie. Unmittelbar unter dem Eindruck des Plenums begann sie, ‘Nachdenken über Christa T.’ zu schreiben.”²⁴⁵

The importance of the generational concept in Wolf’s political thinking

²⁴¹ See chapter “Die weggeschlagenen Hände” in Magenau’s biography on Wolf. Jörg Magenau, *Christa Wolf: Eine Biographie* (Berlin: Kindler, 2002), 172-191

²⁴² Christa Wolf: “Jetzt musst du sprechen!” *Die Zeit*, Nov 8, 2009, <http://www.zeit.de/2009/15/D-Elftes-Plenum/komplettansicht>.

²⁴³ Quoted after Magenau, 173.

²⁴⁴ Christa Wolf, “Diskussionsbeitrag,” in Wolf, *Essays I*, 113-126, 122.

²⁴⁵ *Dokumentation zu Christa Wolf “Nachdenken über Christa T.”*, ed. Angela Drescher (Munich: Luchterhand, 1993), 9.

This critical turn in Wolf's literature is paralleled in the statements she made about her generation in her essays. In order to understand to what extent *Nachdenken über Christa T.* is the result of Wolf's systematic re-evaluation of her generation's path, I will focus on the generational reflections in her essays and speeches before presenting my reading of the novel. Wolf recognizes symbolic potential of her generation for literary representations early on: from Hitler Youth to citizens of the GDR, from believing in the "wrong" ideology to helping to establish the supposedly human and democratic nature of the socialist society—this was the path of socialist heroes and heroines, exactly as the doctrines of socialist realism demanded. Convinced of the invincibility of the socialist German regime, she thought writers of this generation could make a significant contribution. Already in 1961, the year of the construction of the Berlin Wall, she wrote in "Probleme junger Autoren," one of her earliest essays, "daß es nicht irgendeine, sondern *die* Forderung an einen deutschen Schriftsteller unserer Zeit ist, Nationalbewußtsein schaffen zu helfen."²⁴⁶ In a 1962 interview with the GDR magazine *Forum*, she suggests that literature should trace the miracle that happened "in der nach 1945 jungen Generation" and should document "Daß unter diesen Bedingungen, in diesem Deutschland, nach dem Faschismus, allen Widersprüchen direkt ausgesetzt, Menschen herangewachsen sind, die heute als Sozialisten Betriebe leiten, Lehrer sind, Ingenieure – das halte ich für ein eigentliches 'deutsches' Wunder."²⁴⁷ This optimistic depiction of her generation—the embodiment of the GDR's success—reflects a proud belief in their accomplishments, which interestingly generates a moral superiority towards writers of the Hitler Youth generation in West during the early sixties.

²⁴⁶ Christa Wolf, "Probleme junger Autoren (1961)," in Wolf, *Essays I*, 16-18, 17.

²⁴⁷ Christa Wolf, "...mit der Jugend zu rechnen als mit einem Aktivposten. Gespräch mit Christa Wolf (1962)," in Wolf, *Essays I*, 19-23, 23.

We are familiar with this type of thinking from West-German writers, who during the post-reunification period emphasized that the Hitler Youth generation in the East chose the “easy way out” by switching from Nazi ideology to Marxist theory with great ease. As Grass said in 1990: “in der DDR wurde das Braunhemd ausgezogen und das Blauhemd angezogen,”²⁴⁸ referring to the uniforms of the *Hitlerjugend* and the GDR’s youth organization *Freie Deutsche Jugend*. Wolf, on the other hand, depicted West German writers as those who made things easy for themselves. From her perspective, writers in the West simply avoided what the task the East tackled so bravely: to overcome Germany’s shame and guilt after World War II in order to identify with the country again. In an essay from 1965 called “Einiges über meine Arbeit als Schriftsteller” she speaks about the difficulties her generation had to face in the first years after the war:

Nicht vergessen kann ich, wie man uns, die wir bei Kriegsbeginn zehn Jahre alt waren, falsche Trauer, falsche Liebe, falschen Haß einimpfen wollte; wie das fast gelang; welche Anstrengung wir brauchten, uns aus dieser Verstrickung wieder herauszureißen, wieviel Hilfe wir nötig hatten, von wie vielen Menschen, wieviel Nachdenken, wieviel ernsthafte Arbeit, wieviel heiße Debatten. In den nächsten Jahren erlebten wir, wieviel leichter ein ‚Nein‘ sich ausspricht als ein neues ‚Ja‘ [...]; wieviel leichter, sich seines Volkes zu schämen, nachdem man die ganze Wahrheit wußte, als es wieder neu lieben zu lernen.²⁴⁹

This skewed perception that the foundation of the GDR in 1949 accomplished the endeavor of working through the Nazi past simply reiterated the state’s official memory politics. But her generation was greatly validated by believing themselves to be part of a

²⁴⁸ The full quote reads: “Als wir hier ab ’45 auf die freie Wildbahn geworfen wurden, wo sich jeder selbst einen politischen Standpunkt suchen mußte, war das nicht einfach. Aber in der DDR wurde das Braunhemd ausgezogen und das Blauhemd angezogen. Die ohnehin vorhandene Grundhaltung der idealistischen Erziehung ließ offenbar kein ideologisches Vakuum zu. Aus der verschreckten Haltung angesichts der Nazi-Verbrechen, die nach Kriegsende nun offenkundig waren, rettete man sich in die angebliche Alternative, ein sozialistisches, anderes, besseres Deutschland mit stark betontem antifaschistischem Anspruch zu errichten.“ Günter Grass, Hellmuth Karasek, Rolf Becker: “Notwendige Kritik oder Hinrichtung. Spiegel-Gespräch mit Günter Grass über die Debatte um Christa Wolf und die DDR Literatur vom 16. Juli 1990,” in Anz “*Es geht nicht um Christa Wolf*”: *Der Literaturstreit im vereinten Deutschland*. (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1995), 122-134, 124-125.

²⁴⁹ Wolf, “Einiges über meine Arbeit als Schriftsteller (1965),” in Wolf, *Essays I*, 87-93, 88.

great political undertaking. In “Notwendiges Streitgespräch,” a speech she gave at an international colloquium in Berlin in 1964, she played off the East German courage to cope with “real” political challenges against the pessimistic West German atmosphere of resignation. In a sharp and ironic voice, rare for the author, she ridicules leftist West German authors and journalists of her generation in their desire to find political allies among the authors in the East:

[I]ch weiß, daß Grass und [...] Enzensberger, die ich schätze, und vielleicht auch die Redakteure der ‚Zeit‘, sich gern mit mir und meinen Kollegen gern auf einen Stein der Berliner Mauer setzen und das Schicksal Deutschlands beweinen würden. Eines Deutschlands, dem nach ihrer Meinung nun einmal nicht zu helfen ist. Gern würden sie uns auf diesem Stein unter Tränen an ihr Herz drücken. Und dabei würden sogar unsere ‚kleinen literarischen Schwächen‘ mit untergehen, die sie sonst angeblich so hindern, mit uns über Literatur zu sprechen. Wir würden uns als einheitlich empfindende Bürger einer Welt und eines Jahrhunderts fühlen, die als Ganzes im Schatten der Bombe stehen.²⁵⁰

Wolf decidedly distances herself from these attempts. In spite of belonging to the same generation and however far to the left Grass, Enzensberger, and journalists of *Die Zeit* might be, she says, Western and Eastern factions of this generation are not “einheitlich empfindende Bürger einer Welt und eines Jahrhunderts.” What separates them from each other is simply the belief that a realization of communist state is possible, or in Wolf’s words, “daß wir die Welt, oder um bescheidener zu sein, dieses unser Land und die Leute, die hier leben, für veränderbar halten: in dem Sinne, wie Brecht es getan hat.”²⁵¹ Her superiority reaches its peak in this speech—one might add, along with her political naïveté—when she wonders why West German writers glorify freedom of speech when they themselves do not make use of it by fighting for *valuable* political goals. “Oft wird

²⁵⁰ Christa Wolf, “Notwendiges Streitgespräch (1964),” in *Essays I*, 76-86, 79.

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*

uns von westdeutschen Autoren entgegengehalten, sie könnten schreiben, was sie wollten,” she says. “Die Gegenfrage liegt nahe: Was aber wollt ihr?”²⁵²

These passages show that in the first half of the sixties Christa Wolf remains entirely within the official Cold War rhetoric in her depiction of her generation. By the seventies, however, Wolf has lost this energized view of her generation as the pillar of socialism and anti-fascism. Her later generational reflections bear a much different, more sober, tone, which is closely related to her work on *Kindheitsmuster*, the autobiographical novel published in 1976, which I read as an “autobiography of a generation” in the next chapter. In the 1970 essay “Gegenwart und Zukunft,” she announces this future project, noting that she is working on a text in which she will try to tackle the *conflicts* and *tensions* that her generation has experienced and—note the present tense—still experiences: “Vor allem aber beschäftigt mich der große, sehr komplizierte Stoff, den meine Generation als Lebensgeschichte erlebt hat und erlebt, mit all seinen Widersprüchen, Spannungen und starken Konflikten.”²⁵³

Three years later, Wolf went as far as explicitly questioning the idea of a smooth transition from fascism to anti-fascism she had previously described with such confidence. In a conversation with Hans Kaufmann she asserts that former Hitler Youth turned into socialist comrades only at the cost of deep inner conflicts:

Was unsere Generation erlebt hat, wird nie wieder eine Generation erleben: in der einen Gesellschaft aufzuwachsen, erzogen, geprägt zu werden und in der anderen – in unserer – die Möglichkeit zu einer an die gesellschaftlichen Wurzeln gehenden Kritik und Selbstkritik zu haben, zum Denken, Verstehen, Handeln zu kommen, dabei in neue, gewiß nicht einfache Widersprüche und Konflikte gestellt zu sein, mehr: diese Widersprüche selbst mit herzustellen und an ihrer Überwindung mitzuarbeiten, und dabei doch Verhaltensmuster nicht verleugnen zu können, die Kindheit und Jugend bestimmten. Wenn das kein

²⁵² Ibid., 82.

²⁵³ Wolf, “Gegenwart und Zukunft,” in Wolf, *Essays I*, 337-340, 338.

widersprüchliches Kontinuum ist! Aber eben doch ein Kontinuum, denn es ist ein und derselbe Mensch, der das alles erfahren hat- aber ist er es noch? Die Stunde Null jedenfalls, die ihn zu einem anderen machte, hat es nie gegeben...²⁵⁴

Obviously, Wolf has arrived at a more realistic and less glorifying perspective of her generation here. There was never a moment, she admits, when the “new socialist man” entirely cast off his past. Their “Widersprüche” and “Konflikte,” she argues dialectically, must be represented in literature so that they can be recognized and ultimately overcome.

No longer, then, does she expect writers of her generation to depict their path to socialism as “deutsches Wunder.” Surprisingly, however, she holds on to the notion that her generation can serve as a paradigmatic example. She suggests that writers of her generation can make their contribution to “DDR-Nationalliteratur” by openly portraying their idiosyncratic doubts, conflicts, and questions:

Die ältere Generation sozialistischer deutscher Schriftsteller hat klassische Werke vorzuweisen, die in unserer Generation fehlen. Vielleicht wird unser Beitrag zur Literatur darin bestehen müssen, daß wir den Mut finden, unseren eigenen Lebensstoff schonungslos und wahrheitsgetreu zu erzählen.²⁵⁵

This “Lebensstoff” is most explicitly represented in *Kindheitsmuster*, in which Wolf focuses on the legacy of the Nazi past in East German society that lived on *through* this generation despite all efforts to declare it dead. But the author began to reflect more critically upon her generation’s path in the sixties, long before she began work on *Kindheitsmuster*. While *Nachdenken über Christa T.* (1968) was mostly read as “großangelegte Reflexion über das Thema Individuum und Gesellschaft,”²⁵⁶ I will show that Wolf writes, perhaps paradoxically, about individuality from a very concrete

²⁵⁴ Wolf, “Subjektive Authentizität”, in Wolf, *Essays I*, 401-437, 422.

²⁵⁵ Wolf, “Gegenwart und Zukunft,” 340.

²⁵⁶ Friedrich Raddatz, “Mein Name sei Tonio K.,” *Der Spiegel*, June 2, 1969, in *Dokumentation zu Christa Wolf “Nachdenken über Christa T.”*, ed. Angela Drescher, (Munich: Luchterhand, 1993), 121-123, 122.

historical-generational angle. The novel, I argue, represents a first critical retrospective on the Hitler Youth generation's passage to socialism.

The "Plot"

Instead of providing a plot in the traditional sense, *Nachdenken über Christa T* contains a montage of memories and reflections embedded in a complex narrative structure. The primary theme, however, is apparent from the first few words: "Nachdenken, ihr nach—denken,"²⁵⁷ to reflect on Christa T.'s life after her passing—this is the narrator's goal after the death of her friend. Christa T., modeled after Wolf's childhood friend Christa Tabbert, died from leukemia in 1963 at the age of 35.²⁵⁸ The narrator revisits Christa T.'s life with the help of letters and other writings that have been bequeathed to her. She remembers important moments in their friendship: how they met as teenagers when Christa T. and her family moved to the small town East of the Oder during the war, and how, after losing touch in 1945 when the families fled from the Russian Army, they resumed their friendship in the 1950s when they met again by chance during their studies in Leipzig. The reader learns bits and pieces about both women's biographies, both born at the end of the twenties, and slowly understands the narrator's admiration for her friend, an admiration that borders on fascination. Because Christa T. is different—the narrator describes her as an imaginative and autonomous woman, who was always on the search for new ways to explore who she was, and who she wanted to be. A strong individual who did not care about fitting in, she differed from the people surrounding her, the other

²⁵⁷ Christa Wolf, *Nachdenken über Christa T*. (Munich: Luchterhand, 1999), 9.

²⁵⁸ See Therese Hoernigk, *Schriftsteller der Gegenwart: Christa Wolf* (Berlin: Volk und Wissen, 1990), 130.

girls in the BDM as well as her fellow students later in the GDR. “Die Wahrheit war: Sie brauchte uns nicht. Sie kam und ging, mehr ließ sich über sie nicht sagen.”²⁵⁹

During the last years of her life, the narrator only remains in sporadic touch with Christa T., who to everyone’s surprise decided not to make use of her intellectual capacities: “Lehrerin, Aspirantin, Dozentin, Lektorin...Ach, sie traute ja diesen Namen nicht. [...] Sie zuckte davor zurück, sich selbst einen Namen aufzudrücken, das Brandmal, mit welcher Herde in welchen Stall man zu gehen hat.”²⁶⁰ In the years before her death, she withdraws from society. She marries a veterinarian, moves to the countryside, and becomes a wife and a mother of three children. The narrator comments both on this conventional life and her friend’s death when she says: “Nichts könnte unpassender sein als Mitleid, Bedauern. Sie hat ja gelebt. Sie war ganz da.”²⁶¹ However, the end of the novel is marked by a highly melancholic tone. Among her friend’s belongings the narrator finds some phrases that the deceased had scribbled down on a piece of paper, “Dieser lange, nicht enden wollende Weg zu sich selbst. Die Schwierigkeit, ‘ich’ zu sagen,”²⁶² a sad but apt description of her life.

Today, *Nachdenken über Christa T.* reads like a powerful and poetic text on mourning—a psychological portrait of a woman who died too early. At the time of its publication, however, the novel was perceived as—and was intended to be—a highly political text. The book that documents the reception of *Nachdenken über Christa T.* and the turmoil that followed its publication, makes for compelling reading for those

²⁵⁹ Ibid., 15.

²⁶⁰ Wolf, *Nachdenken*, 43-44.

²⁶¹ Ibid., 192.

²⁶² Ibid.

interested in the absurdities of Cold War cultural politics.²⁶³ As soon as Wolf submitted the novel to the state-owned *Mitteldeutscher Verlag*, it was treated as a highly problematic manuscript. Two “experts” examined whether the text could be published, both of which praised the literary quality of the text but considered its politics problematic. One “expert” decidedly recommended against publication, fearing “die Gefahr einer ideologischen Desorientierung,”²⁶⁴ and Wolf received a visitor—“mein Zensor,” she calls him—who unsuccessfully tried to convince her to change the manuscript: the protagonist ought to find her way back to being a productive member of socialist society before her death.²⁶⁵

After much debate, the publishing house eventually asked the *Kulturministerium* for permission to print the novel in an unusually small edition, which was published only over a year later in 1968. The debates, of course, did not cease. Wolf was attacked again and again, while the limited number of *Christa T.* editions were passed on from reader to reader and the author received many letters from intellectuals and ordinary citizens expressing their support. A brief look at a speech given at the VI. Deutsche Schriftstellerkongreß in 1969 in Berlin gives an idea of the kind of criticism levelled against the book. Eberhard Röhrner, professor of history and high-ranking SED official, argued that in the novel the “Selbstverwirklichung des Menschen” appeared “als Rückzug von den entscheidenden Problemen unserer Zeit.” He called Wolf’s treatment of individuality “unproduktiv” because he argued that “in unserer Zeit entwickeln sich

²⁶³ See Drescher, *Dokumentation*.

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 34.

²⁶⁵ Wolf writes in her diary about this visit of the “Zensor”: “Er schlug mir vor eine ganz andere Geschichte zu schreiben: Ein Mensch, eben Christa T., eine tragische Figur, die lange Zeit unter dem Druck ihrer Erlebnisse während der Zeit des Faschismus steht, schwer den Weg in unsere neue Gesellschaft findet (...) und die, als sie sich so weit durchgerungen hat, schließlich stirbt. Die Gesellschaft soll gegenüber dem Individuum auf jeden Fall recht behalten.“ Drescher, *Dokumentation*, 195.

sozialistische Persönlichkeiten gerade im Kampf um die neue Gesellschaft“ and Christa T. had given up the fight.²⁶⁶

Wolf protested both against such a reading and against the reading given by the Western media, who read the novel as a radical critique of the GDR. In December 1969, she sent an official statement to the *Deutscher Schriftstellerverband*, in which she pledged allegiance to the GDR and explained some of the intentions of her work:

Alles, was ich bisher geschrieben habe, nicht zuletzt dieses Buch, entstand aus Parteinahme für die sozialistische Gesellschaft, in der ich lebe. Es käme mir nicht in den Sinn, die Verantwortung, die meine Leser mir hier übertragen, gegen die Unverbindlichkeit einzutauschen, die man im Westen so häufig mit Freiheit verwechselt.²⁶⁷

Her novel, she argued, treated the “Vorgang des Zu-sich-selbst-Kommens von Subjekt und Gesellschaft,” adding that “Dieser Prozeß, vorstellbar nur in der gemeinsamen Arbeit vieler einzelner, ist, was ich Glück nenne.”²⁶⁸ The statement ends with an assertion:

Nachdenken [...] führt keineswegs zur Selbstaufgabe, sondern zur besseren Bekanntschaft mit uns selbst, zur größeren Schärfe des Urteils. Wer könnte im Ernst annehmen, daß dieses Urteil ausgerechnet zugunsten jener notorischen Antikommunisten und ihrer plumpen Anbiederungsversuche ausfallen soll?²⁶⁹

This statement was not only meant to appease political officials,²⁷⁰ but also reflects Wolf’s very particular understanding of liberty: individuality—obviously one of the novel’s most important subjects—is thought of as individuality within the boundaries of a socialist society. *Nachdenken über Christa T.* thus portrays the “Zu-sich-selbst-Kommen”

²⁶⁶ Ibid., 117.

²⁶⁷ Ibid., 186.

²⁶⁸ Ibid., 187.

²⁶⁹ Ibid., 187.

²⁷⁰ Wolf repeats almost *verbatim* here what she had previously expressed in a private letter to her Swedish publisher Thomas von Vegesack, in which she would not have been forced to express her loyalty to the socialist society as explicitly as she does here. The consistency suggests that the statement reflects Wolf’s true personal opinion. See Drescher, *Dokumentation*, 134-37.

of individual *and* society, while also functioning as a work of introspection that Wolf undertakes on behalf of her generation.

Ich und Wir

Several scholars have acknowledged that *Nachdenken über Christa T.* addresses generational questions. Sonja Hilzinger, for example, points out that the biography of Christa T. is representative of Wolf's generation and that the text depicts the encounter between the generation who grew up during the Third Reich and the younger generation socialized in the GDR.²⁷¹ Therese Hörnigk, likewise, summarizes in one sentence: "Auf [...] Reflexions- wie Handlungsebene, werden Denkstrukturen und Handlungsweisen erörtert und debattiert, Grundstrukturen der Generation der um 1930 Geborenen durchgearbeitet, die sich—während des Nationalsozialismus aufgewachsen—übergangslos nach der Befreiung vom Faschismus am Aufbau der neuen Gesellschaft beteiligten."²⁷² Wolfram and Helmtrud Mauser refer to the generational importance in their monograph on *Nachdenken über Christa T.* in the chapter "'ich'-sagen – 'wir'-sagen," stating that Christa T.'s difficulties are "nicht nur ein individuelles, zufällig-persönliches, sondern ein generationsspezifisches Problem."²⁷³

None of these scholars, however, go beyond simply identifying the generational nature of the work. The only *Feuilleton* critic who at the time fully grasped the historical-generational dimension of the text was Marcel Reich-Ranicki, who reviewed the novel for the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* in 1969:

²⁷¹ See Hilzinger, *Christa Wolf*, 33-34.

²⁷² Therese Hörnigk, *Christa Wolf*, 136.

²⁷³ Wolfram and Helmtrud Mauser, *Christa Wolf: Nachdenken über Christa T.* (UTB. Munich: W. Fink, 1987).

Es ist die Geschichte ihrer Generation, die Christa Wolf hier erzählt, die Geschichte jener, die kurz nach 1945, damals kaum achtzehn oder zwanzig Jahre alt, begeistert und emphatisch die Morgenröte einer neuen Zeit grüßten und die sich wenig später inmitten des grauen und trüben Alltags von Leipzig und Ostberlin sahen. Sie glaubten, den Sturm der Revolution entfesselt zu haben, doch was kam, war nur der Mief der DDR.

So betrachtet sind beide—ebenso Christa T. wie ihre berichtende und analysierende Freundin—in hohem Maße typische und exemplarische Gestalten, sensibler freilich und intelligenter als die meisten Generationengenossen.²⁷⁴

I fully agree with his reading: clearly, the retrospective on Christa T.'s life is presented as a retrospective on the generation from the beginning. While Reich-Ranicki does not provide much textual evidence to back up his claim there are indeed several significant passages that provide evidence for Wolf's systematic generational focus.

In the exposition before the first chapter, the narrator writes: “Und bloß nicht vorgeben, wir täten es ihretwegen. Ein für allemal: Sie braucht uns nicht. Halten wir uns also fest, es ist unseretwegen, denn es scheint, wir brauchen sie.”²⁷⁵ The imperative form of “festhalten” in this sentence means both “let’s brace ourselves” as well as “let’s record our lives”. Wolf emphasizes that “we” need to look back and write down what became of our generation. In fact, she even describes the moment at which the narrator realizes the need for this generational retrospective, the moment when the two women meet again in the 1950s during their studies in Leipzig. Walking to the train station together after a lecture they notice how similar their biographies have been since they parted ways in 1945:

So fragten wir uns unsere Erlebnisse ab, als ließen sich Schlüsse daraus ziehen. Dabei merkten wir: Wir gebrauchten und mieden die gleichen Wörter. In der gleichen Versammlung hatten wir eben noch gesessen, die gleichen Schriften

²⁷⁴ Marcel Reich-Ranicki: “Eine unruhige Elegie (1969),” in Marcel Reich-Ranicki, *Ohne Rabatt: Über Literatur aus der DDR* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1991), 174-181, 177. The fact that the Luchterhand publishing house used the first sentence of this quote on the back cover of their paperback edition of *Nachdenken über Christa T.* shows the lasting influence of Reich-Ranicki's reading.

²⁷⁵ Wolf, *Nachdenken*, 11.

mußten wir beide gelesen haben. Viele Wege gab es damals nicht für uns, keine große Auswahl an Gedanken, Hoffnungen und Zweifeln.²⁷⁶

They both recognize that there was a pattern in their lives: both were introduced to Marxist theories (“die gleichen Schriften”) and eventually began to repress their fascist upbringing (“mieden die gleichen Wörter”), as they entered the new society.

The narrator decides that it is time to revisit this shared past, bothered by the lack of a critical-analytical perspective on the past ten or fifteen years of their life. They need to walk the path a second time, to use Wolf’s metaphor:

[D]en Weg vom Kaufhaus zum Bahnhof müssen wir noch einmal gehen, uns andere Worte sagen, den Mut endlich finden, aus unseren halben Sätzen ganze machen, die Unschärfe aus unserer Rede tilgen, schade um die Zeit. Anders ansehen sollen wir uns auch und anderes sehen.²⁷⁷

While this passage is easy to miss, it is crucial in clarifying that the meditation on Christa T.’s life is embedded within a larger project that seeks to evaluate the path of an entire generation—“es ist unseretwegen,” as the narrator says. *Nachdenken über Christa T.* is a portrayal of the Hitler Youth generation in the socialist German state, the generation that regarded itself as morally superior to their colleagues in the West. The quote above continues:

Unschärfe? Das Wort mag befremden. Hat es doch den Jahren, von denen zu reden gewesen wäre, an Schärfe nicht gefehlt. Den Schnitt machen zwischen ‘uns’ und ‘den anderen’, in voller Schärfe, endgültig: das war die Rettung. Und insgeheim wissen: Viel hat nicht gefehlt, und kein Schnitt hätte ‘das andere’ von uns getrennt, weil wir selbst anders gewesen wären. Wie aber trennt man sich von sich selbst? Darüber sprachen wir nicht.²⁷⁸

The narrator admits to the artificiality of their previous image of themselves. They sharply distinguished themselves from “den anderen” in the West by cutting themselves

²⁷⁶ Ibid., 34.

²⁷⁷ Ibid., 35.

²⁷⁸ Ibid., 35.

off from the Nazi past—“das andere”. But the narrator recognizes that by being so decidedly “anti-fascist” they also separated themselves from a part of their own lives. “Anders ansehen sollen wir uns,”²⁷⁹ she says now. Together with Christa T., she wants to revisit the years after the war in order to rethink rash choices and youthful errors. This broader perspective explains why about half of the book is written in the first person plural, with the other half being the narrator’s reflections on Christa T. in the third person. At some point in the novel, the narrator writes: “an die Stelle des Ich kann— diesen Ausweg läßt die Sprache—fast immer das Wir treten, niemals mit mehr Recht als für jene Zeit.”²⁸⁰ Thus, Christa T.’s identity struggles seem to be closely intertwined with the collective identity of the generational “wir.”

A generation’s path from fascism to anti-fascism

How then does the narrator look back on the history of this generation? What critical perspective does she gain? Unlike *Kindheitsmuster*, which focuses on childhood and adolescence, *Nachdenken über Christa T.* illuminates the years after the war, beginning in 1945 with memories of the symbolic destruction of Nazi ideologies: “Sie verbrannte ihre alten Tagebücher, da gingen Schwüre in Rauch auf und die Begeisterungen deren man sich nun schämte, die Sprüche und Lieder.”²⁸¹ Soon thereafter, new ideologies are offered, providing much-needed direction:

die neuen Namen auf den Buchdeckeln: Gorki, Makarenko, die neuen Broschüren, die, so wichtig wie die tägliche Nahrung, jedem in die Hand gegeben werden, der seine Hände nicht zumacht. [...] Ja, so wird es sein. Dies ist der Weg zu uns selber. So wäre diese Sehnsucht nicht lächerlich und abwegig, so wäre sie brauchbar und nützlich.²⁸²

²⁷⁹ Ibid., 35.

²⁸⁰ Ibid., 60.

²⁸¹ Ibid., 37.

²⁸² Ibid., 39.

“Dies ist der Weg zu uns selber”—precisely the belief that the narrator now questions. She comments on her generation’s early fascination with Marxist theory: “Wieviel wird da zu verwerfen sein!”²⁸³ On the way to the Leipzig train station, she suspects that her friend feels a similar distance to this earlier enthusiasm, but they avoid talking about it: “Kein Wort davon auf unserem ersten Weg. Zwei, drei Titel im Höchstfall, nüchterne philosophische und ökonomische Begriffe.”²⁸⁴ Through the many unspoken words and allusions, the reader can sense why the narrator feels the need to “walk this path again” and illuminate the story of her generation through Christa T.’s representative biography.

These passages in the third chapter, which already suggest a critical perspective on the Hitler Youth generation’s rash involvement with the socialist ideal, are complemented by a number of even more explicit passages in the sixth chapter, which contains the passage quoted by every single critic in the East and West after the book was published, Christa T.’s statement that “mir graut vor der neuen Welt der Phantasielosen. Der Tatsachenmenschen. Der Hopp-Hopp-Menschen, so hat sie sie genannt.”²⁸⁵ This sentence was as unacceptable to GDR functionaries as it was praiseworthy to West German critics because it captured so well the manner in which the excitement about new socialist ideas turned into resignation over the reality of totalitarian bureaucracy. Another passage, frequently quoted alongside the previous one, expresses the disillusionment even more clearly:

Der Mechanismus, nach dem sich das alles bewegte—aber bewegte es sich denn?—die Zahnräder, Schnüre und Stangen waren ins Dunkel getaucht, man erfreue sich an der absoluten Perfektion und Zweckmäßigkeit des Apparats, den

²⁸³ Ibid., 39.

²⁸⁴ Ibid., 39.

²⁸⁵ Ibid., 61.

reibungslos in Gang zu halten kein Opfer zu groß schien—selbst nicht das: sich auslöschen, Schraubchen sein.²⁸⁶

No one knew exactly how the GDR functioned; its hidden machinery was “ins Dunkel getaucht.” Things seemed efficient and perfect on the surface, but Wolf suggests that one of the sacrifices as a result of this efficiency was the diminished value of the individual. Throughout her life Christa T. had tried to be more than a piece that kept the machinery going, but she had always felt the threat of being “ausgelöscht” by the state apparatus.

While most critics read these two text passages exclusively alongside Christa T.’s quest for individuality, they overlook that Wolf placed them in a chapter that consists largely of passages written from the generational perspective. By seeking out these passages in the first person plural and rearranging them slightly, thus reversing Wolf’s montage technique, we receive the clearest, most critical depiction Wolf provides of her generation in the novel. Take this key passage, which reveals the author’s critical view of her generation’s naïve switch from one ideology to the next:

Sie [Christa T.] hat an unseren Gesprächen teilgenommen, jenen herrlichen ausschweifenden nächtlichen Gesprächen über die Beschaffenheit des Paradieses, an dessen Schwelle wir, meistens hungrig und Holzschuhe an den Füßen, mit großer Gewißheit standen. Die Idee der Vollkommenheit hatte uns erfaßt, aus unseren Büchern und Broschüren war sie in uns eingedrungen, und von den Podien der Versammlungen kam die Ungeduld dazu: Wahrlich, ich sage dir, heute noch wirst du mit mir im Paradiese sein! Oh, wir hatten das Vorgefühl davon, es war unleugbar und unersetzbar, wir vergewisserten uns seiner, indem wir stritten. [...] Wer aber, wer würde würdig sein es zu bewohnen? Die Allerreinsten nur, das schien doch festzustehen.²⁸⁷

This hyperbolic depiction of their almost religious belief in the socialist utopia, which seemed like paradise, discloses how much distance Wolf feels to these early post-war years two decades later.

²⁸⁶ Ibid., 66.

²⁸⁷ Ibid., 61-62.

Why did it take so long until this generation developed a self-reflective and self-critical perspective? Wolf offers a plausible psychological explanation:

Wir nämlich waren vollauf damit beschäftigt, uns unantastbar zu machen, wenn einer noch nachfühlen kann, was das heißt. Nicht nur nichts Fremdes in uns aufnehmen—und was alles erklärten wir für fremd!—, auch im eigenen Innern nichts Fremdes aufkommen lassen, und wenn es schon aufkam—ein Zweifel, ein Verdacht, Beobachtungen, Fragen—, dann doch nichts davon anmerken zu lassen. Weniger aus Angst, obwohl viele auch ängstlich waren, als aus Unsicherheit.²⁸⁸

It was not only fear that prevented them from shedding any doubts about the new political system but also deep insecurity. Because it was unthinkable that this system, which had provided a safe ideological haven after the collapse of the Nazi regime, could also be corrupt, they created a protective shield that repelled doubts, questions, or suspicions:

So entstand um uns herum, oder auch in uns, was dasselbe war, ein hermetischer Raum, der seine Gesetze aus sich selber zog, dessen Sterne und Sonnen scheinbar mühelos um eine Mitte kreisten, die keinen Gesetzen und keiner Veränderung und am wenigsten dem Zweifel unterworfen war.²⁸⁹

With astonishing insight, *Nachdenken über Christa T.* thus revisits the development of Wolf's generation during the first twenty years after the war and discovers disillusionment and discontent with the GDR but also the need to hold on to a belief system that provides stability.

At the beginning of the novel, the narrator already states that this retrospective will allow them to see their lives from a new viewpoint: “Die Jahre, die wieder aufsteigen, sind dieselben Jahre nicht mehr.” But she continues: “Licht und Schatten fallen noch einmal auf unser Gesicht, das aber gefaßt bleibt.”²⁹⁰ Wolf does not intend to unnerve or upset, and it is interesting that she uses the plural form “*unser* Gesicht” in this

²⁸⁸ Ibid., 60.

²⁸⁹ Ibid., 66.

²⁹⁰ Ibid., 31.

sentence. The strong generational identity continues to exist, only that it is now based on the memory of what used to glue them together, the emphatic embrace of socialism during the early post-war years: “[Wir] lächeln heute, wenn wir uns gegenseitig daran erinnern. Werden noch einmal, für Minuten, einander ähnlich, wie wir es damals durch diesen Glauben jahrelang waren. Können uns heute noch an einem Wort, einer Losung erkennen. Blinzeln uns zu.”²⁹¹ Instead of the future, it is now the memory of the past—of how silly we were...—that creates the bond between the members of this generation.

The idea of the socialist society itself, however, is never questioned. Instead, Wolf wants her generation—in her essay “Lesen und Schreiben,” she refers to “die auffällig verzögerte Reife meiner Generation”²⁹²—to grow up and develop a more critical political attitude, apparently hoping that a new, more mature perspective will lead to these problems being tackled. Defending herself against the criticisms of GDR officials, Wolf quoted a sentence from her novel that in her view clearly showed she was still committed to the socialist idea.²⁹³ She referred to the last sentence of this passage:

Denn die neue Welt, die wir unantastbar machen wollten, und sei es dadurch, daß wir uns irgendeinen Ziegelstein in ihr Fundament einmauerten—sie gab es wirklich. Es gibt sie, und nicht nur in unseren Köpfen, und damals fing sie für uns an. Was aber immer mit ihr geschah oder geschehen wird, es ist und bleibt unsere Sache. Unter den Tauschangelegenheiten ist keines, nach dem auch nur den Kopf zu drehen sich lohnen würde...²⁹⁴

²⁹¹ Ibid., 62.

²⁹² Christa Wolf, “Lesen und Schreiben,” in Christa Wolf, *Essays I*, 238-82, 251.

²⁹³ In a letter to the *Deutscher Schriftstellerverband* she stressed that West German critics must have overlooked the key sentence of her novel: “‘Unter den Tauschangeboten war keins, nach dem auch nur den Kopf zu drehen sich lohnen würde.’ Nicht nur dieser Satz scheint in den Exemplaren, die jenen Kritikern in die Hände gefallen sind, zu fehlen; es ist aber ein Schlüsselsatz, weil er die Kompromißlosigkeit der Selbstprüfung, die Hartnäckigkeit mancher Fragestellungen erst erklärt. Nur wenn man nicht nach billigen dritten Wegen schießt, nimmt man die Auseinandersetzung mit der eigenen Geschichte ernst, und damit den Entwurf der Kinder.” Drescher, *Dokumentation*, 86.

²⁹⁴ Ibid 60-61.

“Es gibt sie”—with the present tense she stresses that the idea of this new society still exists. Christa T.’s death might be an allegory about the loss of individuality in the GDR, but to claim, as several critics have done, that she suffers and ultimately dies because of the GDR, would signify a pessimistic attitude that Wolf certainly did not mean to express.²⁹⁵

Shortly before her death, Christa T. makes a statement that points in the other direction. She has found a new project in designing and building a house, and although financial troubles and health problems present serious obstacles,

war [sie] gar nicht zu erschüttern. Sie wußte ganz gut, daß dieses rohe, winddurchpiffene Haus weiter von seiner Vollendung entfernt war als das Traumhaus an jenem glücklichen Abend auf den Skizzen im Strandhotel, das weiß und schön auf dem Papier dagelegen hatte. Aber sie hatte auch erfahren, daß das wirkliche Material sich stärker widersetzt als Papier und daß man die Dinge, solange sie im Werden sind, unerschütterlich vorwärtstreiben muß. Wir sahen, daß sie längst nicht mehr auf ihren Skizzen bestand, sondern auf diesen rohen Steinen.²⁹⁶

Christa T. realizes that it will take time for the house to resemble her sketches. Things looked easier on paper as they turned out to be in reality. She is ready to make concessions and be content with the rough stones instead of insisting that the house becomes identical with her sketches. It is not her death but this project—representing Christa T.’s maturity and patience, her more realistic approach to the original drafts—that serves as an allegory for the GDR. This passage must be read together with a statement made twenty pages later, “Man kann sich nämlich entschließen, in gewissen Bereichen, das eine für wahr zu halten, das andere nicht. So wie man sich irgendwann entschlossen

²⁹⁵ David Bathrick, for example, writes that “Christa T. ist eine Intellektuelle, die an Leukämie, aber auch an den Unbilden des Lebens in der DDR stirbt.” In “Geschichtsbewußtsein als Selbstbewußtsein. Die Literatur der DDR,” *Literatur nach 1945, Politische und regionale Aspekte*, ed. Jost Hermand (Akademische Verlagsgesellschaft, Athenaiion Wiesbaden 1979), 273-314, 307.

²⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 176.

hat, an die Gutartigkeit des Menschen zu glauben, nützlichkeithalber, als Arbeitshypothese.“²⁹⁷ As I will show in my fourth chapter, Wolf stands by this statement until her death. Reich-Ranicki has pointed out: “[D]iesem Roman also fehlt auch nur die Spur von der fröhlich-optimistischen Perspektive, die die Kulturfunktionäre ihren Schriftstellern abzuverlangen versuchen.“²⁹⁸ But nevertheless, it is ultimately an optimistic perspective.

Conclusion

Klaus Sauer writes aptly of a “Prozeß der Selbstrevision” with regard to the critical turn during this early phase in Wolf’s career in the sixties,²⁹⁹ claiming that in *Nachdenken über Christa T.* we see for the first time the self-reflexive attitude that becomes the trademark of Wolf’s literature. Sauer writes about this astonishing development:

[E]s war keineswegs von Anfang an ausgemacht, daß Christa Wolf über die Fähigkeit verfügen würde, sich selbst und ihre Arbeit in Frage zu stellen. Als sie zu schreiben begann, lag ihr jedenfalls nichts ferner als der Gedanke an eine Literatur, die nicht zuletzt eine Schule des Zweifels ist—des Zweifels an den allzu vielen öffentlich gehandelten Gewißheiten³⁰⁰

In a similar vein, Georgina Paul writes that from the late sixties, Wolf “began to consciously apply the technique of paradigmatic self-analysis through fictionalisation.”³⁰¹ Paul argues that on a profoundly personal level, by including autobiographical elements in her novels, Wolf began to ask critical questions about life in the GDR. However, both the term “self-reflexive writing” as well as Georgina Paul’s phrase “poetics of self-

²⁹⁷ Ibid., 191.

²⁹⁸ Ibid., 178.

²⁹⁹ Klaus Sauer “Der lange Weg zu sich selbst. Christa Wolfs Frühwerk,” in Klaus Sauer, ed., *Christa Wolf, Materialienbuch* (Munich: Luchterhand Verlag, 1979), 64-80, 64.

³⁰⁰ Ibid., 65.

³⁰¹ Georgina Paul, “‘Ich, Seherin, gehörte zum Palast’: Christa Wolf’s Literary Treatment of the Stasi in the Context of her Poetics of Self-Analysis,” in *East German Writers and the Politics of Culture: Dealing with the Stasi*, eds. Paul Cooke, Paul, and Andrew Plowman, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 87-106.

analysis,”³⁰² hide the fact that, strictly speaking, it is not the “self” that is in the center of Wolf’s writing. I would instead argue that Wolf’s truly *self*-reflective writing only begins in 1990, after the socialist society of the GDR finally falls apart. In *Nachdenken über Christa T.*, any reflection about the “self” is embedded within the author’s paradigmatic writing about her generation. It is no coincidence that—as with Tulla and Harry in Grass’ *Hundejahre*—there are two protagonists in Wolf’s novel, who are “nicht immer und nicht so sicher als zwei autonome epische Figuren erkennbar sind,” as Reich-Ranicki has pointed out.³⁰³ With the addition of the narrator as a second, equally important protagonist besides Christa T., Wolf demonstrates on a structural level what she expresses semantically by the constant use of the “wir.” The individual subject in *Nachdenken über Christa T.* represents her generation, which, in turn, represents the larger GDR society.

While my generational reading of *Nachdenken über Christa T.*, a novel that represents her first piece of literature that reveals aesthetic and political independence, does not unveil a dramatically new perspective, I hope to have added a new layer of understanding by stressing how the novel’s emphasis on individuality goes hand in hand with an adherence to collective generational thinking. In his eulogy for Wolf, Grass spoke about the self-doubt with which she faced her own biography in her literary work: “jener Mut zum Selbstzweifel, den Christa Wolf lebenslang, ich meine, im Übermaß bewiesen hat.”³⁰⁴ However, the individual voice in Wolf’s literature would only become stronger over time.

³⁰² Ibid., 88.

³⁰³ Reich-Ranicki, “Eine unruhige Elegie,” 175.

³⁰⁴ Grass, “Trauerrede”.

3. Walser versus Zeitgeist—The essay “Händedruck mit Gespenstern” (1979) from today’s perspective

As we have seen, both Günter Grass and Christa Wolf readily accepted, or even aspired to, a public role as representatives of the Hitler Youth generation in the cultural-political spheres of their respective countries. Grass in the West and Wolf in the East—both used their Hitler Youth past in their role as advocates of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, continually addressing their biographies and their generational background from the beginning of their careers. They talked openly their upbringing in Nazi-Germany, reflected on their generational identity, and depicted their generation’s particular situation during and after the war in their literature. The case of Martin Walser is strikingly different. Whereas Grass and Wolf were already writing autobiographically inspired works about their childhood and youth in the fifties and sixties, Walser conspicuously avoided this subject until 1998 when he published his childhood autobiography *Ein springender Brunnen*. And even then, I will show in my next chapter, the text only underscored Walser’s refusal to represent his “Nazi childhood” in an exemplary political way, as Wolf and Grass had done. In short: While both Grass and Wolf chose to inhabit their roles as generational representatives, it can be argued that Walser was placed in that role unwillingly, made a spokesperson as a result of his assumed biographical experiences, but not as a result of any desire on his own part.

Therefore, one looks for explicit generational-biographical references in Walser’s early work in vain. Both his first and his second novel, *Ehen in Philippsburg* (1957) and *Halbzeit* (1959), portray West Germany during the economic miracle of the fifties. One could potentially connect these texts with Schelsky’s *Die skeptische Generation*, given the ways their characters focus on their private, economic and love affairs, but Walser

himself does not highlight the generational context at all. In fact, in an interview in 1980, he revealed that the motivation for the work on *Halbzeit* was actually a reaction *against* the feeling of being confined to a very specific national identity and biography, and that he wrote the novel “[a]us Wut sozusagen”, after returning to Germany from a trip to America:

Ich war ja doch schon 31 Jahre alt—und hatte gar keine Lust mehr nach Deutschland zurückzugehen. [...] Die Energie dazu [to write the novel in a very short amount of time] kam aus diesem Erlebnis des Gefangenseins auf einem Kontinent, in einem Land, einer Familie, einer Sprache, dieses Abgegrenzt- und Abgekapselt- und Abgepacktsein einer Biographie, aus der Ahnung, du bist der und der, und der hat wieder da und da unter der und der Adresse mit seinem Paß einzufinden. Das schien mir unerträglich.³⁰⁵

This anger seems to have accompanied him ever since. After the publication of *Ein springender Brunnen* in 1998, a critic observed that while other writers of his generation had incorporated their biographies into their works decades earlier, Walser instead wrote a collection of novellas reminiscent of Kafka,³⁰⁶ and seemingly avoided connecting National Socialist history with his own biography, which did not seem to be on his agenda at the time. Walser reacted with fury to the notion that this might have been the result of repression, as was suggested in the television show *Das literarische Quartett* in which *Ein springender Brunnen* was discussed. In an interview with Rudolf Augstein, the editor of *Der Spiegel*, Walser said:

Schon in *Ehen in Philippsburg*, also 1957, sei keiner in der HJ gewesen, keiner im BDM; ja, schon 1955 sei die deutsche Vergangenheit im *Flugzeug über dem Haus* ausgeklammert worden ... Dass das 1955 kafkaeske Parabeln waren, in denen die Hitlerjugend schlecht platzierbar gewesen wäre, gilt nichts. Ästhetik gilt nichts,

³⁰⁵ Martin Walser and Monika Totten: “Ein Gespräch mit Martin Walser in Neu-England,” in Martin Walser and Klaus Siblewski, *Auskunft. 22 Gespräche aus 28 Jahren* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1991) 96-115, 98.

³⁰⁶ For the novellas see Martin Walser, *Ein Flugzeug über dem Haus und andere Geschichten* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1997).

nur die politische Korrektheitsforderung gilt, und das erlebe ich als ungeheure Bevormundung.³⁰⁷

As a result of statements like this, I argue that the generational context has *always* in fact been present in Walser's work, but through its absence—and I will demonstrate that the author made a conscious choice not to be perceived as a representative of the Hitler Youth generation. While this avoidance of the past could be described in psychological terms, as the repression of trauma, I wish instead to focus on the political rather than the personal and psychological implications. It is Walser himself who uses the term “political emotions” in his essay “Händedruck mit Gespenstern,” which is particularly apt given his tendency to display highly emotional reactions precisely when he wants argue in sober, political terms. In considering these emotional reactions, then, I am not so much laying Walser on the couch, as it were, but instead considering them as part of an expression of political identity.

I consider three texts in this last section of the chapter. First, in my discussion of the essay “Über die Neueste Stimmung im Westen” (1970), I will show that Walser began his career fully subscribing to the leftist discourse so often “attached” to his generation. Then, I fast forward to a recent essay called “Über Erfahrungen mit dem Zeitgeist” (2008), in which he provides a retrospective of his public career, representing himself as an individualist who has always been misunderstood because his views contradicted the dominant political culture. Finally, I turn to the essay “Händedruck mit Gespenstern” (1979), which I consider a key text in understanding Walser's rejection of the role as a representative of the Hitler Youth generation in the public sphere. In this

³⁰⁷ Martin Walser, Rudolf Augstein, “Erinnerung kann man nicht befehlen. Martin Walser und Rudolf Augstein über ihre deutsche Vergangenheit,” *Der Spiegel* 46/2002 (reprint from *Der Spiegel* 45/1998), 148-162, 162.

essay, Walser rejects this role of spokesperson because it would not allow him to speak both about his Hitler Youth past *and* his increasingly strong nationalist feelings, given the domination (or even occupation) of the generational Hitler Youth identity by left-liberal discourse.

“Über die Neueste Stimmung im Westen” (1970)

Over the past fifteen years, Walser has repeatedly claimed that the German literary scene had lost its autonomy as a result of being increasingly infiltrated by (left-liberal) political demands, not least demands concerning the memory of the Holocaust. In the *Spiegel* interview quoted above, for example, he complains about an omnipresent “politische Korrektheitsforderung.” In this light, the claims he makes in the essay “Über die Neueste Stimmung im Westen” from 1970 are quite astonishing. Here, Walser aligns himself entirely with those writers on the Left who understood their literature as a critical force in society and a tool to communicate political opinions, attacking the “neueste Stimmung”: the post-modern movement that had spilled over into West Germany’s literary scene from America, and promoted by figures such as the postmodernist critic Leslie A. Fiedler. He juxtaposes a group of younger intellectuals—in particular Rolf Dieter Brinkmann (born in 1940) and Peter Handke (born in 1942)—with a group of politically engaged authors of his own generation. These younger authors, he writes, deal with language

[s]o weit als möglich weg von einer Ausdruckspraxis, die die Welt noch mit Hilfe kritischer Abbilder korrigieren wollte, oder die, selbst wenn die Schreiber das nicht beabsichtigt hatten, ganz von selbst brauchbar schien als ein Mittel zur Ausbildung eines kritischen und dadurch zur Veränderung drängenden Bewußtseins vom gesellschaftlichen Zustand.³⁰⁸

³⁰⁸ Martin Walser: “Über die neueste Stimmung im Westen (1970),” in Martin Walser, *Ansichten, Einsichten*, 284-315, 288.

Walser coins the term “Desengagement” for this mode of experimental writing that uses language in its materiality and no longer as critical tool: “Das Desengagement führte zur Weigerung, mit Sprache Meinung herzustellen, und entwickelte eine artistische Methode der Reduktion des Ausdrucks auf Sprachfertigteile, auf Montage und Collage und Bloßlegung von Sprachstrukturen. Diese Bewegung reicht am sichtbarsten von Heißenbüttel bis Handke.”³⁰⁹

Walser clearly distances himself from this literature of “Desengagement,” arguing that by fostering interiority and individuality in anti-democratic ways, this movement indirectly left room for fascist structures to re-emerge:

[W]o dieser Prozeß hin will: zu einer Gesellschaft, in der jeder seine eigene Befreiung auf dem Weg nach innen sucht, mit Hilfe von Drogen, mit Hilfe einer Literatur, die sich auf Mythen und verfälschte Trivialitäten kapriziert, oder auch mit Hilfe einer Literatur, die als Droge die chemische Droge begleitet. Befreiung des Menschen von der Gesellschaft [...] In ihr [in this liberated society] stirbt mit jedem Ausflug ins Innere eine demokratische Möglichkeit ab und die Möglichkeit zum Gegenteil—und das heißt Faschismus—nimmt zu.³¹⁰

With statements like this one, Walser positions himself in an ongoing debate about aesthetics and politics in German literature that began at the end of the sixties.³¹¹ These quotations demonstrate that Walser argues against a position that he would later assume

³⁰⁹ Ibid., 286.

³¹⁰ Ibid., 307.

³¹¹ Walser was in part responding to Handke’s 1966 essay “Ich bin ein Bewohner des Elfenbeinturms” and Enzensbergers 1968 essay “Gemeinplätze, die Neueste Literatur betreffend.” Handke had argued for the autonomy of literature in 1966, that the omnipresent question of how to become a political human being should be replaced by the question of how to become a *poetic* human being, and that a writer should focus on the abstraction from political matters instead of purporting to be political. Enzensberger, by contrast, considered even the literature of the politically engaged authors of *Gruppe 47* too harmless and affirmative. His radically Marxist approach to literature as a commodity becomes manifest in his provocative and often misunderstood term “Tod der Literatur.” If literature was not *really* political, i.e. if it was not essentially revolutionary, it might as well be declared dead. Walser, in comparison with Handke and Enzensberger, stands somewhere in the middle. While he heavily criticizes Handke’s ideal of an autonomous literary sphere, he writes that Enzensberger’s death metaphor comes “eine Ewigkeit zu früh. Erst wenn die Gegenstände und ihre Namen in eins verschmelzen würden, wäre die Literatur tot.” (“Über die Neueste Stimmung”, 308). As long as this is not the case, he argues, as long as “die Verhältnisse von ihren falschen Namen leben,” it is the writers’ task to make society and politics the subject of their writing. (Ibid., 309).

himself, albeit with some modification, arguing *against* both aesthetic autonomy and the liberation of literature from politics, of which he would later become a strong defender.

At this point in time, he sees himself as a “gesellschaftskritischer Schriftsteller” and even sides with Grass:

Die Produzenten der Neuesten Stimmung können natürlich sagen: ihr sogenannten gesellschaftskritischen Schriftsteller habt nichts geändert, nicht einmal euch selbst. [...] Sie verzichten also auf diese bei uns immer noch gehandelte Rechtfertigung des Schriftstellers, der auf großem Parkett andauernd sein gesellschaftskritisches Ritual aufführt. [...] Ich dagegen muß Grass einfach immer wieder bewundern, wenn er auf seine SPD-Tour geht; bewundern nicht wegen des Bekenntnisses zum SPD-Inhalt, sondern wegen seiner Fähigkeit, eine praktische Konsequenz zu ziehen; für die Virtuosen der Tour nach innen ist Grass wahrscheinlich gerade durch seine Praxis völlig korrumpiert; diese geradezu rücksichtslose Verbindlichkeit eines Schriftstellers ist ihnen ein schmieriger Greuel.³¹²

While he clarifies that he does not necessarily agree with the specific political program Grass promotes, he also clearly identifies with Grass’s concrete political activism rather than with the aesthetic “Tour nach innen” advocated by the younger generation of authors.

Later in his career, Walser completely abandoned his allegiance to the idea of a German *littérature engagée*. As mentioned earlier, in the controversial *Friedenspreis* speech, “Erfahrungen beim Verfassen einer Sonntagsrede” (1998), the basic argument on which he bases his memory “intervention” appears to be the opposite of what he argues in 1970. For him, as he has argued more recently, German literature was “polluted” by the left-wing political understanding of literature, fostered both by authors like Grass, who clung to the notion of an engaged literature, as well as the media, which for a long time guaranteed authorial publicity. As a result, Walser complains, the aesthetic sphere has lost its autonomy. It is within this framework that he looks back onto his early career

³¹² Ibid., 299.

in the 2008 essay “Über Erfahrungen mit dem Zeitgeist,”³¹³ in which he represents himself as a victim of this development.

“Über Erfahrungen mit dem Zeitgeist” (2008)

Walser’s *zeitgeist* essay is cloaked as a broad reflection on how the reigning discourses influences all intellectuals—“[W]as der Sauerstoff für unsere Lunge,” Walser writes “ist der Zeitgeist für das Bewusstsein und für das Selbstbewusstsein.”³¹⁴ His highly subjective investment in this *zeitgeist* analysis, however, become visible when he continues:

“Gewöhnlich nehmen wir von der Luft auch erst Notiz, wenn sie schlecht ist. So auch vom Zeitgeist. Wenn wir mit ihm nicht zurechtkommen, oder er mit uns, dann nehmen wir ihn wahr,”³¹⁵ a comment that must be linked to the memory debates of 1998 and 2002, when Walser was not—and did not want to be—in agreement with the *zeitgeist*. In fact, he ends the essay by quoting the philosopher Peter Sloterdijk who had noted “dass Walser auch hierin zu früh recht hatte”³¹⁶—Walser had been correct in demanding a normalization of German memory discourse in his *Friedenspreis* speech but since he was ten years ahead of the *zeitgeist*, his critics did not realize his brilliant foresight.

It thus becomes clear that Walser writes out of a deep feeling of being misunderstood in this long essay, in which he continuously quotes long passages from his own work, presenting himself as an avantgarde political thinker and author, who was unjustifiably attacked by his critics because his ideas did not match those of the current

³¹³ Martin Walser: “Über Erfahrungen mit dem Zeitgeist,” in Martin Walser, *Kinderspielplatz* (Berlin: Berlin University Press, 2008), 33-70.

³¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 49.

³¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 49.

³¹⁶ See *ibid.*, 70. Walser quotes from Sloterdijk’s essay “Theorie der Nachkriegszeiten” from 2007.

zeitgeist.³¹⁷ The essay reveals strong undertones of victimization, and it becomes apparent that the term *zeitgeist* functions as a metaphor for the culturally dominant left-liberal consensus, a consensus with which Walser had long struggled—not least, I argue, because it was the mainstream discourse of intellectuals of the Hitler Youth generation. As he writes, “[L]inksintellektuell? Ich habe mein Leben unter dieser Etikettierung verbringen müssen. Müssen?”³¹⁸—clearly presenting himself as the victim of a left-liberal *zeitgeist*.

He goes on to launch a retrospective of moments during his career when he deviated from the expectations of being a leftist. At the beginning of the sixties, he polemically explains, the Frankfurt School, according to Walser the dominant school of thought at the time, evaluated German writers with the help of two adjectives: “Mehr als ein Entweder-oder war nicht drin: kritisch-aufklärerisch oder affirmativ.”³¹⁹ Thus, when the first dissertation on his novel *Halbzeit* came to the conclusion that the novel was “affirmativ,” this verdict was tantamount to suggesting the author might be on the political right—a heavy-handed criticism. Paradoxically, he points out, he was “genau in dieser Zeit vom Zeitgeist [...] zum Kommunisten, gestempelt”³²⁰ because of his vehement public protest against the Vietnam War. He quotes a lengthy passage he wrote in his diary in 1971, in which he expressed his disappointment with his editor Siegfried Unseld and the critic Marcel Reich-Ranicki, both of whom had criticized him for being

³¹⁷ One could challenge this statement because Walser makes the attempt to include himself in the group of those who are influenced by the *Zeitgeist*. For example, he says that when he wrote the essay “Über die Neueste Stimmung im Westen,” discussed above, he fell victim to the “linke *Zeitgeist*-Notierung.” (He writes: “Peter Handke war für mich in der linken *Zeitgeist*-Notierung ein Bewusstseinsabenteurer, dessen Innerlichkeitszirkus ich zur ontologischen Turnstunde erklärte.” *Ibid.*, 44) Overall, however, he stresses his individuality and independence from the dominant discourse.

³¹⁸ Walser, “Über Erfahrungen mit dem *Zeitgeist*” 34.

³¹⁹ *Ibid.*

³²⁰ *Ibid.*, 35.

too far on the left. He describes Unseld as ungrateful for not taking his side after he had supported him when his own editors turned against him two years prior, and mentions Reich-Ranicki's negative review of his novel *Jenseits der Liebe*, suggesting that Reich-Ranicki rejected the novel aesthetically because he disagreed with the author's politics.³²¹ Walser claims that "Da wird nicht mehr ein Buch besprochen, sondern eine Person. Aber beides, Buch und Person, wird gleichermaßen erledigt,"³²² adding that he deals with Reich-Ranicki's review for one reason, "weil sie wie keine andere den Zeitgeist demonstriert."³²³ These passages about Unseld and Reich-Ranicki, constituting personal attacks against those who did not share his political positions, significantly weaken Walser's cultural-political argument.

Walser feels especially justified in his self-portrayal as an outcast when it comes to his GDR politics. Jan-Werner Müller, who offers an excellent synopsis of Walser's Germany politics in his book *Another Country*, agrees with the author insofar as he portrays the fall of the Berlin Wall as "the moment of Walser's triumph."³²⁴ Unlike many of his colleagues Walser had always been an advocate of unification, a position for which he was criticized by both the Left and Right. Müller writes that both political wings

tended to attack him for the wrong reasons. The Right wanted to claim as one of its own a man who had consistently espoused 'democratic socialism'. The Left, on the other hand, rather than fastening on these underlying issues and engaging with the questions which Walser persistently posed, seemed to brand him a 'nationalist', even 'revanchist', simply for articulating national questions and the plight of the East Germans.³²⁵

³²¹ Reich-Ranicki had described Walser in this critique as "geistreicher Bajazzo der revolutionären Linken in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland." See *ibid.*, 39.

³²² *Ibid.*, 39.

³²³ *Ibid.*, 39.

³²⁴ See the chapter on "Martin Walser: German Sentiments and Opinions about Germany," in Jan-Werner Müller, *Another Country*, 151-176, here 151

³²⁵ *Ibid.*, 153.

Walser's pro-unification stance, Müller shows, was always motivated by his defense of the idea of a German nation, which in Walser's view could only exist through the reunion of the entire German "Volk."

The *zeitgeist* argument is most convincing in the part of the essay that deals with the difficulties Walser faced because his stance on reunification did not match the Left's acceptance of a divided Germany and a socialist German state. Already in his early essay "Engagement als Pflichtfach für den Schriftsteller" (1967), Walser described the difficulties of passing the public test of having the "correct" political opinion as "engagierter Schriftsteller," which is all about finding the right balance, he says ironically. "[I]n Passau muß man dich für einen Knecht Ulbrichts halten, aber Ulbricht darf sich über dich nicht freuen können. So hat sich der Engagierte einzupendeln zwischen Passau und Pankow."³²⁶ He thus implies that, as a writer in the West German cultural scene of the sixties, he was expected to incorporate a very specific political position: one had to appear as a radical leftist in the traditionally right-wing Bavarian city of Passau while still not appearing to be a communist in Pankow, East Berlin.

But "Über Erfahrungen mit dem Zeitgeist" falls short of this display of intelligent wit and acute observation in suggesting that the Left might have been shortsighted in their view of the GDR. Abandoning his previous analytical lens, in 2008 Walser approaches the topic with bitterness and a sense of victimhood. Again, he personalizes the issue by mentioning how hurt he was by Jurek Becker, a writer and GDR dissident, who had publicly called Walser's speech "nationalistisches Geschwafel,"³²⁷ and by condemning the leftist intelligentsia for turning their back on him when he accepted an

³²⁶ Walser, "Engagement als Pflichtfach für den Schriftsteller. Ein Radio-Vortrag," in Walser, *Ansichten*, 190-213, 190.

³²⁷ See Walser, "Über Erfahrungen mit dem Zeitgeist," 56.

invitation to discuss his speech with the CSU in Bad Kreuth.³²⁸ It's quite clear that in Walser's usage, *zeitgeist* does not denote a neutral concept but specifically refers to the cultural left: his editor's resistance to using the word "Heimat" in a book title because it was considered too right-wing, or the positive international reception of his novella *Dorle und Wolf*, in spite of its negative reception in Germany on account of, as he suggests, leftist disapproval of the pro-unification stance expressed in it.³²⁹ Walser also includes a number of stabs at Grass as the spokesperson of the Left, including a cheap remark on the public's positive view of Grass's political engagement in the sixties and seventies: "Das ist Zeitgeist pur."³³⁰ He displays his disdain for his colleague when he sarcastically writes of Grass' "moralische Intelligenz" with regard to GDR politics—obviously, he suggests, we know whose stance on the GDR was the more intelligent.³³¹

These episodes are all meant to confirm Walser's point that the dominant left-liberal discourse was so influential that it did not allow for his own political opinions. This interesting and important argument is impeded and undermined by the author's desire to vindicate his political positions throughout his career at all costs, and to rewrite his public life as a story of victimisation at the hands of the Left.

"Händedruck mit Gespenstern" (1979)

While Walser heavily criticizes the resistance of younger authors to serve as societal spokespeople in "Über die neueste Stimmung im Westen," he follows their lead only nine years later. Towards the beginning of "Händedruck mit Gespenstern," he explains that

³²⁸ See *ibid.*, 56-57.

³²⁹ See *ibid.*, 57-58.

³³⁰ *Ibid.*, 43.

³³¹ And indeed, Grass' suggestion that the division be maintained as a symbol of punishment for Auschwitz does not seem like an intelligent political analysis from today's (or even from yesterday's) perspective. *Ibid.*, 50.

“Wenn man als Mitarbeiter an der öffentlichen Meinung jahrelang eine gesellschaftliche Ausdrucksweise anstrebt [...], besteht die Gefahr, daß sich die Ausdrucksweise verselbständigt und mit dem, der sie praktiziert, immer weniger zu tun hat.”³³² Walser implies he has long been part of a discourse from which he now feels completely alienated: “Seine Meinungen und er sind einander ein bißchen fremder geworden.”³³³ Without wishing to retract what he had said during the past decade, “er muß doch zugeben, daß seine veröffentlichten Meinungen ihn nicht ganz enthalten,”³³⁴ and that he no longer identifies with the image he used to embody, of a left-wing writer.

In this essay, we can see the beginnings of Walser’s later claim of literature having been appropriated by the public sphere. He considers the enormous influence of writers in the public sphere highly problematic: “Nach *Gott* haben wir nichts Wichtigeres mehr gehabt als *Öffentlichkeit*.”³³⁵ He seems to speak of the danger of having to conform to one and the same opinion and “der Schaden, der entstünde, wenn unsere öffentliche Meinung ein von Mandarinen gemachtes und verwaltetes Routineding ist.”³³⁶ In a truly democratic and pluralist state, he argues, there must be room for friction and contradiction among its intellectuals—a type of contradiction that goes beyond two journalists writing opposing editorials. If “das Verschwiegene,” those political emotions, with which intellectuals struggle and which they usually keep to themselves, were to be addressed in the public sphere, and if the public opinion were no longer a “Produkt des

³³² Walser, “Händedruck mit Gespenstern,” in Walser, *Ansichten*, 617-630, 617.

³³³ Ibid 618. Walser switches to the third person in order to talk about himself from a greater distance.

³³⁴ Ibid., 619.

³³⁵ Ibid.

³³⁶ Ibid., 620.

Lippengebets von bezahlten Gebetsspezialisten,³³⁷ one could actually speak of democratic progress.

Currently, Walser continues, German intellectuals obey a left-liberal discourse that hinders such plurality. He writes in terms that evoke an oppressive intellectual culture that suppresses dissent: “Bei uns hat jeder, wenn mein Fall typisch ist, seinen eigenen Samisdat,³³⁸ using the Russian term *samizdat* for literature that circulated in the underground cultural scene during the Soviet Union as a revolt against official restrictions on the freedom of expression.³³⁹ Walser suggests that he is not so much holding back his opinions but that there are public restrictions preventing him from expressing them —the restrictions of dominant leftist discourse. In order to achieve his pluralistic ideal he wants to repair the damage, as he says, “mit Geständnissen.”³⁴⁰ All along, he then confesses, he only saw himself as “linker Intellektueller” mainly through “[d]ie Reaktionen anderer.”³⁴¹ He himself “ist nicht von solchen Etiketten ausgegangen, sondern von Erfahrungen, die bedingt sind durch Jahrgang und Herkunft.”³⁴²

The label “leftist” certainly does not fit the position he then presents, given that the second half of the essay concerns the German *Volk*, which in his opinion were duped in both world wars.³⁴³ About World War I, for example, he writes:

[D]as deutsche Volk war an diesem Krieg kein bißchen schuldiger als das englische, russische, französische, italienische, österreichische. Die bürgerlich-feudalen Cliques der beteiligten Länder dürften noch am ehesten als Verursacher dieser ausschlaggebenden Katastrophe namhaft zu machen sein. Zu erleiden hatten die Folgen fast ausschließlich das deutsche *Volk*. Nicht die Gesellschaft.

³³⁷ Ibid., 619.

³³⁸ Ibid., 620.

³³⁹ “The clandestine or illegal copying and distribution of literature (orig. and chiefly in the U.S.S.R.); an ‘underground press’; a text or texts produced by this,” *OED*, s.v. “samizdat.”

³⁴⁰ Ibid., 620.

³⁴¹ Ibid., 618.

³⁴² Ibid., 618.

³⁴³ See *ibid.*, 618-20.

Kein Kollektiv. Das Volk als deutsches Volk wurde gedemütigt und ausgeplündert. Von den bürgerlich-feudalen Cliques der Siegermächte.³⁴⁴

This very particular revisionist view of history mixes a Marxist critique of the bourgeoisie, “die bürgerlich-feudalen Cliques,” with a discourse of victimhood centering around the idea of the German *Volk* that Walser knows is connected with the Right. The way Walser stresses this term—“[n]icht die Gesellschaft. Kein Kollektiv. Das Volk als deutsches Volk”—reveals that he is fully aware of its right-wing connotations. At the same time, this emphasis underscores Jan-Werner Müller’s reading of Walser as the self-assigned representative of the German petty-bourgeoisie.³⁴⁵ With the term *Volk*, Walser also depicts the (innocent) “normal” Germans in juxtaposition to the (responsible) political and intellectual elite.³⁴⁶

“Wer sind *wir*?” Walser fantasizes: “Wenn wir Auschwitz bewältigen könnten, könnten wir uns wieder nationalen Aufgaben zuwenden.”³⁴⁷ World War II and the Holocaust, he argues, should not prevent Germany from overcoming its struggle to become a nation again.³⁴⁸ But in his eyes, this can only happen through a collective embrace of historical guilt by the entire German *Volk*, in other words: if the Federal

³⁴⁴ Ibid., 626.

³⁴⁵ Müller writes: “(R)ather than having started off as a left-wing radical and then consistently moved to the right, Walser had for a long time been the proud representative of the provincial German petty-bourgeoisie, and defended a German form of interiority, and arguably, sentimentality.” Müller, 152-53.

³⁴⁶ That Walser’s defense of the *Volk* is connected with an anti-elitist stance becomes apparent in a passage shortly thereafter, which, incidentally, also reveals that Walser’s positive view on the “Kleinbürgertum” directly opposes that of Günter Grass: “Aber in der Rückschau auf das Jahr 1933 hat man sich nahezu festgelegt auf eine Meinung, in der das deutsche Volk als seine Masse erscheint, die zum Reaktionären, Kleinbürgerlichen, Dumpfen, Aufklärungsfeindlichen, Faschismusverdächtigen neigt. Die zurechnungsfähigen Intellektuellen waren an 1933 offenbar nicht beteiligt oder sie waren Opfer. Schuld war wieder dieses deutsche Volk, das dem Verbrechen zugeschaut hatte, mitgemacht hatte, gejubelt hatte. Wieder waren die zurechnungsfähigen Intellektuellen nicht dabei.” Walser, “Händedruck mit Gespenstern,” 626.

³⁴⁷ Ibid., 627.

³⁴⁸ In passing, Walser repeats the thesis of his 1965 essay “Unser Auschwitz”, that only through a collective embrace of Auschwitz can guilt be overcome: “Wo das Ich das Höchste ist, kann man Schuld nur verdrängen. Aufnahme, behalten und tragen kann man nur miteinander.” Ibid., 627.

Republic and the GDR were to become one nation again. Towards the end of the essay we consequently find Walser's clear-cut rejection of Germany's division. He asks: "Warum akzeptieren wir eine Teilung wie ein Naturgesetz, obwohl wir einsehen können, daß sie aus ganz und gar zeitlichen Bedingungen entstand?" Against the dominant public opinion, he announces: "Ich habe ein Bedürfnis nach geschichtlicher Überwindung des Zustands Bundesrepublik."³⁴⁹ The Federal Republic needs to be "overcome" and the Germans need to become one Volk again.

There is much to be said about Walser's politics, which—if one maintains the categorizations the writer insistently declares obsolete—represents the author's nationalism in spite of occasional Marxist borrowings. More compelling in the context of this chapter, however, is the lengthy passage in which Walser confesses that his political thinking is heavily influenced by his biographical attachment to the Nazi period. It is a rare, if not singular, statement in his work where Walser clearly alludes to his political indoctrination in the Hitler Youth:

Jahrgang und Herkunft disponieren ihn zum Demokraten mit Verwirklichungsanspruch, also zum Sozialisten. So muß er noch immer sein Fähnlein benennen. (Wie schonend, das nicht in der ersten Person sagen zu müssen.)³⁵⁰

"Fähnlein" is not only a diminutive of the word "Fahne" (flag) but also, crucially, the name of a unit in the *Jungvolk*, the Hitler Youth for younger boys, comprised of cohorts belonging to the same age group. Underscored by the temporal adverb "noch immer," Walser unmistakably creates a direct line from his Nazi upbringing to his 1979 discourse on *Nation* and *Volk*, in which he also stresses that he is a socialist. If we put together the different ideas Walser offers to us here —Hitler Youth, nationalism, and socialism—we

³⁴⁹ Ibid., 630.

³⁵⁰ Ibid., 618.

see that he identifies the contradictory political emotions that haunt him in 1979 as remnants of his youthful National Socialist beliefs.

Walser is disarmingly honest about his own ambiguity about these opinions: “manchmal schämt er sich seiner Entwicklung und versucht sie gänzlich zu unterdrücken; manchmal verteidigt er sie vehement gegen die besorgten oder beißenden Argumente des Freundes.”³⁵¹ Hidden within the political critique of the dominant left-wing discourse we thus find passages, in which he reveals the overwhelming presence of a childhood trauma:

Ich habe ein gestörtes Verhältnis zur Realität. Das muß ich zugeben. [...] Ich würde gern beweisen, wenigstens behaupten, daß mein gestörtes Verhältnis zur Realität etwas damit zu tun habe, daß ich Deutscher bin und 1927 geboren worden bin. Ich glaube nicht, daß man als Deutscher meines Jahrgangs ein ungestörtes Verhältnis zur Realität haben kann. Unsere nationale Realität selbst ist gestört. Und wenn ein so Ausschlaggebendes gestört ist, ist es möglich, daß man zu allem davon Abgeleitetem kein rechtes Vertrauen gewinnen kann. Was mir vor allem fehlt ist Vertrauen.³⁵²

The fact that Walser quotes this passage from his own diary and that the majority of these psychological passages are written in the third person indicates Walser’s troubled relationship to his own biography. He seems to be able to speak about his past only by removing himself from it, creating a linguistic distance in order to enable critical distantiating.

The subjunctive in the following passage serves a similar function. Walser uses the metaphor of being haunted by “Gedankengespenster”—presumably representing a form of nationalism further to the right than the one Walser openly speaks about in this essay. He imagines the great relief he would experience if he stopped wrestling with the ghosts of the past and fully allowed the feelings to come to the surface:

³⁵¹ Ibid., 621.

³⁵² Ibid., 623.

Endlich keine Kritik mehr der eigenen Neigung, sondern Zustimmung zur bisher ununterbrochen bekämpften Neigung. Zulassung des Widerspruchs, endlich! Ein plötzliches Einlassen jahrelang bekämpfter, immer auf Einlaß drängender Gedankengespenster und Meinungsmonster.

But he knows that his true opinions would never be accepted in the public sphere, and that he would have to be secretive and more careful. This would, on the other hand, not be a great change, since he admits to always having hidden part of his true political emotions:

Das hieße aber, verschwiegen sein. Er dürfe bald keinem mehr sagen, was er ‘wirklich’ meint. Hat er das je getan? Er hat die Teufel vor seinen Fenstern und Türen und Schlüssellochern und Türritzen doch immer gesehen, hat sie immer bekämpft, abgewehrt. Aber er hat nie erwähnt, daß sie ihn belagern, bedrohen. Er hat getan, als sei er schon fein heraus! Als enthalte er nicht selber noch alle Übel, die er bekämpft. Er wollte ein Posten des Fortschritts sein, der Annäherung an Humanität. Er lebte im gespannten Zustand. Zwischen niederziehenden Atavismen und dem zeitgenössischen Bedürfnis, das schlimme Erb- und Traditionszeug loszuwerden.³⁵³

But what would it entail if he actually shook hands with the ghosts of the past? Again, he states, it would not make a difference, because he has never been free of the past:

Jetzt, müde und kapitulierend, wäre er im Handumdrehen besetzt von jener Barbarei der Vergangenheit? Der Handschlag mit Gespenstern fände statt? Jetzt sagt er sich schon – und nennt das [...] ein Geständnis –, er sei nie frei gewesen von den Vergangenheitsbelastungen; er habe nur weiterkommen *wollen*, aber er sei eben nicht weiter gekommen; das sei doch nicht seine Schuld.³⁵⁴

He comes to the conclusion that “Nicht alles, was er ausschloß, durfte schlechterdings ausgeschlossen werden.”³⁵⁵ Not every idea, he suggests, should be rejected offhand because it might in some way relate back to the Nazi era.

“Händedruck mit Gespenstern” thus reveals Walser’s struggle on two fronts, the public and the private one. With regard to the public sphere, he shows that he is aware

³⁵³ Ibid., 621-22.

³⁵⁴ Ibid., 622.

³⁵⁵ Ibid., 622.

that for the dominant political culture which makes it unacceptable for him, a former *Hitlerjunge*, to formulate a political position that connects him with the Right. He does so anyway by carefully wrapping his German nationalism in a plea for plurality in a democratic society. More importantly, however, this essay reveals Walser's personal, psychological struggle to fathom how he can take a stance *without* shaking hands with the ghosts of his past. The abovementioned rhetorical devices, which create distance between the writer and his right-wing politics, demonstrate that he is still deeply conflicted as to how to define his position in relation to the Nazi indoctrination of his youth. The essay leaves this problem unresolved, and Walser never really expresses his struggle with his past as explicitly again as he does here.

“Händedruck mit Gespenstern”, then, is crucial to understanding how the left-wing Walser of the essay “Über die neueste Stimmung im Westen” could turn into the Walser of the *zeitgeist* essay, looking back on his career with bitterness and a sense of having been misunderstood. Furthermore, his position in the memory debates of 1998 and 2002 becomes more transparent against the backdrop of this essay: here, he already expresses his awareness that he is on dangerous ground relating his Hitler Youth past to his nationalist views. After 1998, he makes it a point to continually demonstrate his refusal to be part of what he considers a leftist memory discourse, beginning with the publication of *Ein springender Brunnen* in that year, and culminating in major public controversies, as he turns his refusal into provocation in such texts as the *Friedenspreis* speech in 1998 and the novel *Tod eines Kritikers*. Partly as a result of these provocations, Walser's analysis of the discursive forces at play in post-war Germany was not

acknowledged the way he hoped it would be, and this failure leads directly to the 2008 essay in which Walser ultimately represents himself as a victim of the *zeitgeist*.

Conclusion

My synthesis of the ways in which Grass, Wolf and Walser approached their Hitler Youth biographies in their early literary and essayistic work serves a number of different purposes. To begin with, it confirms the overarching claim of my dissertation—that there is a distinct generational discourse in this generation of writers that needs to be taken into account in any literary or cultural history of post-war Germany. As Grass emphasized in his eulogy for Wolf, “die späte, zu späte Erkenntnis aller im Verlauf von nur zwölf Jahren von Deutschen begangenen Verbrechen haben uns geprägt. Schreiben verlangt seitdem, aus Spuren zu lesen.”³⁵⁶ All three writers made German politics their personal concern. Grass spelled out in greater detail how doubt and skepticism became the crucial concepts of his politics as a counter-reaction to a childhood in Hitler-Germany where a skeptical attitude was impermissible, but Wolf and Walser also valued a critical and skeptical approach in their engagement with societal issues. Through their experience of the Nazi era and the skeptical imperative that resulted from it, Grass and Wolf also distinguished themselves from the older generation of post-war writers.

But while my analysis illuminates the continuation of the writers’ childhood bonds in the post-war era, it also seeks to highlight the differences between their uses of the generational concept. Grass provided an early portrayal of the complicated historical position of the Hitler Youth generation in his 1963 novel *Hundejahre*. While he shows

³⁵⁶ Grass, “Trauerrede”.

that they witnessed the Nazi era as children and as a result were less entangled in the Nazi crimes than the perpetrator generation, he emphasizes that guilt cannot be deferred to the older generation. The guilt of the Hitler Youth generation, he argues, may not have been juridical or on the grand scale of Nazi political oppression, but their childhood world was anything but innocent, as the mistreatment of the “Zigeunermädchen” Jenny Brunies at the hands of Tulla shows. This ambiguous role places them between the perpetrators and the sixty-eighters. The “miracle glasses” that allow the sixty-eighters to see the crimes of their fathers do not work with the Hitler Youth generation, as they are not in the position to judge the guilt of their elders due to their own entanglements with this tainted time period. Based on this subtle depiction of his generation in *Hundejahre*, one could claim that Grass justly became the icon of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, but as I have pointed out before, the exclusion of the most tainted part of his own biography, his membership in the *Waffen-SS*, severely undermines his iconic status, a complexity I address in the next chapter, when I examine his ultimate admission of guilt in his autobiography *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel*, published some forty years later.

The picture Christa Wolf paints of her own generation in *Christa T.* focuses on the post-war rather than the Nazi era, with Wolf questioning their enthusiastic embrace of the political implementation of the socialist idea in the GDR. She wonders if her generation has ever had the chance to develop as critical individuals, having changed so swiftly from one ideology to the next. Christa T. becomes the figure for an individuality and a critical attitude that have no place in the society of the GDR. The reception history of the novel reveals the almost absurd resistance it encountered from GDR officials who considered the subtle, poetic criticisms it expressed to be a danger to the socialist state.

The author's courage, then, cannot be underestimated. But I have also shown how Wolf relates both her adherence to the ideals of the GDR, as well as her increasingly critical attitude towards it to her upbringing during the Third Reich. It is her generational perspective that enables her critique: the experience of fascism drove her to embrace the anti-fascist state, while continually raising the question of its anti-fascist character.

In the last part of the chapter, I have shown that while the generational theme is absent from Walser's literary work in the early phase of his career, it is present in his critique of the left-liberal discourse from the seventies on. The essay "Händedruck mit Gespenstern" reveals that he has tried to relate his political emotions to his biography, but ultimately concludes he will never be able to openly relate his nostalgia for a German *Volk* to his Nazi indoctrination, because of the restrictions of a dominant left-wing discourse on the Hitler Youth generation. One has to be like Grass, speaking about the guilt and not the beauty of German nationalism. This early expression of Walser's frustration that he cannot publicly reveal the links between his childhood and his political opinions is crucial to understanding the three texts of his I will discuss in the next chapters: the childhood memoir *Ein springender Brunnen*, the provocative *Friedenspreis* speech, and the novel *Tod eines Kritikers*. While all these texts address the memory of the Third Reich, they also display the author's refusal to do what he thinks is expected of him as a member of the Hitler Youth generation in the left-wing memory culture, and represent the culmination of a political and cultural dissatisfaction with its roots in the seventies.

Wie [...] begreiflich machen, daß an diesen Schwerpunkten vorbei, sogar ohne sie zu beachten, in kräftigen Farben die Kindheit weiterlief?

—Christa Wolf, *Kindheitsmuster*, 1976

Chapter Three:

Through the Eyes of a Child— Autobiography and Narrative Innocence (1976-2006)

Introduction

The autobiographical novel *Fatelessness* by Hungarian Nobel Prize laureate and Holocaust survivor Imre Kertész (born in 1929) tells the story of the young Jewish boy Gyuri, who is deported by the Nazis from his home town of Budapest at the age of fifteen.³⁵⁷ The reader learns about his odyssey from Budapest to a work camp in Hungary to the concentration camps of Auschwitz and Buchenwald from the teenager's point of view. This point-of-view-narration creates a distinct effect. While the (adult) reader follows the deportation of Gyuri and his family with the full historical knowledge of the Nazi genocide of the European Jews, the boy fails entirely to recognize the seriousness of the situation: The day of his father's deportation to a Nazi work camp, he is thrilled to be released early from school, and when the moment of departure has come, he is bored stiff by the long farewell. Several months later, upon his arrival in Auschwitz in 1944, he feels relief at the sight of the German SS-officers. Hungry and exhausted from the chaotic journey in several trains that crossed the borders of many countries, he thinks: "If there are Germans here, there will be order."

³⁵⁷ Imre Kertész, *Fatelessness* (London: Harvill, 2005).

Fatelessness is just one of many representations of the Holocaust which employ the innocent perspective of the child victim as a rhetorical device, often in not entirely unproblematic ways.³⁵⁸ There are several other examples of novels using the child's perspective to represent war, trauma, and violence.³⁵⁹ The innocently trusting perspective of children and the naïve world-views of adolescents can become powerful stylistic devices to highlight both the vulnerability of the innocent victims and the absurdity and senselessness of war and violence. However, this narrative device seems ethically and politically problematic in literary (and filmic) representations depicting World War II from the side of the German perpetrators because childlike innocence and ignorance were precisely the excuses the majority of Germans used after 1945 in order to reject historical responsibility. The trope of childhood innocence in representations of the Third Reich, it seems, would reproduce a stereotypical strategy of exculpation and reinforce a discourse of victimization.

³⁵⁸ Mark Anderson has examined the important function of child victims in representations of the Holocaust in mainstream American memory culture. Looking at child narratives in various media (Holocaust museums, the film *Schindler's List*, Elie Wiesel's novel *Night*, the numerous adaptations of *Anne Frank's Diary*), he critically points out that "the invocation of young victims easily leads to rhetorical and ideological distortion" and speaks of a "commercial and dramatic exploitation of the child victim". Likewise, in her essay on iconic camera images of the Holocaust, Marianne Hirsch has problematized that while child victims play a powerful role for this visual medium, "the easy identification with children, their virtually universal availability for projection, risks the blurring of important areas of difference and alterity: context, specificity, responsibility, history." See Mark M. Anderson, "The Child Victim as Witness to the Holocaust: An American Story?," *Jewish Social Studies* - Volume 14, No. 1, (Fall 2007): 1-22, here 19-20. Marianne Hirsch, "Projected Memory: Holocaust Photographs in Personal and Public Fantasy," in *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*. Ed. Mieke Bal, Jonathan Crewe and Leo Spitzer (Hanover, NH: University Presses of New England, 1999), 3-23, here 17.

³⁵⁹ See for example, Uzodinma Iweala's *Beasts of no Nation* about child soldiers in West Africa, Loung Ung's *First they killed my father* about the Cambodian genocide, Emma Donoghue's *The Room* about an extreme case of domestic violence, a child and a mother held captive for years, or Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* about told from the perspective of nine-year-old Oskar Schell, whose father died in the World Trade Center on September 11. See Uzodinma Iweala, *Beasts of No Nation: A Novel* (New York: Harper Collins, 2007). Loung Ung, *First They Killed My Father: A Daughter of Cambodia Remembers* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2006). Emma Donoghue, *Room: A Novel* (New York and Boston: Back Bay Books, 2011). Jonathan Safran Foer, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close: A Novel*, (Boston: Mariner Books), 2011.

This is precisely the reproach Sigrid Weigel made against authors of the Hitler Youth generation. Even at an old age, she claimed, they followed their “Begehren nach dem Blick eines unschuldigen Kindes.”³⁶⁰ Is Weigel right? Do the three writers exploit the limited and pre-political perspective of the child, as she claims, in order to establish themselves as innocent witnesses of the Third Reich—outside of the discourse of historical guilt?³⁶¹

This critique seems unjustified in the case of arguably the most famous child narrator of twentieth century literature, the character Oskar Matzerath in Günter Grass’s 1959 novel *Die Blechtrommel*.³⁶² Grass precisely subverts the idea of innocent narration: While Oskar *appears* to be a child to his environment, because by sheer willpower he has stopped growing on his third birthday, he possesses the critical faculties of an adult from the moment of his birth. With a sharp mind, he observes how people in his surrounding become increasingly drawn to Nazi ideologies, and instead of leaving him in the position of the neutral witness, Grass shows him to become complicit like everyone else.

But how do Grass, Walser, and Wolf relate to the issue of childhood innocence and the Third Reich retrospectively in their *autobiographical* texts? How do the authors of the Hitler Youth generation deal with their childhood memory? When Martin Walser was awarded the “Friedenspreis des Deutschen Buchhandels,” Frank Schirrmacher

³⁶⁰ Sigrid Weigel, “Die Generation als symbolische Form,” 169.

³⁶¹ Weigel writes: “This generation came to see itself as an innocent child, as recently shown in the belated autobiographical novel of Martin Walser (born in 1927), which appeals to the imagination of the innocent memory untouched by subsequent knowledge and was frenetically celebrated in the feuilleton.” See the English version of this article, Sigrid Weigel: “Generation as a Symbolic Form,” 273.

³⁶² The long-time influence of “Oskarchen,” also made popular by Schöndorff’s film adaptation of Grass’s novel *Die Blechtrommel* (engl. *The Tin Drum*) by the same title, becomes visible, for example, in the tribute the young American author Jonathan Safran Foer seems to give to Grass in his 2005 novel *Incredibly Loud and Extremely Close*. Foer names his protagonist Oskar. The novel is told from the perspective of the nine-year-old, whose father died in the World Trade Center on September 11. See Jonathan Safran Foer, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*.

presented the author as part of a generation who struggled with their childhood memory, “weil die Erinnerung an ihre Kindheit sich fast niemals mit dem heutigen Wissen über das außerhalb der Spielzimmer stattfindende Verbrechen in Einklang bringen läßt.”³⁶³

Amir Eshel, however, decidedly rejected Schirmmacher’s depiction of the Hitler Youth generation as children with blank slates sullied by the guilt inflicted on them by the Nazis. He saw in Schirmmacher’s speech “eine fragwürdige Stilisierung von Walser und seiner Generation zu Kindern im Spielzimmer” and called to mind this generation’s partial complicity, for example by volunteering for Hitler’s army.³⁶⁴ My own interest lies not in ascertaining the degree of complicity for Grass, Walser, and Wolf. I agree with Jaimey Fisher that adjudicating juvenile guilt with regard to the Nazi period is not only difficult but also rather unproductive.³⁶⁵

Rather, I will focus on the literary representations and explore how the authors used the trope of childhood innocence retrospectively in their childhood autobiographies in order to illuminate how they engage with the respective memory discourse of their times. In my examinations of Walser’s *Ein springender Brunnen* (1998), Wolf’s *Kindheitsmuster* (1976), and Grass’s *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel* (2006), I will show that

³⁶³ Frank Schirmmacher, “Sein Anteil,” in *Die Walser-Bubis-Debatte: Eine Dokumentation*, ed. Frank Schirmmacher (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1999), 17-29, 21.

³⁶⁴ Amir Eshel, “Vom eigenen Gewissen: Die Walser-Bubis Debatte und der Ort des Nationalsozialismus im Selbstbild der Bundesrepublik 2,” *Deutsche Vierteljahresschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* 2 (Juni 2000): 333-60, 343.

³⁶⁵ Fisher asks suggestively: “Could a ten year-old member of the Hitler Youth be considered guilty? Could a nineteen-year-old whose parents put him or her in the group at age ten and who was sent directly from Hitler Youth to Wehrmacht?” He shows in his book on youth, reeducation and reconstruction in post-war Germany that it was precisely the ambivalence, the complexity and the muddledness of the Hitler Youth generation’s implication in the Nazi system that authors, intellectuals, and filmmakers instrumentalized in the early post-war period when approaching questions of German guilt. In the first chapter of this dissertation, I have myself presented an example of this instrumentalization by showing how Alfred Andersch and Hans-Werner Richter took advantage of the label of the “young and innocent generation” for the purpose of self-exculpation—a label that they themselves had attached to the Hitler Youth generation in the first place. This chapter will explore how writers of this generation, namely Walser, Grass and Wolf, dealt with this label themselves. See Jaimey Fisher, *Disciplining Germany: Youth, Reeducation, and Reconstruction after the Second World War* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2007), 14-15.

all of these texts show a great awareness of the moral-political implications of this narrative device. They either use it, reject it, or question it. The authors' stance vis-à-vis the respective memory discourse of their political system and time become clearly visible in their childhood biographies. Thus, while far from being unproblematic, none of the three texts operates outside of the historical discourse, as Weigel had claimed.

I will follow a chronological order in my presentation of the three autobiographical texts, beginning with text that was published first, namely during the Cold War era in the GDR, Wolf's *Kindheitsmuster* (1976), and ending with the two male writers' autobiographies, written in the context of a post-reunification memory discourse. Wolf and Walser's autobiographies stand on opposite sides with regard to the issue of childhood innocence. While Wolf radically questions this concept in *Kindheitsmuster* through a highly complex narrative constellation, Walser embraces it in *Ein springender Brunnen* (1998) by presenting his childhood entirely from the perspective of the naïve child. With regard to the question of childhood innocence, the stakes were arguably the highest for Günter Grass in *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel* (2006). After all, this text contained the author's revelation of his Waffen-SS past. Unsurprisingly then, the author uses a child narrator only with great caution. All in all, I will demonstrate that despite the shared generational experience of a childhood under Hitler the three authors' different personal and political positions have led to exceedingly diverse literary representations.

1. Christa Wolf's *Kindheitsmuster* (1976)—

“Wie sind wir so geworden, wie wir heute sind?”

Biography of a generation

Kindheitsmuster was published in 1976. This publication date is striking not only considering that Wolf's book about her childhood memories during the Nazi era was published about two decades before Walser's *Ein springender Brunnen* (1998) and about three decades before Grass's *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel* (2006). But also because Wolf worked on her childhood autobiography during the Cold War in the East-German state where connections with fascism were officially made only in form of glorious tales of anti-fascist rebellion rather than in self-critical biographical reflections as in *Kindheitsmuster*. While the early publication of *Kindheitsmuster* thus stands out as remarkable to us, Wolf herself addressed the psychological barriers that caused her to *delay* the work on this novel until the seventies. In a discussion following a reading of the book in 1983 she said:

Ich selbst habe so lange Zeit gebraucht, um darüber schreiben zu können. Obwohl ich ein Kind war, obwohl ich über mich selbst nichts Entsetzliches mitzuteilen hatte, war dieser Schock nach 1945 gerade für unsere Generation so eingreifend und anhaltend, daß man einfach noch nicht darüber schreiben konnte—noch nicht in der Form, wo man sich selbst mit hinein nahm.³⁶⁶

Wolf does precisely this: “sich selbst mit hineinnehmen.” *Kindheitsmuster* includes the author's most intimate, conflicted feelings facing her childhood in the Third Reich; it provides a psychological portrait of someone working through a trauma. But Wolf also follows a socio-political urge with this novel. Her speeches and interviews of the

³⁶⁶Christa Wolf, “Eine Diskussion über *Kindheitsmuster*,” *The German Quarterly* 57.1 (Winter, 1984): 91-95, 91.

seventies, in which she frequently speaks about her work on *Kindheitsmuster*, reveal that Wolf deals with her individual childhood memories always already in a representative way. Wolf, one could argue, writes this autobiography as an autobiography for her entire generation—those who have grown up under Hitler and became prototypes of the “new man” in East-German socialism. How can we ignore, Wolf often wondered in public, that we were deeply shaped by fascist ideologies in our childhood and adolescence, ideologies for which we now try to delegate responsibility to the West? The early indoctrination of her generation, she argues, “ist nicht vorbei, wenn man zwei Jahre später sagt:

Donnerwetter, der Marx hat aber recht.”³⁶⁷ The childhood under fascism is still *with* them, she repeatedly stresses at the time. At a GDR writer’s congress in 1973, Wolf says:

Es ist nicht so einfach, eine Kindheit abzuschütteln, die einem zum Beispiel einen tiefen Autoritätsglauben eingefressen hat. Es ist nicht so einfach, eine Kindheit abzuwerfen, die nicht von Wissen, sondern von bedingungsloser Gläubigkeit geprägt war.³⁶⁸

And in a 1975 discussion about *Kindheitsmuster*, a work in progress at the time, she said:

Wie sind wir so geworden, wie wir sind? Das ist eigentlich eine Frage, der ich etwas näherzukommen versuche. [...] Denn ich glaube, daß so manches, was unsere Generation heute tut oder nicht tut, noch mit der Kindheit zusammenhängt. Wenn die Kindheit wirklich eine wichtige Zeit im Leben eines Menschen ist, dann sollten wir nicht so tun, als ob wir, als wir sechzehn waren, als der Faschismus zu Ende war, nun ‚neue Menschen‘ werden konnten. Und daß eine so verbrachte Kindheit ohne Folgen bleiben kann.³⁶⁹

Wolf thus raises the overarching question of her autobiography in the plural: “Wie sind *wir* so geworden, wie *wir* sind?”³⁷⁰ Ultimately then, she approaches her individual childhood memories from a generational and thus a socio-political perspective.

³⁶⁷ Christa Wolf, “Erfahrungsmuster - Diskussion zu Kindheitsmuster,” in Christa Wolf, *Essays, Gespräche, Reden, Briefe 1975-1986*, vol. 8 of *Werke*, ed. Sonja Hilzinger (Munich: Luchterhand, 2000), 31-72, 54.

³⁶⁸ Christa Wolf, “Diskussionsbeitrag zum VII. Schriftstellerkongreß der DDR 1973,” in Wolf, *Essays I*, 452-55, 453.

³⁶⁹ Wolf, “Erfahrungsmuster,” 54.

³⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

Examining her own biography, she asks which patterns of thinking and behavior acquired during their childhood, i.e. which “Kindheitsmuster”, still shape her generation in the socialist society in the present. This sentence from the novel’s preface reveals the text’s representative function:

Wer Ähnlichkeiten zwischen einem Charakter der Erzählung und sich selbst oder einem ihm bekannten Menschen zu erkennen glaubt, sei auf den merkwürdigen Mangel an Eigentümlichkeit hingewiesen, der dem Verhalten vieler Zeitgenossen anhaftet.³⁷¹

Wolf expects readers of her generation to recognize patterns of behavior. The novel then seeks to address a widespread social phenomenon rather than merely presenting Wolf’s individual case. The preface continues with the comment that not the individuals are to blame if they recognize these childhood patterns in themselves. “Man müßte die Verhältnisse beschuldigen, weil sie Verhaltensweisen hervorbringen, die man wiedererkennt.”³⁷² This sentence can be considered paradigmatic for Wolf’s position towards the GDR. By saying that the circumstances (“die Verhältnisse”) are to blame if members of her generation are reminded of their Nazi, it is unclear whether the word “Verhältnisse” refers to past or present. Her phrasing leaves open the possibility that the political conditions in the GDR might remind her generation of their upbringing in the fascist state. In 1976 the GDR denaturalized the dissident songwriter Wolf Biermann, an event that raised protest among many GDR intellectuals including Wolf but also revealed that the state would go rigorously against artists and writers critical towards the regime. Only carefully, Wolf alludes to continuities between the fascist and the socialist regimes by suggesting that present behavior shaped by the past might also remind one of present

³⁷¹ Christa Wolf, *Kindheitsmuster*, (Munich: Luchterhand, 1999), 10.

³⁷² Ibid.

“Verhältnisse” in the GDR. But the critical reader cannot have overlooked this comment prominently placed at the beginning of the novel.

While containing many critical allusions such as the one in the preface, *Kindheitsmuster* never explicitly raises criticism against the GDR. Read as a text of political protest, it is easy to dismiss *Kindheitsmuster* as disappointing and the author as not radical enough in her opposition to the GDR. In his 1977 review of the novel in *Der Spiegel*, Wolf’s former teacher Hans Mayer criticized that the SED-member Wolf had practiced “freiwillige Selbstkontrolle”, for example by not questioning the GDR-myth about the Red Army as liberator and founder of socialist humanity. Mayer also sees a political bias in Wolf’s narrative level that deals with her own writing process (I will explain the three narrative levels of the novels later). While she focuses on recent political events such as the Vietnam War and the military coup d’etat against President Allende in Chile, events in which communists were the oppressed, Mayer criticizes that anti-socialist protests like the Prague Spring or the Hungarian Revolution are missing from her account.³⁷³ Overall, Mayer is disappointed about the vagueness of Wolf’s critical stance towards the GDR and the Cold War in general.

While Mayer is certainly correct in this evaluation, I would suggest to approach this novel from the same historical perspective with which I have approached her earlier novel *Nachdenken über Christa T.* in the previous chapter. As much as the West German literary scene wanted to see Wolf as a dissident writer, despite her increasing skepticism

³⁷³ Mayer writes: “Erbitternd ist bei diesem so ehrgeizig geplanten und so kompliziert gescheiterten Buch die dritte Berichtsebene mit ihren Mitteilungen über die Zeit der Niederschrift 1972/75. Hier gebärdet sich die Erzählerin, als beziehe sie Informationen ausschließlich aus dem “Neuen Deutschland” und von der “Stimme der DDR”. Daß Christa Wolf auch andere Welten kennt, zum Beispiel die USA aus ihrer Tätigkeit als Gastdozentin, konstatiert man zwar aus gelegentlichen Hinweisen im Roman, allein die Bewußtseinslage ist diesmal streng tabuiert. Vietnam und Chile, aber nicht Prag und Budapest und Aufstände in Polen und und.” See Hans Mayer, “Der Mut zur Unaufrichtigkeit,” *Der Spiegel* (16/1977): 185-90, 188.

towards the GDR she was always loyal to the idea of living in a socialist society. This novel confirms the paradoxical constellation in Wolf's generational discourse that I have already emphasized in my analysis of *Christa T.*: She questions the anti-fascist myth upon which the GDR was built by way of showing the fascist remnants in her generation. The generation thus becomes representative of the fascist past. However, at the same time, her generation is representative of the socialist society. Wolf's dealing with the fascist past does not serve the purpose of creating a generation of dissidents but of creating a better socialist society. We might not agree with the writer's utopian belief. But in this chapter my goal is not first and foremost to critique the writer's politics but to examine the differences between her childhood autobiography from similar texts by the writers of the Hitler Youth generation in the West. With regard to this question, I argue that it is Wolf's treatment of her individual biography as a case-study for the improvement of socialist society that distinguishes *Kindheitsmuster* from the other two texts.

The narrative structure: "Vergangenheit von heute aus gesehen"

Wolf's focus on present society becomes apparent in the narrative structure. Even though *Kindheitsmuster* deals with the author's childhood during the Nazi era, past and present are always deeply intertwined on the narrative level. This is entirely different in Walser's novel *Ein springender Brunnen*, in which the first eighteen years of the protagonist, Walser's alter ego, appear "under glass, (like) an irretrievably lost continent from which no road [...] leads to the present persona."³⁷⁴ Walser creates the illusion that his past has been reproduced without hindsight. In his Munich speech the author had stated:

³⁷⁴ Helmut Schmitz, *On Their Own Terms* (University Of Birmingham Press, 2004), 197-98.

“Vergangenheit von heute aus gesehen—kann es etwas Überflüssigeres geben?”³⁷⁵ In the narrative construction of his novel, he follows this idea.

Wolf, by comparison, stresses right at the beginning of her novel that past and present cannot be easily separated from each other. “In die Erinnerung drängt sich die Gegenwart ein”, she writes on the second page of her novel, “und der heutige Tag ist schon der letzte Tag der Vergangenheit.”³⁷⁶ In an interview from 1973—*Kindheitsmuster* was still a work in progress—Wolf raised the question of how this intertwinement can be made manifest on the narrative level. In her book about her generation’s experience of the Nazi period, she says that she faces the methodological problem of finding a narrative technique to adequately express

daß Gegenwart und Vergangenheit – wie sie es in uns Menschen ja andauernd tun – auch auf dem Papier sich nicht nur ‚treffen‘, sondern aufeinander einwirken, in ihrer Begegnung miteinander gezeigt werden. Man muß also Schreibtechniken finden (und zu erkennen geben, daß und warum man sie sucht), die es fertigbringen, die fast unauflösbaren Verschränkungen, Verbindungen und Verfestigungen, die verschiedenste Elemente unserer Entwicklung miteinander eingegangen sind, doch noch einmal zu lösen, um Verhaltensweisen, auf die wir festgelegt zu sein scheinen, zu erklären und (womöglich) zu ändern. Es ist ein ziemlich anstrengendes Unterfangen.³⁷⁷

Not only does she want to reveal the “fast unauflösbaren Verschränkungen, Verbindungen und Verfestigungen”³⁷⁸ with the past. She also wants to depict her very quest for these interrelations between past and present patterns of behavior.

The narrative technique employed in *Kindheitsmuster* does precisely this. To make sure “daß Gegenwart und Vergangenheit [...] in ihrer Begegnung miteinander

³⁷⁵ Walser, “Über Deutschland reden,” 897.

³⁷⁶ Wolf, *Kindheitsmuster*, 14.

³⁷⁷ Wolf, “Subjektive Authentizität,” 415.

³⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

gezeigt werden,³⁷⁹ Wolf not only depicts her childhood years, but also turns the process of writing about her childhood memories into important themes of the novel. The novel's highly self-reflexive and self-referential structure interlinks present and past events already on a narrative level, and depicts the remembered past as well as the remembering subject.

There are three time levels and three respective narratives in *Kindheitsmuster*. As Sandra Frieden has pointed out in her insightful essay on the book, "all three levels are to be understood as merely heuristically separable from one another"³⁸⁰, since they are interwoven from the beginning. Nevertheless, Frieden attempts to 'untie' the three narratives and to describe content and function for each of them:

In the first narrative, Wolf describes the first sixteen years in the life of her alter ego and narrator, Nelly Jordan, from 1929 until 1945. As Frieden writes, "the most historically removed plane presents the dailiness of Nazi-indoctrination in the life of a little girl, whose activities are more and more clearly recollected as the account proceeds forward through her experience."³⁸¹ In this narrative, the narrator speaks about her younger self in the third person as "Nelly" or "das Kind."

The second narrative depicts the narrator's 1971 trip to the (now) Polish town in which she grew up and describes her feelings during this first attempt at revisiting her childhood. The trip to Poland, Frieden writes, provides "a filter of hindsight through which former deeds and values must now pass."³⁸² She emphasizes that the second time

³⁷⁹ Ibid.

³⁸⁰ Sandra Frieden, "'In eigener Sache': Christa Wolf's *Kindheitsmuster*," *The German Quarterly* 54.4 (November 1981): 473-87, 476-77.

³⁸¹ Ibid., 475.

³⁸² Ibid., 476.

level focuses on a “moment-to-moment recording of memory, thought and response,”³⁸³ that it presents “the experience and knowledge of the remembering adult”³⁸⁴ during her visit to the places of her childhood, but leaves an even deeper level of hindsight for the third narrative. For this second time level, the narrator does no longer use the third- but the second-person-perspective. Hence, she addresses herself as “du.”

The third time level—Wolf calls it “Gegenwartsebene”³⁸⁵—presents an account of the narrator’s writing process during the years 1972 to 1975. She narrator reflects upon her Nazi childhood *and* on her feelings and thoughts during the trip to Poland from yet another perspective of hindsight, with more distance and more sense for the ‘bigger picture’. Offering the highest level of reflection, this plane includes personal comments on the writing process as well as broader observations about history and politics. On the third level, like on the second one, the narrator addresses herself as “du.” The first person singular—“ich”—appears only once on the very last page of the novel.

Wolf emphasized that she could not write about her childhood in the first person for both aesthetic and psychological reasons. In a public discussion about the book she said:

Von Kindheitsmuster habe ich eine Reihe von Anfängen, die in der Ich-Form erzählt wurden, als einfache Erinnerung. Das habe ich dann aufgegeben. Einer der Gründe war, daß dieses Kind für mich in der Ich-Form nicht erzählbar war, weil ich es nicht war. Ich konnte mich nicht identifizieren. Das ist vielleicht bezeichnend überhaupt für Erwachsene in ihrem Verhältnis zu sich als Kind. Bei mir war es besonders bezeichnend, weil diese Kindheit in Deutschland dem Erwachsenen, der ich dann geworden war, wirklich vollkommen fremd war. Verdrängung und Nichtwissenwollen war natürlich auch dabei, aber ich wollte ja nun wissen. Trotzdem gelang es mir nicht, dieses Kind ‚ich‘ zu nennen. Da war auch eine psychologische Barriere—es ist nicht nur ästhetisch zu erklären.³⁸⁶

³⁸³ Ibid.

³⁸⁴ Ibid.

³⁸⁵ See Wolf, “Diskussion zu Kindheitsmuster,” 95.

³⁸⁶ Ibid.

While Wolf thus reflects her inability to identify with her younger self by using the third-person-perspective in the childhood-story, she does not leave it at this “Gebetsmühlengeklapper in der gleichen Person,”³⁸⁷ but splits up the narrative voices even further. The purpose of this separation (“sie/Nelly” on the first, “du” on the second, and “du/ich” on the third time level) is explained in the first several paragraphs of *Kindheitsmuster*. The narrator writes: “Ich, du, sie, in Gedanken ineinanderschwimmend, sollen im ausgesprochenen Satz einander entfremdet werden.”³⁸⁸ This destruction of identity on the level of language is intended to ensure that “[d]er Brustton, den die Sprache anzustreben scheint, verdorrt.”³⁸⁹ Wolf chooses a narrative technique that not only represents the rupture between her pre-war and post-war self, but also forces her to take a step back from her present self and to observe it from an analytical, reflective position.

From the beginning, it is thus clear that this childhood retrospective will refrain from grand declarations. “Zwischenbescheide geben, Behauptungen scheuen, Wahrnehmungen an die Stelle der Schwüre setzen,”³⁹⁰ these are the goals the narrator sets for herself. Already, we can see how much this careful approach differs from the certainty with which Grass proclaimed his feelings of shame and guilt, and from Walser’s almost stubborn insistence on his innocent childhood in Hitler’s Germany. Wolf approaches her childhood carefully, asking lots of questions and finding few answers.

Getting to Know the Child

³⁸⁷ Wolf, *Kindheitsmuster*, 14.

³⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 13.

³⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 13.

³⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 14.

While in Grass' *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel* the distance between the author and his younger self is expressed subtly and for the most part only on a stylistic level through a shift from the first- to the third-person-perspective, the narrator of *Kindheitsmuster* leaves no doubt that she feels entirely separated from the child she used to be. She says at the beginning of the novel:

Nicht nur trennen dich von ihm die vierzig Jahre; nicht nur behindert dich die Unzuverlässigkeit deines Gedächtnisses, das nach dem Inselprinzip arbeitet und dessen Auftrag lautet: Vergessen! Verfälschen! Das Kind ist ja auch von dir verlassen worden. Zuerst von den anderen, gut. Dann aber auch von dem Erwachsenen, der aus ihm ausschlüpfte und es fertigbrachte, ihm nach und nach alles nachzutun, was Erwachsene Kindern anzutun pflegen: Er hat es hinter sich gelassen, beiseite geschoben, hat es vergessen, verdrängt, verleugnet, umgemodelt, verfälscht, verzärtelt und vernachlässigt, hat sich seiner geschämt und hat sich seiner gerühmt, hat es falsch geliebt und falsch gehaßt.³⁹¹

The narrator's distance to her younger self, however, must not be misunderstood as an attempt to reject her Nazi childhood. Quite the opposite: after trying to forget her childhood, after neglecting, suppressing or remodelling it, she now decidedly says: "Jetzt, obwohl es unmöglich ist, will er [the adult] es [the child] kennenlernen."³⁹²

Getting to know the child—for Wolf this means precisely *not* relying on those childhood memories that are easy to categorize and to reproduce but rather to work through the most difficult memories. That she considers this the task of a writer in general becomes clear from her poetological essay "Lesen und Schreiben," written a couple of years before *Kindheitsmuster* in 1968. Everyone owns, she had claimed there, "eine Kollektion kolorierter Medaillons mit Unterschriften, teils putzig, teils grauslig", "schön oder häßlich, gut oder böse."³⁹³ Those memories, "beruhigend eindeutig," "glatt,"

³⁹¹ Ibid., 18-19.

³⁹² Ibid., 19.

³⁹³ Christa Wolf, "Lesen und Schreiben," in Christa Wolf, *Essays I*, 238-82, 255.

“stillgelegt” and “zurechtgeschliffen”³⁹⁴ are nothing more than polished and representable stories, freed from all contradictory feelings and reducible to one emotion, whether good or bad. In the essay, Wolf demands that the writer go beyond these neat little memory narratives, that she ought to push forward into “Zonen, die gemieden werden bei der Anfertigung der Medaillons,”³⁹⁵ and work through precisely those memories that are ambiguous and difficult to describe.

The following discussion of text passages from three different chapters of *Kindheitsmuster* will illustrate that Wolf does not present “Erinnerungsmedaillons” but sheds light on the most upsetting and unpleasant, the most embarrassing and the most confusing memories of her childhood. We will see that, compared to Walser and Grass, her childhood autobiography presents a much more self-critical and self-reflexive investigation of the past and why Wolf has called the writing process of *Kindheitsmuster* “fast ein therapeutischer Prozeß.”³⁹⁶

Exercises in hating

I begin with a number of passages from the sixth chapter, which deals with the time period roughly between 1936 and 1938 when Nelly is seven or eight. Wolf calls this chapter “Erinnerungslücken, ‘Friedenszeiten’, Einübung in Haß.” She depicts this period before the war, “peaceful” only in quotation marks, as a time of heavy indoctrination.

The seven-year-old receives her first lesson in hating from her teacher Herr Warsinski:

Ein deutsches Mädchel muß hassen können, hat Herr Warsinski gesagt: Juden und Kommunisten und andere Volksfeinde. Jesus Christus, sagt Herr Warsinski, wäre heute ein Gefolgsmann des Führers und würde die Juden hassen. [...]

³⁹⁴ Ibid.

³⁹⁵ Ibid.

³⁹⁶ Ibid 95.

Nelly haßt den starken Rudi. Einen Juden hat sie ihres Wissens noch nie gesehen, auch einen Kommunisten nicht. Den Haß gegen diese unbekanntes Menschengruppen funktioniert nicht nach Wunsch – ein Defekt, den man verbergen muß.³⁹⁷

Nelly does not find it easy to hate Jews and communists because she cannot imagine what these „Volksfeinde“ look like. But in order to please her teacher, she obediently writes a short anti-Semitic poem that she proudly presents in front of the entire class.

Her ability to imagine “a Jew” becomes better after she eavesdrops on a conversation between her parents and their friend Leo Siegmann, a convinced National Socialist. Siegmann makes anti-Semitic remarks about a Jewish schoolmate—he uses the derogative term “Itzig”—whom, he says, everyone simply felt the urge to beat up. “Das war Instinkt, da kann einer sagen, was er will. Er roch einfach widerlich, oder was es war.”³⁹⁸ In Nelly’s imagination, the image of the Jew takes shape, with all the stereotypes she picks up from Siegmann’s descriptions:

Dies war nun- natürlich ganz gegen Leo Siegmanns Absicht – der erste Jude, den Nelly näher kennenlernen sollte. [...]

Der Judenjunge. Nelly sah ihn deutlich. Er ist blaß, hat ein spitzes Gesicht, welliges dunkles Haar, ein paar Pickel.³⁹⁹

Soon thereafter, Nelly encounters an exhibitionist while running an errand for her mother. Thinking that she has seen a man with a snake, she develops a distinct aversion to reptiles. But for the child, the narrator reluctantly admits, reptiles, the young Jewish boy from Siegmann’s story, and the man with the snake, become images that she associates with each other. They belong to the category of “unrein.” Nelly does not blink twice when others sing the anti-Semitic song “Judenköpfe rollen.” She joins in:

³⁹⁷ Wolf, *Kindheitsmuster*, 191-92.

³⁹⁸ Ibid. 199.

³⁹⁹ Ibid.

Jedenfalls mied sie das Unreine, auch in Gedanken, und stimmte laut, vielleicht überlaut, in ein Lied ein, das sie kannte wie jedermann; man mußte es nicht lernen, es lag in der Luft (‘Maikäfer flieg’ braucht auch kein deutsches Kind zu lernen oder ‘Ri-ra-rutsch, wir fahren in der Kutsch’ oder ‘Ein Jäger aus Kurpfalz, der reitet durch das Gänseschmalz’): ‘Judenköpfe rollen, Judenköpfe rollen, Judenköpfe rollen übern Bürgersteig, / Blut, Blut, Bluhuhut, / Blut muß fließen knüppelhageldick, / wir pfeifen auf die Freiheit/ der Sowjetrepublik.’⁴⁰⁰

The child became so immersed in the anti-Jewish sentiments surrounding her that when in 1936 or 1937, her aunt Trutchen visits and is devastated because people in her village spread a rumour about her being half-Jewish, Nelly is deeply upset:

Sie ist außer sich, aber sie weint nicht. Feucht werden ihr die Augen erst, als die Mutter sie aufstößt, die natürlich etwas gerochen hat, und wissen will, was los ist.

Da äußert Nelly den bemerkenswerten Satz: Ich will keine Jüdin sein!, und Charlotte [Nelly’s mother] richtet an eine nicht zu benennende Instanz die nicht weniger bemerkenswerte Frage: Woher um alles in der Welt weiß dieses Kind, was eine Jüdin ist? Auf diese Frage ist eine Antwort nicht zu ermitteln.⁴⁰¹

The narrator does not hide her repulsion vis-à-vis the anti-Semitism of the seven-year-old child. In paragraphs such as the following, she expresses her shame about this part of her childhood and the difficulties of facing it:

(Heikel bis heute, der Verbindung nachzugehen, die sich damals zwischen dem namenlosen Judenjungen, den Nelly durch Leo Siegmann kannte, und der weißen Schlange hergestellt haben muß. Was hat der blasse picklige Junge mit Kröten, Spinnen, Eidechsen zu tun? Was diese wiederum mit der gläubigen fanatischen Stimmen, die in jener Sonnenwundnacht vom brennenden Holzstoß her rief: ‘Rein wollen wir uns halten und unser Leben reifen lassen für Fahne, Führer und Volk! – Nichts, möchtest du sagen, nicht haben sie miteinander zu tun. So muß die richtige Antwort lauten, und was gäbest du darum, wenn sie auch noch wahr wäre.’)⁴⁰²

Her shameful memories of Nelly’s indoctrination as a child are briefly connected with her thoughts on the psychological reports she has just read on Adolf Eichmann, one of the major organizers of the Holocaust. The reports come to the conclusion that Eichmann

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid., 203.

⁴⁰¹ Ibid., 208.

⁴⁰² Ibid., 202.

was “normal.”⁴⁰³ The word “normal” causes in her “eine feine, doch penetrante Übelkeit.”⁴⁰⁴ The ideas presented to her as a child as normal—“Judenköpfe rollen,” Jews are to fear and hate, Jews and snakes are impure and dirty—makes her feels nauseous.

Kristallnacht

In chapter seven, Wolf presents another difficult memory, Nelly’s experience of the “Kristallnacht”, the nation-wide pogrom against German Jews on November 9, 1938. This time, however, the narrator remembers how the child develops a feeling nobody has taught her: At the sight of the burned-down synagogue the morning after the “Kristallnacht” nine-year-old Nelly feels empathy and sadness:

Nelly konnte nicht dagegen an: Das verkohlte Mauerwerk machte sie traurig. Sie wußte aber nicht, daß es Trauer war, was sie empfand, weil sie es nicht wissen sollte. Sie hatte längst angefangen, ihre wahren Gefühle vor sich selbst zu leugnen.

[...] Die Juden sind anders als wir. Sie sind unheimlich. Vor den Juden muß man Angst haben, wenn man sie schon nicht hassen kann. Wenn die Juden jetzt stark wären, müßten sie uns alle umbringen.

Um ein Haar wäre Nelly eine unpassende Empfindung unterlaufen: Mitgefühl. Aber der gesunde deutsche Menschenverstand baute seine Barriere dagegen, als Angst.⁴⁰⁵

How to deal with these conflicting feelings? Sadness or compassion were feelings that Nelly knew she should not feel towards the Jews. So, she represses them. Thus, by 1938, the narrator shows, Nelly had already learned that she was supposed to encounter the Jews only with hatred or fear. In parentheses, so as not to voice her pain all too loudly, the adult Nelly speaks about the consequences of this “education” to transform sympathy in fear and hatred:

⁴⁰³ Ibid., 207.

⁴⁰⁴ Ibid., 207.

⁴⁰⁵ Ibid., 236-37.

(Vielleicht sollte wenigstens angedeutet werden, welche Schwierigkeiten ein Mensch in Sachen ‘Mitgefühl’ haben muß—auch, was das Mitgefühl mit sich selbst betrifft—, der als Kind gezwungen wurde, Mitgefühl mit Schwachen und Unterlegenen in Haß, in Angst umzumünzen, dies nur, um auf Spätfolgen früherer Geschehnisse hinzuweisen, die man zu Unrecht oft nur in der zwar zutreffenden, doch nicht erschöpfenden Rechnung zusammenfaßt: 177 brennende Synagogen im Jahre 1938 ergeben ungezählte Ruinenstädte im Jahre 1945.)⁴⁰⁶

The physical ruins that remained after “Kristallnacht” and after the Allied bombings of Germany can be summarized in numbers and facts, the narrator writes. The psychological remnants of this time period, however, are harder to fathom. However, that they are still there, Wolf expresses by including an episode from the present, in which the narrator watches a television show, in which a psychologist states that there are certain patterns of behavior, “Grundmuster,” are established through experiences early on in one’s life. They form our moral education.

The trial

In chapter ten, Wolf depicts Nelly’s “career” in the *Hitlerjugend* during the first years of the war. While Nazi education takes effect she develops an increasingly twisted relationship to her own emotions. The center of this chapter describes “ein Strafgericht,”⁴⁰⁷ a trial against a girl in *Jungmädelbund* that Nelly witnesses probably around the age of twelve in 1941. The offense is minor: Gerda Link, a girl of Nelly’s age, stole money from a comrade and lied when her “Gruppenführerin” Christel confronted her. Since, in the eyes of the group leaders, Gerda besmirched the honor of the *Hitlerjugend*, she is publicly humiliated in front of all *Jungmädel* units in town.⁴⁰⁸ Nelly watches with discomfort how Christel, the most senior leader, punishes the girl:

⁴⁰⁶ Ibid., 237.

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid., 281.

⁴⁰⁸ See *ibid.*, 281.

[E]s wartet Gerda Link auf ihr Urteil, das von Christel, der Gruppenführerin, selbst verkündet werden wird. Als Christel nun einen Schritt vortritt und zu reden beginnt, läuft Nelly der Schweiß in Strömen den Rücken hinunter. [...] Neben Christel ist Micky eine untergeordnete Gottheit. Christels Aufmerksamkeit auf sich zu ziehen ist das Höchste oder, falls es im Zorn geschieht, das Schlimmste, was einem widerfahren kann.

Aber Christel weiß ihren Zorn zu bändigen und zeigt Trauer und Enttäuschung, die viel schrecklicher sind. Sie dämpft ihre Stimme, sie erträgt den Schmerz fast nicht, den Gerda Link ihr, ihr ganz persönlich angetan hat; die Schmach, die sie auf jedes einzelne Glied ihrer Gemeinschaft gehäuft, die Schande, die sie über alle, besonders aber über ihre Führerin gebracht.⁴⁰⁹

The overly serious tone of this passage mirrors the grave impression the event leaves on Nelly. “Deutsch sein heißt treu sein”, their leader Micky yells, before they all sing the song of the *Hitlerjugend* and Gerda is expelled from the group for three months. But Nelly cannot help but feel terrible for Gerda on her way home. Later that night, she develops a fever, which the narrator interprets as a psychosomatic reaction to the incident. When her mother asks what is wrong with her, she has difficulties describing the conflicted feelings that derive from her knowledge of what she is supposed to feel and what is actually feeling:

Schrecken, Verzweiflung zu sagen wäre zu stark, und daß sie Angst hat, darf sie nicht wissen wollen. Nach ihrer eigenen Überzeugung hätte sie Abscheu gegen Gerda Link fühlen müssen, nicht dieses weichliche Mitleid, und Begeisterung über die Gradlinigkeit der Führerin anstatt eben Angst. Wie öfter schon handelte es sich um die Unmöglichkeit sich Klarheit zu verschaffen. Da kam das Fieber, sie konnte sich zu Bett legen.⁴¹⁰

However, the mix of fear, pity, and guilt that Nelly feels after Gerda’s trial, do not prevent her from accepting the offer to become “Führerinanwärterin,” on track to become a group leader like Micky and Christel.⁴¹¹

Shortly thereafter, Nelly can proudly call herself a *Jungmädelführerin*. As such, she does a particularly excellent job teaching her unit “die deutschen Tugenden”. To her

⁴⁰⁹ Ibid., 282-83.

⁴¹⁰ Ibid., 284.

⁴¹¹ Ibid.

mother's surprise, the otherwise rather chaotic girl even holds up order and tidiness as important values. During a camping trip she tells on her friend Tella, who has left an old apple in her locker, and she enjoys the recognition she receives in return from the leader of the camp, who stresses that she, like all *Jungmädelführerinnen*, now belongs to the elite of the German nation.⁴¹²

The narrator struggles to explain why Nelly became part of the same system that already at the time she felt was deeply wrong. Why did Nelly become a group leader in the Hitler Youth after Gerda's humiliation made her sick, even against the resistance of her mother? Ambition and the need for recognition must have motivated Nelly's decision, the narrator speculates, but she is not fully satisfied with this explanation:

Ehrgeiz, Geltungsbedürfnis wären erprobte Stichworte, klängen nach Aufrichtigkeit, und daß sie es nicht auf träfen, soll ja nicht behauptet werden. Doch treffen sie es eben nicht ganz. Und gerade der Rest, der nicht durch Ehrgeiz, nicht durch Geltungsbedürfnis gedeckt wird, interessiert.⁴¹³

Could compensation have been a reason for her eagerness to succeed in the Hitler Youth?

A compensation for not fully embracing actions such as Gerda's trial?

Das dritte Stichwort wäre: Kompensation [...]. Anerkennung und verhältnismäßige Sicherheit vor Angst und übermächtigem Schuldbewußtsein werden ihr garantiert, dafür liefert sie Unterwerfung und strenge Pflichterfüllung. Sie hat erlebt, daß sie den Zweifeln nicht gewachsen ist. Sie nimmt sich jede Möglichkeit zu zweifeln, vor allem an sich selbst. ('Das Schwache muß weggehämmert werden.' Adolf Hitler)⁴¹⁴

The subjunctive underscores the narrator's recognition that she will not find definite answers. In spite of the ever-growing material she collects about her childhood—earlier diary entries, old newspapers, and notes from her library research—she sees “immer deutlicher die Unfähigkeit, das immer weiterwachende Material [...] zu bewältigen im

⁴¹² Ibid., 293.

⁴¹³ Ibid., 285.

⁴¹⁴ Ibid., 286.

Sinn von ‘deuten.’”⁴¹⁵ Like other episodes from her childhood and youth, the one about the *Jungmädelsbund* will not have a result. The memories remain “zweifelhaft.”⁴¹⁶

My close reading of these passages shows how Wolf intertwines past memories and present reflections. What is most striking about these episodes is not only the depiction of the child’s slow immersion into the inhuman belief-system but also, and perhaps more importantly the depiction of the narrator’s shame and helplessness during the moments when she is haunted by her childhood in Nazi Germany. The text does not offer answers, solutions, or firm opinions but instead a highly complex narrative intertwinement of past and present, which leaves it up to the reader to draw historical and political connections.

“*Entblößung der Eingeweide*”

After presenting this selection of passages that exemplify Wolf’s approach to her childhood memories, I want to address the overarching question of this chapter: what role does the trope of childhood innocence play in *Kindheitsmuster*?

It should be quite clear that Wolf is not interested in making a statement about guilt or innocence. Rather, she traces her moral education during the Nazi period and indoctrination into Nazi ideology in a drastically honest way, revealing many memories she would prefer to forget. In her soul searching, one could certainly find moments of self-accusation and self-exculpation not dissimilar to those in *Ein springender Brunnen* and *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel*, as I will show later in this chapter. However, as the narrator says at one point: “Selbstbezeichnungen und Entschuldigungsversuche halten

⁴¹⁵ Ibid.

⁴¹⁶ Ibid., 285.

einander die Waage.”⁴¹⁷ One does not get the impression that Wolf assesses the behavior of her younger self with the purpose of rehabilitating a childhood during the Nazi period as in Walser’s case, or a writer’s reputation as in Grass’s. As opposed to the two male authors, Wolf presents an adult who does *not* come to terms with her Nazi childhood and who describes the occupation with an education that taught her hatred and fear with the strong metaphor: “Entblößung der Eingeweide”⁴¹⁸. She presents the narrator, her alter ego, who in the process of remembering and writing about these memories suffers from panic attacks and has to be hospitalized because of a physical and psychological breakdown, but who nevertheless decides: “Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muß man allmählich zu schweigen aufhören.”⁴¹⁹

If we evaluate this novel first and foremost as a personal text, *Kindheitsmuster* proves to be a highly intimate and honest text that gains its qualities from the depiction of a writer’s inconclusive search for answers about her childhood. This childhood story would come to an end, the narrator states at one point, if identity could firmly be reclaimed, if “zweite und dritte Person wieder in der ersten zusammenträfen, mehr noch: zusammenfielen. Wo nicht mehr ‘du’ und ‘sie’—wo unverhohlenen ‘ich’ gesagt werden müßte.”⁴²⁰ At least, on a grammatical level, she does reach this identity. The first-person perspective is used for the first time on the very last page of the book at the moment the narrator (and Wolf) finishes her writing project. But this new “I” stands yet again amidst a group of questions:

⁴¹⁷ Ibid., 298.

⁴¹⁸ Ibid., 264.

⁴¹⁹ Ibid., 262.

⁴²⁰ Ibid., 507.

Das Kind, das in mir verkrochen war—ist es hervorgekommen? Oder hat es sich, aufgescheucht, ein tieferes, unzugänglicheres Versteck gesucht? [...]

Und die Vergangenheit, die noch Sprachregelungen verfügen, die erste Person in eine zweite und dritte spalten konnte—ist ihre Vormacht gebrochen? Werden die Stimmen sich beruhigen?⁴²¹

To sum up, the narrators raises only one question at the end: Has the past been mastered?

Significantly, Wolf leaves the answer open. The narrator's response is: "Ich weiß es nicht."⁴²² What remains is the impression of melancholy and pain toward a childhood that has left its imprint forever.

2. In defense of a childhood?

Martin Walser's *Ein springender Brunnen* (1998)

Childhood images

In his speech "Über Deutschland reden. Ein Bericht," Martin Walser most clearly articulates the contrast between the innocence of his childlike perceptions of the Nazi era and the historical guilt connected with this time period. In this speech, given in Munich in 1988, he raises the question of whether he could represent the years between 1933 and 1945 in the way he experienced them as a child and adolescent, or whether he was morally and politically obliged to reflect his childhood in Nazi Germany in the context of the Holocaust and to reconstruct it with the full knowledge of hindsight.⁴²³ The speech begins:

⁴²¹ Ibid., 593.

⁴²² Ibid.

⁴²³ Martin Walser, "Über Deutschland reden," in Martin Walser, *Werke in zwölf Bänden. Ansichten, Einsichten. Aufsätze zur Zeitgeschichte*, Ed. Helmuth Kiesel, Vol. 11, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1997, 896-915. (The speech was held at the Münchner Kammerspiele on October 30th in 1988 as part of the lecture series "Reden über unser Land". It was first published on November 3rd of the same year in *Die Zeit*. See: Ibid., 1103)

Ist man fähig oder gar verpflichtet, Kindheitsbilder nachträglich zu bewerten, oder darf man sich diesem allerreichsten Andrang für immer überlassen? Ich habe das Gefühl, ich könne mit meiner Erinnerung nicht nach Belieben umgehen. Es ist mir, zum Beispiel, nicht möglich, meine Erinnerung mit Hilfe eines inzwischen erworbenen Wissens zu belehren. Die Erinnerung reicht zurück in eine Zeit, von der ich inzwischen weiß, daß sie furchtbar gewesen ist. Jedes Parteigesicht, jede Militärscheinung, jede Lehrperson und alle Gesichter aus der Nähe zeigen, daß sie aus jener Zeit stammen. Aber das Furchtbare selber zeigen sie nicht. Ein Sechs- bis Achtzehnjähriger, der Auschwitz nicht bemerkt hat. Kindheit und Jugend entfalten ihren unendlichen Hunger und Durst, und wenn Uniformen, Befehlshabergesichter und dergleichen angeboten werden, dann wird eben das alles verschlungen.⁴²⁴

The images that make up his childhood, Walser argues, do not show any atrocities.

Between 1933 and 1945, he never heard of Auschwitz; he was a “Sechs- bis Achtzehnjähriger, der Auschwitz nicht bemerkt hat” and who naively absorbed his National Socialist surroundings. The realization that his childhood and adolescence coincided with the most atrocious crimes against humanity, Walser argues, did not change the widely positive memory of his childhood. The images his memory provides, he says, are free from the Holocaust and he cannot retrospectively “add” anything to them, “[k]einen Kommentar, keine Aufklärung, keine Bewertung. Die Bilder sind jeder Unterrichtung unzugänglich. [...] Das erworbene Wissen über die mordende Diktatur ist eins, meine Erinnerung ist ein anderes.”⁴²⁵ In order to write about his childhood in connection with the Holocaust, he would have to transform himself, he says, into an anti-fascist child:

Ich müßte mich, um davon erzählen können, in ein antifaschistisches Kind verwandeln. Ich müßte also reden, wie man heute über diese Zeit redet. Also bliebe nichts übrig als ein heute Redender. Einer mehr, der über damals redet, als sei er damals schon der Heutige gewesen.⁴²⁶

⁴²⁴ Walser, “Über Deutschland reden,” 896.

⁴²⁵ Ibid., 896-897.

⁴²⁶ Ibid., 897.

To view the past from such a present perspective, however, is in Walser eyes “[e]in peinliches Vorgehen.”⁴²⁷

Considering these statements, it is hardly surprising that in his autobiographical novel *Ein springender Brunnen*, Walser presents the years between 1933 and 1945 entirely from the point of view of the “Sechs- bis Achtzehnjähriger, der Auschwitz nicht bemerkt hat”.⁴²⁸ His protagonist is the young Johann, his alter ego, who—like the author—grows up in the small village of Wasserburg on Lake Constance, whose father, like Walser’s father, dies when the boy is about ten, and whose mother, like Walser’s mother, is the owner of the local pub and meeting place of the village.⁴²⁹ The novel is divided into three parts, each of which is set at a different time in Johann’s life; he is about five in the first part, about ten in the second and eighteen in the last. Each part is introduced by a theoretical passage, set apart from Johann’s autobiographical account, in which an impersonal narrator reflects on the relationship between past and present in fairly abstract terms. So Walser does not, in fact, present the memory images of his childhood without commentary or explanation. But the three prologues, all entitled “Vergangenheit als Gegenwart,” stand apart from the main narrative, seemingly unrelated to Johann’s story. This is, I suspect, why many critics just ignored them or mentioned them only marginally in their readings of the novel. However, only in the context of the

⁴²⁷ Ibid., 897.

⁴²⁸ Ibid., 896.

⁴²⁹ In a conversation with Rudolf Augstein, published in *Der Spiegel* in 1998 and reprinted on the occasion of Augstein’s death in 2002, Walser explicitly says that he wrote about his “Kindheitserfahrungen” in his last novel, referring to *Ein springender Brunnen*. Apart from the fact that his mother entered the party earlier than Johann’s mother did in the book, as Walser emphasizes in the discussion with Augstein, all biographical dates in Johann’s life seem to be in accordance with Walser’s biography. For example, Walser even speaks about his memories of Frau Hänsel, the Jewish woman, who appears at the end of the book. Treating Walser’s ‘novel’ as an autobiographical text thus seems to be justified. See Martin Walser, Rudolf Augstein, “‘Erinnerung kann man nicht befehlen,’ Martin Walser und Rudolf Augstein über ihre deutsche Vergangenheit,” *Der Spiegel* 46/2002: 148-62.

prologues on the one hand and Walser's Munich and his so-called *Friedenspreis* speech on the other hand, his use of the idea of childhood innocence becomes visible not as an exculpatory rejection of national-historical responsibility but as a conscious refusal to have his childhood be "exploited" for a political discourse, with which he disagrees.

Coming of age in Wasserburg—A Synopsis

The first part of the book, called *Der Eintritt der Mutter in die Partei*, focuses on the months leading up to the Nazis' rise to power in January 1933 when Johann is five or six. At the end of the Weimar Republic and the height of Germany's economic crisis, Johann's family, along with many others in the village, struggles to make a living. His father, unable to work due to an ailment resulting from his fighting in World War I, does not help the situation with his unrealistic dreams of making it big by breeding silk worms or angora sheep. While the father is skeptical of the National Socialists, Johann's mother, albeit not interested in politics, recognizes that the ever-growing support for this new political movement in the village presents great opportunities for her business. She joins the Nazi party in order to gain the favor of the local SA, who she hopes will hold their weekly meetings in her pub, the so-called *Restauration*. The family's financial problems, the muted political tensions between Nazi supporters and opponents, the mother's decision to become a member of the NSDAP as one of the first in the village—all this is conveyed to the reader only through bits and pieces the five-year old Johann picks up of the adult conversations surrounding him.

The information about the historical and political context is woven into Johann's stream of consciousness that leads us through the abundance of his childlike thoughts and observations. He ponders about the different habits and dialects of employees and visitors

of the *Restauration*, about the local hair-dresser, raspberry candy and his brother's annoying piano playing, but above all about his father. While the text suggests very clearly that the highly sensitive but weak and ailing man is a hopeless dreamer and only burdens the family with his quirky ideas of breeding angora sheep, Johann speaks about his father with the utmost admiration, not least because of the father's magical invention of the "Wörterbaum": Whenever Johann manages to spell a word that is particularly difficult or exotic, the father praises him saying "Johann, ich staune!" and hangs the newly mastered word into a self-made "tree of words" that assembles his sons' greatest accomplishments, words like "Jugendstil," "Popocatepetl," or "Theosophie."

In the second part of the novel, Johann, age ten, is a member of the *Jungvolk*. There are two episodes telling how Johann witnesses political and racial repression. The first one takes place in the *Jungvolk* when Wolfgang Landsmann, a boy of Johann's age, is excluded from the group. His bicycle is taken away from him and he is publicly humiliated because he is "half-Jewish." The second episode depicting Nazi repression describes how a group of the village's SA brutally beats up a circus clown who, in a political cabaret during a circus show in Wasserburg, had made fun of Hitler. While Johann barely registers the violence against the clown, he develops a great sensibility for, and aversion to, Nazi language at the time. When he listens to his best friend's father, the highest ranking Nazi in the village, his Nazi jargon appears uncouth compared to the poetic language of his own father, who had recently passed away. During this time period, Johann is most preoccupied with his awakening sexuality, which conflicts with his catholic education.

In the third part of the novel, which carries the title “Ernte”, the eighteen-year-old Johann is waiting for his conscription order for the *Gebirgsjäger*, the mountain troops of the German *Wehrmacht*, for which he had volunteered earlier. The young man’s thoughts and feelings show him as a sensitive, musical and slightly vain young man, who is still very much attached to his home. But he is eager to fight in the war like his older brother to prove that he is not a coward. He is increasingly interested in literature: he wins the first prize for a play in a regional drama competition, and constantly writes love poems for his girlfriend Magda. Shortly before Johann is conscripted, he and his family are informed of the brother’s death in combat. After the defeat at the end of the War, Johann is taken prisoner by the Americans in Bavaria. But only a few weeks later, he is released and returns home. He is surprised to learn that there were, in fact, Jewish people in his village who lived in constant fear of being deported, but he remains indifferent to the news. He meets Lena, the daughter of the new tenant of his mother’s pub and is completely smitten. We see the interactions between Johann and Lena growing from first trepidatious encounters to nightly visits in each other's room. This new relationship gives Johann a first taste of the freedom that awaits him, a freedom that he will explore, as he says, by finding his own language, since the language of the Nazis as well as the language of the church have always been foreign languages to him.⁴³⁰

⁴³⁰ Johann thinks: “Die Sprache, die nach 1933 erlernt hatte, war, nach der Kirchensprache, die zweite Fremdsprache gewesen. Sie war ihm nicht nähergekommen als die Kirchensprache. Er hatte sich mit beiden Sprachen herumgeschlagen. Er mußte eine eigene finden.” See Walser, *Ein springender Brunnen* 402.

Aesthetics and Zeitgeist

“Das erworbene Wissen über die mordende Diktatur ist eins, meine Erinnerung ist ein anderes.”⁴³¹ In *Ein springender Brunnen*, Walser puts this statement from the Munich speech into effect. Nazi crimes and Nazi genocide are widely bracketed from the depiction of the protagonist’s adolescent years. Walser presents the reader with an elegantly and powerfully written coming-of-age story of a boy growing up in the beautiful scenery of Lake Constance. The war, death, “Auschwitz”, or “das Schreckliche”, as Walser refers to the Holocaust, are present in the background but are clearly not the main focus of the book.

This conscious neglect of historical context turned the novel into a controversial subject among its critics, with many defending Walser’s approach.⁴³² Some, however, were bothered by the novel’s provocative gesture. Andreas Isenschmid, for example, literary critic for the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, ended his presentation of the novel in the TV-show *Das literarische Quartett* with the following summary:

Das Heikelste an der ganzen Sache [...] ist natürlich dies, dass das eine Kindheitsgeschichte im deutschen Faschismus ist, in der das Wort ‘Auschwitz’ nicht vorkommt, das Wort ‘Dachau’ vielleicht dreimal vorkommt, aber der Schrecken des Faschismus, wie wir ihn kennen, eigentlich beinahe ausgeblendet ist. Es gibt einige wenige Szenen, wo Antisemitismus stattfindet. Es gibt natürlich einen spürbaren Druck der nationalsozialistischen Formierung im Dorf, aber hier wird eine Jugend geschildert, in der jemand in einem ganz engen Wissensradius gelebt hat. Und Martin Walser hat sich dazu entschieden, diese Jugend, ich sage mal, mit Scheuklappen zu schildern. Ganz bewusst hat er das Wissen, das im Buch dargestellt wird, reduziert auf das Wissen, das er damals gehabt hat, und das ist kläglich wenig. Und er weigert sich sozusagen, hinzutun so etwas wie Vergangenheitsbewältigung, geradezu auch nur Scham zu zeigen über die damalige Zeit. Das ist wahrscheinlich das Provokative in diesem Buch.⁴³³

⁴³¹ Walser, “Über Deutschland reden,” 896-897.

⁴³² See for example Jörg Magenau, “Abschied von der Einmischung,” *taz*, July 25, 1998, 11, and Hajo Steinert, “Johann’s Heimkehr an den Bodensee,” *Focus 33 (1998)*: 96-97.

⁴³³ Marcel Reich-Ranicki, Sigrid Löffler, Hellmuth Karasek, Andreas Isenschmid, “Das literarische Quartett. Sendung vom 14. August 1998,” *Das literarische Quartett: Gesamtausgabe aller 77 Sendungen*

Walser responded directly to Isenschmid's criticism in his acceptance speech for the prestigious *Friedenspreis des Deutschen Buchhandels* he was awarded in 1998. He made fun of Isenschmid for not recognizing one of the most basic techniques of literature, the point-of-view narration:

Ein smarterer Intellektueller hißt im Fernsehen in seinem Gesicht einen Ernst, der in diesem Gesicht wirkt wie eine Fremdsprache, wenn er der Welt als schweres Versagen des Autors mitteilt, daß in des Autors Buch Auschwitz nicht vorkomme. Nie etwas gehört vom Urgesetz des Erzählens: der Perspektivität. Aber selbst wenn, Zeitgeist geht vor Ästhetik."⁴³⁴

Walser thus argues that Auschwitz does not appear in his novel due to the narrative form he chose. Why the drama? the author seems to ask. This is *literature*, he claims, a domain that should be guided by aesthetic principles not by political demands by the *zeitgeist*. But of course, the childlike innocence displayed in the novel and the minor role the Holocaust plays in the text were not simply aesthetic choices on the part of the author. This becomes particularly clear from the inter-text emerging from the novel and the *Friedenspreis* speech, which I will consider later. But even the prologues to the three sections of the novel reveal that Walser takes a distinct position on how the Nazi past should be remembered in present-day Germany. The prologues turn this literary work into a political podium.

The prologue to the first part of *Ein springender Brunnen* argues that our collective memory is a matter of public interest and that this public memory is subject to change and can be shaped and molded. *Individual* memory, however, cannot be changed *ad libitum* and ought to be a private matter. Walser phrases this in more poetic terms:

von 1988 bis 2001, eds. Peter Just, Pascal Pfitzenmaier and Nicola Uther, Vol. 3 (Berlin: Directmedia, 2006. 127-33), 128.

⁴³⁴ Martin Walser, "Erfahrungen beim Verfassen einer Sonntagsrede," in Schirmmacher, *Die Walser-Bubis-Debatte*, 7-17, 12.

In der Vergangenheit, die wir alle zusammen haben, kann man herumgehen wie in einem Museum. Die eigene Vergangenheit ist nicht begehbar. Wir haben von ihr nur das, was sie von selbst preisgibt. Auch wenn sie dann nicht deutlicher wird als ein Traum.⁴³⁵

Remembering the past is thus imagined as something that occurs “von selbst” rather than something that can be actively pursued. Similar to a dream, our past offers itself to us and we are merely its passive recipients. While we risk that the past might remain just as vague as a dream, we need to refrain from interpreting and trying to derive meaning from it. Only then, the past can maintain its authenticity:

Träume zerstören wir auch, wenn wir sie nach ihrer Bedeutung fragen. Der ins Licht einer anderen Sprache gezogene Traum verrät nur noch, was wir ihn fragen. Wie der Gefolterte sagt er alles, was wir wollen, nichts von sich. So die Vergangenheit.⁴³⁶

Walser thus seems to want to recreate the past with no interest other than the desire to let the images speak for themselves. Since it is through the child’s perspective that the past is supposed to reveal itself, the adult voice speaking to the reader in the prologue—unidentified but recognizable as the author’s voice as I will show later—retreats to a passive position as soon as the point-of-view narrative begins. He wants to ‘receive’ the past without interfering with it: “Man nimmt entgegen. Bleibt bereit.”⁴³⁷

The second prologue justifies this narrative approach from another angle. Here, Walser preemptively responds to the critique that a representation of the Holocaust is missing from his novel. This prologue lines up the three situations during Johann’s adolescence in which the boy heard the word ‘Dachau.’⁴³⁸ These memories are presented

⁴³⁵ Martin Walser, *Ein springender Brunnen*, (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2000).

⁴³⁶ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁴³⁷ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁴³⁸ Johann hears the word „Dachau“ for the first time shortly before the beginning of the war when a guest in the pub mentions it in a hushed voice to his mother. He encounters the word for the second time during his duty as *Flakhelfer* when he and his friend Wolfgang see a group of inmates from Dachau on the street. And the third situation takes place at the very end of the war when he and two fellow soldiers encounter

without a comment. But they are juxtaposed with the ten-year-old's memories of his recently deceased father, his favorite music, his way of taking medicine on a piece of bread and the one time he slapped Johann in the face. Walser suggests that for the ten-year-old Johann, "Dachau" experiences carried the same weight as the experience of taking medicine on a piece of bread. Experiences become memories only after the fact, and memories are qualified in their historical or biographical weight only in hindsight. "Solange etwas ist, ist es nicht das, was es gewesen sein wird", Walser had written at the very beginning of the novel, and he repeats here "Solange man es [das Vergangene] noch vor Augen hat, schaut man nicht hin."⁴³⁹

Apart from the fact that the rhetoric of "nicht hinschauen" becomes important in Walser's *Friedenspreis* speech, as I will explain later, it also evokes the question of the role of the bystander. The child and teenager who did not see the Nazi oppression before his eyes may not be blamed for his ignorance. But how does the person remembering the past evaluate this ignorance? How does he feel about the recognition that for the child and teenager the word "Dachau" was merely a random word and that he did not understand its political, or rather criminal, implications? In the prologue, the narrator says vaguely: "Im Objekt solcher Heimsuchung kann der Verdacht entstehen, das Vergangene dränge sich nur auf, daß man unter seiner Unwiederbringlichkeit leide."⁴⁴⁰ It *could* be suspected that the person haunted by the past might suffer from it, more precisely from the fact that it might be irretrievable. Nothing can be done to change it.

two "Dachauer" who have left the liberated camp and take the young soldiers' weapons from them. See *ibid.*, 121-24.

⁴³⁹ *Ibid.*, 129.

⁴⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 129.

But the suffering remains only a possibility, a suspicion. Walser ultimately shrug his shoulders at the irretrievability of life experiences. He says:

Woher hätte man wissen können, was das, was passierte, dem Gedächtnis wert ist? Man kann nicht leben und gleichzeitig etwas darüber wissen. Welche Warze war denn höher, erhabener, die links neben der Nase im Gesicht von Helmers Hermine oder die auf der Oberlippe der Zollbeamtenfrau und stellvertretenden NS-Frauenschaftsführerin Heym?⁴⁴¹

Perhaps, this is the most explicit comment on the consequences of the narrative through the eyes of the child: For Johann, the name of the concentration camp “Dachau” meant as little or as much as the warts on the noses of the women of the village. The provocative matching of the politically and historically charged term “Dachau” with something utterly banal such as warts illustrates that for the sake of authenticity, Walser accepts the uniformity of these experiences—even or precisely when it comes to memories of the Third Reich.

In the third prologue, he comes back to the idea of authenticity presented in the first prologue, surprisingly undercutting what he had claimed there, namely that the person remembering the past remains passive in the memory process. Here, he concedes that one always approaches the past with a certain motivation. The past, he argues, is always a product of the present:

Vergangenheit ist in der Gegenwart auf eine Weise enthalten, daß sie nicht aus ihr gewonnen werden kann, wie man einen Stoff, der in einem anderen Stoff enthalten ist, durch ein kluges Verfahren herausziehen kann, und man hätte ihn dann als solchen. Die Vergangenheit als solche gibt es nicht. Es gibt sie nur als etwas, das in der Gegenwart enthalten ist, ausschlaggebend oder unterdrückt, dann als Unterdrückte ausschlaggebend.⁴⁴²

We may wish to view the past in complete separation from the present and to distill the past by clearing out all the parts that were added later on. But it is simply not possible to

⁴⁴¹ Ibid., 124.

⁴⁴² Ibid., 281.

consider the past without the present. The narrator wishes to conserve his memory exactly as it was but he realizes at the same time that even this very intention is rooted in the present. The third prologue ends with the wish that the past may reveal itself to us, as it was the idea in the first prologue. This wish, however, is now formulated in the subjunctive and receives a dream-like quality:

Der Vergangenheit eine Anwesenheit wünschen, über die wir nicht Herr sind. Nachträglich sind keine Eroberungen zu machen. Wunschdenkens Ziel: Ein interesseloses Interesse an der Vergangenheit. Daß sie uns entgegenkäme wie von selbst.⁴⁴³

Ultimately, Walser thus addresses the futility of trying to maintain a past “under glass.” The narrator admits that the more he attempts to revisit the past in its complete authenticity, the more he is guided by a certain intention, “ein Motiv, das mich gerade jetzt heißt, die Vergangenheit aufzusuchen.”⁴⁴⁴ Thus, Walser directly points us to the question of what *his* motif is. He gives the answer *ex negativum* when he he critically speaks about those who have developed an exclusively negative perspective toward their past. The most important passage of the third prologue reads:

Manche haben gelernt, ihre Vergangenheit abzulehnen. [...] Ich habe einige Male zugeschaut, wie Leute aus ihrer Vergangenheit förmlich herausgeschlüpft sind, um der Gegenwart eine günstigere Vergangenheit anbieten zu können. Die Vergangenheit als Rolle. [...] In Wirklichkeit wird der Umgang mit der Vergangenheit von Jahrzehnt zu Jahrzehnt strenger normiert. Je normierter dieser Umgang, umso mehr ist, was als Vergangenheit gezeigt wird, Produkt der Gegenwart. [...] Eine komplett erschlossene, durchleuchtete gereinigte, genehmigte, total gegenwartsgeeignete Vergangenheit. Ethisch, politisch durchkorrigiert. Vorexerziert von unseren Gescheitesten, Einwandfreisten, den Besten. Was auch immer unsere Vergangenheit gewesen ist, wir haben uns von allem befreit, was in ihr so war, wie wir es jetzt nicht mehr möchten.⁴⁴⁵

⁴⁴³ Ibid., 283.

⁴⁴⁴ Ibid., 282.

⁴⁴⁵ Ibid., 281.

⁴⁴⁵ Ibid., 283.

⁴⁴⁵ Ibid., 282-83.

He criticizes those intellectuals—the “Gescheitesten”, “Einwandfreisten” and “Besten”—who have presented their biographies in a politically correct and ethically corrected way. This distanced view “people” develop toward their past is presented as role-playing and even lying here. The memory of the past, Walser suggests, should not be instrumentalized for present interests. Walser concedes: even if he wishes that the past could be represented without the interference of present interests, and even if he gives this novel the illusion of an authentic replica of his childhood and adolescence, there is a present motif guiding him. And his motif is precisely this: to represent the wish that this unobtrusive, innocent memory of a childhood and adolescence during the Third Reich were possible.

Thus, whereas *Ein springender Brunnen* appears at first glance as a poetic and apolitical rendering of Walser’s childhood, the political framework becomes evident in the prologues. As vague as Walser remains in his language, speaking broadly of the “past” and the “present, my reading strongly suggests that he refers to the memory of the Nazi past and the present discourse about it in the late 1990s. I argue that Walser writes his memoir *against* this discourse that he considers normative in that he thinks it is too occupied with the Holocaust and forces German intellectuals of his generation to relate to their childhood and youth to this part of the history between 1933 and 1945 only.

Clearly then, the narrative form of *Ein springender Brunnen* conveys a provocative political message. Walser attacks this discourse by representing his childhood nostalgia in *Ein springender Brunnen*. The narrative device of the childhood narrator and the idea of childhood innocence are used purposefully to underscore his critique of the memory discourse. In my eyes, this is a problematic stance to begin with.

But I take issue in particular with a passage in the novel, in which Walser presents his own memory in *competition* to the memory of the Holocaust.

The German-Jewish encounter

It would be wrong to say, as Andreas Isenschmidt did, that [the](#) Nazi terror is excluded from Walser's text. Although the child narrator himself is not capable of relating the repression in Wasserburg to the greater political framework, let alone to critically evaluate it, the text does occasionally point at Nazi discrimination and persecution, and it is not least the reader's political and historical knowledge that lends these instances an almost eerie presence in Johann's story.

This is the case, for example, in the episode about the clown in the second part of the book. During his visit to the circus, the ten-year-old Johann does not understand that the clown takes a great risk by mocking Hitler's so-called "*Anschluss*" of Austria in 1938. The reader, however, knows the likely consequences of such openly critical remarks about Hitler. He sees the subsequent violence against the clown immediately in the context of Nazi oppression, while for Johann the event is incomprehensible, even if it is significant because it results in the circus leaving the village. While Johann worries about being separated from his teenage love Anita, the circus director's daughter, the violence against the clown leaves a different imprint on the reader's mind. It foreshadows the political development following the annexation of Austria in 1938: the increasing violence against critics of the regime, the anti-Jewish pogroms of the "Reichskristallnacht" in the same year, and the beginning of the war a year later. Although it is not explicitly spelled out, the politico-historical context thus looms in the

background, and Johann's apolitical and unreflected perception of the rise of National Socialism in the village requires the reader to fill in the gaps.

But the reader's role changes in the third part of the novel. In the first and second part where Johann is five and ten respectively, his young age functions as an indicator for the reader not to accept the account of the young boy entirely at face value. But in the third part, Johann is eighteen and no longer a child. Necessarily, I would argue, the reader's critical distance to the protagonist diminishes. The narrative constellation also changes because we are looking at the historical turning point of 1945. By setting the third part of the novel in 1945, Walser inevitably raises the question of how Johann's perspective changes after he learns that the Nazi regime was, in fact, a murderous dictatorship. In his Munich speech, Walser juxtaposed his childhood experiences and the knowledge "über die mordende Diktatur," that he later gained. The reader wonders: did the eighteen-year-old Johann/Martin not learn of the Europe-wide persecution, deportation and killing of Jews that also took place in Wasserburg?

Walser addresses this issue in a key scene towards the end of the novel. The scene is set after the war. Johann has returned to Wasserburg and has re-enrolled into his high school program in the nearby city Lindau in order to complete his *Abitur*. One day, during his daily bike ride to school, he runs into Wolfgang Landsmann who struggles with a flat tire. Wolfgang, the reader remembers from an episode told earlier in the novel, was excluded from the *Jungvolk* because his mother was Jewish. Johann and Wolfgang were ten at the time, and the earlier episode also involved a bike. The *Jungvolk Führer* Edi Fürst had pushed Wolfgang's new bike down a hill to humiliate the boy. At the sight of Wolfgang and his bike in 1945, Johann feels deeply uncomfortable, but he helps him

to repair the flat tire. Being reminded of this act of discrimination, Johann is insecure as to how to react:

Johann spürte, daß es ihm ganz und gar gegen den Strich gegangen wäre, wenn Wolfgang jetzt von Edi Fürst angefangen hätte, von dem Appell damals. Er hätte doch überhaupt nicht gewußt, was er hätte sagen sollen. Sagen können. Und selber davon anfangen, das war unvorstellbar. Wenn Wolfgang davon anfangen würde, müßte Johann reagieren. Wie, wußte er nicht. Also, auf jeden Fall, alle Aufmerksamkeit aufs Fahrradflicken.⁴⁴⁶

This encounter is emblematic of the Hitler Youth generation’s “awakening” at the end of the war, their recognition that the political system in which they grew up was a regime of repression and mass murder. Johann’s insecurity toward Wolfgang—How should he deal with the memory of the bicycle incident? Should he openly talk about it? Does he have to evaluate it now?—emphasizes their difficult situation in 1945. How to deal with the knowledge that for the surviving victims of the Nazi regime the last 12 years will be remembered as the most horrific and fearsome period in their lives and not as the time of a happily lived childhood? Understandably, Johann is overwhelmed by this confrontation and does not want the other boy to address the issue. But while he focuses on repairing Wolfgang’s tire, Wolfgang wants to talk:

Wolfgang war noch nicht fertig mit dem, was er Johann offenbar erzählen will. [...] Wie wenig Johann weiß. Das wundert Wolfgang am meisten. Seine Mutter, Jüdin, lebte doch mit seinem Vater, dem Dr. Landmann, in *privilegierter Mischehe*. Der Vater, trotz seines Namens, kein Jude. [...] Wolfgangs Mutter andauernd in der Angst, abgeholt zu werden. [...] Dann weißt du auch nicht, sagte er, daß Rudolf Heß 1934 Frau Haensel besucht hat? Nein, weiß Johann nicht. Er weiß nicht, daß Frau Haensel Jüdin ist. Wolfgang wunderte sich.⁴⁴⁷

Johann is faced with a different “side of the story,” another account of the past several years: Wolfgang’s mother feared deportation every day because the village teacher threatened to report her to the *Gestapo*. Frau Hänsel, an old customer of his parents, is

⁴⁴⁶ Ibid., 395-96.

⁴⁴⁷ Ibid., 397-98.

Jewish. Johann's reaction is crucial: He wants to fend off this knowledge, as he thinks it is too burdening:

*Johann wehrte sich gegen die Angst, in der Frau Landsmann gelebt hatte. Wolfgang hatte ihm leid getan, als Edi Fürst ihm das Fahrrad den Rain hinuntergeworfen hatte. Er hatte Wolfgang dann vergessen und vergessen, daß er ihn vergessen gehabt hatte. Warum hat er nicht gesagt, daß er dieses Rad kennt? Er hätte doch zeigen können, daß er dieses Rad kennt. Dann hätte Wolfgang gewußt, was Johann damit sagen wollte! Warum hatte er das nicht gesagt? Die Angst, in der Frau Landsmann gelebt hat, engt ihn ein. Er will mit dieser Angst nichts zu tun haben.*⁴⁴⁸

Johann's initial insecurity soon turns into a more aggressive rejection. He does not want to be bothered with Wolfgang's perspective and becomes defensive. How could he have known? Wolfgang, he thinks, has no right to accuse him of not having known:

Er hatte gespürt, daß Wolfgang, was er ihm erzählt hatte, erzählt hatte, weil Johann das wissen müsse. Vielleicht meinte Wolfgang, daß Johann ein Vorwurf zu machen sei, weil er all das nicht gewußt hatte. *Johann wehrte sich gegen diesen vermuteten Vorwurf. Woher hätte er denn wissen sollen, daß Frau Haensel Jüdin ist? Er wollte von sich nichts verlangen lassen. Was er empfand, wollte er selber empfinden. Niemand sollte ihm eine Empfindung abverlangen, die er nicht selber hatte. Er wollte leben, nicht Angst haben.* Frau Landsmann würde ihn mit ihrer Angst anstecken, das spürte er. Er mußte sich wegdenken von ihrer Angst. Eine Angst gebiert die nächste. Nichts so sicher wie das. Er hatte Angst, Frau Landsmann zu begegnen. Seit er wußte, in welcher Angst sie gelebt hatte, wußte er nicht mehr, wie er ihr begegnen mußte. Wie grüßen, wie hin- oder wegschauen? Mehr ausdrücken, als er in dem Augenblick gerade empfand? *Er wollte nicht gezwungen sein. Zu nichts und von niemandem. [...] Johann wollte nie mehr unterworfen sein, weder einer Macht noch einer Angst. Niemand sollte einen Anspruch an ihn haben. Am liebsten wäre er so frei gewesen, wie noch nie jemand gewesen war.*⁴⁴⁹

Since we still follow the point of view of the eighteen-year-old without being offered a commentary, this passage is ambiguous: Is this a *critical* portrayal of the protagonist's refusal to have empathy for the Jewish experience of the Third Reich? Does Walser depict a moment in early post-war history here when the prototypical German response to

⁴⁴⁸ Ibid., 400 (my emphasis).

⁴⁴⁹ Ibid., 401-02 (my emphasis).

the Holocaust was to push the Nazi crimes far away? Might this passage even be, as Tillmann Moser claims, a poetic transfiguration of the Mitscherlichs' famous thesis of Germany's inability to mourn?⁴⁵⁰

It is unlikely that Walser wants the reader to take a critical stance toward Johann in this passage because in a speech given in 1998, the year *Ein springender Brunnen* was published, Walser expressed a strikingly similar view to the one his eighteen year-old alter ego expresses in the passage above. The way Johann rejects the victims' memory in the novel very clearly reflects the way Walser rejects Holocaust memory in the speech he gave at the award ceremony for the *Friedenspreis des Deutschen Buchhandels*.

The Friedenspreis speech

The *Friedenspreis* speech presents, at its core, a critique of Germany's memory discourse of the 1990. According to Walser, the memory of the Holocaust has become a mere "Drohoutine" in the German media, "jederzeit einsetzbares Einschüchterungsmittel oder Moralkeule."⁴⁵¹ His reaction to this supposed instrumentalization of the Holocaust is to

⁴⁵⁰ Moser writes about Johann's inability to react emotionally in this situation (he calls this "die Unfähigkeit Johanns emotional reagieren"): "Mir scheint, Walser überläßt es dem Leser, diese Unfähigkeit zu erkennen, vielleicht zu bedauern, oder auch die Aufrichtigkeit Walsers zu würdigen. Die 'Unfähigkeit zu trauern' ist vielleicht nie aufrichtiger eingestanden worden als gegen Ende des Romans, als Johann heimkehrt und vieles hört von den Grausamkeiten der letzten Kriegstage, von den gefallenen Schulfreunden, aber auch von den letzten Hinrichtungen in Polen wegen Rassenschande.", Tillmann Moser, "Erinnerungen an eine Kindheit in der NS-Zeit oder Wieviel musste Martin Walser wissen vom damaligen Schrecken?," *Deutschlandfunk*, broadcast on December 11, 1998, http://www.tilmanmoser.de/publi/essays/1996_erinnerungen_kindheit_ns.html. Note that Moser falsely misreads Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlichs' phrase of the "inability to mourn." In their book with the same title, the authors related it to the national trauma the loss of the Führer had caused. In the field of memory studies, however, the catchphrase of the inability to mourn has often been falsely understood as relating to Germany's lack of sensitivity towards the victims' fate—certainly an assumption worthwhile of reflection, but not what the authors argued.

⁴⁵¹ See Walser, "Erfahrungen beim Verfassen einer Sonntagsrede," 13.

look away from images of concentration camps,⁴⁵² and he also feels a strong resistance to having to deal with this memory:

Kein ernstzunehmender Mensch leugnet Auschwitz; kein noch zurechnungsfähiger Mensch deutelt an der Grauenhaftigkeit von Auschwitz herum; wenn mir aber jeden Tag in den Medien diese Vergangenheit vorgehalten wird, merke ich, *daß sich in mir etwas gegen diese Dauerrepräsentation unserer Schande wehrt*. Anstatt dankbar zu sein für die unaufhörliche Präsentation unserer Schande, fange ich an wegzuschauen. Ich möchte verstehen, warum in diesem Jahrzehnt die Vergangenheit präsentiert wird wie nie zuvor. *Wenn ich merke, daß sich in mir etwas dagegen wehrt*, versuche ich, die Vorhaltung unserer Schande auf Motive hin abzuhören, und bin fast froh, wenn ich glaube, entdecken zu können, daß öfter nicht mehr das Gedenken, das Nichtvergessendürfen das Motiv ist, sondern die Instrumentalisierung unserer Schande zu gegenwärtigen Zwecken.⁴⁵³

Walser's argument against what he considers a publicly reinforced memory of the Holocaust for the wrong reasons is that every individual should decide for him- or herself how to remember the Nazi period. He stresses the importance of the privacy of one's moral conscience. He gets to the conclusion:

Mit seinem Gewissen ist jeder allein. Öffentliche Gewissensakte sind deshalb in der Gefahr, symbolisch zu werden. Und nichts ist dem Gewissen fremder, als Symbolik, wie gut sie auch gemeint sei. [...] Es kann keiner von einem verlangen, was er gern hätte, der aber nicht geben will.⁴⁵⁴

Much has been written about these and other controversial passages of the speech, which became the subject of one of the most heated memory controversies in post-war Germany, in its impact topped perhaps only by the *Historikerstreit* in the eighties. The controversy, later called the "Walser-Bubis Debatte", was triggered by Ignaz Bubis, who as a Holocaust survivor and head of the *Zentralrat der Deutschen Juden* criticized Walser for ultimately propagating that Germany move on from his Nazi history, and he called the

⁴⁵² Walser writes: "Von den schlimmsten Filmsequenzen aus Konzentrationslagern habe ich bestimmt schon zwanzigmal weggeschaut." Walser, Sonntagsrede, 11.

⁴⁵³ Ibid., 11-12 (my emphasis).

⁴⁵⁴ Ibid., 14.

speech “geistige Brandstiftung.”⁴⁵⁵ The innumerable *Feuilleton* commentaries, the letters both Walser and Bubis received as well as a documentation of the meeting of the two men have been published in a volume that counts no less than 679 pages. Since I will present a more in-depth discussion of the controversy in the following chapter, I will narrow my focus here and only highlight the evident connection between the speech and the novel.⁴⁵⁶

That there is such a connection becomes clear from the fact that Walser uses almost the exact same phrasing in the speech as in the scene in the novel where he describes the encounter between Johann and Wolfgang. In the novel he writes:

Johann wehrte sich gegen diesen vermuteten Vorwurf. [...] Er wollte von sich nichts verlangen lassen. Was er empfand, wollte er selber empfinden. Niemand sollte ihm eine Empfindung abverlangen, die er nicht selber hatte.⁴⁵⁷

By comparison, in the speech he says:

[W]enn mir [...] jeden Tag in den Medien diese Vergangenheit vorgehalten wird, merke ich, daß sich in mir etwas gegen diese Dauerrepräsentation unserer Schande wehrt. [...] Mit seinem Gewissen ist jeder allein. [...] Es kann keiner von einem verlangen, was er gern hätte, der aber nicht geben will.⁴⁵⁸

Johann’s refusal to deal with the Jewish experience of the years between 1939 and 1945 in combination with his insistence on individual memory hence strikes me as analogous to Walser’s resistance towards the public memory of the Holocaust and his insistence on a private instead of a public conscience. The similarity in both wording and content demonstrates that Johann, at least in the last part of the book, functions as Walser’s mouthpiece. The author seems to be threatened by an omnipresent discourse that focuses

⁴⁵⁵ See article “Geistige Brandstiftung, Bubis wendet sich gegen Walser (FAZ, 13.10.1998),” in Schirrmacher, *Die Walser-Bubis-Debatte*, 34-35.

⁴⁵⁶ To my knowledge, only Amir Eshel has linked Johann’s reaction in the encounter with Wolfgang with the *Friedenspreis* speech, in which Walser expressed his wish for what Eshel calls “einen befreiten Gedenkdiskurs“ (Eshel 357). See Eshel, “Vom eigenen Gewissen”, 346.

⁴⁵⁷ Walser, *Ein springender Brunnen*, 401.

⁴⁵⁸ Walser, “Sonntagsrede,” 14.

primarily on the victims' fate. His critique against the leftist discourse, already voiced in "Händedruck mit Gespenstern" and "Über Deutschland reden," is brought to an extreme here. His unwillingness to play the part he thinks he is expected to play within this discourse—to present an "ethically corrected" memory of his childhood that cuts off the beauty and tenderness he might feel—tips over into angry denial and defense. We can conclude that if Johann displays this attitude at the end of the novel it merely reproduces the author's own conviction.

Safety zone literature

An important part of Walser's critique of the memory discourse of the 1990s is his claim about the subjection of aesthetics to politics. He dedicates large portions of his *Friedenspreis* speech to the argument that writers ought not be treated as "Gewissenswarte der Nation." They should carry responsibility only for themselves, not for the public. He refers to Goethe and Thomas Mann as authors who, from today's perspective, did not have the "politically correct" (and that for Walser means not a leftist) position in the political discourse—Goethe with his visit to the anti-revolutionary camp in France and his retreat to aestheticism during the French Revolution, and Thomas Mann with his anti-democratic writings of 1918—but were nevertheless acknowledged for their literary accomplishments. Those who read *Buddenbrooks* or *Zauberberg*, Walser argues, did not notice Mann's "krassen Meinungswechsel" but recognized "den wirklichen Thomas Mann," the writer Thomas Mann.⁴⁵⁹ Walser continues:

Das möchte man den Meinungssoldaten entgegenhalten, wenn sie mit vorgehaltener Moralpistole, den Schriftsteller in den Meinungsdienst nötigen. Sie haben es immerhin so weit gebracht, daß Schriftsteller nicht mehr gelesen werden müssen sondern nur noch interviewt. Daß die so zustande kommenden

⁴⁵⁹ Ibid., 15.

Platzanweisungen in den Büchern dieser Schriftsteller entweder nicht verifizierbar oder kraß widerlegt werden, ist dem Meinungs- und Gesinnungswart eher egal, weil das Sprachwerk für ihn nicht verwertbar ist.⁴⁶⁰

To summarize Walser's position: In his depiction, the media ("Meinungssoldaten") force the writer into the role of a commentator of political and moral issues without taking his literature into consideration. It is in his literature, however, that the morality of an author, his "actual" feelings and character, becomes most visible. Since the media does not bother with the author's aesthetic work and is only interested in a political categorization ("Platzanweisungen") based on his non-literary works ("Texten, in denen er politisch-moralisch recht haben mußte"), they do not notice that this categorization cannot be verified or is proved wrong in his books. Walser describes the problem a nutshell in 2002 in *Der Spiegel*: "Ästhetik gilt nichts, nur die politische Korrektheitsforderung gilt, und das erlebe ich als ungeheure Bevormundung."⁴⁶¹ And his response to Isenschmidt's criticism that the Holocaust is missing from his novel: "Nie etwas gehört vom Urgesetz des Erzählens: der Perspektivität. Aber selbst wenn, Zeitgeist geht vor Ästhetik."⁴⁶² Hence, I suggest that we read the following statement about Thomas Mann also as a statement about Walser:

Wie er wirklich dachte und empfand, seine Moralität also, teilt sich in seinen Romanen und Erzählungen unwillkürlich und vertrauenswürdiger mit als in den Texten, in denen er politisch-moralisch recht haben mußte. Oder gar das Gefühl hätte, er müsse sich rechtfertigen.⁴⁶³

In fact, I would argue, it is in *Ein springender Brunnen*, the literary counterpart to the *Friedenspreis* speech, that Walser dares to express his political opinions most

⁴⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁶¹ Ironically, Walser makes this statement in an interview—the very medium he had previously criticized as the author's substitute for his literature. Martin Walser and Rudolf Augstein, "Erinnerung kann man nicht befehlen," 162.

⁴⁶² Ibid., 12.

⁴⁶³ Walser, *Sonntagsrede*, 15.

expressively. The vagueness of the literary language allows him to express controversial views he thinks he could otherwise not communicate publicly

Walser even makes this idea explicit in the novel. In the final scene, Johann is wondering if he should tell his girlfriend about a precarious dream he had about her, a dream about which he feels shame. Instead of talking to her he considers *writing* about the dream:

Was er nicht sagen konnte, schreiben? Den Traum aufschreiben, dann Lena den aufgeschriebenen Traum lesen lassen? Eine Art Hoffnung, daß er durch das Aufschreiben den Traum beruhigen könnte. Oder daß die Beschämungskraft des Traums nachließe. Er mußte den Traum aufschreiben. Er mußte sich wehren.

Den Traum aufschreiben, das kam ihm vor, wie etwas, was man nicht tun darf. Aber er tat's. Er mußte es tun. Sich einfach der Sprache anvertrauen.⁴⁶⁴

We can read this passage as a double entendre: “Den Traum aufschreiben”, here used in a literal sense, was the goal formulated at the beginning of the book, where the past was compared to a dream.⁴⁶⁵ Writing the dream thus becomes a metaphor for the entire project, Walser’s autobiography.

As such, this passage names several reasons why at the age of seventy-one Walser finally dealt with his childhood during the Third Reich. The first is his wish for calm (“den Traum beruhigen”), which we can read as the wish to work through a trauma, either the trauma of having been brought up with Nazi ideologies, or in Anne Fuchs’ interpretation the trauma of losing father and brother.⁴⁶⁶ The second reason is the desire

⁴⁶⁴ Walser, *Ein springender Brunnen*, 404.

⁴⁶⁵ “Erzählen, wie es war”, the narrator says there, “ist ein Traumhausbau. Lange genug geträumt. Jetzt bau. Beim Traumhausbau gibt es keine Willensregung, die zu etwas Erwünschtem führt. Man nimmt entgegen. Bleibt bereit.” Walser, *Ein springender Brunnen*, 10.

⁴⁶⁶ Anne Fuchs argues in her article “Towards an Ethics of Remembering” that the discussions surrounding *Ein springender Brunnen* missed one crucial component. She writes: “What none of the critics had commented on is the way the idyllic atmosphere of *Ein springender Brunnen* is fundamentally undercut by the traumatic experience of loss: the protagonist Johann loses his beloved father and later his much admired brother who signs up for the Wehrmacht shortly before the war’s end and becomes cannon fodder on the collapsing Eastern front. With his story Walser implied that, as a representative of the generation that grew

“daß die Beschämungskraft des Traums nachließe.” The dilemma of feeling innocent yet somehow involved in the Nazi period—the dilemma of the Hitler Youth generation—obviously still wakes a feeling shame for the author. But the third reason reveals the strong sense of resistance that he feels when dealing with this childhood memories. Johann wants to write down the dream because: “Er mußte sich wehren.”⁴⁶⁷ From my perspective this motivation is the strongest: The name of the family’s pub, *Restauration*, accurately describes the motto of this novel: Walser wants to restore his childhood and with it, the village of Wasserburg with its dialect, its solidarity and its close-knit community⁴⁶⁸. A nostalgic depiction of the Nazi years? Walser predicts that such a project will raise suspicions: “Den Traum aufschreiben, das kam ihm vor, wie etwas, was man nicht tun darf. Aber er tat’s. Er mußte es tun.”⁴⁶⁹

A concluding assessment of Walser’s autobiography and its narrative set-up must take into account all three motivations the author names in this passage: trauma, shame, and protest. The question that this text raises for me is whether Walser’s protest is necessary. The novel was celebrated in the *feuilleton*, and only a few scholars have made

up during the Nazi period, he too has the inalienable right to record a painful loss as just that: a wound that has not healed.” Anne Fuchs, “Towards an Ethics of Remembering: The Walser-Bubis Debate and the Other of Discourse,” *The German Quarterly* 75.3 (Summer 2002): 235-46, 243-44.

⁴⁶⁷ See last block quote. Walser, *Ein springender Brunnen*, 404.

⁴⁶⁸ The conservative and almost nostalgic approach to the past becomes clear also in the afterword to the novel, in which Walser speaks about a number of dialect words that have disappeared ever since his childhood. For Reinhart Baumgart, the sense of community celebrated in Walser’s childhood novel changes the perspective of the rest of the author’s work. Baumgart writes: “Erst mit diesem Werk ist klargeworden, daß die unendliche Romanserie von Halbzeit bis hin zu Ohne einander und Finks Krieg immer nur von dieser Ohneeinander-, ja Gegeneinander-Welt erzählt, dem wüsten Antipodenreich zu allen Walserschen Visionen von Miteinander, Solidarität, Volk. Jetzt erst, in seinem Kindheitsmuster, wagt er die Gegenprobe. Ausgerechnet in den Jahren zwischen 1933 und 1945 entdeckt er sein Wasserburg als einen Chor von Stimmen, eine Einheit trotz aller Dissonanzen. Ein gewaltiges Idyll, das Dorf als Welt und Inbild einer Gemeinschaft. Aber zugleich ein Abschiedsbild, denn Schritt um Schritt sieht der Roman diesen Kosmos untergehen in Diktatur und Krieg.” See Reinhard Baumgart, “Sich selbst und allen unbequem. Der Weg des Martin Walser als ‘geistiger Brandstifter,’” in Schirmmacher, *Die Walser-Bubis-Debatte*, 389-94, 393.

⁴⁶⁹ Walser, *Ein springender Brunnen*, 404.

the effort of discussing the moral implications of a depiction of the Nazi era through the perspective of a child.. At least parts of Walser's novel show that such a narrative constellation can be revealing and productive. The child figure with its different perspective on the world can subvert our common views of the Nazi period and illuminate aspects that were not visible before. A literary work is not a history book, after all. As readers we never expect to be offered a complete historical account. The child narrative in *Ein springender Brunnen* only becomes problematic when Walser sets up his own experience of the Nazi era in competition with the memory of the Holocaust. It is problematic when the German-Jewish encounter that Walser stages in the third part seems to sanctify a lack of sympathy for the fate of the Jewish victims because Johann's "Angst" is greater than his sensitivity for Wolfgang's experiences. Why does Walser present his nostalgia for "ein Dorf, das es nicht mehr gibt"⁴⁷⁰ in a mode of protest? Perhaps my perspective results from a shift in the memory discourse. But I wonder whether there were as many restrictions in the memory discourse as Walser assumed there would be. Had the debates about Germans as victims not at least brought the recognition that the memory of the victims and the memory of the perpetrators are not mutually exclusive? From today's perspective, one cannot help but to see Walser tilting at windmills in his attempt to make this beautiful poetic text a provocative piece of political writing.

⁴⁷⁰ Ibid., 121.

3. Innocence and Guilt in Günter Grass' *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel*

The scandal

Günter Grass' autobiographical novel *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel* became a famous and much discussed text even before its publication. On August 11 2006, the *Deutsche Presseagentur* sent out the following report:

Hamburg (dpa) – Der Literaturnobelpreisträger Günter Grass war nach eigenen Worten im Zweiten Weltkrieg Mitglied der Waffen-SS. Darüber berichtet der Schriftsteller erstmals in seiner im September erscheinenden Autobiografie. Er sei kurz vor Kriegsende zur Waffen-SS einberufen worden. In einem Gespräch mit der Frankfurter Allgemeinen Zeitung (Samstagsausgabe) bestätigte er diesen Sachverhalt.⁴⁷¹

Indeed, in the interview with the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* printed one day later, Grass confirmed that he had decided to include in his soon-to-be-published autobiography what he had long kept a secret: He had always claimed that he had spent the last months of the war as a *Flakhelfer*, like many young men his age. Now, he admitted that at the age of seventeen he had served as a drafted member of the Waffen-SS.

The confession caused a great uproar and occupied large parts of the German media for weeks. Every public figure, whether literary critic, politician, historian or writer, seemed eager to comment on Grass' revelation. While some acknowledged his courage in finally telling the true version of his biography, the majority of critics harshly bemoaned the belatedness of his confession. Some even demanded, to no avail, that the author's most prestigious award, the Nobel Prize for literature, be revoked. With all this publicity, Grass's publisher, the Steidl Verlag, decided to publish the novel *Beim Häuten*

⁴⁷¹ For this quotation and the following overview of the course of the debate, see passage "Kleine Chronologie" in *Ein Buch, ein Bekenntnis: Die Debatte um Günter Grass' "Beim Häuten der Zwiebel,"* ed. Martin Kölbl (Göttingen: Steidl 2007), 7-17, 9.

der Zwiebel two weeks before its intended publication date. And when the book appeared in the bookstores on August 15th in 2006, it was in such great demand that the publishing house immediately ordered the printing of a second edition, which was delivered only a few days later. By September 1st, the date Grass' autobiography was originally to be published, the book had already been number one on the bestseller lists, and the debate was still in full swing.⁴⁷²

However, those readers who expected *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel* to reveal spectacular details about Grass' time in the SS, perhaps even a possible implication in Nazi crimes, must have been disappointed. Two chapters dealing with this period of the author's life take up only a small portion of the book—about a fifth of the roughly 500-page autobiography—and Grass stresses that he never fired a single shot in combat. The biographical facts explaining how he wound up in the SS can be summarized in less than a paragraph: What emerges is the story of an ordinary young German, who in the midst of puberty, was eager to drop out of school and leave his petty-bourgeois background behind in order to fight for the *Führer*. As a fifteen-year-old, Grass initially volunteered only for the submarine fleet of the *Wehrmacht*. When he received his conscription order about two years later (shortly before his seventeenth birthday), it was not for the navy and not even for the *Wehrmacht*. He was ordered to serve as a *Panzerschütze* in the tank division *Jörg von Frundsberg*, part of the Waffen-SS, where he remained until being wounded on April 20th in 1945, shortly before Germany's surrender.⁴⁷³

⁴⁷² Whereas for this present chapter, I provide only this short overview of the debate in order to move on to the discussion of the text itself, an in-depth discussion of the debate can be found in chapter 4.

⁴⁷³ See chapters "Er hieß Wirtunsowasnicht" and "Wie ich das Fürchten lernte" in Grass, *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel*.

In her essay “‘Ehrlich, du lügst wie gedruckt’: Günter Grass’s Autobiographical Confession and the Changing Territory of Germany’s Memory Culture”, Anne Fuchs divides *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel* into three different parts: The first deals with Grass’ adolescent experience of Nazi Germany from 1939 until 1945; the second, modelled on Grimmelshausen’s *Simplicissimus*, portrays Grass’ “vagabond-like existence in search of food, women and entertainment”⁴⁷⁴ in the immediate post-war period; and the third focuses on the decade from 1949 until 1959, tracing Grass’ development as a sculptor in Düsseldorf and his early beginnings as a writer. Fuchs points out that each part is written in a different mode: while the last part reads like a cultural history of Germany in the fifties and the narrative in the second part mimics the style of a picaresque novel, the first part is presented as a “confessional account of Grass’s youthful errors.”⁴⁷⁵

It is worth noticing that Grass dedicates the larger part of his autobiography to the depiction of the years between the end of the war roughly until the publication of his first novel *Die Blechtrommel* in 1959. This depiction underpins my earlier argument that intellectuals of the Hitler Youth generation were widely absent from the cultural debates of the forties and fifties. Grass gives a vivid and—I believe—representative account of how he struggled with rather practical matters of life during this time period. Barely an adult in 1945, he had to find a way to make a living and to continue his education—and was also busy exploring the other sex. He speaks of his “three hungers”: the actual hunger during the months immediately following the war, the second hunger, an insatiable hunger for sexual relations, and a little later a third type, his hunger for art.⁴⁷⁶

⁴⁷⁴ 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*, 60.2 (2007): 261-75, 273.

⁴⁷⁵ Fuchs, “Ehrlich, du lügst wie gedruckt,” 267.

⁴⁷⁶ See Grass, *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel* 309.

Since this chapter focuses on the representation of childhood and youth in Hitler Youth autobiographies, I will not deal with Grass's depiction of the post-war years, but instead discuss only the first part of *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel*, that part of his autobiography which deals with the author's adolescence from 1939 until 1945. In my discussion of this first part, I will not focus on the SS-episode itself but rather ask in general how Grass approaches his younger self and whether he excuses his joining the Waffen-SS with his young age. It will become clear that although from the very beginning Grass puts great efforts into depicting his fascination with the Nazi movement and his membership in the Waffen-SS *precisely not* as youthful follies, he nevertheless uses narrative strategies which continually undercut this stance. The reader faces a constant back-and-forth between the evocation and the denial of childhood innocence.

Oskar and Günter

Perhaps the most curious aspect about Grass' childhood autobiography is that he does not actually write about his childhood proper. As opposed to both Walser and Wolf, both of whom include the pre-war years before Hitler's rise to power, *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel* begins in 1939 with the beginning of the war, when Grass is already twelve. Grass implies on the first pages of *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel* that he has already treated his childhood, including this earlier period, in his very first novel *Die Blechtrommel*, published in 1959. Why then, he asks in an important passage, did he have to write another book on his childhood and adolescence?

Warum überhaupt soll Kindheit und deren so unverrückbar datiertes Ende erinnert werden, wenn alles, was mir ab den ersten und seit den zweiten Zähnen widerfuhr, längst samt Schulbeginn, Murmelspiel und verschorften Knien, den frühesten Beichtgeheimnissen und der späteren Glaubenspein zu Zettelkram wurde, der seitdem einer Person anhängt, die, kaum zu Papier gebracht, nicht wachsen wollte, Glas in jeder Gebrauchsform zersang, zwei hölzerne Stöcke zur

Hand hatte und sich dank ihrer Blechtrommel einen Namen machte, der fortan zitierbar zwischen Buchdeckeln existierte und in weißnichtwieviel Sprachen unsterblich sein will?⁴⁷⁷

Why does Oskar Matzerath, the “Person” to which Grass alludes in this passage, not suffice as a representative of the author’s Danzig childhood, if Grass has already incorporated “alles, was mir ab den ersten und seit den zweiten Zähnen widerfuhr” in this literary figure? He gives the answer himself. Because he omitted a part of his biography in this early novel that he must now, after all these years, include after all:

Weil dies und auch das nachgetragen werden muß. Weil vorlaut auffallend etwas fehlen könnte. Weil wer wann in den Brunnen gefallen ist: meine erst danach überdeckelten Löcher, mein nicht zu bremsendes Wachstum, mein Sprachverkehr mit verlorenen Gegenständen. Und auch dieser Grund sei genannt: weil ich das letzte Wort haben will.⁴⁷⁸

Grass wants to have the last word. Whether we read this as a self-ironic statement that characterizes the always outspoken author, or an expression of the wish to confess before his death, Grass explains at the beginning of the book that Oskar, while in some ways representing his childhood, was only in part an autobiographical figure.

Like the character Zweifel in Grass’s *Tagebuch einer Schnecke*, Oskar thus becomes visible as another “retrospektive Wunschfigur” of the author, to borrow Sebald’s term again.⁴⁷⁹ Not only because he does not become a member of the Waffen-SS but mainly because Grass depicts him as someone who does not have to deal with a childhood during the Nazi era and the difficult moral implications about guilt and innocence that follow from it. For Oskar is not really a child. He is lucid, reflexive and crafty from the moment of his birth, as he himself tells us:

⁴⁷⁷ Ibid., 8.

⁴⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁷⁹ See my discussion of this term in Chapter 2. While Sebald uses it critically in his critique of post-war authors, I am using it in a neutral sense here. See W. G. Sebald, “Konstruktionen der Trauer. Günter Grass und Wolfgang Hildesheimer,” In *Campo Santo* (Munich: Hanser, 2003), 101-27, 113.

Ich gehörte zu den hellhörigen Säuglingen, deren geistige Entwicklung schon bei der Geburt abgeschlossen ist und sich fortan nur noch bestätigen muß. So unbeeinflußbar ich als Embryo nur auf mich gehört und mich im Fruchtwasser spiegelnd geachtet hatte, so kritisch lauchste ich den ersten spontanen Äußerungen der Eltern unter den Glühbirnen. Mein Ohr war hellwach. Wenn es auch klein, geknickt, verklebt und allenfalls niedlich zu benennen war, bewahrte es dennoch jede jener für mich fortan so wichtigen, weil als erste Eindrücke gebotenen Parolen. Noch mehr: Was ich mit dem Ohr einfing, bewertete ich sogleich mit winzigstem Hirn und beschloß, nachdem ich alles Gehörte genug bedacht hatte, dieses und jenes zu tun, anderes gewiß zu lassen.⁴⁸⁰

Only a few seconds after his birth, Grass thus presents Oskar as a critical observer, who cannot only perceive his environment but also evaluate it. He is able to reflect upon what he hears and sees, and well capable, “dieses und jenes zu tun, anderes gewiß zu lassen.”

Oskar soon understands that his childlike appearance puts him in an advantageous position, as the adults around him constantly underestimate his critical faculties. He decides to remain in the position of a child by refusing to grow. At the age of three, he makes the decision “einen Punkt zu machen, so zu verbleiben [...]”; ich blieb der Dreijährige, der Gnom, der Däumling, [...] um Unterscheidungen wie großer und kleiner Katechismus enthoben zu sein, um nicht *als einzweundsiebzig großer, sogenannter Erwachsener* einem Mann, der sich [...] mein Vater nannte, ausgeliefert und [s]einem Geschäft verpflichtet zu sein.”⁴⁸¹ Thus, Oskar recognizes that by remaining a child, he can avoid responsibility.

Grass himself could not. While Oskar, the author’s fantasy-fictional alter ego, refused to grow up and to grow into the Nazi society, Grass emphasizes in *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel* that his own process of growing up was “kaum zu bremsen:” “Ich aber wuchs und wuchs,”⁴⁸² he writes. “Schon mit sechzehn, als ich zum Arbeitsdienst kam,

⁴⁸⁰ Günter Grass, *Die Blechtrommel*. (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag), 1993, 52.

⁴⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 71 (my emphasis).

⁴⁸² *Ibid.*

galt ich als ausgewachsen. Oder maß ich erst dann endgültig *einen Meter und zweiundsiebzig Zentimeter*, als ich Soldat wurde und nur mit Glück oder aus Zufall das Kriegsende überlebte?“⁴⁸³ The actual Günter Grass, the author emphasizes here, grew up and, not having Oskar’s critical capacities, became part of the Nazi’s institutions, the Hitler Youth, the *Arbeitsdienst*, the Wehrmacht, and the Waffen-SS. But does he depict this development as the result of being a naïve and young child?

The end of childhood innocence

In his review of *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel*, Andreas Huyssen writes that “Grass comes down hard and unsentimentally on his inability as a young man to read the signs of the times.”⁴⁸⁴ Indeed, Sigrid Weigel’s critique that the Hitler Youth generation presents itself as innocent witnesses of the Nazi past, while true for Walser, does not seem to be justified in Grass’ case. Nothing becomes clearer in this book than Grass’s willingness *not* to use his childhood in an exculpatory way.

Already in the first two paragraphs of the novel, Grass emphasizes that he is tempted to write evasively about himself in the third-person and represent himself as a little boy sitting on his mother’s lap. However, that he will not do so, becomes clear in his statement that the beginning of the war meant the end of childhood innocence:

Ob heute oder vor Jahren, lockend bleibt die Versuchung, sich in dritter Person zu verkappen: Als er annähernd zwölf zählte, doch immer noch liebend gern auf Mutters Schoß saß, begann und endete etwas. Aber läßt sich, was anfang, was auslief, so genau auf den Punkt bringen? Was mich betrifft, schon. Auf engem Raum wurde meine Kindheit beendet, als dort, wo ich aufwuchs, an verschiedenen Stellen zeitgleich der Krieg ausbrach. [...] [M]it ehernen Worten

⁴⁸³ Grass, *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel*, 8 (my emphasis). Note the intertextual reference based on the given height in both passages.

⁴⁸⁴ Andreas Huyssen, “I’m Not the Man I Used to Be. Günter Grass’ *Peeling the Onion*,” *The Nation*, August 13 (2007): 25-28, 26.

[from the radio] wurde in einer Parterrewohnung, die Teil eines dreistöckigen Mietshauses im Langfuhrer Labesweg war, das Ende meiner Kinderjahre ausgerufen.⁴⁸⁵

However, he admits that he used his status as a child to play dumb when Nazi repression and violence increased around him. He did not ask questions when his Polish uncle was shot by the Germans during the invasion of Poland, nor when his classmate Heinrich disappeared after Heinrich's anti-fascist father had been arrested by the *Gestapo* and his mother had committed suicide. Would he have been more aware of the Nazi regime's oppressive nature if his father had, like Wolfgang Heinrich's father, been opposed to it instead of joining the Nazi party early on? Grass brushes off these apologetic thoughts:

Hätten wir damals... Wären wir damals...

Aber ich habe nicht, bin nicht. Der Onkel war weg, der Schulfreund blieb weg. Doch überdeutlich ist jener Junge, dem ich auf der Spur zu bleiben habe, dort aufzufinden, wo Ungeheuerliches geschah: knapp ein Jahr vor Kriegsbeginn. Gewalt, hell ausgeleuchtet bei Tageslicht.

Als bald nach meinem elften Geburtstag in Danzig die Synagogen brannten und Schaufenster in Scherben fielen, war ich zwar untätig, doch als neugieriger Zuschauer dabei [...]⁴⁸⁶

Trying to reconstruct what he felt when he watched SA men set the Danzig synagogues on fire during the so-called "Reichskristallnacht" in November 1938, Grass writes he was probably slightly surprised, perhaps even excited, but certainly oblivious to the injustice that happened before his eyes. He writes: "So beflissen ich im Laub meiner Erinnerungen stochere, nichts findet sich, das mir günstig wäre. Offenbar haben keine Zweifel meine Kinderjahre getrübt. Vielmehr machte ich, leicht zu gewinnen, bei allem mit, was der Alltag, der sich aufgeregt aufregend als ‚Neue Zeit‘ ausgab, zu bieten hatte."⁴⁸⁷

⁴⁸⁵ Grass, *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel*, 7.

⁴⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁴⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

Grass thus portrays himself as the classic bystander, whose failure to recognize and then to act upon discrimination, persecution and violence constitutes his moral guilt. He emphasizes that he never denounced anyone, neither the neighbor who told jokes about Göring, nor the history teacher who expressed his doubts about the propagated “Endsieg”. But when Monsignore Stachnik, a priest who taught Latin at his high school, disappeared and there were rumours that he was brought to the Stutthof concentration camp, he once more remained a silent observer, uncritical enough not to inquire further into the matter.⁴⁸⁸

During his training for his military service as a *Flakhelfer*, he displayed the same attitude towards another fifteen-year-old boy in his unit. This boy, probably a member of the Jehovah’s Witnesses, refused to hold or even touch a weapon, always using the same explanation: “Wir tun so was nicht.” The boy, soon called “Wirtunsowasnicht”, kept up his resistance and eventually disappeared. The young Grass felt

wenn nicht froh, dann erleichtert seitdem der Junge verschwunden war. Der Anflug von Zweifel an allem, was sich als Glaube felsenfest gab, flaute ab. Und die Windstille in meinem Kopf wird wohl keinem Gedanken erlaubt haben, flügge zu werden. Nur Stumpfsinn machte sich in ihm breit.⁴⁸⁹

Even though the young Grass suspected that “Wirtunsowasnicht” was brought to Stutthof, he did not doubt the legitimacy of this action.

Grass shakes his head about the obliviousness of his younger self, also with regard to his recruitment for the Waffen-SS. He cannot remember his exact reaction to receiving the conscription order. But he speculates that he must have felt excited to join the *SS*, the *Führer*’s elite soldiers, who—such was their image—were ordered to help out

⁴⁸⁸ Grass asserts that his silence about the Monsignore’s disappearance must have felt burden enough so that he felt the need to build a form of ‘memorial’ for him him by making him a figure in his novel *Der Butt*. See *ibid.*, 45-46.

⁴⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 102-103.

the *Wehrmacht* in particularly dangerous combat situations and were comprised of volunteers from several European countries in order to collectively save “das Abendland vor der bolschewistischen Flut.”⁴⁹⁰

In the chapter “Wie ich das Fürchten gelernt habe”, Grass describes the short time period he spent in his Waffen-SS division: In one of the very few contacts with ‘the enemy’, he soils his pants out of fear. Shortly before the end of the war, the eighteen-year-old Grass is injured. Shortly after the end of the war, he runs away from his division as the others are taken prisoners. He trades his *SS* uniform for a *Wehrmacht* one, winds up first in a field hospital to have his injury treated and later in an American POW camp.

Grass emphasizes that he was never involved in any war crimes, that he did not even know about their existence, that he never used his weapon other than for training purposes, and that he was part of the *SS*-division only for a few months. “Also Ausreden genug”⁴⁹¹ he states. But he continues:

Und doch habe ich mich über Jahrzehnte hinweg geweigert, mir das Wort und den Doppelbuchstaben einzugestehen. Was ich mit dem dummen Stolz meiner jungen Jahre hingenommen hatte, wollte ich mir nach dem Krieg aus nachwachsender Scham verschweigen. Doch die Last blieb, und niemand konnte sie erleichtern.

Zwar war während der Ausbildung zum Panzerschützen, die mich den Herbst und Winter lang abstumpfte, nichts von jenen Kriegsverbrechen zu hören, die später ans Licht kamen, aber behauptete Unwissenheit konnte meine Einsicht, einem System eingefügt gewesen zu sein, das die Vernichtung von Millionen Menschen geplant, organisiert und vollzogen hatte, nicht verschleiern. Selbst wenn mir tätige Mitschuld auszureden war, blieb ein bis heute nicht abgetragener Rest, der allzu häufig Mitverantwortung genannt wird. Damit zu leben ist für die restlichen Jahre gewiß.⁴⁹²

Despite the fact that he did not carry any “tätige Mitschuld” and came to the *SS* as an oblivious and naive seventeen-year-old not understanding the political situation, Grass

⁴⁹⁰ Ibid., 127.

⁴⁹¹ Ibid., 127.

⁴⁹² Ibid.

says that he has always felt great responsibility for having been part of a system that organized and executed the Holocaust.

But it seems as though he blames himself even more for the conformist behavior towards the persecution that took place right in front of his eyes. As Anne Fuchs has pointed out, the episodes about the killing of his Polish uncle, the disappearance of Wolfgang Heinrich's father, his witnessing the "Reichskristallnacht" and especially the episodes about Monsignore Stachnik and Wirtunsowasnicht "exemplify the idea of resistance to the system, demonstrating that alternative non-conformist behavior would have been possible."⁴⁹³

With this admission of guilt, Grass explicitly distinguishes himself from other members of his generation, who use their age or their obliviousness to free themselves from any involvement with the Nazi period. He dissociates himself from those—those like Walser, one could add—he ironically calls "Minderbelastete,"⁴⁹⁴ who after the war simply presented themselves as clueless and indoctrinated victims of the Nazi regime:

Ihnen war außer Pflichterfüllung nichts nachzuweisen. In Chorstärke sangen sie 'Kein schöner Land in dieser Zeit...' Und als Verführte und Verblendete reihten sie mildernde Umstände, stellten sich ahnungslos und sprachen einander ein Höchstmaß an Unwissenheit zu.⁴⁹⁵

He admits that he sometimes feels tempted to use the same defense strategies, most importantly he would like to use the excuse that he did not learn about the enormity of Nazi crimes until after the war. But his moral guilt, he stresses once more, consists in the fact that he experienced the deportation of people he knew first-hand, but nevertheless, "trotz überprüfbarer Fassadenrisse, zunehmender Flüsterparolen und des überall, nun

⁴⁹³ Fuchs, "Ehrlich, du lügst wie gedruckt," 269.

⁴⁹⁴ Grass, *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel*, 106.

⁴⁹⁵ Ibid.

auch in Frankreich rückgängigen Frontverlaufs,” his belief in the *Führer* remained entirely “unbeschadet.”⁴⁹⁶ The *mea culpa* of a member of the Hitler Youth could not be more unsparing than in the following:

[D]as Belasten, Einstufen und Abstempeln kann ich selber besorgen. Ich war ja als Hitlerjunge ein Jungnazi. Gläubig bis zum Schluß. Nicht gerade fanatisch vorneweg, aber mit reflexhaften unverrücktem Blick auf die Fahne, von der es hieß, sie sei ‚mehr als der Tod‘, blieb ich in Reih und Glied, geübt im Gleichschritt. Kein Zweifel kränkte den Glauben, nichts Subversives, etwa die heimliche Weitergabe von Flugblättern, kann mich entlasten. Kein Göringwitz machte mich verdächtig. Vielmehr sah ich das Vaterland bedroht, weil von Feinden umringt. [...] Meine Kritik richtete sich allenfalls gegen lokale Parteibonzen, sogenannte Goldfasane, die sich feige vorm Dienst an der Front drückten, uns nach Aufmärschen vor Tribünen mit öden Reden langweilten und dabei ständig den heiligen Namen des Führers mißbrauchten, an den wir glaubten, nein, an den ich aus ungetrübter Fraglosigkeit so lange glaube, bis alles [...] in Scherben fiel. [...]

So sehe ich mich im Rückspiegel. [...] Um den Jungen und also mich zu entlassen, kann nicht einmal gesagt werden: Man hat uns verführt! Nein, wir haben uns, ich habe mich verführen lassen.⁴⁹⁷

Nothing, Grass argues, can exonerate him from his naive belief in Hitler and his opportunist behavior. He unequivocally stresses that he was not lured into his belief in National Socialism—which would be an obvious apologetic argument—but that he let himself be lured and thus played an active part in this process.

Peeling the onion

Already from this brief presentation of the text it becomes clear that Grass’s main focal point is not, like in Walser’s case, the depiction of a childhood and youth during the Nazi era, but rather the display of the author’s self-criticism today. Whereas Walser creates the illusion of reconstructing the past in the greatest immediacy possible seemingly *without* the interference of the author, Grass makes his present view of his adolescence the center

⁴⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁷ Ibid., 43-44.

of his autobiography. The metaphor of the onion epitomizes this emphasis on the process of remembering. Actively involved in the process of regarding his past, the author peels layer after layer of the onion, and every new layer faces him with new and more oblique memories that he needs to decipher:

Wenn ihr mit Fragen zugesetzt wird, gleicht die Erinnerung einer Zwiebel, die gehäutet sein möchte, damit freigelegt werden kann, was Buchstab nach Buchstab ablesbar steht: selten eindeutig, oft in Spiegelschrift oder sonstwie verrätselt. Unter der ersten, noch trocken knisternden Haut findet sich die nächste, die, kaum gelöst, feucht eine feuchte dritte freigibt, unter der die vierte, fünfte, warten und flüstern. Und jede weitere schwitzt zu lange gemiedene Wörter aus, auch schnörkelige Zeichen, als habe sich ein Geheimniskrämer von jung an, als die Zwiebel noch keimte, verschlüsseln wollen.⁴⁹⁸

Grass describes the task of deciphering the onion's "text" as difficult. His memories, he implies, are unreliable and ambiguous, and not everything in his autobiography must be taken for the truth. "Dichtung and Wahrheit", Grass emphasizes, go hand in hand in this text:

Schon wird Ehrgeiz geweckt: dieses Gekrakel soll entziffert, jener Code geknackt werden. Schon ist widerlegt, was jeweils auf Wahrheit bestehen will, denn oft gibt die Lüge oder deren kleine Schwester, die Schummelei, den haltbarsten Teil der Erinnerung ab; niedergeschrieben klingt sie glaubhaft und prahlt mit Einzelheiten, die als fotogenau zu gelten haben [...].

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. Was vor und nach dem Ende meiner Kindheit geschah, klopft mit Tatsachen an und verlief schlimmer als gewollt, will mal so, mal so erzählt werden und verführt zu Lügengeschichten.⁴⁹⁹

But while Grass indicates here that the memories of his adolescence might not be accurate in every instance and that his autobiography might even contain some

⁴⁹⁸ Ibid., 9.

⁴⁹⁹ Ibid., 9.

“Lügendgeschichten”,⁵⁰⁰ he emphasizes that the *process* of remembering is a truthful enterprise. Only *during* the act of peeling, “Beim Häuten der Zwiebel”, does the onion speak the truth.

The text thus redirects the reader’s attention from the events during Grass’ adolescence to the way in which the autobiographer approaches this past in the present. The reader who peels the onion with Grass and follows him on his way through the multiple layers of his memory, from the dry and cracked older skins outside of the onion to the younger, moister and tear-inducing skins on the inside, can experience the true and authentic Grass.⁵⁰¹

Self-accusation and self-exoneration

While *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel* certainly foregrounds Grass’ emphatic self-accusation, a number of textual strategies nonetheless work in the author’s defense. The absolute rejection of the idea of childhood innocence, for example, is counterbalanced by several references reminding the reader that Grass was, in fact, ‘only a child’: The onion, at one point, whispers to Grass: “du bist doch fein raus, warst nur ein dummer Junge, hast nichts Schlimmes getan.”⁵⁰² His belief in Adolf Hitler, he writes at another point, “fiel kinderleicht.”⁵⁰³ And he calls his trip from Danzig to Dresden, where he joined the Waffen-SS division Jörg von Frundsberg “Kinderlandverschickung.”⁵⁰⁴ Even if he

⁵⁰⁰ This is evident for example in the passages, in which Grass describes his encounters with the young Joseph Ratzinger—today Pope Benedikt XVI—in an American POW camp. See Grass, *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel*, 191-92, 217-18 and 223-24.

⁵⁰¹ As Huyssen has pointed out, the onion presents another intertextual reference to the chapter “Der Zwiebelkeller” in *Die Blechtrommel* where Grass presents the onion as a tool used to induce tears in a society which otherwise refused to mourn the traumatic experiences of the Nazi past. See Huyssen 25.

⁵⁰² Grass, *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel*, 44

⁵⁰³ *Ibid.*, 106.

⁵⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 122.

ultimately contradicts the onion, even if the use of the word “kinderleicht” is clearly ironic and even if he writes that of course his “zweite Reise in den Westen wäre nur aus zynischer Perspektive als Kinderlandverschickung zu verstehen gewesen,”⁵⁰⁵ these passages serve as reminders of his young age.

That his intended self-accusation is accompanied by a desire for self-exoneration becomes very clear in two crucial passages, in which Grass stages encounters between himself as autobiographer and his teenage self. While he acknowledges that his young age cannot exonerate him from all responsibility, he writes that he cannot retire to a position either, from which he interrogates and judges his younger self as though he felt no sympathy for the boy he used to be at all. This conflicted relationship to his youth is epitomized in the following, in which each Grass persona represents a different attitude towards the past; the elderly Grass judges without mercy, while the young one finds excuses:

Sobald ich mir den Jungen von einst, der ich als Dreizehnjähriger gewesen bin, herbeizitiere, ihn streng ins Verhör nehme und die Verlockung spüre, ihn zu richten, womöglich wie einen Fremden, dessen Nöte mich kaltlassen, abzuurteilen, sehe ich einen mittelgroßen Bengel in kurzen Hosen und Kniestrümpfen, der ständig grimassiert. Er weicht mir aus, will nicht beurteilt, verurteilt werden. Er flüchtet auf Mutters Schoß. Er ruft: ‚Ich war doch ein Kind nur, nur ein Kind...‘⁵⁰⁶

The second passage depicts the autobiographer’s inner conflict even more clearly. Grass writes that he feels shame and disgrace towards his uncritical and naive belief in the Nazis. But at the same time he emphasizes that he can only express these feelings in retrospect (“im Nachholverfahren”), since as a the twelve-year-old he was not aware of

⁵⁰⁵ His first trip from Danzig to the West being the actual “Kinderlandverschickung”, a trip to the Rhineland in either 1936 or 1937. Ibid., 121.

⁵⁰⁶ Ibid., 37 (my emphasis).

any wrongdoings. Grass admits that he thus probably overtaxes his younger self when he interrogates him about the past:

Also schreibe ich über die Schande und die ihr nachhinkende Scham. Selten genutzte Wörter, gesetzt im Nachholverfahren, derweil mein mal nachsichtiger, dann wieder strenger Blick auf einen Jungen gerichtet bleibt, der kniefreie Hosen trägt, allem, was sich verborgen hält, hinterdreinschnüffelt und dennoch versäumt hat, „warum“ zu sagen.

Und während der Zwölfjährige noch peinlich befragt und dabei gewiß von mir überfordert wird, wäge ich in immer schneller schwindender Gegenwart jeden Treppenabsatz, atme hörbar, höre mich husten und lebe so heiter es geht auf den Tod zu.⁵⁰⁷

His view of his former self, he writes in this programmatic passage, will thus be lenient and critical at the same time (“mal nachsichtiger, dann wieder strenger”).

What becomes most apparent from the juxtaposition of the young boy in shorts and the almost eighty-year-old author, who is out of breath, coughs, feels physically weak and is approaching death, is the great distance Grass feels towards his youth. This distance is a major theme throughout the book, apparent for example in the many questions in the text, which do not only point at the autobiographer’s porous memory but also signal his estrangement with his own thoughts and feeling, especially during the National Socialist period.⁵⁰⁸

Grass presents this distance as yet another possible form of exoneration. This is why in the programmatic opening paragraph of the book, along with rejecting the idea of childhood innocence, he pleads to resist the temptation to write about himself in the third person and hence to distance himself from his past. At a later point, he reiterates this idea

⁵⁰⁷ Ibid., 16-17 (my emphasis).

⁵⁰⁸ Grass wonders for example about his motives for volunteering for the military at the age of fifteen. He writes: “Ist es der Andrang überbordender Gefühlsströme gewesen, die Lust, eigenmächtig zu handeln, der Wille, übereilt erwachsen, ein Mann unter Männern zu sein?” Ibid., 82.

that the third-person narrative would be a way to speak more abstractly about his Nazi youth and to avoid personalisation of and identification with it:

Weil aber so viele geschwiegen haben, bleibt die Versuchung groß, ganz und gar vom eigenen Versagen abzusehen, ersatzweise die allgemeine Schuld einzuklagen oder nur uneigentlich in dritter Person von sich zu sprechen: Er war, hat, sagte, er schwieg...⁵⁰⁹

Grass explicitly rejects the idea of speaking about himself “nur uneigentlich in dritter Person” (as he has done for decades, one could add, in his fictional works). However, just as he alludes to his young age several times in the text despite the various affirmations that childhood is not an excuse, does not absolve him, for innocence, there is a distinct marker in the text with which Grass constantly distances himself from his youth: a continuous shift from a first-person to a third-person narrative.

In the chapters about the time period between 1939 and 1945, Grass often refers to himself as “jener Junge, der anscheinend ich war,”⁵¹⁰ “der Sohn,”⁵¹¹ “der Junge meines Namens,”⁵¹² “jener Junge, dem ich auf der Spur zu bleiben habe,”⁵¹³ “der grimassierende Junge,”⁵¹⁴ “der maßlose Junge, der als Entwurf meiner selbst weiter zu entdecken ist,”⁵¹⁵ “der Junge mit der vorstehenden Unterlippe,”⁵¹⁶ “mein uniformiertes Selbst,”⁵¹⁷ or simply as the twelve-year-old, the thirteen-year old, the fourteen-year-old, etc. Ostensibly more comfortable identifying with his younger self later on, Grass uses these self-depicting phrases less frequently in the chapters set after the war and writes almost entirely from

⁵⁰⁹ Ibid., 36.

⁵¹⁰ Ibid., 10.

⁵¹¹ Ibid., 12.

⁵¹² Ibid., 27.

⁵¹³ Ibid., 26.

⁵¹⁴ Ibid., 39.

⁵¹⁵ Ibid., 43.

⁵¹⁶ Ibid., 56.

⁵¹⁷ Ibid., 106

the first-person-perspective.⁵¹⁸ A certain sense of estrangement, however, remains. At some point mid-way through the book he stresses that despite having more and more practice in using the “I”, as he calls it, his former “I” remains foreign to him:

Sobald ich, wie mittlerweile geübt, über alle Bedenken hinweg Ich sage, also meinen Zustand vor rund sechzig Jahren nachzuzeichnen versuche, ist mir mein damaliges Ich zwar nicht ganz und gar fremd, doch abhanden gekommen und entrückt wie ein entfernter Verwandter.⁵¹⁹

This passage as well as the various self-descriptive phrases in the third person dissociate the elderly author from the *Hitlerjunge*, *Flakhelfer* and member of the SS Günter Grass.

Self-accusation as strategy?

Thus, although Grass stresses that he does *not* want to exonerate himself by emphasizing how young he was, he continually hints at his young age. And although he assures us that he does *not* want to relate to his younger self from the safe distance of a third-person perspective, he switches back and forth between first and third person in the first part of his novel. So, Grass’s confessional narrative ultimately becomes visible, in Anne Fuchs’ words, as “a dialectical process in which each act of self-accusation triggers moments of self-exoneration.”⁵²⁰ This dialectical back and forth between self-accusation and self-exoneration represents the author’s relationship to his Nazi childhood probably in the most accurate terms, and in my view the book would have gained moral credibility if

⁵¹⁸ The last significant passage, in which Grass problematizes his difficulties to relate to the young man he used to be by alternatively writing about himself in the third and the first person, is at the beginning of the chapter “Übertage und untertage”, which begins with Grass’ release from a POW camp and marks his first step into freedom. He writes: “Er oder ich wurde mit leichtem Gepäck, zu dem knapp zwei Pfund erhandelter Tee gehörten, in etwas versetzt, das Freiheit hieß und auf die britische Besatzungszone als Raum für Bewegung beschränkt war. [...] Vorerst will es mir nicht gelingen, ein Bild meines damaligen Zustandes an die Wand zu pinnen. Zu wenige Fakten sind sicher. Achtzehn zähle ich. Kein Untergewicht zum Zeitpunkt der Entlassung. Frei von Läusen und auf den Gummisohlen amerikanischer Schnürschuhe bewege ich mich und sehe rückgespiegelt nicht übel aus. [...] Er grübelt. Was er denkt, will kein Zitat hergeben. Nur äußerlich ist einiges unverblichen [...] Annähernd zivil sieht er aus.” See *ibid.*, 228-29.

⁵¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 184.

⁵²⁰ *Ibid.*

Grass had emphasized the exonerating aspects critically even more. As it is, he clearly foregrounds self-criticism and non-exculpation, a mode which appears slightly thick-layered especially considering that he uses the emphatic self-accusation to shield himself from criticism.

In the debate following the book's publication, this was precisely his position. When critics asked why in his long career as a writer and public intellectual, Grass had always criticized Germany's superficial reckoning with the Nazi past but never talked about his own entanglement, he always evasively pointed to the book as though to say: the conflicted relationship with my past, my self-criticism and self-awareness, it's all in there. In a television interview with Ulrich Wickert for the ARD-show "Tagesthemen", for example, the interviewer confronted Grass with the criticism of Charlotte Knobloch, at the time president of the "Zentralrat der deutschen Juden". Knobloch had said that Grass' confession to have been in the Waffen-SS demonstrates the absurdity of his earlier speeches about Germany's insufficient dealings with the past. Grass replied:

[I]ch [kann] nur darauf hoffen, dass Frau Knobloch die Zeit findet, mein Buch zu lesen, denn innerhalb des Zeitraums, den ich schildere—meine jungen Jahre—spielt das [his membership in the Waffen-SS] zwar eine Rolle, aber die weit kritischeren Fragen stelle ich mir in einem ganz anderen Zusammenhang. Dass ich zum Beispiel als Jungvolk-Hitlerjunge zu bestimmten Situationen im engeren Kreis, auch zum Beispiel im Familienkreis, nicht Fragen gestellt habe, nicht die richtigen Fragen gestellt habe.⁵²¹

About the fact that he kept his SS-past a secret over several decades, he said further:

Ich hab das ja in meinem Buch—auch dieses Schweigen von mir—zum Thema gemacht. Deswegen kann ich eigentlich in der jetzigen Situation nur darauf hinweisen. Das Buch wird jetzt ausgeliefert und die Leser können sich selber ein Bild machen. Ich bin ja diesem Thema nicht ausgewichen im Buch. So, wie es in der Presse dargestellt worden ist, durch eine Vorabmeldung in der FAZ, sieht es

⁵²¹ See Kölbel, *Ein Buch, ein Bekenntnis*, 81.

so aus, als hätte ich der FAZ ein Geständnis gemacht; das ist nicht der Fall, es ist Inhalt meines Buches.⁵²²

But Knobloch had wanted an explanation not so much for the lack of political insight of the Hitlerjunge Grass nor for his volunteering for the Wehrmacht or his joining the Waffen-SS. She asked for an explanation for his long silence. Although Grass claims in the interview that *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel* offers clarification with regard to this aspect, it actually widely avoids this subject mentioning only briefly the shame that the author says had hindered him from “speaking the truth.”⁵²³ Especially when pointing his finger at other members of his generation—who in his eyes look back onto their Nazi pasts less critically than he does—the constant demonstration of his willingness to criticize himself seems slightly forced. Not only would Grass’ confession have been more convincing without this indirect self-appraisal and the emphasis on the onion-peeler’s exemplary self-criticism, but a truly self-critical autobiography, one could argue, would have included a satisfying answer to the question why Grass waited so long to confess his youthful sins.

⁵²² Ibid., 81-82.

⁵²³ He writes: “Kann es sein, daß mich Angst vor einer alles auf den Kopf stellenden Antwort stumm gemacht hat?”

Das ist die winzigtuende Schande, zu finden auf der sechsten oder siebten Haut jener ordinären, stets griffbereit liegenden Zwiebel, die der Erinnerung auf die Sprünge hilft. Also schreibe ich über die Schande und die ihr nachhinkende Scham. Selten genutzte Wörter, gesetzt im Nachholverfahren, derweil mein mal nachsichtiger, dann wieder strenger Blick auf einen Jungen gerichtet bleibt, der kniefreie Hosen trägt, allem, was sich verborgen hält. Hinterdreinschnüffelt, und dennoch versäumt hat, ’warum’ zu sagen.” Grass, *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel*, 16-17.

Conclusion

Shortly after Günter Grass revealed his membership in the *Waffen-SS* in *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel*, Martin Walser was quoted in the *Stuttgarter Zeitung*:

Der Mündigste aller Zeitgenossen kann sechzig Jahre lang nicht mitteilen, dass er ohne eigenes Zutun in die Waffen-SS geraten ist. Das wirft ein vernichtendes Licht auf unser Bewältigungsklima mit seinem normierten Denk- und Sprachgebrauch. [...] Grass hat durch die souveräne Platzierung seiner Mitteilung diesem aufpasserischem Moral-Klima eine Lektion erteilt.⁵²⁴

Grass's confession: a provocative gesture made in order to challenge Germany's supposedly normative and narrow-minded memory culture? This is a misreading of *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel* that speaks volumes about Walser's own position vis-à-vis German memory discourse. While Walser's book clearly seeks to provoke, Grass' is instead a work of compliance, a work that subscribes to the tenets of that discourse, a book written in an attempt to redeem the author after decades of hiding his past. Blaming Grass' silence on the restrictions of a memory discourse that would not have permitted the revelation of his *Waffen-SS* past sooner is simplistic, especially since—as several critics have noted—the Bitburg affair in 1985 would have been an ideally powerful moment for such a confession. Whatever the consequences for his reputation, such a move would have underscored the author's advocacy of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* in a truly meaningful—and less compromising—way.⁵²⁵

Despite Walser's attempts to ally himself with Grass in 2006, their childhood autobiographies could not be more different. *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel* represents exactly what Walser in his own memoir had criticized as “[e]ine komplett erschlossene,

⁵²⁴ Ibid., 12.

⁵²⁵ I will explain this point in more detail in the next chapter. For two articles that makes precisely this point, see Frank Schirrmacher, “Das Geständnis” *FAZ* (12 August 2006) 26-27, 26. See also Jens Jessen, “Und Grass wundert sich. Die öffentliche Selbstrechtfertigung des großen Schriftstellers ist so unnötig wie ärgerlich,” Kölbl, *Ein Buch, ein Bekenntnis*, 172-174, 173.

durchleuchtete gereinigte, genehmigte, total gegenwartsgeeignete Vergangenheit. Ethisch, politisch durchkorrigiert.”⁵²⁶ Grass knew that he had to take responsibility, to “own,” his sin in order to maintain his status as a public intellectual; he knew that he had to plea guilty from the beginning, and to unequivocally reject any apologetic tendencies. As Grass writes, “das Belasten, Einstufen und Abstempeln kann ich selber besorgen.”⁵²⁷ Walser, on the other hand, belongs to those whom criticized by Grass for playing the apologetic roles of “Verführte und Verblendete,”⁵²⁸ those who claim they did not know about Nazi crimes. Thus, while Grass wanted to prove himself guilty to take the wind out of his critics’ sails, Walser wanted to prove himself innocent in order to take a stand against the discourse on German guilt that he understood as dominating the memory culture of the nineties.

What these two post-reunification texts have in common, however, is their treatment of the subject of childhood innocence within a discourse no longer focused on German guilt as a whole, but instead on the status of the author/intellectual himself. Both authors were aware of the delicate nature of their respective books, were aware that these texts would put them in the spotlight due to their prominent roles in post-war German memory discourse. And we see Walser address this delicacy in his attempts to separate private and public memory, both at the beginning of his novel as well as in his *Friedenspreis* speech. Of course, such a separation is wishful thinking: Grass’ and Walser’s memories of the Nazi era, as much as they might be part of their private, individual biographies, can never remain a private affair. As members of the Hitler Youth generation and the last witnesses of the Third Reich on the perpetrators’ side, Grass and

⁵²⁶ Walser, *Ein springender Brunnen*, 282-83.

⁵²⁷ Grass, *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel*, 43.

⁵²⁸ *Ibid.*, 106.

Walser were and are aware of the representative function their childhood memories would inevitably carry, and they both seem to have incorporated these public expectations into the construction of their childhood narratives.

Christa Wolf's *Kindheitsmuster* (1976), written at an earlier and very different time, presents a different case. The memory of the Third Reich had not yet become omnipresent in literature and television, especially not in East Germany where the GDR's culture of anti-fascism made any account of this time period that did not involve heroic socialist resistance taboo. Therefore, the sheer fact that Wolf wrote a text about her own involvement in the fascist regime, her adoption of anti-Semitic stereotypes, her willingness to ignore from discrimination, and her eagerness to climb the ladder in the hierarchical system of the *Bund Deutscher Mädel*, must be considered courageous. However, it is still true that Wolf only vaguely alludes to the parallels between the Nazi and GDR regimes. When she describes her active participation in the *BDM* and her pride in becoming a group leader despite her recognition of the mistreatment suffered by one of her members, the girl Gerda, it would thus likely be an overstatement to consider this a self-reflexive depiction of her role in the GDR. One wishes the novel contained more passages in which Wolf had critically depicted not only her role in the Nazi system but also in the GDR. And Wolf clearly wished this too—as she noted much later in her 2010 novel *Stadt der Engel*: “Um wie vieles leichter war es doch, dachte ich, über die Verführungen einer Kindheit Rechenschaft zu geben als über die Verfehlungen der späteren Jahre.”⁵²⁹

Nevertheless, Wolf has undoubtedly written the most personal, most intimate and most self-reflexive of all three of these childhood texts, precisely because she explicitly

⁵²⁹ Christa Wolf, *Stadt der Engel oder The Overcoat of Dr. Freud* (Suhrkamp: Berlin 2010), 219.

writes it as a representative of her generation and not—like Grass and Walser—in order to establish or maintain her individual role in the public sphere. Like Walser in *Ein springender Brunnen*, Wolf represents her childhood with poetic immediacy and a sense of childlike innocence; like Grass in *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel*, she also depicts her narrator's conflicted feelings towards the younger self. She, however, adds a third narrative missing from the other two novels, adding a second level of self-observation and of critical distance by incorporating her narrator's writing process. Ultimately, it is the inclusion of this narrative that turns Wolf's text into the most exceptional and most insightful examination of a Nazi childhood.

Do the three writers of the Hitler Youth generation simply exploit their childhood representations for the purpose of exculpation? This would be a crude exaggeration, since while none of the texts reject the role of the innocent witness, none of them use it in order to reject historical responsibility. Even in the case of Walser's novel—which at first glance might give this impression—the author's insistence on an entirely innocent child narrator was not so much (or simply) about self-exculpation but rather a critique of the memory discourse of the nineties. Reading these texts as simply exculpatory, as many have done, seems to me to miss one of their most important aspects, and to miss an important critical opportunity afforded by them: a consideration of how the autobiographical texts of this generation played a part not just in adding to the understanding of the Nazi past, but also in shaping the memory discourse that developed in post-war Germany. Rather than reading them as authors seeking to use childhood innocence for their own individual ends, we should read Grass and Walser (and to a

lesser extent Wolf) as authors involved in a complex discursive sphere, and consider how the perspective of childhood innocence plays into that sphere.

I began this chapter with the observation that the representation of childhood innocence in Imre Kertész's *Fatelessness*, his novel about Auschwitz, would not be possible in a depiction of World War II from the perpetrators' side. And as I have shown, while the three texts under examination here do explore this idea of a childlike innocence, they do not employ it without—at least partially—subverting it. In 2010, however, Rowohlt published a paperback memoir with the title *Ich war Hitlers letztes Aufgebot. Meine Erlebnisse als SS-Kindersoldat*, which tells the story of Günter Lucks' adolescence. Recruited by the SS in 1944 at the age of 16, the same year Grass volunteered for the *Waffen-SS*, Luchs was sent into combat, captured by the Russians, and spent several years in their POW camps. The neologism "SS-Kindersoldat"—used almost nonchalantly in the book's title—describes with a certain accuracy the idiosyncratic historical role of the Hitler Youth generation: it evokes innocence as well as guilt, violence *being done to* the child as well as violence *committed by* it, the child as a victim *and* perpetrator. Not surprisingly, we find Grass' recommendation on the back: "Der Text hat mich berührt. Ich hoffe, dass mit Hilfe solch anschaulicher Beschreibungen Nachgeborene Gelegenheit haben, aus den Erfahrungen früherer Generationen zu lernen."⁵³⁰ While the almost insoluble tension of the term "SS-Kindersoldat" is startling, the fact that this might be the first publication to use the term "child soldier" in the context of World War II and the Holocaust, definitely reflects a shift in German memory

⁵³⁰ See Günter Lucks and Harald Stutte, *Ich war Hitlers letztes Aufgebot. Meine Erlebnisse als SS-Kindersoldat* (Reinbek/Hamburg: Rowohlt, 2010), http://www.rowohlt.de/buch/Guenter_Lucks_Ich_war_Hitlers_letztes_Aufgebot.18042010.2770782.html.

discourse—the ideas of innocence and guilt by association or participation no longer seem mutually exclusive.

Manchmal habe ich gedacht, wenn eine gute Fee vorbeikäme, und ich hätte drei Wünsche frei—oder nur einen!—dann hätte ich gewünscht, noch einmal unbekannt sein zu dürfen. Die Ansprüche an mich kamen so massiv, daß ich in einem ständigen Schuldgefühl lebte, weil ich nicht allen gerecht werden konnte.
—Christa Wolf

Chapter Four:

Leaving the Stage—Post-Unification Literary Debates (1990–2010)

Introduction

On October 2nd, 1990, one day before Germany celebrated its official political reunion, Frank Schirrmacher, editor and co-publisher of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, called the phenomenon of the Hitler Youth generation’s enduring dominance of the German literary scene since the 1960s “ein in der europäischen Literaturgeschichte einzigartiger Sonderfall.”⁵³¹ Addressing the seemingly everlasting presence of this elderly league of writers, he wrote:

Fast kein neues Gesicht ist hinzugekommen. Fast alle sind sie noch da. Und die jüngeren Autoren sind nicht da wie sie. Es hat sich so gut wie nichts verändert. Die hier schon seit dreißig Jahren versammelt sind, bestimmen [...] das literarische Leben des Landes bis heute. Es fällt nicht leicht, eine andere Epoche zu finden, die so lange bei sich selber aushielt.⁵³²

Schirrmacher argued that after the historical caesura of 1945, it became the self-assigned task of West German literature “zu bessern, zu belehren und zu erziehen, [...] ein demokratisches Bewußtsein zu beweisen,” in sum, to create a founding myth for the new

⁵³¹ Frank Schirrmacher, “Abschied von der Literatur der Bundesrepublik: Neue Pässe, neue Identitäten, neue Lebensläufe. Über die Kündigung einer Mythen des westdeutschen Bewußtseins,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, October 2, 1990. Note: The only copy I was able to obtain of this article did not have page numbers.

⁵³² *Ibid.*

nation, a feasible national identity, that turned out to be, “das läßt sich nach dem Ende der Teilung feststellen, [...] die Identität einer einzigen Generation.”⁵³³

However, Schirmacher predicted that in the wake of Germany’s reunification, this generation, with its particular relation to World War II and the Holocaust, would finally be forced to retire. The fall of the Berlin Wall would involve the emergence of a new generation of writers and a literature liberated from national and moral-political demands.

Surprisingly enough, Ulrich Greiner, a journalist for *Die Zeit*, a weekly newspaper traditionally to the left of the *F.A.Z.*, supported Schirmacher’s critique of left-liberal writers. In the 1990 debate on Christa Wolf, later called “*deutsch-deutscher Literaturstreit*,” Greiner coined a highly controversial term, describing the predominant aesthetic model of Wolf’s literature—and of post-1945 German literature in general—as “Gesinnungsästhetik.” That is, a type of aesthetics primarily concerned with “außerliterarischen Themen [...], mit dem Kampf gegen Restauration, Faschismus, Klerikalismus, Stalinismus etcetera.”⁵³⁴ Greiner argued, “Die Gesinnungsästhetik ist das gemeinsame Dritte der glücklicherweise zu Ende gegangenen Literaturen von BRD und DDR.”⁵³⁵

Similarly, the conservative thinker and editor of *Der Merkur* Karl-Heinz Bohrer declared in 1990, not without relief, that the model of the German *littérature engagée* was outdated. In an essay programmatically entitled “Die Ästhetik am Ausgang ihrer

⁵³³ Ibid.

⁵³⁴ Ulrich Greiner, “Die deutsche Gesinnungsästhetik. Noch einmal: Christa Wolf und der deutsche Literaturstreit. Eine Zwischenbilanz,” *Die Zeit*, November 2, 1990, in “*Es geht nicht um Christa Wolf*”: *Der Literaturstreit im vereinten Deutschland*, ed. Thomas Anz (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1995), 208–16, 213–14.

⁵³⁵ Greiner, “Gesinnungsästhetik,” 213.

Unmündigkeit,” Bohrer traces the long history of the German alliance between aesthetics and politics since the 18th century.⁵³⁶ He invokes both Kant and Hegel in order to emphasize that German literature stands at the threshold of a great liberation nothing short of the Enlightenment: the “Selbstbefreiung (of art) von theologisch-metaphysischer, schließlich ideologisch-geschichtsphilosophischer Bevormundung.”⁵³⁷ Like Schirmmacher and Greiner, Bohrer thus announced the end of a literary epoch. Finally, with the political change in 1990, the realm of aesthetics would be liberated from the socio-political and historical demands marking the country’s rebuilding after 1945. A discourse had ended.

Bohrer, however, revised this assertion sixteen years later in the wake of the Günter Grass debate around the author’s Waffen-SS membership. In his 2006 essay “Das eigentliche Fiasko des politischen Moralismus,”⁵³⁸ he conceded that the idea of a German *littérature engagée* had not ended with the historical caesura of 1990. He wrote: “Es zeigte sich [...], dass wir aus dem Zeitalter der Moralpolitik nur zögerlich auszutreten beginnen.”⁵³⁹ Indeed, the pronouncements of the death of this generation of writers and their moral-political discourse were premature. The emancipation from the Hitler Youth generation took longer than Bohrer, Greiner, and Schirmmacher predicted. These writers continued to publish and to dominate the post-reunification public discourse. And yet, the Christa-Wolf-debate in 1990 was the first in a series of debates in which the biographies and the moral integrity of writers of this generation came to be increasingly questioned. The Wolf debate in 1990 and the media-scandal around Grass’s Waffen-SS membership in 2006, I argue, mark the general boundaries of the period, during which the process of

⁵³⁶ Karl Heinz Bohrer, “Die Ästhetik am Ausgang ihrer Unmündigkeit,” *Merkur* 44 (1990): 851-65.

⁵³⁷ *Ibid.*, 852.

⁵³⁸ Karl Heinz Bohrer, “Das eigentliche Fiasko des politischen Moralismus,” *Merkur. Deutsche Zeitschrift für Europäisches Denken* 11 (2006): 1095–98.

⁵³⁹ *Ibid.*, 1095.

detachment from the Hitler Youth generation took place. Wolf's Stasi collaboration, the antisemitism reproach raised against Walser, and Grass's Waffen-SS past knocked the authors off their pedestals and, as a consequence, questioned the aesthetics they embodied—an aesthetics imbued with the morality and biography of the author.

In this chapter, I trace the development of Germany's separation from a generation of authors who, through their biographies, had long represented the ability of postwar Germany to transcend the Nazi past. I will further examine a question the feuilleton critics widely overlooked: what the authors themselves had to say about this development. Since the controversies focused almost exclusively on the writers's political role, the critics failed to notice the authors's self-awareness in the very texts that triggered the debates. I will show that Wolf, Walser, and Grass themselves commented on the cultural-political change after 1989/90, as it concerned their public role.

This chapter is divided into three parts. First, I consider the debates about Christa Wolf's political attitude towards the GDR, the so-called *Deutsch-Deutscher Literaturstreit* of 1990–91, triggered by a critique of Wolf's novel *Was bleibt* (1979/1990) as well as the discussions that followed the revelation of her Stasi affiliation in 1993. I reveal that in *Was bleibt*, Wolf depicted her difficulties in relinquishing her role as a public advocate of the socialist utopia, a role I claim she only abandoned in her most recent novel, *Stadt der Engel* (2010). Second, I focus on the controversies surrounding Walser's 1998 *Friedenspreis* speech, known as the "*Walser-Bubis-Debatte*," and his allegedly anti-Semitic novel *Tod eines Kritikers* (2002). I argue that both of these texts were planned disturbances of the memory discourse, with which Walser sought to provoke those who expected him, as a former Hitler Youth member, to cherish the

urgency of Holocaust memory. Consciously toying with the subject of memory in his texts, he did precisely the opposite. Finally, I turn to the scandal of Grass's membership in the Waffen-SS, which he revealed in his autobiographical novel *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel* (2006). I argue that, in contrast to Walser, Grass's novel reveals an undiminished desire to remain the moral-political conscience of the nation even after his biographical revelations.

My analysis shows that the most obvious commonality between the three sets of debates was the writers's role as placeholders. Clearly, Wolf, Walser, and Grass did not present the only controversial subjects. At stake were Germany's unification, German-Jewish relations, and the necessity of a generational change. Rather perceptively, Thomas Anz entitled his edited volume on the Christa Wolf debate *Es geht nicht um Christa Wolf*⁵⁴⁰. This could be said, respectively, for each author in each debate.

1. Täterakte-Opferakte—Christa Wolf and the Stasi in *Was bleibt* (1990) and *Stadt der Engel* (2010)

Christa Wolf, Stasi informant

In January 1993, Christa Wolf published an article in the *Berliner Zeitung*, a local Berlin newspaper, where she declared that during a visit at the so-called Gauck-Behörde where the documents of the GDR's Secret Police have been administered since 1990, she found forty-two folders with documents confirming that the Stasi had observed her and her

⁵⁴⁰ Thomas Anz, ed, "Es geht nicht um Christa Wolf": Der Literaturstreit im vereinten Deutschland, Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1995.

family between 1968 and 1980.⁵⁴¹ But besides these “*Opferakten*,” the files that showed Wolf as a victim of the Stasi, she was also confronted—as she says in the article, much to her own surprise—with one small folder belonging to the “*Täterakten*,” those files with information about the people who had worked *for* the Stasi. The evidence was indisputable: Wolf had been an informant for the Geheime Staatspolizei, a so-called “*Informeller Mitarbeiter*” (IM), between 1959 and 1962.⁵⁴²

The “perpetrator” file, published with the author’s agreement shortly after she had revealed her “discovery” in 1993, shows that the cooperation of IM Margarete (Wolf’s middle name and code name for her Stasi activities) with the Stasi had indeed always been informal, as she never signed any documents, and her cooperation had always been “only” as an informant. Wolf was, for example, never assigned active observations, and while the “*Täterakte*” reveals that she wrote a small number of evaluations on the political attitude of other writers or artists in the GDR, it also makes clear that these reports never contained any incriminating information. Rather, Wolf praised the political loyalty or literary talent of her *Genossen*.⁵⁴³ The Stasi itself marked the mere “*informativischen Charakter*” of these reports, and after Wolf moved from Halle to Potsdam in 1962, the organization apparently lost interest in cooperating with her. In a final report written three years after the end of Wolf’s IM activities, a certain Oberleutnant Roscher emphasized Wolf’s “überbetonte Vorsicht und größere Zurückhaltung, die auf einer gewissen intellektuellen Ängstlichkeit basieren.” Comrade

⁵⁴¹ These are the dates Wolf herself indicates in her article “Eine Auskunft” in *Berliner Zeitung* along with the suggestion that the Stasi files containing reports from the years 1980-90 seem to have been destroyed. Presumably then the observation did not stop in 1980. Christa Wolf, “Eine Auskunft,” *Berliner Zeitung*, January 21, 1993, in Hermann Vinke, *Akteneinsicht Christa Wolf: Zerrspiegel und Dialog. Eine Dokumentation*. (Hamburg: Luchterhand, 1993) 143-144, see 143.

⁵⁴² This information, provided by Wolf in her article “Eine Auskunft,” is confirmed by the Stasi files reprinted in Hermann Vinke’s volume, see above.

⁵⁴³ See Vinke, *Akteneinsicht*, 20-25, especially 24.

Wolf seemed to be supportive of the SED party, “jedoch scheint ihr Verhältnis zur Partei mehr intellektuell-verstandesmäßig und weniger klassemäßig zu sein.”⁵⁴⁴ Roscher reported that Wolf had declined to meet with Stasi officials after moving to Halle. In 1962, the “*Täterakte*” on Wolf was closed and put into the archives. It contained, in a single folder, roughly seventy pages regarding her activities as an IM. The “*Opferakte*” on Christa Wolf, which was opened in 1968, contains forty-two folders and thousands of pages that document the surveillance of Wolf and her husband between 1965 and 1980.⁵⁴⁵

Stasi debate (1993)

Finding an IM file with her name on it came as a shock to Christa Wolf. In “*Auskunft*,” the revelatory article in *Berliner Zeitung*, where she publicized this information, she wrote that she simply did not remember this episode of her life. The only memory she claimed to have was of a visit by two Stasi officials in 1959 who tried to obtain information about a West German author who had criticized the GDR regime. She remembered agreeing to another meeting with the Stasi because she felt intimidated. All the rest, her activities as *Informeller Mitarbeiter* were completely absent from her memory.⁵⁴⁶

The personal attacks against Wolf were fierce. The headline on the front page of *Bild* was full of malice, reading: “Unsere berühmteste Schriftstellerin Christa Wolf: Ich war IM... aber ich wußte es nicht.”⁵⁴⁷ The magazine *Der Spiegel* had supposedly been able to buy a copy of the IM file illegally, although the file was not yet available to the public. With this evidence, they felt legitimized to speak of Wolf as “überaus angepaßte

⁵⁴⁴ Vinke 24.

⁵⁴⁵ See Wolf, “Auskunft.”

⁵⁴⁶ See Wolf, “Auskunft.”

⁵⁴⁷ “Christa Wolf: Ich war IM” *Bild-Zeitung*, Jan 22, 1993, in Vinke, *Akteneinsicht*, 146.

Opportunistin.”⁵⁴⁸ The magazine characterized her cooperation with the *Ministerium für Staatssicherheit* as “eifrige Dienstbarkeit bei der Stasi,”⁵⁴⁹ and categorized her presentation of the IM episode in the *Berliner Zeitung* article as downplaying the facts.⁵⁵⁰ Despite the accusatory tone and the many generalizations typical of the entire debate, the authors of the *Spiegel* article attempt to separate the biographical information on the person Christa Wolf from the written work of the author: “Es bleibt von Christa Wolf ein international beachtetes literarisches Werk. Bücher wie ‘Kassandra’ (1983) oder ‘Störfall’ (1987) haben nie einen Zweifel daran gelassen, daß hier keine Apologetin des DDR-Staates und schon gar nicht, wie immer behauptet, eine ‘Staatsdichterin’ schrieb.”⁵⁵¹ This moral failure, according to *Der Spiegel*, did not diminish Wolf’s continuously critical attitude expressed in her literary work since the 1960s.

This attitude was an exception. Friedrich J. Raddatz in *Die Zeit*, for example, barely distinguishes between Wolf’s literature and her biography. In his article “*Von der Beschädigung der Literatur durch ihre Urheber: Bemerkungen zu Heiner Müller und Christa Wolf*,” he claims that both Christa Wolf and Heiner Müller have discredited their work with their dishonorable political behavior:⁵⁵² “Mir scheint, beide haben nicht nur ihrer Biographie geschadet; sie haben ihr Werk beschädigt.”⁵⁵³ Furthermore, Raddatz argues that this damage the authors have done to their work represents a betrayal of their audience: “Sie haben uns verraten: nicht im Sinne von ‘angezeigt’, sondern in einem viel

⁵⁴⁸ “Die ängstliche Magarete” *Der Spiegel*, Jan 25, 1993, in *Ibid.*, 152–57, 156.

⁵⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 156.

⁵⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 152.

⁵⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 156.

⁵⁵² Müller was believed to have cooperated with the Stasi, but unlike Wolf, no evidence was found.

⁵⁵³ Fritz J. Raddatz, “Von der Beschädigung der Literatur durch ihre Urheber. Bemerkungen zu Heiner Müller und Christa Wolf” *Die Zeit* (Jan 28, 1993), Vinke, *Akteneinsicht*, 168–71, 168.

tieferen Sinne.”⁵⁵⁴ Personally, the critic and former GDR citizen says, he feels greatly, almost paralyzingly, disappointed.⁵⁵⁵ The article ends with the demand that Wolf and Müller explain their behavior in order to rehabilitate their work and ease the disappointment and sadness of their audience: “Halten Sie der Würde ihres Werkes die Treue. Erklären Sie. Nehmen Sie mir und Ihren Lesern die Traurigkeit.”⁵⁵⁶

In the eyes of politician Antje Vollmer, the lack of distinction between Wolf’s work and her life and the highly emotional reaction that this article by Raddatz displays were paradigmatic of the attitude with which GDR writers were regarded in the West. She describes this problem as “Distanzlosigkeit” and refers to it as “klebrige Haß-Liebe,”⁵⁵⁷ the reason, according to her, why this debate about the GDR was so passionate and highly charged.⁵⁵⁸ Vollmer harshly criticizes the German feuilleton’s sensationalism and the media’s incapacity to distinguish between author and work: “[D]a der Jagdinstinkt groß ist, werden für den Augenblick beide beschädigt, die Frau und ihr Werk.”⁵⁵⁹

Literary critic Volker Hage, however, argues in his *Spiegel* article that this lack of distinction comes as no surprise, considering that Wolf’s work has always been strongly inspired by her personal biography; the reader is facing a literary work “das mit dem

⁵⁵⁴ Ibid., 168.

⁵⁵⁵ Raddatz writes: “Es geht nicht um Hetze und nicht um karteiwedelnde Jagd. Kein ernsthafter Mensch—und niemand in der ZEIT—hat Heiner Müller oder Christa Wolf ‘Spitzel’ genannt, sie auch nur solcher Dienste verdächtigt. Aber meine—und die ist betäubend—Enttäuschung bleibt.” Ibid., 168.

⁵⁵⁶ Ibid., 171.

⁵⁵⁷ Vinke, *Akteneinsicht*, 192.

⁵⁵⁸ Antje Vollmer, “Der Zeitgeist ist Anarchist. Das deutsche Feuilleton und Christa Wolf,” *taz*, Feb 2, 1993, in Vinke, *Akteneinsicht*, 192–93, 192.

⁵⁵⁹ Ibid., 192. Vollmer claims that based on the very same files, a completely different “Medieninszenierung” would have been possible (192–93). She adds: “Auch die Frage, warum gerade das brave Kind Christa Wolf das ideale Medium war, in dem der lange Weg von der ideologischen Loyalität bis zur Aufkündigung des Gehorsams sich vollzog, wäre Stoff für Recherchen und Romane” (193). My dissertation provides the research Vollmer is asking for. It provides an answer to the question of why Wolf became a “Medium,” a representative figure: because of her generational background as a former member of the Hitler Youth.

Leben der Autorin stark verquickt ist.”⁵⁶⁰ Having continually fostered interest in her biography, he suggests, Wolf had to expect this great interest in her personal life and, by consequence, also in her failure. Hage thinks Wolf cannot be seen as a victim of a media campaign, as Vollmer, for example, suggests, because:

Christa Wolf ist nun einmal nicht allein Schriftstellerin und Privatperson, sie ist auch öffentliche Figur. Das Interesse des Publikums an ihrem Lebenslauf kann ihr niemand ersparen. Sie hat—als Autorin—auch ihren Nutzen daraus gezogen. [...] Es ist also nicht Sensationsgier oder Voyeurismus, was zu Nachforschungen Anlaß gibt, sondern das Interesse an einem wesentlichen Mosaikstein im Leben dieser bedeutenden Autorin, und nicht nur das: auch in der Literaturgeschichte und der deutschen Geschichte überhaupt.”⁵⁶¹

He considers the public’s demand to know more about Wolf’s brief cooperation with the Stasi not only understandable but also legitimate, considering her role as a public and a representative figure.

Hage is right in pointing out that Wolf contributed to becoming the public figure she is by making her personal biography, and particularly her very personal relationship with the GDR, an integral part of her writing ever since her novel *Nachdenken über Christa T* (1968). Considering her public role, he seems to argue, she should not have been surprised about the great interest in her life. The problem with this argument, however, is that Wolf’s literature was precisely neglected in most discussions of her biography. The writer’s moral integrity was measured largely independently from the corpus of her work and merely on the basis of her political biography.

This problem had been even more obvious in the debate surrounding Wolf’s *Was bleibt* in 1990–91. The critics’ stunning blind spot for the novella at the center of the debate reveals the extent to which the controversy was focused on Wolf as a public

⁵⁶⁰ Volker Hage, “Wir müssen uns dem Schicksal stellen,” *Der Spiegel*, Feb 8, 1993, in Vinke, *Akteneinsicht*, 196–97, 197.

⁵⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 197.

persona. The feuilletons failed to notice that Wolf, the writer, had already commented on the very same subject they were so heatedly discussing—her relationship with the GDR and her moral integrity as a public intellectual—in *Was bleibt*. In the following, I will recapitulate the main events of the 1990 debate before presenting my reading of *Was bleibt*. At the center of this part of my chapter on Christa Wolf, however, stands my discussion of Wolf's novel *Stadt der Engel*, published one year before she passed away in 2011. While during the twenty years between 1990 and 2010, the discourse on the Hitler Youth generation changed—public interest in the writers' representative function diminished—Wolf continued to hold on to the idea that her biography represented GDR history until her last novel. The autobiographical text focuses on the question of how she could repress her Stasi past. She wants to present a clear explanation in order to complete the story of the East-German state. But as I will show, the text does not give a satisfactory answer. Like Wolf's life and the political utopia in which she believed, the novel leaves us with contradictions.

What remains—The “Was bleibt” debate in 1990

Whereas in the Stasi debate in 1993, Wolf's writing was questioned on the grounds of her biography, the earlier debate in 1990–91 questioned her biography on the grounds of a literary work. The object of dispute was the short novella *Was bleibt*, published one year after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. In this text, Wolf describes in just ninety-two pages one day in the life of a female author in East Berlin in 1979, who is being observed by the Stasi. The notion of being under surveillance accompanies the narrator's every action, from the most banal private ones like making coffee to significant public ones like a reading in an East Berlin theater. Besides the great anxiety that the two Stasi men

parked in front of her building cause her, the text depicts her strong resistance toward acknowledging the oppressive sides of the GDR regime. At almost any costs, she wants to maintain the utopian ideal on which this state was founded. Wolf demonstrates how the narrator's convictions begin to crumble—and how, nonetheless, she cannot release her attachment to the socialist idea.

The publication of this short text was followed by a heated debate carried out in all national dailies and weeklies for over a year, a debate that shook the intellectual scene of the newly re-united Germany to its core. The “*Christa-Wolf-Debatte*” became what was later called “*Der Deutsch-Deutsche Literaturstreit*,” a debate no longer only involving the East German writer but a broad reassessment of post-1945 literature in both East and West Germany.⁵⁶² Obviously, Wolf served as a catalyst for a cultural debate that was needed one year after the fall of the Berlin Wall, but how did the slim novella *Was bleibt* become the trigger?

Ulrich Greiner's article “*Mangel an Feingefühl*,” published June 1, 1990 in *Die Zeit*, served as the starting point of the debate. In this article, Greiner attacked Wolf by calling the publication of this book hypocritical. He pointed out that through the figure of the narrator,⁵⁶³ the author had presented herself as a victim of the same regime she had actually always supported. With unrestrained sarcasm, he writes:

Das ist ja ein Ding: Die Staatsdichterin der DDR soll vom Staatssicherheitsdienst der DDR überwacht worden sein? Christa Wolf, die Nationalpreisträgerin, die

⁵⁶² See the introduction of Anz, *Es geht nicht um Christa Wolf*, 7–28, 16.

⁵⁶³ The details of the life of the narrator—professional occupation, living and family situation—so clearly accorded with the life of Christa Wolf that the distinction between first-person-narrator and author almost automatically collapsed in the reviews of this book. The text was read autobiographically, and while I will proceed making a distinction between narrator and author, it is probably not too far-fetched to assume that an autobiographical reading was intended by the author.

prominenteste Autorin ihres Landes, SED-Mitglied bis zum letzten Augenblick, ein Opfer der Stasi?⁵⁶⁴

Wolf's failure and her lack of integrity were most apparent, according to Greiner, in the fact that Wolf withheld its publication until after the fall of the Berlin Wall. The novella ends with the juxtaposition of two dates in the last line suggesting its genesis both in "*Juni/Juli 1979*" and "*November 1989*."⁵⁶⁵ In his eyes, the two dates represent on the one hand the moment Wolf began to write about the surveillance when it occurred in 1979 and on the other the time when she finally dared to take the manuscript out of the drawer. That is, the time of the fall of the Berlin Wall, when it was politically safe and no longer presented a personal risk for her to publish this text. Greiner calls this belated publication embarrassing:

[D]er 9. November ist doch mindestens in dieser Hinsicht eine historische Wasserscheide. *Davor* wäre die Publikation dieses Textes eine Sensation gewesen, die sicherlich das Ende der Staatsdichterin Christa Wolf und vermutlich ihre Emigration zur Folge gehabt hätte. *Danach* ist die Veröffentlichung nur noch peinlich.⁵⁶⁶

By not publishing the text earlier, Greiner argues, Wolf decided to retain the comfortable position of being the GDR's "*Staatsdichterin*," and thereby missed the opportunity to become a courageous critic of the regime. "Daß Christa Wolf diesen Text in der Schublade behielt, ist ihr gutes Recht,"⁵⁶⁷ Greiner concedes this point, half-heartedly pointing out that as a West German citizen he might not be in a position to judge. Nevertheless, in his eyes Wolf is to blame for having been dishonest with herself and her own history. He claims that the belated publication expressed "einen Mangel an

⁵⁶⁴ Ulrich Greiner, "Mangel an Feingefühl," *Die Zeit*, June 1, 1990, in Anz, *Es geht nicht um Christa Wolf*, 66–70, 66.

⁵⁶⁵ Christa Wolf, *Was bleibt* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2007), 93.

⁵⁶⁶ Greiner, "Mangel an Feingefühl," 67.

⁵⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 70.

Feingefühl gegenüber denen, deren Leben der SED-Staat zerstört hat.”⁵⁶⁸ While others were forced to flee because they were overt in their criticism, Greiner suggests, Wolf had been able to stay because she remained vague. That she attempted to correct this behavior in retrospect with a text representing her as a victim of the GDR regime was outrageous.

Frank Schirmmacher published a similarly accusatory article on Wolf in the *F.A.Z.* one day after Greiner’s article appeared. Like Greiner, Schirmmacher harshly criticizes the late publication of *Was bleibt* and considers it a missed opportunity: “Dieses Buch, das eine Verfolgungsangst schildert, hätte vor zehn, ja vor fünf Jahren der Staatssicherheit wohl Schaden zufügen können. Jetzt ist es bedeutungslos, anachronistisch und hat Züge des Lächerlichen.”⁵⁶⁹ Schirmmacher makes it very clear that Wolf does not interest him from an aesthetic viewpoint: “Christa Wolf interessiert nicht als künstlerischer Fall,” he says bluntly, and he speaks of her reputation as a writer as “weit überschätzt.”⁵⁷⁰ Schirmmacher thus dismisses Wolf as an artist, and instead openly attacks her on a moral basis. He speaks with contempt of her willingness to believe in the political system of socialism without ever losing “jene Mischung von Illusionsbereitschaft, Wunschdenken und bigotter Zustimmung, die es fraglich erscheinen läßt, ob Christa Wolf überhaupt jemals begriffen hat, daß sie in einem totalitären System lebte.”⁵⁷¹ He blames her for having downplayed the totalitarian character of the GDR and sarcastically mocks her alleged naiveté, stating that she does not seem to have ever understood “daß die

⁵⁶⁸ Ibid., 70.

⁵⁶⁹ Frank Schirmmacher, “Dem Druck des härteren, strengeren Lebens standhalten. Auch eine Studie über den autoritären Charakter: Christa Wolfs Aufsätze, Reden und ihre jüngste Erzählung *Was bleibt*,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, June 2, 1990, in Anz, *Es geht nicht um Christa Wolf*, 77–89, 87.

⁵⁷⁰ Schirmmacher, “Dem Druck,” 77.

⁵⁷¹ Ibid., 79.

sozialistische Unterdrückung nicht mit einem gruppentherapeutischen Selbsterfahrungszyklus bekämpft werden kann.”⁵⁷²

He then continues his analysis by turning Wolf’s moral failure into an exemplary case. He reads “die beunruhigende und in vielem exemplarische Biographie dieser Schriftstellerin”⁵⁷³ as a study of the authoritarian German character. Wolf becomes a representative of intellectuals in both the GDR *and* the Third Reich: “der versagende Intellektuelle im Angesicht totalitärer Herrschaft,”⁵⁷⁴ blindly following state authorities at the loss of intellectual integrity. He writes: “Angesichts ihrer Biographie stellt sich ein zweites Mal in der Geschichte dieses Jahrhunderts die Frage, wie blind Denken und Tat, Literatur und Welt füreinander sein könnten.”⁵⁷⁵ And further: “[I]n Wahrheit war das Verhältnis des Intellektuellen zum SED-Staat in vielem eine fast tragikomische Wiederholung der Fehler von einst, und jene ‘Strukturen’, von denen man in aller Unklarheit so gerne sprach, lebten hier vor aller Augen greifbar fort.”⁵⁷⁶ He clarifies that the GDR regime lacked the criminal energy of the murderous Nazi regime but maintains that the parallels in the behavior of intellectuals in both regimes are obvious: history has repeated itself in that the writers again have proven not to be courageous enough to stand up to the totalitarian regime. Again, the intellectuals have failed.

Schirmacher embeds his statements about Wolf’s allegedly authoritarian character and opportunism into what Andreas Huyssen has mockingly called the “*psycho-historisch aufgeputztes Generations-Argument*.”⁵⁷⁷ In order to explain why Wolf was

⁵⁷² Ibid., 79.

⁵⁷³ Ibid., 77.

⁵⁷⁴ Ibid., 86.

⁵⁷⁵ Ibid., 85.

⁵⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷⁷ Andreas Huyssen, “Das Versagen der deutschen Intellektuellen. Verschiebepark Literaturstreit,” in *Der Deutsch-deutsche Literaturstreit, oder, “Freunde, es spricht sich schlecht mit gebundener Zunge”*:

unable to see herself being corrupted by the totalitarian regime, Schirmmacher espouses an idea that Wolf herself has expressed many times, namely that it was the catastrophic experience of the Third Reich that made her believe in the experiment of socialism with its founding myth of anti-fascism and its goal to become the better Germany. The wish for acceptance by the older generation of socialist heroes and father figures, and the hope to redeem her first moral failure, her guilt about her Hitler Youth past, lead her to slip into her second moral failure: her belief in the socialist utopia represented by the GDR. Huyssen has pointed out that it is “[v]öllig unzulässig” to denigrate Wolf “als Gallionsfigur eines Totalitarismus mit Vaterkomplex.”⁵⁷⁸ He writes: “Schirmmacher scheint vergessen zu haben, daß es Wolf war, die die Kontinuitäten im Leben unter dem Faschismus und in der DDR in ‘Nachdenken über Christa T.’ und in ‘Kindheitsmuster’ thematisierte, und zwar gegen große Widerstände in der DDR.”⁵⁷⁹ Perhaps even more objectionable than the neglect of those core works is that Schirmmacher’s generational argument is in fact, knowingly or unknowingly, “borrowed” from Wolf herself. To present Christa Wolf as a case study of the authoritarian character—embodying a lack of independence and responsibility among intellectuals that was prevalent in Hitler’s Germany and supposedly continued into the GDR—is almost ironic considering the project of Wolf’s novel *Kindheitsmuster* (1976). This novel turns precisely around the self-critical quest for patterns that have remained dominant in the generation that grew up under Hitler, such as a deep belief in authorities.

Analysen und Materialien, eds. Karl Deiritz and Hannes Krauss (Hamburg, Zürich: Sammlung Luchterhand, 1991), 78–94, 86.

⁵⁷⁸ Huyssen, “Das Versagen,” 86.

⁵⁷⁹ Ibid.

Schirmmacher does acknowledge the importance of the category of “generation” for Wolf but presents it as proof of his own argument:

Scham, Schuld, Wiedergutmachung—diesen Imperativ und die Einsicht in die Konsequenz der ungeheuren Verbrechen scheint in Ost und West jene Generation am tiefsten verinnerlicht zu haben, die das Dritte Reich noch als Jugendliche erlebt hat. *Das Schlüsselwort, mit dem Christa Wolf immer wieder politische Sachverhalte interpretiert, heißt denn auch ‚Generation‘*. Es hat in allen ihren Essays und all ihren Romanen und Erzählungen eine zentrale Bedeutung [...].⁵⁸⁰

Schirmmacher brushes off Wolf’s generational reflections as simplistic. He does not even entirely ignore that Wolf presents her own political trajectory and that of generation at times in a highly self-critical way. He simply dismisses these moments of self-recognition as “folgenlos” and hidden underneath Wolf’s allegedly wishy-washy language:

Auch in den Momenten der Selbsterkenntnis *verhüllt ihre* [i.e., Wolf’s] *Sprache wieder alles, was das Gewissen freigibt*: jene Mischung aus Selbstlosigkeit und folgenloser Selbstbeziehung, die noch im Schuldbekenntnis die Märtyrerhaltung sucht und mit der die gleiche Generation auch in der Bundesrepublik vierzig Jahre lang den Widerstand gegen Hitler nachholte.⁵⁸¹

Wolf’s self-criticism loses credibility, from his perspective, because it is merely an attempt at redemption, especially if it occurs only in the realm of aesthetics. “Vor der Gewissensnot in die diffusen Räume des Unsagbaren flüchten, das war [...] schon die Übung der vom Nationalsozialismus belasteten Intellektuellen der Nachkriegszeit-Wiederholungszwang der Geschichte,”⁵⁸² he writes, alluding to the so-called *Innere Emigration* during the Nazi period. *Was bleibt*, for him, seems to be yet another text representing the moral failure of German writers of the 20th century, too weak to address political oppression.

⁵⁸⁰ Schirmmacher, “Dem Druck,” 82. My emphasis.

⁵⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 83.

⁵⁸² *Ibid.*, 87.

Personal, political, and aesthetic crisis—A reading of “Was bleibt”

Schirmmacher’s interpretation of Wolf’s *Was bleibt* conflicts with my own close reading of the text. I argue that Wolf does *not* avoid a critical stance. Rather, her criticism is directed not exclusively at the GDR, but at her own attitude towards the socialist state. To argue that Wolf hides self-criticism behind her poetic language is possible only if one overlooks the text’s frame—its beginning and end, in which Wolf explains in a highly self-critical way why her language lacks the sharpness and directness that both Schirmmacher and Greiner demand of her. The entire text is framed by the narrator’s doubt, expressed in the first and last paragraph, about whether she will ever be able to find this type of language. The text begins with an encouragement not to postpone the project of writing about the Stasi surveillance:

Nur keine Angst. In jener anderen Sprache, die ich im Ohr, noch nicht auf der Zunge habe, werde ich eines Tages auch darüber reden. Heute, das wußte ich, wäre es noch zu früh. Aber würde ich spüren, wenn es an der Zeit ist? Würde ich meine Sprache je finden? Einmal würde ich alt sein. Und wie würde ich mich dieser Tage dann erinnern? Der Schreck zog etwas in mir zusammen, das sich bei Freude ausdehnt. Wann war ich zuletzt froh gewesen? Das wollte ich jetzt nicht wissen. Wissen wollte ich—es war ein Morgen im März, kühl, grau, auch nicht mehr allzu früh—, wie ich in zehn, zwanzig Jahren an diesen noch frischen, noch nicht abgelebten Tag zurückdenken würde.⁵⁸³

Besides evoking an atmosphere of anxiety (“Angst”) and sadness (“Wann war ich zuletzt froh gewesen?”), which sets the tone of this text right from the start, this passage also contains the admission of a failure: the narrator hopes that some day she will be able to talk “about that” (“darüber”) in a different kind of language, but she has doubts about when and even *if* this will happen (“Würde ich meine Sprache je finden?”). For now, she concedes that this use of a new language presents an impossibility (“Heute, das wußte ich, wäre es noch zu früh”).

⁵⁸³ Wolf, *Was bleibt*, 5.

The narrator is not yet able to talk about the blatant gap between the original idea of socialism represented and the GDR reality. This becomes manifest in a passage where she speaks about the headrests in her observers' car. She has learned not to confuse those inanimate objects with the heads of the observers:

Köpfe sind ungleichmäßig geformt, beweglich, Kopfstützen gleichförmig, abgerundet, steil—ein gewaltiger Unterschied, den ich irgendwann einmal genauer beschreiben könnte, in meiner neuen Sprache, die härter sein würde als die, in der ich immer noch denken mußte. Wie hartnäckig die Stimme die Tonhöhe hält, auf die sie sich einmal eingependelt hat, und welche Anstrengung es kostet, auch nur Nuancen zu ändern. Von den Wörtern gar nicht zu reden, dachte ich, während ich anfing, mich zu duschen—den Wörtern, die, sich beflissen überstürzend, hervorquellen, wenn ich den Mund aufmache, angeschwollen von Überzeugungen, Vorurteilen, Eitelkeit, Zorn, Enttäuschung und Selbstmitleid.⁵⁸⁴

Someday, she says, she will be able to describe the discrepancy between the ideal appearance, “gleichförmig, abgerundet, steil,” and the reality of things, “ungleichmäßig geformt, beweglich.” To describe this drastic difference between the utopian ideal and its ugly manifestation, seeing the heads of those men ordered to sit in front of her house to keep her under surveillance, she will need to find a different register, a different pitch—a task that presents enormous difficulties for her since she emphasizes the effort this change requires: “Wie hartnäckig die Stimme die Tonhöhe hält, auf die sie sich einmal eingependelt hat, und welche Anstrengung es kostet, auch nur Nuancen zu ändern.” To find a vocabulary for her new language seems even harder to her. She will have to overcome a flood of emotions in order to speak differently about the GDR regime, “Überzeugungen, Vorurteile [...], Eitelkeit, Zorn, Enttäuschung und Selbstmitleid.”⁵⁸⁵

Thus the narrator finds herself at a turning point. She is becoming disillusioned with the GDR regime, and this disillusionment, she feels, affects her writing. She

⁵⁸⁴ Ibid., 9-10.

⁵⁸⁵ All citations in this paragraph are taken from the paragraph quoted above.

recognizes that, with the realization of the oppressive sides of the regime, her aesthetic approach will also have to change. This recognition triggers a veritable “*Sprachkrise*.” The language she used to speak is already in a state of crisis, as becomes visible in the following passage:

Aber zu welchem Zweck saßen drei junge Herren viele Stunden lang beharrlich in einem weißen Wartburg direkt gegenüber unserem Fenster.

Fragezeichen. Die Zeichensetzung in Zukunft gefälligst ernster nehmen, sagte ich mir. Überhaupt: sich mehr an die harmlosen Übereinkünfte halten. Das ging doch, früher. Als hinter den Sätzen mehr Ausrufezeichen als Fragezeichen standen? Aber mit simplen Selbstbeichtigungen würde ich diesmal nicht davonkommen. Ich setzte Wasser auf. Das mea culpa überlassen wir mal den Katholiken. Wie auch das pater noster. Lossprechungen sind nicht in Sicht.⁵⁸⁶

The conventions of punctuation, “die harmlosen Übereinkünfte” of language, which here stand in for political convictions as well, have become fragile. Where there used to be exclamation marks, there are now question marks. “Lossprechungen,” easy ways out of the crisis, are not on the horizon.

Later in the text, the beginning passage is reiterated. Don’t be afraid, the narrator says to herself again, there will be a new language. It has already begun to grow inside of her:

Keine Angst. Meine andere Sprache, dachte ich, weiter darauf aus, mich zu täuschen, während ich das Geschirr in das Spülbecken stellte, mein Bett machte, ins vordere Zimmer zurückging und endlich am Schreibtisch saß—meine andere Sprache, die in mir zu wachsen begonnen hatte, zu ihrer vollen Ausbildung aber noch nicht gekommen war, würde gelassen das Sichtbare dem Unsichtbaren opfern, würde aufhören, die Gegenstände durch ihr Aussehen zu beschreiben—tomatenrote, weiße Autos, lieber Himmel!—und würde, mehr und mehr, das unsichtbare Wesentliche aufscheinen lassen. Zupackend würde diese Sprache sein, soviel glaubte ich immerhin zu ahnen, schonend und liebevoll. Niemandem würde sie weh tun als mir selbst. Mir dämmerte, warum ich über diese Zettel, über einzelne Sätze nicht hinauskam. Ich gab vor, ihnen nachzuhängen. In Wirklichkeit dachte ich nichts.⁵⁸⁷

⁵⁸⁶ Ibid., 11.

⁵⁸⁷ Ibid., 13–14.

One day, she will be able to overcome the simple realism of describing objects by their outer appearance. The new language will “das unsichtbare Wesentliche aufscheinen lassen”; it will not just convey the color of the surveillance car in front of the narrator’s house but also address its political significance. This language will get to the bottom of things without being accusatory; she herself will be the only person to whom this new language will cause pain. But as in the opening paragraph, this hope for a new language is expressed in the subjunctive, and the narrator even acknowledges that her talk about a new language serves the purpose of self-deception. With the talk of the “other” language, she is “weiter darauf aus, mich zu täuschen.” For the moment, the thoughts of a more critical and more concrete way of writing about the GDR are not all-absorbing: “Ich gab vor, ihnen nachzuhängen. In Wirklichkeit dachte ich nichts.”

Again, the text displays the narrator’s failure. While she is able to analyze the problem her inability to express the corruption of the idea she once believed in), to see the challenge (finding a new mode of expression that allows for doubt and criticism), and to imagine a solution for the future (the new language with which she will be able to express criticism firmly and openly), she also makes it clear that for now, she is stuck hoping for a different, more critical aesthetic. Thus, I read the beginning of *Was bleibt*, the framework for this novella about Wolf being under Stasi observation, not as a representation of victimhood but as a self-critical assessment of a process of disillusionment that started with the recognition of her own surveillance.

The day Wolf describes in *Was bleibt* marks the beginning of a process of disillusionment. It starts with a change in perception that makes her recognize the terror of the Stasi observation: “Irgendetwas ging mit mir vor, mit meinem Sehvermögen, oder,

genauer, mit meinem gesamten Wahrnehmungsapparat. [...] Was ist mit uns, hörte ich mich denken, mehrmals hintereinander, sonst fehlten mir die Worte, sie fehlen mir bis heute.”⁵⁸⁸ What about us, the people who believed in this system? It is significant that Wolf is publishing this text in 1990 claiming that she still has not found the words to comment on this loss of political orientation in a meaningful way: “sie fehlen mir bis heute.” It is a strong statement that Wolf publishes this text displaying her aesthetic and political paralysis around 1979 in 1989 at the moment of the GDR’s total collapse, because it shows that she is at the same point she was ten years before. She is still searching for a way of translating the drastic political change into a new aesthetic form. This text mirrors her helplessness in facing, both personally and aesthetically, the breakdown of the utopian idea that had accompanied her throughout her life.

This reading invalidates Greiner’s reproaches concerning Wolf’s language and the date of publication. In the article initiating the long-lasting Christa Wolf debate, Greiner had criticized what he calls the “Christa-Wolf-Sound, diese flau Unverbindlichkeits-Melodie in der apart formulierten Sprache, [...] diese für Christa Wolf typische Unschärfe-Relation zwischen der wirklichen Welt, die als ferne Ahnung herüberschimmert, und der poetischen Welt ihrer Texte.”⁵⁸⁹ Only vaguely, he states, does Wolf describe the problems in the GDR instead of calling institutions or places by their names: “Der vorliegende Text vermeidet jede Konkretion. Weder von Stasi ist die Rede noch von Berlin. Terror findet statt. Aber kein Ort, nirgends.”⁵⁹⁰ But whereas Greiner reads the text’s lack of concreteness as well as its late publication date as a sign of Wolf’s avoidance and cowardice, I argue that this is precisely what Wolf displays in *Was bleibt*:

⁵⁸⁸ Ibid., 69.

⁵⁸⁹ Greiner, “Gesinnungsästhetik,” 67.

⁵⁹⁰ Ibid., 68.

her inability to be concrete in her criticism of the GDR. She herself recognizes as a failure that she is not able to adequately depict what is wrong with the state she lives in. The book is framed by the admission that there is still no new, free language, not even in 1989. Ironically, Greiner is then only repeating the idea Wolf had already addressed in her book. Because of her inability to address the real problems of the GDR regime, he turns her into a representative of the moral failure of the left, after she had depicted herself in this role.

The juxtaposition of Wolf's generation with the younger generation of GDR citizens and writers in *Was bleibt* can be seen as further evidence for this reading. In an encounter with a young female writer of the same generation as the narrator's daughter, the narrator recognized that this younger generation does not share her deep personal intertwinement with GDR history and is much freer and more courageous in its political criticism. The young writer comes to her apartment for advice. It turns out that the young woman had been involved in political activities as a university student, which ultimately led to her being expelled from her studies: "sie es war, die man damals vom Studium ausgeschlossen hatte, da sie nicht zu den Erpreßbaren gehörte."⁵⁹¹ Ultimately, she was even put in prison. The narrator feels strongly that this confinement, the result and embodiment of the younger woman's willingness to risk her personal freedom in order to speak up against the regime, separates the two: "'Gefängnis' war das Wort, das unsere Verwandtschaft in Frage stellte. Es ließ sich nichts dazu sagen, nichts fragen."⁵⁹²

⁵⁹¹ Ibid., 65.

⁵⁹² Ibid., 65.

Although the young woman's writing is excellent, the narrator advises her not to publish any of it. While she admires the younger colleague for her courage, she feels that she risks too much with her regime-critical writing:

Ich dachte: Es ist soweit. Die Jungen schreiben es auf. Das Mädchen erzählte von seinem harten Leben, jetzt wollte es sein innerstes Wesen hervorkehren, aber wohin sollte das führen, ich mußte es zügeln, ich konnte nicht dulden, daß es in diesem zutraulichen Zustand auf die Straße trat, ich mußte es fragen, wie es im Gefängnis war, mußte mir anhören, die Kälte sei das schlimmste gewesen. [...] Ich mußte jetzt, falls es möglich war, diesem Mädchen Angst einjagen. Mußte ihm sagen, die größten Talente seien in deutschen Gefängnissen vermodert, dutzendweis, und es sei nicht wahr, daß ein Talent der Kälte und der Demütigung und der Zermürbung besser widerstehe als ein Nichttalent. Und daß noch in zehn Jahren Menschen Sätze würden lesen wollen, wie sie sie schrieb. Und daß sie, bitte, nicht in jedes offene Messer laufen sollte.⁵⁹³

Here we arrive at an exceedingly important passage of the text. Considering that Wolf herself waited until 1989 to publish *Was bleibt*, it is significant that she recommends the young writer to leave her manuscript in the drawer because in ten years' time the situation might look different. Had the critics discovered this interesting twist of the text, they would have probably read it as a justification of Wolf's alleged opportunism: not only did she herself lack the courage to publish a critical text, but she portrays it as juvenility. But the encounter with the younger writer triggers crucial moments of self-doubt in the narrator that Wolf equally portrays in the text. Comparing herself to the young woman, the narrator realizes that her own inability to write about the regime's terror stems from a hesitation to let go of the socialist ideal: "Das Mädchen fragte nicht krämerisch: Was bleibt. Es fragte auch nicht danach, woran es sich erinnern würde, wenn es einst alt wäre."⁵⁹⁴

⁵⁹³ Wolf, *Was bleibt*, 66-67.

⁵⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 68.

Later, when she is confronted with the open criticism of a few younger GDR citizens at the reading she gives in an East Berlin theater, she says: “Was taten diese Leute. Sie brachten sich in Gefahr. Aber mit welchem Recht hielt ich sie für dümmer als mich? Mit welchem Recht nahm ich mir heraus, sie vor sich selbst zu schützen?”⁵⁹⁵ This juxtaposition of the narrator’s fear with the younger generation’s courage turns *Was bleibt* into a self-critical autobiographical text. Later at night, the narrator’s daughter calls because she had heard about an incident at the reading. She says at the end of the phone conversation: “Was ich noch sagen wollte: Sie haben ja recht, dir zu mißtrauen.” The narrator responds: “Das fange ich gerade zu begreifen an.”⁵⁹⁶ The novella pinpoints this moment—the moment the narrator realizes that she is slowly but surely moving to the side of the critics of the regime. The curtailment of civic freedom in the GDR has increased so much that she can no longer look away. *Was bleibt* depicts the narrator’s melancholic position of trying to come to terms with this conflict and her vain struggle to find a new language to write about it.

Light and free?—Christa Wolf in the City of Angels

Almost exactly twenty years after Germany’s reunification and the publication of *Was bleibt*, Wolf’s autobiographical novel *Stadt der Engel oder The Overcoat of Dr. Freud* (2010) appeared in German bookstores. *Stadt der Engel* covers the academic year 1992–1993, when Wolf was a fellow of the Getty Center in Los Angeles, while the Stasi debate was in full swing in Germany. The novel portrays the American experience of the protagonist, clearly identifiable as Christa Wolf, her emotional reactions to the attacks against her in the German press, and, most importantly, her attempts at understanding

⁵⁹⁵ Ibid., 83.

⁵⁹⁶ Ibid., 92.

how she could simply forget about the part of her biography that involved her affiliation with the Stasi.

Wolf's fans and critics had awaited this novel with great anticipation. In the *Berliner Zeitung* article, in which she had confessed to having a Stasi file, she had announced a plan to write about her personal relationship with the GDR one day "in größerem Zusammenhang."⁵⁹⁷ From my perspective, the novel fulfills that promise—however, not in the sense many readers expected, who were counting on a clear-cut explanation of Wolf's cooperation with the Stasi and her long silence about it. Wolf does not give an explanation that goes beyond the memory loss she had claimed earlier. But she provides something else. In the last paragraph of *Was bleibt*, the narrator expresses with some hope: "Eines Tages, dachte ich, werde ich sprechen können, ganz leicht und frei."⁵⁹⁸ This day, I believe, arrives with the publication of *Stadt der Engel*. Wolf depicts her liberation from the firm grip of socialism, a liberation that also has aesthetic consequences.

It is a strange setting: the East German author Christa Wolf in L.A., transplanted to the easy-going West Coast of the United States, her recently dissolved country appearing in the distance as a vague memory. This setting, however, creates a particular atmosphere that demands a shift in perspective, both in the narrator as well as in the reader. How important L.A. is for the understanding of the novel can not only be seen

⁵⁹⁷ Wolf wrote in her article "Eine Auskunft" in 1993: "Ich war und bin darüber bedrückt, daß durch die Jagd nach "IM" eine Auseinandersetzung mit der komplexen Realität DDR und auch die selbstkritische Aufarbeitung unserer Lebensläufe in diesem Land eher blockiert als befördert wird. Ich wollte meine Entwicklung in einem größeren Zusammenhang darstellen, in dem auch diese Aktenerkenntnisse ihren Platz finden sollten." Wolf, "Eine Auskunft," 144.

⁵⁹⁸ Christa Wolf, *Stadt der Engel*, 93.

from the title but also from the novel's epigraph, taken from Walter Benjamin's

Ausgraben und Erinnern:

So müssen wahrhafte Erinnerungen
viel weniger berichtend verfahren
als genau den Ort bezeichnen,
an dem der Forscher ihrer habhaft wurde.⁵⁹⁹

Thus we are told from the beginning why the City of Angels is of great importance: It is the place where Wolf is confronted with her memories of the GDR, or more precisely her attempts to remember what led to her cooperation with the Stasi. We will be given "wahrhafte Erinnerungen," the epigraph suggests, and they will be expressed not in the form of a report ("berichtend"), but indirectly in this narrative of Wolf's visit to California.

Wolf stays at the Getty Center as a writer in residence, but while she secretly pursues another project—the search for an old Jewish friend of her friend Emma, both of them communists from the first hour—she goes to the Center every day and writes "Tagesprotokolle" of her experiences in L.A. Increasingly, these daily reports turn into "Überlegungen, die mit den Tagesnotizen scheinbar nichts zu tun hatten,"⁶⁰⁰ and she writes down memories of her life in the GDR and reflections on her relationship to the socialist state. These reflections stand out typographically from the rest of the text, as they are written in capital letters. As such Wolf gives the illusion that we are dealing with the same notes she had scribbled down on a daily basis in 1993 at the Getty Center. She simply collected them and inserted them into her novel.

One of these notes, placed towards the beginning of the text, I consider particularly important for the character of the entire novel. It reads: "VOM ENDE HER

⁵⁹⁹ Ibid., 7.

⁶⁰⁰ Ibid., 30.

ERZÄHLEN.”⁶⁰¹ This indicates the perspective of hindsight, both politically as well as biographically, from which Wolf tells her story. On the one hand, the word “end” refers to the end of the GDR. The socialist state as a political entity “ended” with Germany’s reunification in 1990. More importantly, however, Wolf’s approach “vom Ende her” alludes to her own biography. As Jörg Magenau, Wolf’s biographer, has pointed out, it is not a coincidence that the novel ends with a trip to Death Valley and the fantasy, rather untypical for Christa Wolf, of flying over the vast landscape with an angel.⁶⁰² Wolf evidently considers this autobiographical text the last one she will write in her lifetime. One has to read the following note with both the political and the personal layers of meaning in mind:

WIE VOM ENDE HER ALLES SICH AUFKLÄRT. WIE MAN, WENN MAN MITTEN DRIN STECKT, DURCH KEINE ANSTRENGUNG DAS MUSTER ERKENNEN KANN. DAS UNTER DEN ERSCHEINUNGEN ARBEITET. WEIL DER BLINDE FLECK DAS ZENTRUM DER EINSICHT UND DER ERKENNTNIS ÜBERDECKT.⁶⁰³

Whereas in *Was bleibt*, Wolf presents herself as too entangled with the ideas behind the corrupted political system to gain a critical perspective, she suggests that this text contains the insights of a woman of eighty-one years who has seen the GDR collapse more than twenty years earlier—a perspective from which things obviously look different.

The temporal and geographical distance allows her to revisit her strong belief in the socialist utopia and also to eventually tackle the most difficult part of her past: the

⁶⁰¹ Ibid., 28.

⁶⁰² Magenau writes that in “Die Reise endet nicht zufällig im ‘Death Valley’, wo sie in eine Traumvision hinübergleitet. Ein Sog ‘vom Ende her’ gründiert das ganze Buch. Mit dem Alter nähert sich der Tod; da ist es Zeit, Bilanz zu ziehen.” Jörg Magenau, “Ans Selbstgespräch gefesselt,” *taz*, June 26, 2010, <http://www.taz.de/1/archiv/digitaz/artikel/?ressort=ku&dig=2010/06/26/a0028&cHash=acfdddb3a4>.

⁶⁰³ Wolf, *Stadt der Engel* 121.

cooperation with the Stasi that she had repressed for so long and re-discovered less than a year before. She wants to find out both what had made her amenable to being an informant for the Stasi and, perhaps even more importantly, how she could forget this episode of her life. “MEINER EIGENEN FREMDHEIT NACHZUGEHEN,” she writes “hatte ich lange vermieden, bis jetzt.”⁶⁰⁴ Her plan is now: “NOCH EINMAL DAS UNTERSTE NACH OBEN KEHREN.”⁶⁰⁵ The image with which she tries to capture the difficulty of this inquiry becomes the overcoat of Dr. Freud, used throughout the novel.

The coat had once belonged to an architect, Bob Rice, who had received it from the wife of Richard Neutra, to whom the coat had been given by Freud himself. With Freud’s overcoat he would be able to make it through any difficulty in life, Rice thought. When it was stolen, Rice simultaneously felt a great loss and the conviction that he would make do without its protection. The ambiguity of the loss of the coat—was it a loss or a blessing in disguise?—draws Wolf, again and again, to this image. When she tells her American friend Sally about the unexpected Stasi files, Wolf says: “The overcoat of Dr. Freud [...]. Ich wünschte, er könnte mich schützen.” Sally replies: “Im Gegenteil [...]. Er ist doch dazu da, dir deinen Selbstschutz wegzuziehen,”⁶⁰⁶ implying that the psychoanalytic technique Freud represents is supposed to bring back repressed fears and conflicts into consciousness. Wolf explains the coat metaphor most clearly to her Feldenkrais therapist, like her Chinese acupuncture therapist one of many Californian characters the East-German author encounters: “The overcoat of Dr. Freud [...]. Der Mantel, weißt du, der dich wärmt, aber auch verbirgt, und den man von innen nach außen

⁶⁰⁴ Ibid., 120.

⁶⁰⁵ Ibid., 596.

⁶⁰⁶ Ibid., 203.

wenden muß. Damit das Innere sichtbar wird.“⁶⁰⁷ This image expresses the two-fold process she must follow: in order to stop the concealment, she needs to get to the bottom of her repressed memory about her Stasi past (“MEINER EIGENEN FREMDHEIT NACHGEHEN,”⁶⁰⁸ as she calls it), while simultaneously protecting herself from what this process will stir up. The process of unveiling, not coincidentally, begins on the evening she first hears about Dr. Freud’s overcoat from Bob Rice.

In the novel, this is the moment in which Wolf decides that she needs to speak publicly about her Stasi “Täterakte”:

Alles in mir sträubte sich dagegen, aber es ließ sich nicht mehr aufschieben, damit an die Öffentlichkeit zu gehen, ich fing an, eine Art Bericht zu schreiben, so wahrhaftig wie möglich, den ich an eine Zeitung in Berlin faxte.⁶⁰⁹

The wish for a protective shield becomes urgent when, shortly after the publication of the article in *Berliner Zeitung*, the Stasi affair reaches its peak in the German media. In *Stadt der Engel*, Wolf reveals how she suffered during this time. The night after her husband faxes her some of articles containing harsh personal attacks against her, she has suicidal thoughts:

Ich fragte mich ernsthaft, was ich machen sollte. Wie ich die Nacht überstehen sollte. [...] Ich legte mich ins Bett und suchte angestrengt nach Beweisen, die ich für eine Verteidigung hätte brauchen können. Ich fand keine. Keinen Zipfel des overcoat des Dr. Freud konnte ich ergreifen. Ich spürte, daß ich in einen Strudel geriet, und begriff, daß ich in der Gefahr war. Der Grund des Strudels, an dem ich nicht mehr da wäre, kam mir sehr verlockend vor, als das einzig Mögliche. Ich überlegte, wie ich es machen könnte, das lenkte mich etwas ab.⁶¹⁰

Wolf is ultimately able to free herself from the maelstrom, but the nagging self-interrogation does not stop. If she only searches long and hard enough, if she turns herself

⁶⁰⁷ Ibid., 260.

⁶⁰⁸ Ibid., 120.

⁶⁰⁹ Wolf, *Stadt der Engel*, 177.

⁶¹⁰ Ibid., 236.

inside out, she hopes to eventually find a convincing way of explaining what happened in 1959 when she began to cooperate with the Stasi, and how she could forget about it. She realizes the implausibility of the only explanation she has to offer: “Wie hatte ich das vergessen können? Ich wußte ja, daß man mir das nicht glauben konnte, man warf es mir sogar als mein eigentliches Vergehen vor.”⁶¹¹ Was it really possible that she could have simply forgotten she was an IM? She talks to a friend, a psychotherapist, from Zurich:

Ich rief den Freund in Zürich an: Sie als Psychologe müssen es wissen: Kann man es vergessen? Daß sie mir einen Decknamen gegeben haben? Daß ich einen Bericht geschrieben habe? Er ließ sich nicht aus der Ruhe bringen. Na und? sagte er. Was weiter? Im übrigen: Man kann alles vergessen. Man muß sogar. Kennen Sie nicht den Satz von Freud: Ohne Vergessen könnten wir nicht leben? – Verdrängen! sagte ich. Und er: Nicht unbedingt. Man vergißt auch, was man nicht so wichtig findet. – Aber das kann es doch bei mir in diesem Fall nicht gewesen sein. – Wer weiß. Wie lange ist das denn her. – Dreiunddreißig Jahre. – Ach du lieber Himmel. Und woher wollen Sie dann heute wissen, was Ihnen damals wichtig war? – Das will ich rauskriegen. – Und wie? – Ich steig noch mal runter in diesen Schacht.⁶¹²

She might have repressed the 1959 encounters with the Stasi, says the psychotherapist, or simply forgotten them because they were not that important. Wolf finds this explanation as unsatisfying as many of her critics. In one of her notes, she writes: “MANCHMAL DENKE ICH, ICH MÜSSTE MICH NUR AUF DIE RICHTIGE WEISE ANSTRENGEN, DANN WÜRDEN DIE RICHTIGEN, DIE RETTENDEN SÄTZE ZUM VORSCHWEIN KOMMEN.”⁶¹³ There must be a good way to defend herself, to find the right language to do it. She only has to try harder.

⁶¹¹ Ibid., 205.

⁶¹² Wolf, *Stadt der Engel*, 205.

⁶¹³ Ibid., 239.

Jörg Magenau, in his review of the novel for the *taz*, focuses on this introspection and expresses his tiredness with Wolf's "tendenziell unendliche Selbstbefragung."⁶¹⁴

Critically, he asks:

Müsste Christa Wolf nach ihrem Stasi-Gedächtnis-Debakel nicht ihre Methode ändern? [...] Sie setzt die alte Methode der selbstquälerischen Erinnerungsarbeit fort, als wäre nichts gewesen.⁶¹⁵

I disagree with Magenau's reading. In my view, *Stadt der Engel* represents a turning point in Wolf's writing precisely because she gives up the torturing self-interrogation. It is hard to pinpoint a precise moment in the novel at which Wolf finally abandons the search for a justification and the self-inspection that went along with it. But there are moments of recognition throughout the novel that point in this direction, such as when she wonders about the right behavior in her situation but ultimately acknowledges:

“ODER VERFALLE ICH WIEDER IN DEN FEHLER, NACH DEN ANSPRÜCHEN ANDERER ZU FRAGEN.”⁶¹⁶ An encounter with a young (West) German journalist who has come to California to interview her also shows her that it might ultimately be futile to hope for understanding at all.⁶¹⁷ Faced with the journalist's ignorance—she is entirely clueless and uninformed with regard to Wolf's literary work—Wolf feels that whatever explanation she gives will be misunderstood. At another point, she notices that she mainly pursues an internal self-interrogation out of an external sense of duty to the public:

⁶¹⁴ Magenau, “Ans Selbstgespräch gefesselt.”

⁶¹⁵ Ibid.

⁶¹⁶ Wolf, *Stadt der Engel*, 187.

⁶¹⁷ The passage about the West German journalist presents a satirical portrayal of the often unsubstantiated and misinformed critique of East German writers that was presented in the West German media after the fall of the Berlin Wall. The rather funny passage ends in a tone of despair: “Ich war hilf- und sprachlos. Ich sah, alle Erklärungsversuche würden nichts nützen. [...] Betäubt Wenn ich das in einem Buch lesen würde, dachte ich, das könnte ich nicht glauben. Nie würde ich mir erlauben, ein derartigen Klischee zu verwenden. [...] Ich hatte wieder dieses Gefühl von Vergeblichkeit.” Wolf, *Stadt der Engel*, 231.

MIR IST KLARGEWORDEN, DASS ICH MICH ALS EXEMPEL NEHME, ALSO VON MIR ABSEHE, INDEM ICH MICH GANZ AUF MICH ZU KONZENTRIEREN SCHEINE. EINE MERKWÜRDIGE GEGENLÄUFIGE BEWEGUNG.⁶¹⁸

These moments of recognition, I argue, lead to the novel's strange ending and can explain the lack of a satisfying explanation for Wolf's Stasi past. If one assembles all the passages relating to this episode in her life, the reader is offered the following narrative: in her naive admiration for the GDR state, Wolf did not see any reason to question the necessity of the *Geheime Staatspolizei*. She willfully cooperated, writing a few reports. Then she simply forgot this episode of her life, because it just did not have great significance for her at the time.

The fact that Christa Wolf abides by this simplest, banal, and definitely least believable explanation of her Stasi past, and that she accepts that there is no great secret to discover, no solution, no possibility to be a role model in this situation, takes on a much greater significance at this point in the text. She will not need the protective shield of Freud's coat nor will she have to turn it inside out in an act of self-revelation. All she needs to do—after all, this is new-agey California—is learn the art of letting go, which she accomplishes at the end.

Flight with an angel? The ending of "Stadt der Engel"

This acceptance of her double moral failure—her Stasi past and its repression—transforms her. She isolates herself from her friends and falls ill with a high fever. The fever seems to be reason for the appearance of Angelina, the angel, who in reality is her African American cleaning lady. "OB SIE, DER ENGEL, EIN TEIL MEINER

⁶¹⁸ Wolf, *Stadt der Engel*, 356.

GENESUNG SEI,”⁶¹⁹ Wolf wants to know. Clearly, the answer is yes. She experiences a great change during her last weeks in the U.S. She arrives at a “Wendepunkt [...], Wochen, in denen ich das Gefühl hatte, in einer immer brüchiger werdenden Wirklichkeit zu leben.”⁶²⁰ On a trip to Arizona with new friends, she visits a Hopi reservation, and faced with the history of this people, she realizes her country’s and her own insignificance in the great scope of things. The trip becomes “EINE REISE AUF DIE ANDERE SEITE DER WIRKLICHKEIT,”⁶²¹ and angel Angelina remains her steady companion.

The healing process taking place during this trip to the other side of reality involves giving up the torturing habit of self-questioning: “Angelina ließ mich wissen, daß man nicht alles erklären müsse.”⁶²² Wolf meditates on the necessity of living with unsolvable conflicts; she learns “DASS KEINE UNSERER UNAUSWEICHLICHEN ENTSCHEIDUNGEN RICHTIG IST. DASS WIR KEINE WAHL ZWISCHEN FALSCH UND RICHTIG HABEN.”⁶²³ This recognition goes hand in hand with a remarkable shift in tone, a freer and lighter, almost humorous language that allows for conversations with angels and other magical elements such as the flight over Death Valley Wolf undertakes with Angelina at the very end of the novel. From the perspective of death, “vom Ende her,” Wolf ultimately recognizes that nothing ever comes to a perfect completion:

Ich wußte, daß es ein Abschied war. Eine Arbeit ist getan, Angelina, aber warum bleibt das Gefühl der Vollendung aus? Ein Wort trieb mir zu, das ich seit Wochen

⁶¹⁹ Ibid., 326.

⁶²⁰ Ibid., 367.

⁶²¹ Ibid., 385.

⁶²² Wolf, *Stadt der Engel*, 334.

⁶²³ Ibid., 380.

unbewußt gesucht hatte: Vorläufig. Eine vorläufige Arbeit ist zu einem vorläufigen Schluß gekommen. Angelina lachte: Aber ist es so nicht immer?⁶²⁴

To let go—this seems to be the life lesson Wolf learns at the end of her stay in California.

From her new vantage point, the suffering that the socialist experiment called GDR has caused in her life seems in vain:

Das kleine Land, aus dem ich kam, [...] [s]tand über ihm nicht von Anfang an das Menetekel des Untergangs: ins Nichts mit ihm? Wäre es möglich, daß ich um einen banalen Irrtum so sollte gelitten haben?⁶²⁵

It appears as though this is the moment she leaves behind the idea of her country, indeed the entire belief system that accompanied her ever since she emerged from World War II as a young woman, one of Hitler's admirers. How can she make do without her identity as a socialist writer? How is starting from scratch possible at her advanced age?

Angelina, the angel, has the last word, and so the novel ends with a reference to life's (and the text's) uncertainty and circularity:

Müßte ich jetzt nicht eine große Schleife fliegen? Sagte ich. Zurück auf Anfang? Mach doch, sagte sie ungerührt. Und Jahre Arbeit? Einfach wegwerfen? Das Alter, Angelina, das Alter verbietet es. Angelina hatte zum Alter kein Verhältnis. Sie hatte alle Zeit der Welt. Sie wollte ihren Leichtsinn auf mich übertragen. Sie wollte daß ich diesen Flug genoß. [...] Wohin sind wir unterwegs? Das weiß ich nicht.

With this final, almost absurd and certainly unusual image—a Superman-like flight of an *Ossi* with an African American angel—Wolf shows her readers that she has found a new way to approach her past. Surprisingly, it is not the dialectic language of questioning and self-questioning, of rational explanations and getting to the bottom of things we are used to from Wolf's texts. It seems that "Leichtsinn"—the levity Angelina wanted to transfer onto her, as the last quote suggests—has indeed crept into Christa Wolf's writing, in the

⁶²⁴ Ibid., 413.

⁶²⁵ Ibid., 413.

truest sense of the word. Towards the end of her life, Wolf accepts the loss of the socialist utopia and the great ideological disorientation it brings (“Wohin sind wir unterwegs? Das weiß ich nicht.”). She even seems to enjoy it. Will people believe her when she says that she has simply forgotten about her Stasi affiliation in her youth? *Stadt der Engel* presents a liberation from this very question. Wolf said once in an interview that if a fairy came and granted her three wishes, or even one, she would wish that she had never become famous, because the burden of responsibility she felt toward the public was often too much to bear.⁶²⁶ With the figure of Angelina, Wolf has created an American version of this fairy, but with *Stadt der Engel* she herself makes this wish come true.

Reception of “Stadt der Engel”

Wolf’s 1990 novella *Was bleibt* displays the writer’s difficulty abandoning the socialist utopia, so integral of her post-war biography and constitutive of her identity as a writer. Even after the collapse of the GDR regime, she emphasizes in this novel, she has not yet found a language that would be critical of the socialist experiment. In *Stadt der Engel*, she still has not found this critical language. However, seventeen years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, she finally realizes that while the public discourse about writers of the Hitler Youth generation had changed, she herself continued to hold on to the idea of exemplifying the political development of the GDR. The failure of the state and her own failure became one. But with the surrealist ending of *Stadt der Engel*, Wolf’s true

⁶²⁶ In an interview with the newspaper *Wochenpost* in 1993, Wolf was asked whether she ever perceived her great influence over moral-political matters in the GDR as burdening. Her answer is decidedly positive. “*Wochenpost*: In der DDR wurden Sie von vielen Leuten als moralische Instanz angesehen. Hat Sie das belastet? *Christa Wolf*: Es hat mich unglaublich belastet. Manchmal habe ich gedacht, wenn eine gute Fee vorbeikäme, und ich hätte drei Wünsche frei—oder nur einen!—dann hätte ich gewünscht, noch einmal unbekannt sein zu dürfen. Die Ansprüche an mich kamen so massiv, daß ich in einem ständigen Schuldgefühl lebte, weil ich nicht allen gerecht werden konnte.” See “Margarete in Santa Monica. Wie fremd kann die Vergangenheit sein? Fritz Jochen Kopka sprach in Kalifornien mit Christa Wolf” *Wochenpost* (28 Jan. 1993), in Vinke, *Akteneinsicht*, 164–167, 167.

“*Alterswerk*” and the last novel before her death she puts an end to a search for a new language. In an act of liberation, she imagines the end of her life in an unusual language, in an untypical setting, as far away as she could possibly be from embodying GDR history. But how did the critics react to this conscious counterpoint to Wolf’s previous writing? How did they evaluate Wolf’s treatment of her Stasi past, which the writer herself had called unsatisfying?

Considering that Wolf was read as a symbol of German history both in 1990 and 1993, it is astonishing that there was not even a hint of such a representative reading in the initial reviews of *Stadt der Engel*. While the text vividly represents Wolf’s own psychological quest to get to the bottom of her Stasi repression, the critics seem to be preoccupied mostly with aesthetic questions. Joachim Güntner, for example, writing for *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, focuses on the genre question—is this a novel or a travelogue?—and complains about the many side characters, who appear “flat” to him, especially compared to Wolf’s other novels.⁶²⁷ Arno Widmann’s review for the *Frankfurter Rundschau*, is similarly concerned with the genre of the text. He protests that Wolf should have made the text more obviously autobiographical by including more concrete dates.⁶²⁸

Jens Jessen, journalist for *Die Zeit*, provides the subtlest reading of the novel. His review was the only one offering an explanation of the strange twist at the end of *Stadt der Engel*. Like me, he interprets *Stadt der Engel* as Wolf’s disassociation from a certain

⁶²⁷ Joachim Güntner, “Weich abgefederte Selbstbefragung. *Stadt der Engel* oder *The Overcoat of Dr. Freud*. Christa Wolfs kalifornisches Raisonement,” *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, June 22, 2010, http://www.nzz.ch/nachrichten/kultur/buchrezensionen/weich_abgefederte_selbstbefragung_1.6201888.html.

⁶²⁸ Arno Widmann, “Christa Wolf’s *Stadt Der Engel*. Wahrheit und Wahn,” *Frankfurter Rundschau*, June 14, 2010, <http://www.fr-online.de/literatur/wahrheit-und-wahn,1472266,4476272.html>.

self-image: her “hochgehaltenes, literarisch hochgezüchtetes Selbstbild als Inbegriff moralischer Sensibilität.”⁶²⁹ He does not spare Wolf the charge of “Larmoyanz und Selbstgerechtigkeit,” but ultimately understands that “die Selbstgerechtigkeit, die Anfälle von Weinerlichkeit und Selbstmitleid werden nur zur Vorbereitung einer ganz anderen Pointe inszeniert”⁶³⁰: all self-involvement is staged in order to be left behind. His reading of the novel thus ends on a positive note. Wolf, in his eyes, is preparing herself for the end of her life and has never been more humble.

Overall, the reviews clearly lack the judgmental tone with which Wolf’s moral-political failures were commented on before. The emotional investment palpable in the reviews of *Was bleibt* is missing. The accusations and the assessment of guilt that formed the foundation of the 2003 Stasi debate seem to no longer be of interest to critics in 2010. Instead, they reveal a willingness to discuss the text primarily for its aesthetic merits or failures. Apparently, the discussion of whether Wolf belongs to the shelf of German history on the side of the “*Täterakten*” or on the side of the “*Opferakten*” had petered out long before the author herself, with some belatedness, gave up on playing a representative role in German post-war history.

⁶²⁹ Jens Jessen, “Reise ans Ende der Tugend. *Stadt der Engel*. Christa Wolfs Entdeckung der kalifornischen Sonne und der eigenen Fehlbarkeit,” *Die Zeit*, June 17, 2010, <http://www.zeit.de/2010/25/Christa-Wolf/komplettansicht>.

⁶³⁰ Ibid.

*Es gab in seiner Rede überspitzte Formulierungen. Ein Dichter darf so etwas.
—Gerhard Schröder*

2. Literature and Morality— The Walser Debates of 1998 and 2002

The moral cudgel—Walser speaking at St. Paul's Church

Martin Walser's speech "*Erfahrungen beim Verfassen einer Sonntagsrede*," parts of which have been previously discussed, becomes relevant once again in the context of this chapter. I have argued that Walser's insistence on presenting his childhood memories in *Ein springender Brunnen* from the ahistorical and apolitical perspective of the child matches his demand for an individualization of memory in the *Friedenspreis* speech. I have already mentioned the particularly provocative passages of the speech: Walser argued that the Holocaust was being instrumentalized, that it had become mere "Drohoutine, [...] jederzeit einsetzbares Einschüchterungsmittel oder Moralkeule."⁶³¹ He spoke of an "Instrumentalisierung unserer Schande zu gegenwärtigen Zwecken,"⁶³² and a "Routine des Beschuldigens" in the German media, called the Holocaust memorial in Berlin "einen fußballfeldgroßen Alptraum," and he confessed that he had developed a strong resistance against this type of "Dauerrepräsentation unserer Schande."⁶³³ "Mit seinem Gewissen ist jeder allein,"⁶³⁴ Walser claimed insisting on individuality in matters of memory, which in his eyes ought not to be imposed by the government or the media.

⁶³¹ Martin Walser, "Erfahrungen beim Verfassen einer Sonntagsrede," in Schirmmacher, *Die Walser-Bubis-Debatte*, 7-17, 13.

⁶³² *Ibid.*, 12.

⁶³³ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁶³⁴ *Ibid.*, 14.

What remains to be considered is the furious debate that arose shortly after Walser's speech. This controversy as well as the debate that followed the publication of Walser's novel *Tod eines Kritikers* (2002) four years later will be the focus of this next part of my chapter.

In its emotional and intellectual vigor, the Walser-Bubis debate, which arguably became the most important memory controversy of the 1990s, is comparable only to the famous *Historikerstreit* of 1987. It began with a public statement by Ignatz Bubis, president of the *Zentralrat der Deutschen Juden in Deutschland* at the time. Bubis had already expressed his dislike of Walser's speech by remaining seated in the St. Paul's Church while the majority of the audience gave Walser a standing ovation. Two days later, on October 11, he was quoted in the FAZ putting Walser in close ideological proximity to politicians of the extreme right: "Leute wie der DVU-Vorsitzende Gerhard Frey and Ex-Republikaner Chef Franz Schönhuber sagen es auch nicht anders. Das ist geistige Brandstiftung."⁶³⁵ On November 9, the anniversary of the *Kristallnacht*, his accusations became more concrete. In a commemorative speech at a synagogue in Berlin, he referred to Walser's speech as "[d]en neuesten Versuch, Geschichte zu verdrängen beziehungsweise die Erinnerung auszulöschen."⁶³⁶ Walser, in turn, defended his stance with the argument that many Germans felt the same way. At the university of Duisburg on November 28, he stressed that in the roughly six weeks since the Friedenspreis speech he had received over one thousand letters, in which German citizens expressed "daß sie

⁶³⁵ "Geistige Brandstiftung. Bubis wendet sich gegen Walser," *dpa/Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* October 13, 1998, in Schirmmacher, *Die Walser-Bubis-Debatte*, 34-35, 34.

⁶³⁶ Ignatz Bubis, "Rede des Präsidenten des Zentralrates der Juden in Deutschland am 9. November 1998 in der Synagoge Rykestraße in Berlin," in Schirmmacher, *Die Walser-Bubis-Debatte*, 106-113, 106.

einer Rede zustimmen, in der öffentlich gesagt wurde, was jeder bisher nur gedacht oder gefühlt hatte.”⁶³⁷

The outrage both over Walser’s speech and Bubis’ response did not abate for at least four months. Until the beginning of the following January, when contributions became more irregular, there were articles and letters-to-the-editor in the papers every single day, either commenting on Walser’s speech or Bubis’ reaction, or discussing the German memory discourse in general. Every German intellectual of distinction seems to have contributed to the exchange. The volume assembling articles and letters encompasses 679 densely printed pages.

The Walser-Bubis debate in its historical and political context

Three characteristic features can explain the intensity of the debate. The first one is the political and historical context of the 1990s. As Schirmmacher put it, the time of Walser’s speech at St. Paul’s Church presented an “Augenblick, da das Land die Hauptstadt wechselt und das Jahrhundert hinter sich läßt.”⁶³⁸ The 1990s in Germany represented a decade of great historical and political change, beginning with Germany’s reunification in 1990, a consequence of which was the move of the country’s capital from provincial Bonn to the historical city of Berlin in 1998. Furthermore, the era of Helmut Kohl had just ended. One month before the *Friedenspreis* speech, in September 1998, a new

⁶³⁷ Martin Walser, “Wovon zeugt die Schande, wenn nicht von Verbrechen. Das Gewissen ist die innere Einsamkeit mit sich: Ein Zwischenruf,” *FAZ*, November 28, 1998, in Schirmmacher, *Die Walser-Bubis-Debatte*, 252-260.

⁶³⁸ Frank Schirmmacher, “Ein Gespräch. Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung,” *FAZ*, December 14, 1998, in Schirmmacher, *Die Walser-Bubis-Debatte*, 436-438, 437. With these words, Schirmmacher introduces a meeting of Walser and Bubis, who were invited by the *FAZ* to talk to each other in person when two months after Walser’s speech the controversial discussions still had not calmed down. For a transcription of the conversation between Walser and Bubis, with the presence of Salomon Korn and Frank Schirmmacher, see Ignatz Bubis, Salomon Korn, Frank Schirmmacher, and Martin Walser, “Wir brauchen eine neue Sprache für die Erinnerung. Ein Gespräch,” *FAZ*, December 14, 1998, in Schirmmacher, *Die Walser-Bubis-Debatte*, 438-465.

parliament was elected: for the first time in eighteen years the German chancellor was no longer Helmut Kohl, and a coalition of the social-democratic and the Green Party (“Die Grünen”) took over, with Gerhard Schröder as the chancellor and Joschka Fischer as the foreign minister.⁶³⁹ These obvious political changes entailed shifts in less conspicuous realms. German national identity needed to be redefined, and how closely this reflection on nationhood and identity was intertwined with the memory of the past becomes palpable from the various memory debates of the 1990s such as the Wehrmacht debate, the Goldhagen controversy, the fights over compensatory claims made by Holocaust survivors, the debates about Germans as victims of World War II, and the debate about the Holocaust memorial that Walser mentions in his speech.⁶⁴⁰ In the cultural sphere, a number of national and international movies (with Steven Spielberg’s 1993 film *Schindler’s List* being the most popular) and television productions (consider for example Guido Knopp’s popular documentaries) addressing the subject of the Holocaust and World War II further demonstrate that the 1990s were a decade of an international “memory boom”—with Germany, due to its historical role, always at the center.⁶⁴¹ Considering the omnipresence of the memory subject, it is not surprising that almost everyone seemed to have an opinion about Walser’s memory speech. Obviously, there was great need for an open dialogue about memory. Walser had hit the nation’s nerve not least because of the politico-historical timing of his speech.

⁶³⁹ Kohl was Germany’s Chancellor from 1982 to 1998.

⁶⁴⁰ For information on these debates, see *Lexikon der “Vergangenheitsbewältigung,”* eds. Torben Fischer, and Mathias N. Lorenz (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2009). More specifically, see entries on “Wehrmachtsausstellung” (288-289), “Holocaust-Mahnmal in Berlin” (290-292), “Goldhagen-Debatte” (295), as well as the section on “Deutsche Opfernarrative” (340-356).

⁶⁴¹ See for example James E. Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning*, (Yale: Yale University Press), and Andreas Huyssen, *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia*. (New York: Routledge), 1994.

The second characteristic feature that contributed to the heatedness of the debate concerns the protagonists's biographies. Both Walser and Bubis were born in 1927, but in the debate they occupied different roles with regard to the history of the Third Reich, Bubis belonging to the side of the Jewish victims, Walser to the side of the German perpetrators. As Schirmmacher put it: "zwei Gleichaltrige, aufgewachsen auf den zwei Seiten der Jahrhunderterfahrung."⁶⁴² Thus, while it was repeatedly said that the debate enabled a new form of Jewish-German dialogue,⁶⁴³ Karl Heinz Bohrer was correct when he pointed out that this controversy was "ein im Grunde nicht lösbaren Streit zwischen emotionell sich verletzt Fühlenden einer noch betroffenen Generation."⁶⁴⁴ What distinguished this debate from previous ones, Bohrer argued, was "daß die meisten Teilnehmer nicht eigentlich wie Intellektuelle sprachen oder vorrangig in Kompetenz über eine Sache Sprechende waren, sondern buchstäblich Betroffene."⁶⁴⁵

Klaus von Dohnanyi's role in the controversy exemplifies Bohrer's thesis. The participants had high emotional stakes in the debate due to their biographical attachment to the Nazi period. Von Dohnanyi had tried to mediate between Bubis and Walser in his role as someone who, coming from a family with members of the resistance movement, stood between perpetrators and victims.⁶⁴⁶ He suggested in his defense of Walser in *Die Zeit* that this position enabled him to see why one party could not understand the other, or

⁶⁴² Frank Schirmmacher, Ein Gespräch, *Walser-Bubis-Debatte*, 438.

⁶⁴³ See for example Rafael Seligmann, "Endlich streiten wir uns. Walser contra Bubis: Der deutsch-jüdische Dialog befreit sich aus dem Angstghetto," *Die Welt*, November 21, 1998, in Schirmmacher, *Die Walser-Bubis-Debatte*, 198-200.

⁶⁴⁴ Karl Heinz Bohrer, "Schuldkultur oder Schamkultur und der Verlust an historischem Gedächtnis," *NZZ*, December 12, 1998, in Schirmmacher, *Die Walser-Bubis-Debatte*, 420-431, here 423-24.

⁶⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 421.

⁶⁴⁶ Klaus von Dohnanyi, former mayor of Hamburg and a famous figure in Germany's political scene, is the son of Hans von Dohnanyi and Christine Bonhoeffer. His father was arrested by the Gestapo because of his active resistance against the Nazis and killed in the concentration camp of Sachsenhausen shortly before the end of the War in 1945. His uncle Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Lutheran theologian and pastor, was also an active opponent of Nazism and equally involved in the German resistance movement. Arrested in 1943, he was sent to Buchenwald concentration camp and later executed.

rather why Bubis could not understand Walser: “weil [...] für Ignatz Bubis niemals auch nur ein Nebenton von persönlichem Vorwurf zu spüren sein kann. Bubis ist Jude, für ihn als Deutschen beginnt die Verantwortung erst nach dem Holocaust.”⁶⁴⁷ Walser’s speech, however, was read by von Dohnanyi as “die Klage eines persönlich unschuldigen Deutschen, der sich in der historischen Haft weiß, in einer Schande für die Verbrechen vorangegangener Generationen, die er nicht begangen hat, für die er sich aber doch verantwortlich fühlen muss.”⁶⁴⁸ Ironically, while von Dohnanyi from his supposedly neutral stance seemed to argue for communication across the stark historical divide between perpetrators and victims, he achieved quite the opposite. The positions hardened after he proceeded to ask whether Bubis had ever wondered how the Jewish citizens of Germany would feel today if ‘only’ the disabled, the homosexuals and the Roma had been deported to the camps and the Jews had been excluded from Nazi persecution.⁶⁴⁹ Bubis responded almost immediately, calling this question “böartig.”⁶⁵⁰ Von Dohnanyi, deeply upset, felt misquoted and misunderstood—and soon the exchange became a back-and-forth of unproductive accusations and expressions of hurt sensitivities.⁶⁵¹ Jens Jessen

⁶⁴⁷ Klaus von Dohnanyi, “Eine Friedensrede. Martin Walsers notwendige Klage,” *FAZ*, November 14, 1998, 146-150, 148.

⁶⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 150.

⁶⁴⁹ Dohnanyi writes: “Ich selbst formuliere deswegen, trotz meiner Familiengeschichte, immer ganz bewußt: Wir Deutsche haben das gemacht. Ignatz Bubis muß als Jude ein anderes Bewußtsein haben. Für ihn haben die Deutschen das getan. Allerdings müßten sich natürlich auch die jüdischen Bürger in Deutschland fragen, ob sie sich so sehr viel tapferer als die meisten anderen Deutschland verhalten hätten, wenn nach 1933 ‘nur’ die Behinderten, die Homosexuellen oder die Roma in die Vernichtungslager geschleppt worden wären. Ein jeder sollte versuchen, diese Frage für sich selbst ehrlich zu beantworten.” *Ibid.*, 148.

⁶⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 148.

⁶⁵¹ Klaus Dohnanyi wrote in an open letter to Bubis: “Ich finde, als Vorsitzender des Zentralrates der Deutschen Juden könnten Sie mit Ihren nicht-jüdischen Landsleuten etwas behutsamer umgehen; wir sind nämlich alle verletzbar. (‘Klaus von Dohnanyi antwortet Ignatz Bubis. Wir sind alle verletzbar,’ *FAZ*, November 11, 1998, in Schirmacher, *Die Walser-Bubis-Debatte*, 164.) Bubis, in turn, understanding the pronoun “wir” in last sentence as referring exclusively to the non-Jewish Germans, suggested in his response that von Dohnanyi and Walser could likewise treat their fellow Jewish citizens with more caution “denn auch wir sind verletzbar. Ist Ihnen das schon einmal in den Sinn gekommen?” (“Ignatz Bubis antwortet Klaus von Dohnanyi. Über den Seelenfrieden,” *FAZ*, November 19, 1998, in Schirmacher, *Die Walser-*

evaluated the situation intelligently several years later when he wrote about Bubis, Dohnanyi, and Walser: “In diesem historisch durchaus emblematischen Dreieck von überlebendem Opfer, Nachfahr des Widerstands und national verzweifelter Dichter bewegte sich nun die Debatte von Verletzung zu Verletzung, ohne den geringsten Erkenntniswert als eben den der Verletzbarkeit [...].”⁶⁵² The debate within the debate thus verifies Bohrer’s point very clearly: these participants do not speak with the rational voice and emotional distance of intellectuals but as representatives of the same complex generation with, however, distinct historical roles that seemed to make of a dialogue a topic so closely related to their personal biographies difficult if not impossible.

The third reason for the fervor and length of the debate was Walser’s nebulous phrasing. The speech was full of vague formulations and allusions, and to a large extent, the Walser-Bubis debate can simply be seen as “*Interpretationsstreit*,”⁶⁵³ in which the greatest ambiguity concerned the question Klaus Harpprecht asked in *Die Zeit*: “Wen meint Martin Walser?”⁶⁵⁴ Like many other, Harpprecht wondered why Walser did not clarify against whom his critique of the instrumentalization of Holocaust memory was directed. It was this vagueness, he argued, that gave way to suspicions about underlying

Bubis-Debatte, 174-175, 175.) Von Dohnanyi then clarified in yet another retort, deeply aggrieved, that he had of course meant *all* German citizens with his remark that everyone is vulnerable and—finally—asked Bubis to continue this dialogue in person. (“Klaus von Dohnanyi antwortet Ignatz Bubis. Wer das Wir zerbricht,” *FAZ*, November 20, 1998, in Schirmmacher, *Die Walser-Bubis-Debatte*, 186).

⁶⁵² Jens Jessen, “Der Dichter und sein Bärenführer. Der Fall Martin Walser ist auch ein Fall Frank Schirmmacher: Wozu die ‘Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung’ einen Tabubrecher braucht,” *Die Zeit*, June 6, 2002, http://www.zeit.de/2002/24/Der_Dichter_und_sein_Baerenfuehrer.

⁶⁵³ Rafael Seligmann, “Endlich streiten wir uns. Walser contra Bubis: Der deutsch-jüdische Dialog befreit sich aus dem Angstghetto,” *Die Welt*, November 21, 1998, in in Schirmmacher, *Die Walser-Bubis-Debatte*, 198-200, 198.

⁶⁵⁴ Klaus Harpprecht, “Wen meint Martin Walser?,” *Die Zeit*, October 15, 1998, in Schirmmacher, *Die Walser-Bubis-Debatte*, 51-53.

anti-Semitism.⁶⁵⁵ Salomon Korn criticized Walser's "nebulösen

Instrumentalisierungsvorwurf" in a similar way:

Er hätte zumindest Roß und Reiter nennen müssen, um nicht den fatalen Eindruck zu erwecken, es seien wieder einmal 'die üblichen Verdächtigen' gemeint, zum Beispiel der Zentralrat der deutschen Juden in Deutschland, der World Jewish Congress oder gar das 'internationale Judentum'—oder waren es vielleicht doch Grass, Reich-Ranicki, Habermas und andere?"⁶⁵⁶

And Marcel Reich-Ranicki, while considering the content of the speech rather harmless,

identified Walser's rhetoric of ambiguity as its actual problem:

Ich sehe in seiner Rede keinen einzigen wirklich empörenden Gedanken. Aber es wimmelt in ihr von unklaren und vagen Darlegungen und Formulierungen, die mißverstanden werden können und von denen manche—das war doch vorauszusehen—mißverstanden werden müssen.⁶⁵⁷

Why would Walser not avoid any ambiguity that could bring him close to positions of the extreme right? He refused to distance himself from these "false" readings of his speech.

If his vagueness had been unintentional and he had felt that the entire debate was based on misunderstandings, would it not have been easy for a writer to explain his position?

"Ein klärendes Wort, wäre das so schwierig gewesen, ein klärendes Wort?," Salomon

⁶⁵⁵ Harpprecht writes: "Durch die Wolkigkeit der Anklage spannt er das Netz des Verdachts viel weiter: Wer steckt zuletzt hinter der 'Drohoutine'? Wer droht wem? Drohen New Yorker Anwälte, die von der Deutschen Bank Aufklärung über Arisierungsgewinne und von der Allianz Auskunft über unterschlagene Versicherungen fordern? Droht der Jüdische Weltkongreß? Israel?" He concludes: "Das Problem der Frankfurter Rede Walsers ist nicht ihre Kühnheit, sondern die Feigheit generalisierender Verdächtigung." Ibid., 52 and 53.

⁶⁵⁶ Salomon Korn, "Es ist Zeit. Die andere Seite des Walser-Bubis-Streits," *FAZ*, December 1, 1998, in Schirmmacher, *Die Walser-Bubis-Debatte*, 304-307, 305-306. In the same vein, Wolfram Schütte found fault with Walser's "Kritik, die semantisch in die Nähe politisch rechter Verschwörungstheorien landete." Wolfram Schütte, "Lawinenkunde. Folgekosten einer 'literarischen' Friedensrede," *Frankfurter Rundschau* November 25, 1998, in Schirmmacher, *Die Walser-Bubis-Debatte*, 220-223, 222. And Friedrich Schorlemmer expressed a similar concern in a letter to Bubis that Walser "begibt [...] sich in den Dunstkreis rechter Zweideutigkeit und schwankt mit Heidegger ins Ungefähre." Friedrich Schorlemmer, "Brief an Ignatz Bubis: Walsers trostloses Ungefähr. Einwände zu Martin Walsers Friedenspreisrede am 11.10.98 in der Frankfurter Paulskirche," October 20, 1998, in Schirmmacher, *Die Walser-Bubis-Debatte*, 73-75, 74.

⁶⁵⁷ Marcel Reich-Ranicki, "Das Beste, was wir sein können. Walser, Bubis, Dohnanyi und der Antisemitismus.," *FAZ*, December 2, 1998, in Schirmmacher, *Die Walser-Bubis-Debatte*, 321-326, 324.

Korn asked Walser. But Walser did not want to clarify. In fact, he made it a point not to do so.

No need to clarify?

During the conversation with Bubis and Schirmacher at the offices of the *FAZ*, Bubis kept reminding Walser of his important role in German memory politics. Bubis argued that Walser has always been known for his moral integrity, especially when it came to the memory of the Holocaust—after all, it was Walser who had written the famous essay “Unser Auschwitz” in 1965, reminding the Germans of their historical responsibility.⁶⁵⁸ Bubis appealed to Walser’s role as representative figure in the memory discourse when he says: “Man erlebt jetzt eine Entlastung, man kann jetzt sagen, man habe jemanden, auf den man sich berufen kann, auf Martin Walser, einen unverdächtigen Mann.”⁶⁵⁹ Salomon Korn further explicated this point: “Es geht darum, daß sich viele Menschen aus dieser Verantwortung nun verabschieden, weil sie sagen können, daß Martin Walser es ihnen vorgemacht hat.”⁶⁶⁰ This representative role, however, was precisely what Walser wanted to cast off. Fritz Göttler commented in *Süddeutsche Zeitung*:

Es war einmal, ein paar Jahr nur ist das her, da hat man sich nicht mehr retten können vor lauter Walser-Auftritten und -Äußerungen. Grass war gerade etwas abgetaucht, Walser gefordert als moralische Instanz. Gerade das will er nun als Friedenspreisträger nicht [mehr] sein.⁶⁶¹

⁶⁵⁸ Walser wrote the essay “Unser Auschwitz” in 1965 during the time of the Auschwitz trials. He accused the German public of delegating the responsibility for the Nazi crimes conveniently to “the Nazis,” the small group of men being put on trial, while the widespread support of the entire nation was being forgotten. See Martin Walser, “Unser Auschwitz”, in Martin Walser, *Ansichten, Einsichten*, 158-172.

⁶⁵⁹ Ignatz Bubis, Salomon Korn, Frank Schirmacher, Martin Walser, “Wir brauchen eine neue Sprache für die Erinnerung. Ein Gespräch,” *FAZ*, December 14, 1998, in Schirmacher, *Die Walser-Bubis-Debatte*, 438-465. 457.

⁶⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 457.

⁶⁶¹ Fritz Göttler, “Der Frieden und sein Preis. Rede oder Widerrede: Was spricht, wenn Walser spricht?,” *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, October 14, 1998, in *ibid.*, 46-48, 46-47.

Clearly, Walser rejects the role as “moralische Instanz” when in the conversation with Bubis he points out that he spoke as a private person and carried no responsibility for other people’s understanding of his speech: “Ich habe nur gesagt, wie es mir geht. Und darin haben andere gesehen, wie es ihnen geht.”⁶⁶² If these ‘other people’ misunderstood his literary language, he made clear in the following statement, it was not his fault:

Es ist nicht leicht, in einem politischen Raum mit einer persönlichen Schriftsteller-Sprache zu sprechen. Ich will mir aber keine Sekunde lang meinen Sprachgebrauch durch den Raum vorschreiben lassen, in den ich spreche.⁶⁶³

Thus, by depicting himself as an author who had merely expressed his personal opinion, Walser rejects the moral-political responsibility that, one could argue, was expected of him since he spoke not only from a political podium at St. Paul’s Church, but also as a representative of the Hitler Youth generation. The historical moment was well chosen: At the peak of the memory boom of the 1990s, at a moment when Germany sought to redefine its political identity, the atmosphere was already charged. The vagueness of the *Friedenspreis* speech and the impression it evoked that Walser had shifted towards the right, I argue, were fully intentional, as was the controversy that evolved in the political climate of 1998. With this text, Walser distances himself more clearly than ever before from the left-liberal consensus among authors of his generation. He re-defines his role as a public intellectual by staging himself as an author as opposed to a political commentator.

Borchmeyer and Bogdal on Martin Walser and the public sphere

Before I examine the *Friedenspreis* speech with regard to Walser’s self-understanding as a public intellectual, I will briefly discuss readings of the speech by two scholars, both of

⁶⁶² Ibid., 456.

⁶⁶³ Ibid., 456.

whom have argued that is is the result of a broadly consistent position in Walser's work dating to the late 1970s: Dieter Borchmeyer's short 2001 monograph *Martin Walser und die Öffentlichkeit*, and Klaus-Michael Bogdal's essay "Nach Gott haben wir nichts Wichtigeres mehr gehabt als die Öffentlichkeit". Selbstinszenierungen eines deutschen Schriftstellers."⁶⁶⁴ While Borchmeyer and Bogdal agree that the speech mostly reiterates previously formulated ideas, their evaluation of Walser could not be more contrary. While Borchmeyer seeks to rehabilitate the author by showing that the critics simply misunderstood the speech, Bogdal reads the *Friedenspreis* speech as Walser's latest piece of "Selbstinszenierung."

Borchmeyer argues that Walser never intended to marginalize Holocaust memory. He considers this reading of the speech the result of a "Fehlrezeption."⁶⁶⁵ Walser's critique, he claims, was not directed at the memory discourse per se, but at a public discourse, in which rules about political directness impede the open exchange of political opinions—a point Walser had made since the end of the 1970s. Borchmeyer uses Walser's Auschwitz essays from the 1960s and 1970s⁶⁶⁶ as evidence that his *Friedenspreis* speech cannot have been aimed at normalization and forgetting. The numerous interpretations of the speech, he claims, constructed a "second speech," which existed only in the minds of the critics and falsely rendered the true intentions of the first one. "Walsers Rede [hat] geradezu das Gegenteil dessen erreicht [...], was sie

⁶⁶⁴ Dieter Borchmeyer, *Martin Walser und die Öffentlichkeit. Von einem neuerdings erhobenen unvornehmen Ton im Umgang mit einem Schriftsteller*, (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2001). Klaus-Michael Bogdal, "Nach Gott haben wir nichts Wichtigeres mehr gehabt als die Öffentlichkeit:Selbstinszenierungen eines deutschen Schriftstellers", in *Martin Walser (Text + Kritik)*, ed. Heinz-Ludwig Arnold (Munich: Edition Text + Kritik, 2000), 19-43.

⁶⁶⁵ Borchmeyer, *Martin Walser und die Öffentlichkeit*, 53.

⁶⁶⁶ See Walser's two Auschwitz essays. Martin Walser, "Unser Auschwitz" (1965), and "Auschwitz und kein Ende" (1979), in Martin Walser, *Ansichten, Einsichten. Aufsätze zur Zeitgeschichte*, vol IX of *Werke in zwölf Bänden*, eds. Helmuth Kiesel and Frank Barsch (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1997), 158-172, and 631-636.

anstrebe,“⁶⁶⁷ Borchmeyer argues in the last essay of his book. It could have generated a “Bereicherung der Diskussion um die Erinnerung an den nationalsozialistischen Judenmord, ihrer Befreiung von Schablonen und erkenntnishemmenden Tabus.”⁶⁶⁸ The result, however, was a missed opportunity for a dialogue about public memory, for which he does not blame Walser but rather his critics.⁶⁶⁹ Borchmeyer’s own agenda is visible when he laments the lack of true literary scholarship during the Walser-Bubis debate. He speaks of a tendentious “Enthüllungsgermanistik,” “übler Nachrede,” and “predigthaften pathetischen Tiraden [...], die an die Stelle philologischer Argumentation treten.”⁶⁷⁰ Had the critics read the speech more carefully, he suggests, they would have understood that Walser was merely trying to free the public discourse of normative restrictions.

Certainly, Borchmeyer correctly points out that the Walser-Bubis debate represents a missed opportunity, especially for a German-Jewish debate about unhelpful taboos in the memory discourse. However, his interpretation of the debate as the mere result of a misunderstanding serves to underestimate and make a victim of a writer who in my own opinion clearly aimed at provocation rather than “gemeinsames Erinnern,”⁶⁷¹ as Borchmeyer would have wanted him to do. Klaus-Michael Bogdal’s reading strikes me as more convincing.

Bogdal claims that Walser’s speech ought to be seen within the context of an intentional “*Selbstinzenierung*.” He emphasizes: “Walser gehört zu jenen Autoren, die

⁶⁶⁷ Borchmeyer, *Martin Walser und die Öffentlichkeit*, 54.

⁶⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁶⁶⁹ Borchmeyer’s reading, from the beginning, is set out to defend the author. The only criticism directed at Walser appears in Borchmeyer’s last sentence, where he suggests that Walser could have stressed more strongly in his speech what he had said afterwards in the conversation with Bubis: that the collective memory can exist *alongside* the individual memory. If Walser had emphasized this idea more in his speech, Borchmeyer admits, he could have avoided “manche Verletzung der heillosen Debatte.” *Ibid.*, 57.

⁶⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 50-51.

⁶⁷¹ This is the title of Borchmeyer’s forth essay. *Ibid.*, 53.

Werk und (öffentliche) Person funktional verknüpft haben und ihre Selbstinzenierungen und –stilisierungen dem Wandel des Schriftstellerbildes nach 1945 flexibel anzupassen wussten.”⁶⁷² Bogdal posits that since the late 1970s Walser has increasingly distanced himself from the type of left-liberal intellectual that intellectuals like Grass represented. He writes: “Es wäre [...] verfehlt, die Frankfurter Rede [...] primär als Meinungsäußerung eines engagierten Intellektuellen (des Grass-Types) einzuordnen.”⁶⁷³ For a long time, Walser had been trying to escape the role of the left-liberal intellectual “durch den Wechsel von den traditionellen Themen linksintellektueller Schriftsteller zu ‘großen’ Themen wie Nation, Heimat, Gewissen und Sprache. Mit dem Wechsel soll auch die Wahrnehmung der literarischen Werke aus dem linksintellektuellen Kontext gelöst und eine gewisse Dignität und Seriosität (Spätstil) erlangt werden.”⁶⁷⁴ Bogdal points out that these topics are framed in the *Friedenspreis* speech “in bewusster Differenz zum moralisch-politischen Redetypus und dessen Sprache.”⁶⁷⁵ I strongly agree with this reading, although I would emphasize that Walser did not simply position himself in opposition to the left-liberal intelligentsia in general but to intellectuals of his own generation. At the end of the nineties, Walser begins to strongly reject the moral-political role in society that came with his generation’s particular historical position. In the following, I will read the *Friedenspreis* speech as an expression of this feeling and thus highlight a hitherto neglected aspect in this much-discussed text.

⁶⁷² Bogdal, “Nach Gott,” 19.

⁶⁷³ Ibid., 22.

⁶⁷⁴ Bogdal, “Nach Gott,” 38.

⁶⁷⁵ Ibid., 29.

The Friedenspreis speech: a critical reading

The refusal of a societal role connected to his generational identity becomes apparent in the way Walser frames his speech. He begins by speaking about his feelings upon the news that he was awarded the *Friedenspreis des Deutschen Buchhandels*. It bothered him, he says, that he was expected to give a “critical” speech:

Darüber, daß von ihm natürlich eine kritische Rede erwartet werde, konnte der Ausgesuchte sich nicht [...] freuen. Klar, von ihm wurde die Sonntagsrede erwartet. Die kritische Predigt. [...] Der Ausgesuchte kam sich eingengt vor, festgelegt.⁶⁷⁶

The passage following this statement, which due to its vagueness never appears in any of the critical readings of the speech, seems to concern the choice of topic of his “*Sonntagsrede*.” With bitter irony, Walser declares that talking about “*Schönes*” at St. Paul’s Church would have been out of the question. He was expected to deliver a critical speech on a subject of societal relevance, a so-called “Gewissensthema.” He says: “In jeder Epoche gibt es Themen, Probleme, die unbestreitbar die Gewissensthemen der Epoche sind. *Oder dazu gemacht werden.*”⁶⁷⁷ This sentence sheds light on one of many inconsistencies in the speech, namely why Walser addresses a topic at the beginning that is seemingly unrelated to the rest: his plea to pardon Rainer Rupp, a GDR spy who had been, in Walser’s view unjustly, sentenced to twelve years in prison. By unexpectedly addressing this subject, in fact, by addressing the *Bundespräsident* in person to ask for Rupp’s release, Walser posits what he considers worthy of his public interference. He seems to suggest that Holocaust memory, by contrast, has been *made* into such a

⁶⁷⁶ Walser, “Erfahrungen beim Verfassen einer Sonntagsrede,” in Schirmmacher, *Die Walser-Bubis-Debatte*, 7-17, 7.

⁶⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 10. My emphasis.

“Gewissensthema” in the 1990s, a topic every public intellectual thinks he has to address. He, however, refuses to play along.

This set-up allows Walser to distinguish himself from those intellectuals and writers who do talk about memory—in Walser’s eyes too much. It was suspected that Walser meant Habermas and Handke when he referred to “ein wirklich bedeutender Denker” and “[e]in wirklich ebenso bedeutender Dichter,” for both writers had argued that the most urgent problem of the 1990s was the increased popularity of Neo-Nazis within German society.⁶⁷⁸ Walser fends off this idea by suggesting that it is unrealistic to assume that all political and societal forces in Germany, “Regierung, Staatsapparat, Parteienführung und die braven Leute am Nebentisch” are “moralisch-politisch” verwahrlost.⁶⁷⁹ Walser considers the assumptions about the terror from the right as exaggerated as Grass’s controversial position in the reunification debate: “Jemand findet die Art, wie wir die Folgen der deutschen Teilung überwinden wollen, nicht gut und sagt, so ermöglichen wir ein neues Auschwitz.”⁶⁸⁰ He summarizes:

⁶⁷⁸ The respective passage reads: “Ein wirklich bedeutender Denker formulierte im Jahr 92: ‘Erst die Reaktionen auf den rechten Terror -die aus der politischen Mitte der Bevölkerung und die von oben: aus der Regierung, dem Staatsapparat und der Führung der Parteien - machen das ganze Ausmaß der moralisch-politischen Verwahrlosung sichtbar.’ Ein ebenso bedeutender Dichter ein paar Jahre davor: ‘Gehen Sie in irgendein Restaurant in Salzburg. Auf den ersten Blick haben Sie den Eindruck: lauter brave Leute. Hören Sie Ihren Tischnachbarn aber zu, entdecken Sie, daß sie nur von Ausrottung und Gaskammern träumen.’ Addiert man, was der Denker und der Dichter - beide wirklich gleich seriös - aussagen, dann sind Regierung, Staatsapparat, Parteienführung und die braven Leute am Nebentisch "moralisch-politisch" verwahrlost. Meine erste Reaktion, wenn ich Jahr für Jahr solche in beliebiger Zahl zitierbaren Aussagen von ganz und gar seriösen Geistes- und Sprachgrößen lese, ist: Warum bietet sich mir das nicht so dar? Was fehlt meiner Wahrnehmungsfähigkeit? Oder liegt es an meinem zu leicht einzuschläfernden Gewissen? Das ist klar, diese beiden Geistes- und Sprachgrößen sind auch Gewissensgrößen.” See Walser, “Sonntagsrede,” 10.

⁶⁷⁹ Ibid., 10.

⁶⁸⁰ Ibid., 12. This statement refers to Grass’s controversial stance towards Germany’s reunification: the author had feared that the reunion of the two German states would foster a sense of normalization about and forgetting of the Nazi past.

Ich werde andauernd Zeuge des moralisch-politischen Auftritts dieses oder jenes schätzenswerten Intellektuellen und habe selber schon, von unangenehmen Aktualitäten provoziert, derartige Auftritte nicht vermeiden können.⁶⁸¹

It becomes clear that the target of his criticism is precisely this “use” of the intellectual in the moral-political realm, when he asks the rhetorical question:

Wäre die Öffentlichkeit ärmer oder gewissenverrohter, wenn Dichter und Denker nicht als Gewissenswarte der Nation aufträten?

He continues with a critique of the media. Writers like him are often forced into the role of public speakers by the media, which are increasingly less interested in these writers’s literary texts. He speaks of journalists as “*Meinungssoldaten*” who

mit vorgehaltener Moralpistole, den Schriftsteller in den Meinungsdienst nötigen. Sie haben es immerhin so weit gebracht, daß Schriftsteller nicht mehr gelesen werden müssen, sondern nur noch interviewt. Daß die so zustandekommenden Platzanweisungen in den Büchern dieser Schriftsteller entweder nicht verifizierbar oder kraß widerlegt werden, ist dem Meinungs- und Gewissenswart eher egal, weil das Sprachwerk für ihn nicht verwertbar ist.⁶⁸²

Interviews, in which writers function as political commentators, have replaced a serious appreciation for literature, Walser claims here. A writer’s morality, he argues later in his speech, cannot be based on categorizations such as left or right—“*Platzanweisungen*,” as Walser calls them. Instead, a writer’s morality becomes apparent in his or her aesthetics.

So far, one could summarize Walser’s position as a writer’s plea to reverse the politicization of German literature. But Walser proceeds by provocatively speaking about the instrumentalization of Holocaust memory in a manner that comes dangerously close to right-wing positions.⁶⁸³ Considering that both those commentators of the speech who

⁶⁸¹ Ibid., 9.

⁶⁸² Ibid., 15.

⁶⁸³ For evidence that his speech became a celebrated piece of writing for the political right in Germany at the time, see eds., *Endlich ein normales Volk? Vom rechten Verständnis der Friedenspreisrede Martin Walsers - Eine Dokumentation*, eds. Martin Dietzsch, Siegfried Jäger, and Alfred Schobert (Duisburg: DISS, 1999).

came to Walser's defense and those who attacked the writer widely agreed about the ambiguity of his language, there is one passage in Walser's speech that I consider highly problematic. In it, he admits that his way of protesting against the widespread mobilization of German writers as preachers and political commentators is to withdraw into the aesthetic realm in order to make use of the ambiguity of literary language:

[W]enn ich ahne, daß es gegen meine Empfindung wäre, mich ein weiteres Mal dieser Predigerersatzfunktion zu fügen, dann liefere ich mich der Sprache aus, überlasse ihr die Zügel, egal, wohin sie mich führe. Letzteres stimmt natürlich nicht. Ich falle ihr in die Zügel, wenn ich fürchten muß, sie gehe zu weit, sie verrate zuviel von mir, sie enthülle meine Unvorhersehbarkeit zu sehr. Da mobilisiere ich furcht- und bedachtsam sprachliche Verbergungsroutinen jeder Art.⁶⁸⁴

Only when he feels that he reveals too much of his "unrepresentable" opinions, only when it reveals too much of himself, the freedom of language needs to be restricted. Thus, Walser clearly admits that his speech was purposefully ambiguous.

I am not going as far as arguing that Walser hides his right-wing opinions behind this ambiguity. Yet, the criticism voiced by Bubis and others is legitimate: Walser provided the extreme right with fresh arguments for their cause. He was fully aware of the delicacy of the subject he was addressing, and played with his authority within the memory discourse deliberately and, as I would add, recklessly. On the other hand, it is no coincidence that Walser does not just simply distance himself from the concept of *littérature engage*. It is no coincidence that he does not simply address his tiredness with the German "obsession" with memory. His speech must be read as the performance piece of a member of the Hitler Youth generation. Even though Walser never makes the generational background explicit, the fact that his celebration of an aesthetics free of political demands is connected with the topic of memory politics illustrates that he is not

⁶⁸⁴ Walser, "Sonntagsrede," 16-17.

simply talking about aesthetics and politics in general but the interconnectedness of aesthetics, politics and generational identity. Walser, like Bubis and von Dohnanyi, speaks from his position as *Zeitzeuge* of the Nazi era with the background of a very specific biographical experience. The point of his performance is to demonstrate that he would no longer obey any demands connected to his biographical attachment to the Nazi period.⁶⁸⁵ How far he would go with his demonstration will become clear in my presentation of Walser's next big coup, the 2002 publication of *Tod eines Kritikers*.

“Tod eines Kritikers”

In the spring of 2002, Frank Schirmacher of the *FAZ*—a great admirer of Martin Walser who had given the encomium when Walser was awarded the *Friedenspreis*—was part of a small group of people who were allowed to read the proofs of Walser's new novel, *Tod eines Kritikers*. Like many of his texts, this novel, announced as “skandalöses Buch” earlier that year,⁶⁸⁶ was supposed to be serialized in the *FAZ* before its official publication. But unexpectedly, on May 29, Schirmacher published an open letter directed at Walser in which he proclaimed that the *FAZ* had decided against serializing *Tod eines Kritikers*. “Ihr Roman ist eine Exekution. Eine Abrechnung [...] mit Marcel

⁶⁸⁵ It should be pointed out that Walser repeatedly used the very moral-political authority he rejected in his speech when during the Bubis debate he depicted himself as the spokesperson of the German *Volk*. He suggested that many people felt the same way as he did about the exaggerative German duty of commemoration. Otherwise, he would not have received standing ovations at St. Paul's Church as well as over a thousand letters from citizens who expressed their support. This way, he reassumed the authoritative role he wanted to fend off.

As far as I can see, the only person who has publicly pointed out this inconsistency in Walser's position was Richard von Weizsäcker, who said: “Walser hat als Privatperson eine, wie er es nannte, Sonntagsrede gehalten, freilich als Friedenspreisträger in der Frankfurter Paulskirche auf dem geistig-moralischen Podest der Nation. [...] Er sprach mit einer Autorität, um die es ihm ging und für die er sich später auf den stehenden Beifall des Auditoriums berief.” Richard von Weizsäcker, “Der Streit wird gefährlich. Mußte Walser provozieren?” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, November 20, 1998, in Schirmacher, *Die Walser-Bubis-Debatte*, 187-188, 187.

⁶⁸⁶ This is how Walser described the novel in February 2002 to the boulevard magazine *Bunte*. Quoted after: Martin Walser and Volker Hage, “‘Der Autor ist der Verlierer.’ Der Schriftsteller Martin Walser über die Vorwürfe gegen seinen neuen Roman.” *Der Spiegel* 23/2002, 186-190, 186.

Reich-Ranicki,” he wrote, calling Walser’s book “ein Dokument des Hasses” and “nichts anderes als eine Mordphantasie;” Walser worked, he argued, with a “Repertoire antisemitischer Klischees,” from which one could not simply look away.⁶⁸⁷ Undoubtedly, Schirmmacher stated, the protagonist in Walser’s novel was a caricature of Germany’s most influential and most famous literary critic Marcel Reich-Ranicki, who had also been head of the *FAZ* feuilleton from 1973-1988. It was tasteless, Schirmmacher argued, that Walser had evoked the death of Reich-Ranicki, a Polish Jew who had survived the Warsaw Ghetto and had escaped, against all odds, the Nazi murder of European Jewry. Schirmmacher writes: “Verstehen Sie, daß wir keinen Roman drucken werden, der damit spielt, daß dieser Mord fiktiv nachgeholt wird?”⁶⁸⁸

Schirmmacher correctly says that the novel *plays* with the murder of the figure representing Reich-Ranicki, who is called Andre Ehrl-König in Walser’s text.⁶⁸⁹ A murder does not actually take place. The plot begins with the disappearance of the star critic from a party at the house of the publisher Ludwim Pilgrim. The police cannot find his body but evidence suggests that he was murdered. Since Ehrl-König had just excoriated the new novel by Hans Lach in his TV show *Sprechstunde* (modeled after Reich-Ranicki’s *ZDF*-show *Das literarische Quartett*), Lach is considered the prime

⁶⁸⁷ Frank Schirmmacher, “Der neue Roman von Martin Walser: Kein Vorabdruck in der *FAZ*. Frank Schirmmachers offener Brief an Martin Walser,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 29 June 2002, No. 122, 49.

⁶⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸⁹ The name Ehrl-König is a reference to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s famous ballad *Der Erlkönig*. In the poem, Erlkönig is a figure of death accompanying the lyrical “I” on horse back on the way to seek help for his dying child. The last stanza describes how the ride through the windy night was in vain. The erl-king is holding the dead child in his arms (“in seinen Armen das Kind war tot”). Jan-Philipp Reemtsma points out that “Erlkönig” was the nickname of Willy Andre König, a critic figure in Walser’s 1993 novel *Ohne einander*. It was suggested in this earlier novel, that the character was called “Erlkönig” because of the line from Goethe’s poem “in seinen Armen das Kind war tot,” meaning: just like Erlkönig in Goethe’s poem, the figure of the critic in both novels brings death over his subject. Reemtsma goes further on to argue that Walser alludes to another line in Goethe’s poem: “Erlkönig hat mir ein Leids getan.” Reemtsma reads this as a reference to Walser’s hurt feelings towards Reich-Ranicki. See Reemtsma, *Ein antisemitischer Affektsturm*.

murder suspect. He is arrested, not only because of his motive but also because he allegedly threatened the critic by uttering a variation of Hitler's infamous quote about the attack of Poland in 1939: "ab 0.00 Uhr wird zurückgeschlagen."⁶⁹⁰ The narrator, another author called Michael Landolf, begins a private investigation of the case in order to prove Lach's innocence. He interviews friends and foes of the critic—writers, publishers, editors, journalists and professors, essentially the entire German literary scene—all of whom seem to have an opinion on Ehrl-König but none of whom bring Landolf forward in his investigation. At the end of the novel, Walser presents the reader with a twist: Lach and Landolf, he unveils, are one and the same person, and Ehrl-König reappears after a weekend with his mistress. The famous critic had staged his own murder.

Controversial readings of the novel

Walser's novel is not only a satire but also a *roman-à-clef*. Besides Marcel Reich-Ranicki, several other prominent figures of the German *Literaturbetrieb* are recognizable in Walser's representation of this scene: Jürgen Habermas, Joachim Kaiser, Walter und Inge Jens, Siegfried Unseld, and Ulla Berkewicz, to name only the most prominent ones. The uproar that followed Schirmmacher's open letter was not about this aspect of the novel but about *Tod eines Kritikers* as supposedly anti-Semitic—as was the general understanding of Schirmmacher's reproach.⁶⁹¹ Reich-Ranicki was sent a copy of the manuscript and soon commented that he found the entire matter "wirklich

⁶⁹⁰ Martin Walser, *Tod eines Kritikers* (Berlin: Ullstein-Taschenbuch-Verlag, 2003).

⁶⁹¹ Schirmmacher stressed in an interview with *Der Spiegel* that he did not call the novel an anti-Semitic book but rather critiqued Walser's irresponsible use of anti-Semitic clichés: "Dass ich behauptet habe, wie mir unterstellt wird, es sei schlechthin ein antisemitisches Machwerk, ist falsch. Ich sprach vom Spiel mit dem Repertoire antisemitischer Klischees, etwa was die notorische 'Herabsetzungslust' des Kritikers angeht." See Frank Schirmmacher, interview with Wolfgang von Höbel and Mathias Schreiber, "Ich war so angewidert." *FAZ*-Mitherausgeber Frank Schirmmacher über seine Ablehnung des Walser-Textes." *Der Spiegel* 23/2002, <http://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-22776360.html>.

ungeheuerlich.” He condemned the book not only because of Walser’s “antisemitischen Ausbruch, der ja wirklich offenkundig ist” but also because of the text’s poor literary quality. He called it “miserable Literatur” and added: “So schlecht hat Walser noch nicht geschrieben.”⁶⁹² Walser on the other hand seemed aghast about Schirmmacher’s accusations, as the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* reported having spoken to the author on the telephone the day after the letter appeared in *FAZ*. He stressed that it was simply not true that the novel was about the alleged murder of a Jew. The novel’s only topic was “die Machtausübung im Kulturbetrieb zur Zeit des Fernsehens.”⁶⁹³ He would repeat this sentence with slight variations regularly during the weeks that followed. In an interview with *Der Spiegel*, he said emphatically:

Niemals, wirklich niemals, hätte ich gedacht, dass es auf diese Weise abgelehnt wird, mit dem Vorwurf des Antisemitismus. Wenn ich auch nur einen Satz in dieser Richtung hätte wittern können, dann hätte ich ihn rausgestrichen! Warum sollte ich das Buch damit belasten, wo es mir um etwas ganz anderes ging: um die Machtausübung im Kulturbetrieb.⁶⁹⁴

Was *Tod eines Kritikers*, as Walser stresses here, merely a satirical text about the German cultural scene without the intentional use of anti-Semitic stereotypes? This was the question critics had to deal with as soon as the novel was published.⁶⁹⁵

Schirmmacher had claimed that the repertoire of anti-Semitic clichés was “nicht übersehbar.”⁶⁹⁶ The list of evidential material included the threat made against Ehrl-

⁶⁹² All quotes found in “Unter Anklage. Antisemitismus-Vorwürfe gegen Martin Walser”, *NZZ-Online*, May 30, 2002, <http://www.nzz.ch/2002/05/30/fe/article86V0D.html>.

⁶⁹³ Ibid.

⁶⁹⁴ Walser, “Der Autor ist der Verlierer,” 186.

⁶⁹⁵ A sideline of the debate, which was also called the Walser-Schirmmacher-debate, was also concerned with the fact that Schirmmacher had lanced a public attack of a novel that had not even been published yet. In several articles, mainly in *Süddeutsche Zeitung* but also in *Die Zeit*, this step was understood as a great journalistic *faux pas*, because no one but a very small circle of people at *FAZ* and the Suhrkamp publishing house were able to read the text in order to examine whether or not the reproaches were justified. As a consequence, *Suhrkamp* had to publish the novel weeks before the intended publication date. It appeared on June 26, 2002. For a critique of Schirmmacher, see for example Jessen, “Der Dichter und sein Bärenführer.”

König at the party, a modification of the Hitler phrase “Seit 5 Uhr 45 wird jetzt zurückgeschossen,” the fact that the Jewish critic had a thick accent Schirmmacher found reminiscent of the Yiddish language, and that he was portrayed as suffering from a veritable “Messiaskomplex.”⁶⁹⁷ The book was about the murder not of a critic but of a Jew, he concluded, the Jewish critic being Marcel Reich-Ranicki. Most outrageous in Schirmmacher’s eyes was a sentence uttered by Ehrl-König’s wife who commented on her husband’s disappearance saying that it did not “suit him to be murdered.” Considering that Reich-Ranicki was the only one in his family who survived the Holocaust, Schirmmacher considered this sentence “der das Getötetwerden oder Überleben zu einer Charaktereigenschaft macht”⁶⁹⁸ appalling.

There were critics who agreed with Schirmmacher’s judgment and critics who argued against it. Among the former was the director of the Hamburger Institut für Sozialforschung, Jan Philipp Reemtsma, who added several more points to Schirmmacher’s list: the critic’s lecherous but ultimately impotent sexuality, his illegitimate lust for power, his cosmopolitanism while his origin is not completely clear, and a scene in alluding to a Jewish conspiracy when in his TV show the critic promotes Jewish literature (a book by Philip Roth) while belittling German literature (the book by Hans Lach). The novel portrayed, Reemtsma summarized, “[die] Zerstörung der deutschen Literatur durch den mächtigen jüdischen Schädling.”⁶⁹⁹ His explanation: Martin Walser had been continually hurt by Reich-Ranicki and over time had become so enraged that this rage

⁶⁹⁶ Schirmmacher, “Kein Vorabdruck in der *FAZ*”.

⁶⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹⁹ Jan Phillip Reemtsma, “Ein antisemitischer Affektsturm,” *FAZ*, June 27, 2002, <http://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/buecher/rezensionen/belletristik/rezension-belletristik-ein-antisemitischer-affektsturm-163118.html>.

ultimately led “zum antisemitischen Affektsturm.”⁷⁰⁰ Walser’s fictional murder fantasy about Reich-Ranicki displayed a social brutality, “die das Werk, in dem das geschieht, von vornherein disqualifiziert, es mag ansonsten beschaffen sein, wie es will.”⁷⁰¹ In other words, for Reemtsma the moral-political content of the novel, in his eyes unacceptable, undermined the novel’s aesthetic value entirely. In the concluding sentence Reemtsma heightens Schirrmacher’s evaluation stating firmly that Martin Walser had written an anti-Semitic novel.⁷⁰²

Ruth Klüger responded to Walser’s novel in the *Frankfurter Rundschau* on June 26 on a more personal level. In an open letter to Martin Walser, she wrote: “Als eine Jüdin, die sich beruflich mit deutscher Literatur befasst und sich mit Dir und Deiner Familie befreundet glaubt, fühle ich mich von Deiner Darstellung eines Kritikers als jüdisches Scheusal betroffen, gekränkt, beleidigt.”⁷⁰³ Klüger does not accept the satirical nature of *Tod eines Kritikers* as an excuse:

Der Satiriker wählt, was ihm bedeutend erscheint. Verantwortlich ist er dann allerdings für die Bedeutung. Und wenn er einen widerlichen Kritiker als Juden zeichnet, dann darf man wohl fragen, ob er damit so etwas wie die zerstörende Macht der Juden im deutschen zeitgenössischen Geistesleben meint.⁷⁰⁴

Understanding *Tod eines Kritikers* as a satire, a comedy, or a farce does not solve the problem, Klüger argues. She points out that comedies and bad jokes have always been “besonders beliebte Vehikel der Verhöhnung.”⁷⁰⁵ The reappearance of the critic and the recognition that there was no murder at all do not take away Walser’s blame for her. She writes: “Lieber Martin, vor dem Hintergrund der deutschen Geschichte, die sich nun

⁷⁰⁰ Ibid.

⁷⁰¹ Ibid.

⁷⁰² Ibid.

⁷⁰³ Ruth Klüger, “‘Siehe doch, Deutschland!’ Martin Walsers *Tod eines Kritikers*,” *Frankfurter Rundschau*, June 27, 2002, <http://www.lyrikwelt.de/rezensionen/todeineskritikers-r.htm>.

⁷⁰⁴ Klüger, “Siehe doch Deutschland.”

⁷⁰⁵ Ibid.

einmal nicht ausklammern lässt, ist die komische Wiederkehr des nur scheinbar ermordeten Juden noch schlimmer als ein handfester Krimi mit Leiche gewesen wäre.”⁷⁰⁶ For Klüger, Günter Grass’ last novel *Im Krebsgang*, which depicts a murder actually committed by a Jew, serves as a counter-example to Walser’s book. She characterizes Grass’ representation as “weder anti- noch philosemitisch, sie ist vorurteilsfrei und daher nicht zu beanstanden.”⁷⁰⁷ Walser himself had described his novel as a discourse on power and on winners and losers in the cultural scene. But this discourse on power, she argues, does not only concern writers and critics, “sondern stellvertretend ist auch das Vaterland, das einstens besiegte, das sich noch immer schämt, miteinbezogen, mitgedacht.”⁷⁰⁸ At the end of her letter, Klüger asks Walser directly: “Wo bleibt hier die Moral?”⁷⁰⁹

Dieter Borchmeyer and Helmuth Kiesel seek to eliminate this type of personal or moral approach in their 2003 book *Der Ernstfall*. In the preface to this collection of essays on the debate surrounding *Tod eines Kritikers*, they categorically describe the “Literaturkritik” of the German Feuilleton as incompetent of the “Genauigkeit philologischer Lektüre,”⁷¹⁰ at which their volume aims.⁷¹¹ Almost triumphantly they state that none of the contributors to their volume had come to the conclusion that Schirmacher’s accusations were justified even in the slightest.⁷¹² *Feuilleton* critics, they claim, have altogether overlooked the finesse of Walser’s literary technique and misread

⁷⁰⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁰⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁰⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁰⁹ Ibid.

⁷¹⁰ Dieter Borchmeyer, and Helmuth Kiesel, “Vorwort,” in *Der Ernstfall*, eds. Dieter Borchmeyer and Helmuth Kiesel, (Hamburg: Hoffmann und Campe, 2003), 7-24, 22.

⁷¹¹ Ibid., 22.

⁷¹² The respective passage reads: “Keiner der beteiligten Autoren gelangt zu der Ansicht, daß der offene Brief Schirmachers und die nachfolgende Polemik der *FAZ* und anderer ihr in diesem Punkt nahestehender Organe auch nur im Ansatz berechtigt ist—nicht zu reden vom elementaren Verstoß gegen die guten Sitten und die publizistische Moral, den jene Vorverurteilung Walsers darstellte.” Borchmeyer and Kiesel, *Der Ernstfall* 20.

the novel as anti-Semitic as a result. Thus, Walser did not write an anti-Semitic novel but rather a revealing portrayal of a literary scene dominated by the media. By the very definition of the text's genre, plot and characters were exaggerated and provocative. The fact that Walser even depicts the *Feuilleton*'s eagerness to highlight anti-Semitism as the motive of the alleged murder of the Jewish critic—a sideline of the plot—Walser's has proven his prognostic talent: "Dieser Roman setzte sich im vergangenen Jahr aufgrund des um ihn entfachten Skandals in der Wirklichkeit fort."⁷¹³

Without giving Walser as much credit as Borchmeyer and Kiesel do, Bill Niven comes to a similar conclusion in an insightful and less tendentious article. He offers a sober analysis of the novel by considering arguments for and against an anti-Semitic reading. Ultimately, he argues, "any reading of *Tod eines Kritikers* as anti-Semitic [...] can only be sustained by failing to acknowledge the manner in which the novel is constructed, indeed by failing to acknowledge its status as literature."⁷¹⁴ Niven claims that almost every negative statement on the Jewish critic is not directly uttered by a character but mediated through other people or the press. He summarizes: "The novel thus highlights the problematic nature of a notion such as authenticity in a world in which reality is mediated—not least through the media themselves."⁷¹⁵ Moreover, Niven argues, it ought not to be underestimated that "Walser's novel satirizes the self-importance of its characters."⁷¹⁶ If the characters utter their negative opinions about the critic, Niven claims, their reliability is simultaneously undermined by the critical way in which Walser depicts them. Thus, he writes, "[t]he novel is not about a Jew, but about the anti-Semitic

⁷¹³ Borchmeyer and Kiesel, *Der Ernstfall*, 19.

⁷¹⁴ Bill Niven, "Martin Walser's 'Tod eines Kritikers' and the issue of anti-Semitism," *German Life and Letters*, Volume 56, Issue 3, (July 2003): 306-307.

⁷¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 307.

⁷¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 307.

construction of a Jew in the minds of the resentful.”⁷¹⁷ Hence, Niven reads *Tod eines Kritikers* as an experiment in post-modern writing—one of poor quality, he makes sure to add—the overall purpose of which it is to exhibit the constructedness of reality. This constructedness “is designed to highlight the fact that the ‘Literaturbetrieb’ [...] is dominated by self-interested rumors and projections.”⁷¹⁸ Thus, “[t]o equate Walser’s attitude with those of his characters [...] is to overlook the essential point that the ironization of the heart of the novel strongly invites the reader to distance himself or herself from their views. A novel whose characters make anti-Semitic remarks is not necessarily an anti-Semitic novel.”⁷¹⁹

On the question of anti-Semitism, I tend to agree with Bill Niven: there are “aspects of the novel” which could arguably support Schirmmacher’s anti-Semitic reading of it,⁷²⁰ and attributes with which Walser describes the Jewish critic—for example his sexual predilection for young girls⁷²¹ or his insatiable hunger for power—that, as Niven carefully formulates, “make of Ehrl-König a construction not dissimilar to National Socialist anti-Semitic projections.”⁷²² But ultimately, it is hard to prove that Walser actually used anti-Semitic clichés, let alone that Walser is an anti-Semite, and even a detailed discussion of this subject would presumably not lead to a definite answer. There

⁷¹⁷ Ibid., 310.

⁷¹⁸ Ibid., 311.

⁷¹⁹ Ibid., 310.

⁷²⁰ Niven writes: “Ehrl-König is portrayed variously by the characters in the novel as an amalgam of ugliness (Tek 106), poisonous nastiness (Tek 108), sexual obsession and lasciviousness (Tek 41,56,79), gaudy superficiality and empty showmanship (Tek 34f), parasitic dependence on the skills of those around him (Tek 91, 108ff.), apparently calculated treachery (Tek 92-7), egomania (Tek 82), and absolute determination to succeed at the cost of others.” (Niven 303). Note: “Tek” stands for *Tod eines Kritikers*. However, Niven refers to an edition of *Tod eines Kritikers* different from the one I use.

⁷²¹ “Am liebsten waren ihm natürlich Mädelschen, aber wenn’s keine gab, nahm er auch Mädels. Frauen findet er langweilig. Unzumutbar. Besonders deutsche.” Walser, *Tod eines Kritikers*, 111

⁷²² Niven 303.

can, however, be no doubt that he *played* with anti-Semitic clichés very consciously, and this is highly relevant for the context of this chapter.

“Tod eines Kritikers” and the discourse on the Hitler Youth generation

Notwithstanding its provocative and tasteless aspects and poor literary quality, *Tod eines Kritikers* presents a compelling text when read as a reaction—or rather, an over-reaction—to the very phenomenon I want to highlight in this chapter: the blurring of moral–political and aesthetic matters in post-War German literature that becomes particularly evident in the reception of writers of the Hitler Youth generation. Like the *Friedenspreis* speech, the novel criticizes a feuilleton culture, in which authors are judged within the rules of a political and not a literary discourse. Both Reemtsma’s dismissal of the novel based on the argument that it is anti-Semitic as well as Klüger’s question “wo bleibt die Moral?” represent precisely this type of privileging of moral-political before aesthetic criteria. An even more apt example of the alleged infiltration of the literary discourse by demands based on memory, history, and biography is the article by Ruth Klüger, who expresses her hurt feelings as Walser’s friend and as a Jew. Post-war German literature, Walser seems to suggest, has been superseded by a discourse in which biographical-generational parameters play a more important role than aesthetic ones. More precisely, Walser is bothered by the fact that he is still considered to be writer who belongs, at least in some ways, to the perpetrator collective.

In order to demonstrate that literature ought to be a realm independent of such historical-biographical matters, *Tod eines Kritikers* inverts the historical roles of perpetrator and victim. He shows how the German author Hans Lach becomes the victim of the Jewish literary critic Ehrl-König. As Walser revealingly put it in his *Spiegel*

interview: “durch sein Verschwinden und Wiederauftauchen besiegt er (the Jewish critic) noch einmal den Autor. Der Autor ist der Dumme, der ist der Verlierer. Der Kritiker kehrt ins Scheinwerferlicht zurück.”⁷²³ Lach becomes the victim on several levels: First because his book is badly reviewed on Ehrl-König’s show, second because he becomes the main suspect in the murder case while being completely innocent, and third—and this bears the greatest significance—because the media immediately frame the murder in a German-Jewish context:

Das Thema war jetzt, daß Hans Lach einen Juden getötet hatte. [...] Hans Lach hatte seine Tat in der Tatnacht in der PILGRIM-Villa in einem an Hitler erinnernden Jargon angekündigt. *Ab heute nacht Null Uhr wird zurückgeschlagen.* Diesen Hans Lach-Satz konnte man jetzt jeden Tag überall lesen und abends aus allen Kanälen hören.⁷²⁴

The anti-Semitism debate that follows is depicted as a farce. The majority of feuilleton critics in Walser’s novel believe “daß in Deutschland die Ermordung eines Juden doch wohl ein Faktum ganz anderer Art sei als in jedem anderen Land der Welt.”⁷²⁵ Hans Lach’s book *Der Wunsch, Verbrecher zu sein*, seen as evidence for his wish to murder the critic, becomes “das am meisten zitierte Buch des späteren Winters.” And the writer Landolf says at one point in the novel: “Um die Schuld oder Unschuld eines Schriftstellers zu beweisen, braucht man doch keine Indizien, die Bücher genügen.”⁷²⁶ Only one journalist critically notes that this approach to the murder of a critic whose Jewish identity is not even confirmed is indicative of the “Geisteszustand der deutschen Gesinnungspresse.”⁷²⁷ The term “Gesinnungspresse —“*Gesinnungspresse* war sofort ein

⁷²³ Walser, “Der Autor ist der Verlierer,” 189.

⁷²⁴ Walser, *Tod eines Kritikers*, 145.

⁷²⁵ *Ibid.*, 145.

⁷²⁶ *Ibid.*, 122.

⁷²⁷ *Ibid.*, 145.

Wort, ohne das keiner mehr auskam”⁷²⁸— alludes to the Christa-Wolf-debate in the early nineties when Ulrich Greiner described Wolf’s work as part of a widespread “*Gesinnungsästhetik*.” In Walser’s depiction, not the authors are obsessed with historical and political questions but the media. Hans Lach’s novel *Der Wunsch, Verbrecher zu sein* is taken to prove the writer’s “guilt”, just as it was the case in the reception of *Ein springender Brunnen*, and now again with *Tod eines Kritikers* itself.

Due to the level of self-reflexivity manifest in the novel, it is difficult to see it as anything else but a calculated provocation. In a commentary on the Walser-debate in *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, Martin Meyer pointed at the boundaries he believed Walser had overstepped: “Wie weit darf ein intelligenter Autor gehen, um immer noch damit rechnen zu können, dass sein Text als ‘reine’ und ästhetisch geschützte Literatur wahrgenommen wird?” And he claimed: “[D]iese Frage hat sich Walser offenbar kaum gestellt.”⁷²⁹ But Walser obviously asked himself this question and took it very seriously. It is precisely this idea of moral restraints in the aesthetic realm that he attacked. I argue that he consciously played with the theme of anti-Semitism, “das heikelste aller Themen,”⁷³⁰ as Greiner has called it. Hence, it is hard to take Walser seriously when he claims that he would have never published the book, or anything for that matter, if he had had only the slightest hunch that one could consider the text anti-Semitic.⁷³¹ Rather, one has to assume that Walser provoked the entire debate in order to be able to point to the

⁷²⁸ Ibid., 145.

⁷²⁹ Martin Meyer, “Das Reden der Schafe. Martin Walsers neuer Roman ‘Tod eines Kritikers’”, *Neue Zürcher Zeitung online*, June 1, 2002, <http://www.nzz.ch/2002/06/01/fe/article86ZBC.html>.

⁷³⁰ Ulrich Greiner, “Walser, der Spezialist des Undeutlichen,” *Die Zeit*, June 6, 2002, http://www.zeit.de/2002/24/200224_walser1_xml.

⁷³¹ I quoted earlier what Walser said in an interview with *Der Spiegel*: “Niemals, wirklich niemals, hätte ich gedacht, dass es (the novel) auf diese Weise abgelehnt wird, mit dem Vorwurf des Antisemitismus. Wenn ich auch nur einen Satz in dieser Richtung hätte wittern können, dann hätte ich ihn rausgestrichen! Warum sollte ich das Buch damit belasten, wo es mir um etwas ganz anderes ging: um die Machtausübung im Kulturbetrieb.” Walser, “Der Autor ist der Verlierer,” 186.

literariness of his book and to the critics' misreading of his book as anti-Semitic. "Das ist doch reine Satire!"⁷³² he regularly said.

With his statements that the novel was not about a Jew but about a critic, and that he wanted to broadly address the widespread "Machtausübung im Kulturbetrieb,"⁷³³ Walser simply plays at naïveté in order to outrage his critics. Clearly, it played a crucial role that he depicted a *Jewish* critic, considering the importance of the German-Jewish context for the novel. Walser has always seen his relationship with Reich-Ranicki in a historical-biographical context, and even more precisely, in a perpetrator-victim context. This becomes evident in an interview with *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, given shortly before the 1998 *Friedenspreis* speech. Walser said:

In unserem Verhältnis ist er der Täter, und ich bin das Opfer. [...] Jeder Autor, den er so behandelt, könnte zu ihm sagen: Herr Reich-Ranicki, in unserem Verhältnis bin ich der Jude.⁷³⁴

Thus, years before the publication of *Tod eines Kritikers*, Walser had already formulated the inversion of the perpetrator and the victim role that would become the topic of the novel. Hence, I find Bill Niven's non-historicizing reading of the novel as a post-modern experiment ultimately unconvincing. It falls short of addressing this historical-biographical anchor that—while Walser claims to want to move away from it—becomes palpable everywhere in the text.

On Walser's diagnosis

How accurate was Walser's diagnosis? Was the media in 2002 still only occupied with historical and political questions entirely unrelated to the literary work itself? If we

⁷³² Ibid.

⁷³³ Ibid.

⁷³⁴ Willy Winkler, "Die Sprache verwaltet das Nichts. Interview mit Martin Walser," *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, September 19 and 20, 1998, 15.

examine the controversy about his own book and compare it to the 1990 debate around Christa Wolf's *Was bleibt*, we can see that the moral-political authority of the Hitler Youth generation had begun to dwindle. Already in 1998, in an open letter to Walser published in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, Klaus-Michael Bogdal and Michael Brocke had criticized the author for his complaint that the media supposedly forced authors into the role of political commentators and moral guides. They argued that the general public was less and less interested in writers' opinions about moral-political affairs, which in their eyes rendered Walser's protest pointless:

Wenn Sie [...] wahrzunehmen meinen, daß 'Meinungssoldaten' sie 'mit vorgehaltener Moralpistole... in den Meinungsdienst' nötigen, mag das Ihrer Profession und Ihrer früheren öffentlichen Rolle geschuldet sein, seit dem deutsch-deutschen Literaturstreit nach der Vereinigung ist es doch eher so, daß eine breite Öffentlichkeit nur noch in sehr geringem Maße an dem interessiert ist, was Schriftsteller zur politischen Moral zu sagen haben.⁷³⁵

Obviously this is not entirely true, since the upheaval Walser successfully caused with his provocations in 1998 and 2001 confirms that there was still interest in what this author had to say. It is striking, however, that the majority of critics who participated in the debates were either of Walser's generation or part of the generation of 1968. It is probably safe to say that the younger generations considered this discourse outdated and its vehemence incomprehensible.

But even among the older generations, Walser's moral-political provocations were not taken seriously by everyone anymore. One can find a recurring argument in the reception of *Tod eines Kritikers*, which indicates a changed perception of the author in the public realm. While most critics categorically rejected the novel *both* for its literary and its moral-political qualities, several argued that *Tod eines Kritikers* should be

⁷³⁵ Klaus M. Bogdal/Michael Brocke, "Offener Brief an Martin Walser. (9.11.1998)", *Walser-Bubis-Debatte*, 119-120, 120.

considered a piece of literary writing *separate* from its political content. Hellmuth Karasek, for example, agreed with Schirmmacher that the book presented a document full of hatred, but stated in his review with *Tagesspiegel*: “Ein Werk des Hasses, das müsste noch kein Fehler sein.”⁷³⁶ He highlights the well-written satirical passages and carefully distinguishes them from the passages, which reveal “bedenkenlos antisemitische [...] Klischees.”⁷³⁷ Martin Meyer, in the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, similarly makes an effort to consider the literary quality separately from the morally problematic parts. “*Tod eines Kritikers*,” he writes, “ist ein haarsträubend schlechter Roman—und das noch vor allen möglichen ideologischen Implikationen.”⁷³⁸

Particularly interesting is Fritz J. Raddatz’s article “Das Treffen im Seichten,” published in *Die Zeit*.⁷³⁹ Raddatz, who had condemned Christa Wolf for her Stasi affiliation in 1993, arguing that it had damaged her work irreversibly, now brushes away moral arguments.⁷⁴⁰ He writes: “Literatur darf alles: Mordphantasien schäumen lassen, Hinrichtungen herbeibeten, kalte Rache üben an unserer Welt—auch an einem jüdischen Fernsehrichter. Wenn es denn Literatur ist.”⁷⁴¹ In a strange way, then, Walser achieved what he had demanded in his Friedenspreis speech: some critics agreed that there ought

⁷³⁶ Hellmuth Karraseck, “Mordversuch um jeden Preis. Was wirklich drin steht: Martin Walsers neuer Roman beschädigt vor allem seinen Autor,” *Tagesspiegel*, May 31, 2002, http://217.160.137.223/Syberberg4/5_Juni2.html

⁷³⁷ Ibid.

⁷³⁸ Martin Meyer, “Das Reden der Schafe,” *NZZ* online, June 1, 2002, <http://www.nzz.ch/2002/06/01/fe/article86ZBC.html>.

⁷³⁹ Fritz J. Raddatz, “Das Treffen im Seichten. Antisemitisch ist Martin Walsers Roman nicht. Aber läppisch. Marcel Reich-Ranicki hätte Schlimmbesseres verdient,” *Die Zeit*, 24/2002, http://www.zeit.de/2002/24/Das_Treffen_im_Seichten. Not coincidentally, I would argue, this title alludes to Günter Grass’ novel on Gruppe 47, *Das Treffen in Telgte*. Without explicitly mentioning it, Raddatz seems to see Walser in context with West-German counterpart Günter Grass.

⁷⁴⁰ See Fritz J. Raddatz, “Von der Beschädigung der Literatur durch ihre Urheber. Bemerkungen zu Heiner Müller und Christa Wolf,” *Die Zeit*, January 28, 1993, in Vinke, *Akteneinsicht*, 168–71.

⁷⁴¹ Fritz J. Raddatz, “Treffen im Seichten.”

to be no moral restrictions. Raddatz, however, still considers Walser's book a complete and utter failure—only that he does so based on literary, not on moral-political criteria.

The attempts to separate aesthetics and politics in the 2002 debate about *Tod eines Kritikers* can be read as a sign that authors of the Hitler Youth generation were being perceived in a new way. They continued to be in the limelight but were perceived less as political figures than as writers. The discourse on the Hitler Youth generation had begun to change. This becomes especially clear when we consider the 2006 debate about Günter Grass.

*Um wie vieles leichter war es doch, dachte ich, über die Verführungen einer Kindheit
Rechenschaft zu geben als über die Verfehlungen der späteren Jahre.
—Christa Wolf, Stadt der Engel, 2010*

3. Fall of a Hero—Günter Grass’ *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel*

The confession

In 2006, Günter Grass revealed a detail that hitherto had been omitted from his official biography. On August 11 it made the national news: the news shows of both ARD and ZDF, the two biggest German television channels, announced that Grass had not just served in the Nazi system as a *Hitlerjunge* and *Flakhelfer* but also as a member of the Waffen-SS. In an interview with the *FAZ* on August 12 about his forthcoming autobiography, *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel*, Grass confirmed that his book would treat his brief membership in the Waffen-SS.⁷⁴² Reportedly, he volunteered unsuccessfully for the submarine fleet at the age of 15, was then conscripted into the Reich Labour Service (*Reichsarbeitsdienst*), and ultimately called up for the Waffen-SS, into the “Panzerdivision Frundsberg,” shortly before his 17th birthday in October 1944. He then stayed with this division, surviving a few combat situations without firing a single shot until the “*Panzerdivision Frundsberg*” surrendered to U.S. forces in April 1945.⁷⁴³

⁷⁴² The Waffen-SS was the armed force of the SS. Grass served in an elite combat troop. “The Waffen-SS was made up of three subgroups: the *Leibstandarte*, Hitler’s personal bodyguard; the *Totenkopfverbände* (Death’s-Head Battalions), which administered the concentration camps; and the *Verfügungstruppen* (Disposition Troops), which swelled to 39 divisions in World War II and which, serving as elite combat troops alongside the regular army, gained a reputation as fanatical fighters.” For more information on ‘SS’ and ‘Waffen-SS’, see *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, s. v. “SS,” accessed April 19, 2012, <http://www.britannica.com.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/EBchecked/topic/562059/SS>.

⁷⁴³ See Grass’ interview with the *FAZ*. Frank Schirmacher, Hubert Spiegel, and Günter Grass, “Warum ich nach sechzig Jahren mein Schweigen breche. Eine deutsche Jugend: Günter Grass spricht zum ersten Mal über sein Erinnerungsbuch und seine Mitgliedschaft in der Waffen-SS,” *FAZ*, August 12, 2006, in *Ein Buch, ein Bekenntnis: Die Debatte um Günter Grass’ “Beim Häuten der Zwiebel,”* ed. Martin Kölbl (Göttingen: Steidl, 2007), 27-36. Grass also describes his experiences in the SS in the chapter “Wie ich das Fürchten lernte” of his autobiography *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel*. Günter Grass, *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel*, 121-180. For a short report on his wartime experiences written by Grass himself for

Grass in the *Waffen-SS*—what did this mean for Germany? After the 2006 World Cup, hosted by Germany, the media had a new topic. After the first wave of the Grass scandal had hit the German public, the comedian Harald Schmidt satirically summarized the reactions to Grass' revelation in his column for the magazine *Focus*: "Literarisch bleibt er für mich ein Großer, aber moralisch würde ich nicht mal mehr eine Blechtrommel von ihm kaufen!"⁷⁴⁴ This is a fairly accurate summary of the general opinions voiced in the debate. The public outrage about Grass did not arise from the fact that he had been a member of the *Waffen-SS* at age seventeen—indeed, his young age was widely accepted as an excuse for his ideological aberration. The criticism was primarily directed at the fact that Grass had kept silent about it afterwards during his almost fifty-year writing career. A number of critics put forward the so-called Bitburg affair, in which Grass had vehemently protested the symbolic gesture planned on the occasion of US-President Reagan's visit to Germany on the 40th anniversary of V-Day: Kohl had suggested that both political leaders should lay a wreath at the Bitburg cemetery where not only German *Wehrmacht* soldiers were buried but, as it turned out, also several members of the *Waffen-SS*.⁷⁴⁵ There seemed to be a general agreement that if there ever was a "right" moment for Grass to reveal his own membership in the SS, it would have

The New Yorker in 2007, see Günter Grass, "How I Spent the War. A Recruit in the Waffen-SS," *The New Yorker*, June 2007, http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2007/06/04/070604fa_fact_grass.

⁷⁴⁴ Harald Schmidt, "Mach et, Günter!" *Focus*, August 21, 2006, in Kölbel, *Ein Buch, ein Bekenntnis*, 196. The last sentence about the tin drum, incidentally, alludes to Joachim Fest's dictum "Ich würde nicht mal mehr einen Gebrauchtwagen von diesem Mann kaufen," see "Walesa macht Grass Ehrenbürgerwürde streitig," *Spiegel online*, August 13, 2006, <http://www.spiegel.de/kultur/literatur/0,1518,431491,00.html>.

⁷⁴⁵ The result of the many protests in both countries, in short, was that while the visit at the cemetery still took place, the wreath was ultimately laid at the concentration camp Bergen Belsen. For more information on this memory debate, see entry "Bitburg-Affäre," Fischer and Lorenz, *Lexikon der 'Vergangenheitsbewältigung'*, 227-229.

been in the context of Bitburg.⁷⁴⁶ Thus Grass' silence during the Bitburg affair was considered the peak of his hypocrisy.⁷⁴⁷

The debate

The debate about Günter Grass' moral credibility that followed his *Waffen-SS* revelation displays in the clearest terms the representative function Grass had occupied in the cultural sphere of the post-war era. What Christa Wolf was for East Germany, Grass was for the West: a role model *par excellence*. His fall from grace, then, was accordingly severe. The day of the first announcement on TV, August 11, the news show *Heute-Journal* had still introduced Grass with the sentences: "Günter Grass ist eine moralische Instanz in Deutschland. Sein Wort zählt, und das nicht nur in der Literatur."⁷⁴⁸ Soon, however, the headline of any news report on Grass's belated confession could essentially have been: "Ende einer moralischen Instanz."⁷⁴⁹ As the general secretary of the German PEN Wilfried F. Schoeller wrote, "die moralischen Verdikte fielen verheerend aus, als ginge es bei diesem Verschweigen einer jugendlichen Torheit um Landesverrat."⁷⁵⁰

Indeed, Grass's national importance became most obvious at the moment when its end

⁷⁴⁶ Frank Schirmacher was the first to point to Bitburg in his editorial "Das Geständnis" in *FAZ*. He wrote: "Wie wäre die Bitburg-Debatte verlaufen, wenn er sich damals erklärt hätte—und sei es im selbstzweifelnden, goethischen Sinne, daß er noch nie von einem Verbrechen gehört habe, das er nicht auch selbst hätte begehen können? [...] wäre die Debatte nicht wahrhaftiger gewesen, wenn man gewußt hätte, daß aus einem verblendeten Mitglied der Waffen-SS (so stellt Grass selbst sich dar), einem der Jugendlichen, die da lagen, einer wie er hätte werden können—nicht nur ein Verteidiger, ein Protagonist von Freiheit und Demokratie?" Frank Schirmacher, "Das Geständnis" *FAZ*, August 12, 2006, 26-27, 26. See also Jens Jessen, "Und Grass wundert sich. Die öffentliche Selbstrechtfertigung des großen Schriftstellers ist so unnötig wie ärgerlich," in Kölbel, *Ein Buch, ein Bekenntnis*, 172-174, 173.

⁷⁴⁷ See for example, Grass article published in *Die Zeit*. Günter Grass: "Geschenkte Freiheit. Versagen, Schuld, vertane Chancen," *Die Zeit*, 20/1985, June 10 1985, <http://www.zeit.de/1985/20/geschenkte-freiheit>.

⁷⁴⁸ Karin Cartal and Norbert Schneider, *ZDF Heute-Journal*, August 11, 2006, in Kölbel, *Ein Buch, ein Bekenntnis*, 21-22, 21.

⁷⁴⁹ Grass biographer Michael Jürg was the first to be quoted as having said that he was personally disappointed and that the result of Grass' revelation would be the end of his moral authority. See Martin Kölbel, "Kleine Chronologie," in Kölbel, *Ein Buch, Ein Bekenntnis*, 8-17, 10.

⁷⁵⁰ Wilfried F. Schoeller, "Unversöhnt mit sich selbst," *Literaturen 10* (2006), in Kölbel, *Ein Buch, ein Bekenntnis*, 314-317, 314.

was announced. Even Germany's chancellor Angela Merkel commented on the affair, saying, "ich hätte mir gewünscht, wir wären über seine Biografie von Anfang an in vollem Umfang informiert gewesen."⁷⁵¹ This comment is striking not only because Germany's highest governing official felt provoked to give a public comment at all. It is also the use of the pronoun "wir," with which Merkel implied that Grass had disrespected his obligations to the Germans, the national collective he and she were representing. More polemically, *Der Spiegel* wrote, "Grass gab sich als moralischer Aufsichtsratsvorsitzender der Bundesrepublik Deutschland," and with equal gloating, and arguably also with accuracy, Henryk M. Broder called Grass "de[n] Prototyp des guten Deutschen, den man überall vorzeigen konnte, weil er auch sein Land mit Kritik nicht verschonte, die intellektuelle Quersumme aus Thomas Mann, Frantz Fanon und Popeye."⁷⁵²

Even in his failure critics saw him as representative figure. As in the case of Christa Wolf's Stasi affiliation, the author's weakness was considered symbolic of the country he was representing. Ina Hartwig, critic at *Frankfurter Rundschau*, wrote: "Grass hat jetzt einen Coup gelandet, gerade weil er sich in seiner moralischen Unvollkommenheit zeigt."⁷⁵³ With his long silence about his past, Frank Schirrmacher wrote, Grass epitomized Germany's difficulties with *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, the same resistance to face the past that Grass had tirelessly denounced. The sociologist Heinz Bude, who was the first to do research about the *Flakhelfergeneration* in the 1980s, similarly said that Grass's withholding turned him into an "echten Repräsentanten

⁷⁵¹ See Martin Kölbel, "Kleine Chronologie," 15.

⁷⁵² Henryk M. Broder, "Happy Hour im Fegefeuer," *Weltwoche* 33 (2006), in Kölbel, *Ein Buch, ein Bekenntnis*, 126-127, 126.

⁷⁵³ Ina Hartwig, "Die Gnade der späten Fehlbarkeit," *Frankfurter Rundschau*, August 22, 2006, in Kölbel, *Ein Buch, ein Bekenntnis*, 178-179, 179.

der Bundesrepublik.”⁷⁵⁴ He spoke of Grass’s “historische Glaubwürdigkeit” and called him “ein würdiger Nobelpreisträger aus Deutschland.”⁷⁵⁵ According to Thomas Steinfeld, feuilleton editor of *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, what had become clear by the end of the first week of the scandal—that “Grass ist Deutschland”—would be confirmed after people read his book: “Grass war Deutschland.”⁷⁵⁶

Grass was Germany

The shift from the present to the past tense—from “Grass ist Deutschland” to “Grass war Deutschland”—indicates both the writer’s enormous significance for German society as well as the loss of his moral authority marked by his disclosure. In her article “‘Ehrlich, du lügst wie gedruckt’: Günter Grass’ Autobiographical Confession and the Changing Territory of Germany’s Memory Culture,” Anne Fuchs claims that this loss of authority concerns Grass’s entire generation. “The controversy over Grass’ hypocrisy,” she writes, “seems to mark the end of the Hitler Youth generation’s intellectual prominence.”⁷⁵⁷ The Grass debate, argues Fuchs, served “as an opportunity to dismantle the political and intellectual authority of the so-called Hitler Youth generation, which had dominated post-war affairs for more than forty years.”⁷⁵⁸ Fuchs sees indicators of this change in the vehemence of the attacks against Grass “as an icon of the post-war German intellectual scene.”⁷⁵⁹ She uses the cover of the August 2006 issue of *Der Spiegel* as an example,

⁷⁵⁴ Heinz Bude, “Die Überlegenheit des Schülersoldaten. Warum uns Günter Grass zeigt, wo wir herkommen – und deshalb ein würdiger Nobelpreisträger aus Deutschland ist,” *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, August 17, 2006, <http://www.sueddeutsche.de/kultur/debatte-um-guenter-grass-die-ueberlegenheit-des-schuelersoldaten-1.804189>.

⁷⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁵⁶ Thomas Steinfeld, “Grass ist Deutschland,” *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, August 19, 2006, in Kölbel, *Ein Buch, ein Bekenntnis*, 186-87, 186 and 187.

⁷⁵⁷ Ibid., 266.

⁷⁵⁸ Ibid., 265.

⁷⁵⁹ Ibid., 265.

which portrays Grass as Oskar Matzerath, the famous protagonist of the *Blechtrommel*, drumming on an SS-helmet. According to Fuchs, the title “Der Blechtrommler,” the word “*Blech*” being highlighted, suggested “that Grass’ belated confession turned his many interventions in Germany’s post-war politics into a heap of rubbish.”⁷⁶⁰ Furthermore, she observed that younger generations of Germans had grown tired of the very heatedness with which the Grass case was discussed:

[I]nterventions by a range of younger writers and commentators gave expression to a deep-seated sense of tiredness with this type of German memory contest that continues to make the National Socialist past a prime concern of the present at the expense of other more contemporary and pressing issues.⁷⁶¹

Since Anne Fuchs makes this point in passing, she does not provide much evidence for her claim. Perhaps one could consider the satirical takes on the Grass debate, such as commentaries by Henryk M. Broder and Harald Schmidt, both born after the war, as a sign of the exhaustion Fuchs observes. Schmidt writes that the general German sentiment towards Grass should be “Schade eigentlich. Denn über die Jahre war GG ein Fels im Watt. Ob für Willy oder gegen Verdrängung—GG sagte uns (oft ungefragt), wo’s langgeht. Auch die Filme waren Spitze.”⁷⁶² This satirically portrays what the general public (rather superficially) connected with Grass: his engagement for Willy Brandt and against the repression of the Nazi as well as Schlöndorff’s film version of *die Blechtrommel*, arguably better known than Grass’ novel. Fuchs is right in pointing out that this type of analysis bears a new tone in that it indicates amused indifference rather than outrage. Casually, Schmidt recommends saying good-bye to the great writer: *Tant*

⁷⁶⁰ Ibid., 265.

⁷⁶¹ Ibid., 266.

⁷⁶² Harald Schmidt, “Mach et, Günter!,” 196.

pis, it was nice while it lasted, we've always liked his movies. Fuchs explains the phenomenon as such:

The awareness that the last generation of witnesses is now passing away has produced a new transgenerational dialogue which abandons the accusatory tone of earlier inner-familial engagements with the National Socialist past, paradigmatically voiced in the so-called 'Väterliteratur', popular during the 1970s and 1980s in Germany."⁷⁶³

Fuchs's claim about a new, less accusatory and less emotional tone in the perception of the Hitler Youth generation is convincing but difficult to prove. Most articles written by journalists and public intellectuals of various generations naturally take issue with Grass' hypocrisy. There are, however, two striking phenomena that become evident in the 2006 Grass debate in comparison with the preceding controversies around Wolf and Walser.

Generational awareness

The first phenomenon is that, in Fuchs's words, "the Grass debate brought the issue of generation in contemporary German identity debates to the fore."⁷⁶⁴ Compared to the controversies surrounding Wolf and Walser, the debate over Günter Grass exhibits a much greater awareness of the role Grass and his generation played in post-war Germany. The symbolic significance of the Hitler Youth generation seems to be finally noticed by the feuilleton community, paradoxically at a moment when it had already waned. With much greater analytical distance than in the previous debates, several critics even redirected the critical gaze from the author to society itself. In an article in *Frankfurter Rundschau*, for example, Harry Nutt writes:

Wenn an der These, dass Grass eine Art moralischen Selbstmord begangen habe, etwas dran ist, dann stellt sich gesellschaftspolitisch die Frage, was für ein Leben man so einer Vorbild-Instanz von außen zuschreibt. Die moralische Eitelkeit der

⁷⁶³ Anne Fuchs, "Ehrlich, du lügst wie gedruckt," 264.

⁷⁶⁴ Ibid 265.

Person korrespondiert nur allzu gut mit dem Bedürfnis nach einfachen Identifikationsangeboten. Als widerspruchsfreie Leitfigur, der eine stellvertretende Unschuld beanspruchen kann, ist der Typus des Intellektuellen jedoch schon vor längerer Zeit gestorben.⁷⁶⁵

Grass's reign over post-war society, Nutt states, cannot merely be blamed on the author's vanity, which Nutt condemns earlier in the article. His authority was also based on a societal desire for authority figures, with which one could easily identify. The Hitler Youth generation represented the better Germany, the left-liberal antipodes to the Nazi period, from which they seemed to have emerged as the only Germans seemingly untainted—or at least that is what people wanted to believe. The problem, a columnist for the *Badische Zeitung* writes, was the Germans's "Sehnsucht nach der unverfälschten moralischen Instanz," and "[de]r in Ost und West schier unerschütterliche Glaube an die moralisch-ethische Kraft des Schriftstellers."⁷⁶⁶

In an insightful article for *Der Tagesspiegel*, Peter von Becker points to the particular role Grass and his generation have played for the post-war memory discourse:

Aus der Generation Grass sind ja einige alte, große Autoren und Gelehrte noch spät von ihrer einst ziemlich unvermeidlichen Hitler-Jugend eingeholt worden. Männer wie Walter Jens und Peter Wapnewski. Doch das alles passiert wohl zum letzten Mal. Die Zäsur steht an, denn die Täter, Opfer und Mitläufer, die Zeitzeugen, sie sterben aus. Damit setzt eine Historisierung des Erinnerns ein, auch die distanzierende Musealisierung. Schon jetzt ist beispielsweise das Holocaust-Mahnmal in Berlins Mitte für die Jungen eine lockere Begehungs- und Begegnungsstätte. Begegnung mit Vergangenheit – und Zukunft. Ein Hauch, eine frische Zugluft war auch die Fußball-WM. Statt des hässlichen zeigte sie der Welt den hübschen, heiteren Deutschen. Den jungen Deutschen.⁷⁶⁷

Von Becker predicts that with the last witnesses of the Nazi period vanishing—from the public scene and, given their age, also in general—there will be room for a generational

⁷⁶⁵ Harry Nutt, "Das lange Schweigen," *Frankfurter Rundschau*, August 14, 2006, in Kölbel, *Ein Buch, ein Bekenntnis*, 43.

⁷⁶⁶ Klaus Siebenhaar, "Gefallener Engel," in Kölbel, *Ein Buch, ein Bekenntnis*, 50.

⁷⁶⁷ Peter von Becker, "Nach Grass. Übervaterlose Gesellschaft," *Der Tagesspiegel*, August 19, 2006, in Kölbel, *Ein Buch, ein Bekenntnis*, 119-20, 119.

change that was long overdue. This will mark a caesura in post-war German history: a historicization of memory will begin, as soon as there will no longer be members of the Hitler Youth generation who are still biographically attached to Hitler's Germany.

Whereas Grass will remain popular as the writer of *Die Blechtrommel*, he will certainly lose his moral authority over Germany—which in von Becker's eyes presents a positive development:

Grass hat mit der ‚Blechtrommel‘ oder den ‚Hundejahren‘ Weltliteratur geschrieben. Das bleibt, für immer. Nur das moralische Denkmal ist gestürzt. Das hat auch etwas Gutes. Denk mal selber! Ohne praeceptor Germaniae.

Denn jetzt kommt eine andere Zeit. Keine Wertewende. Aber was wir in dieser letzten Woche erlebt haben, ist in Deutschland 60 Jahre nach dem Krieg und anderthalb Jahrzehnte nach der jüngsten Diktatur der Anfang einer übervaterlosen Gesellschaft. Das schafft Spielraum, öffnet einen neuen Freiraum. Auch wenn da noch ein Leerraum gähnt.⁷⁶⁸

The disassociation from Grass and other members of the Hitler Youth generation, von Becker argues, will mark the beginning of a new time period: “der Anfang einer übervaterlosen Gesellschaft,”⁷⁶⁹ in which people will no longer be able to rely on the guidance of these societal role models who seemed to guarantee the correct moral and political opinion. The notion of *sapere aude* implicit in von Becker's argument indicates the significance he assigns to this historical change.

Disassociation of aesthetics and politics

The second phenomenon, new to the 2006 Grass debate, is the astonishingly strict separation of Grass's aesthetic and his political work. It seemed almost as if Günter Grass were two distinct people: an author and a public intellectual. The discussions on the repercussions of Grass's revelation for his place in society and the reviews of the

⁷⁶⁸ Ibid 119-120.

⁷⁶⁹ See quote above.

book were almost entirely dissociated from one another.⁷⁷⁰ The criticism mostly concerned the public persona Günter Grass, while his autobiographical novel emerged from the “Papierberg der Entrüstung,” Schoeller writes, “bislang relativ unbeschadet.”⁷⁷¹ The distinction between Grass the author and Grass the authority figure became explicit in many commentaries by other public figures. Former *Bundespräsident* Richard von Weizsäcker was quoted with the sentence: “An der Kraft seiner Literatur und seinen prägenden Leistungen für das deutsch-polnische Verhältnis nach dem barbarischen Krieg ändert das nichts!”⁷⁷² The Peruvian writer and Nobel laureate Mario Vargas Llosa argued that the scandal would soon be forgotten, while Grass’s writing, especially his novel *Die Blechtrommel*, would last. “Berührt das, was geschehen ist, das literarische Werk von Günter Grass? Überhaupt nicht,”⁷⁷³ he stated decidedly. Michel Friedmann, former vice president of the *Zentralrat der deutschen Juden*, said in an interview: “Günter Grass gehört zu den genialen Dichtern, seine politischen Äußerungen sind teilweise nachvollziehbar, teilweise strittig. Darum geht es ja nicht. Um was es geht, ist der Homo politicus, der sich zurecht in die politisch-moralisch-historische Debatte einbrachte.”⁷⁷⁴ Critic Joachim Kaiser, asked in an interview with *Focus* what remained of Grass as a public authority figure, responded: “Ungebrochenes Vertrauen in seine genialisch-poetische Kraft, sanftes Achselzucken, wenn er als Zeitkritiker fundamentalistisch in

⁷⁷⁰ Granted, the news about the Waffen-SS membership reached the public before the book did. Thus, the first wave of articles logically focused on the revelation itself, while reviews appeared a little bit later after the book was published. Still, even Grass’s other literary works were seldom mentioned in the first wave of articles. The separation of aesthetics and politics remains striking even if one considers the later publication of the book.

⁷⁷¹ Wilfried F. Schoeller, “Unversöhnt mit sich selbst,” *Literaturen* 10 (2006), in Kölbel, *Ein Buch, ein Bekenntnis*, 314-317, 314.

⁷⁷² Richard von Weizsäcker, *Bild am Sonntag*, dpa report, August 20, 2006, in Kölbel, *Ein Buch, ein Bekenntnis*, 14.

⁷⁷³ Mario Vargas Llosa, “Stein des Anstoßes—Günter Grass am Pranger,” *El País*, August 27, 2006, in Kölbel, *Ein Buch, ein Bekenntnis*, 137-141, 138.

⁷⁷⁴ Michel Friedman, “Ich bin von ihm als deutscher Jude enttäuscht,” interview with *Leipziger Volkszeitung* August 19, 2006, in Kölbel, *Ein Buch, ein Bekenntnis*, 93.

Wallung gerät.”⁷⁷⁵ Swiss literary scholar Peter von Matt was asked by the magazine *Weltwoche*: “Schädigt das Schuldgeständnis Grass’ literarisches Werk und seine Rolle als moralische Instanz der Nachkriegszeit, oder ist sein Ruhm als Nobelpreisträger so groß, dass er die Affäre unbeschädigt überstehen wird?” He answered succinctly: “Mit der moralischen Instanz ist es jetzt Essig. ‘Die Blechtrommel’ aber bleibt ein herrlicher Roman.”⁷⁷⁶ Margarete Mitscherlich, co-author of *Die Unfähigkeit zu trauern* (1967),⁷⁷⁷ was asked by the magazine *Cicero* whether she agrees with those critics demanding that Grass return the Nobel Prize he had been awarded in 1999. She said: “Aber nein. Er hat diesen Preis nicht seiner Gesinnung wegen bekommen, sondern wegen seines Werks.”⁷⁷⁸

Most journalists likewise praised Grass’s literary accomplishments while stating more critically that his moral credibility had seriously suffered. The distinction between Grass’s moral credibility and his qualities as a writer almost became a presupposition, as the following quotes demonstrate:

Als öffentliche Autorität ist Günter Grass unwiderruflich beschädigt. Sein Werk harret indes einer womöglich spannenden Relektüre.⁷⁷⁹

[M]an [muss] die öffentliche Person, den weltanschaulichen und politischen Kommentator Grass von dem Dichter und seinem Werk unterscheiden: Wie so oft, ist das Werk hier deutlich klüger als die öffentliche Stimme des Autors.⁷⁸⁰

⁷⁷⁵ Joachim Kaiser, “Beklemmendes Verdrängen,” interview with *Focus*, August 21 2006, in Kölbel, *Ein Buch, ein Bekenntnis*, 97.

⁷⁷⁶ Peter von Matt, “Große Kunst kommt aus der Wildnis” Interview with *Weltwoche* (33/2006), in Kölbel, *Ein Buch, ein Bekenntnis*, 98-99, 99.

⁷⁷⁷ See Alexander Mitscherlich, Margarete Mitscherlich, *Die Unfähigkeit zu trauern. Grundlagen kollektiven Verhaltens* (Munich: Piper, 2007).

⁷⁷⁸ Margarete Mitscherlich, “Vorbild um den Preis der Lüge,” *Cicero* (9/2006), in Kölbel, *Ein Buch, ein Bekenntnis*, 103-05, 105.

⁷⁷⁹ Bettina Schulte, “Das Schweigen des Moralisten,” *Badische Zeitung*, August 16, 2006, in Kölbel, *Ein Buch, ein Bekenntnis*, 47-48, 48.

⁷⁸⁰ Gustav Seibt, “Geständnis einer Schnecke. Mitgliedschaft in der Waffen-SS als Siebzehnjähriger in den letzten Kriegsmonaten: Was Günter Grass enthüllt hat,” *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, August 14, 2006, in Kölbel, *Ein Buch, ein Bekenntnis*, 39-41, 41.

Das Werk steht unbeschädigt, es verliert nicht ein Jota von seinem literarischen Wert, es zeigt sich resistent gegen die öffentlichen Anwürfe. Zur Diskussion steht nicht der Literat, sondern die öffentliche Person.⁷⁸¹

What had appeared in outlines of the controversy surrounding Walser's *Tod eines Kritikers* becomes most obvious in the 2006 Grass debate: writers of the Hitler Youth generation were released from their public role.

The significance of this development cannot be overestimated. Consider the debates surrounding Christa Wolf during the nineties in comparison, in which Wolf's alleged moral-political failure was consistently understood as devaluing her work. Whereas there seems to have been a general agreement in 1993 that Wolf's image as a writer was hurt by her *Stasi* affiliation, journalists in 2006 simply rejected the idea that Grass's hypocritical silence about the *Waffen-SS* past could affect the high estimation of his writing. Thus, I would correct Fuchs's claim that the Grass controversy marked "the end of the Hitler Youth generation's intellectual prominence."⁷⁸² It was their authority as political commentators that had come to an end. Their prominence as writers remains unbroken, as the success of recent publications by all three writers, Grass, Wolf, and Walser suggests.⁷⁸³ The true change, which became visible first with the last Walser debate in 2002, lies in the reestablishment of boundaries between the biography of the authors and their literary work.

Bad conscience of the nation—a reading of "Beim Häuten der Zwiebel"

⁷⁸¹ Jürgen Otten, "Schuld und Sühne," *Leipziger Volkszeitung*, August 19, 2006, in Kölbel, *Ein Buch, ein Bekenntnis*, 181-92, 182.

⁷⁸² Anne Fuchs, 'Ehrlich, du lügst wie gedruckt' 266.

⁷⁸³ See Martin Walser, *Muttersohn* (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 2011). Günter Grass, *Grimms Wörter: Eine Liebeserklärung* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2010). And Christa Wolf, *Stadt der Engel oder The Overcoat of Dr. Freud* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2010).

In the first part of this chapter, I argue that Christa Wolf, in her most recent autobiographical novel *Stadt der Engel*, lets go of the responsibility she felt toward the public. In her novel, she liberates herself from the representative role she had long embraced but always perceived as a burden. Martin Walser, by contrast, had done so long before, and his controversial texts from 1998 and 2002 depict an almost cynical act of game-playing with this role: he subverts the morality that was expected of him by breaking the most delicate taboos present in German memory discourse. What then does Grass's autobiographical novel *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel* reveal about the author's position regarding his public role?

It seems fairly clear, not only from the autobiographical novel itself but also from the *FAZ* interview in which the author talks for the first time publicly about his *Waffen-SS* past, that as opposed to Wolf and Walser, Grass clung to his role as Germany's "national conscience." He continued to write as a representative of the Hitler Youth generation, personal and collective memory intertwined. As Anne Fuchs has pointed out, the autobiography is "[w]ritten in a highly self-conscious manner, the book does not begin with Grass's birth and early childhood memories but rather with the outbreak of the Second World War on 1 September 1939, which for Grass marks the abrupt end of his childhood; and it ends with the publication of *Die Blechtrommel* in 1959."⁷⁸⁴ This time frame alone indicates that Grass does not present his readers with a typical autobiography spanning his entire life to the present. Rather, he paints a portrait of the artist as a young man that ends with the publication of the work that has brought about Grass's national and international fame. *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel* depicts the years before *Die Blechtrommel*, the formative years for the career that would follow. These biographical

⁷⁸⁴ Ibid.

experiences, Grass seems to say, motivated him to become who he is, not as a private person but as a public intellectual. This is why Grass continually connects biographical experiences during the war and the immediate post-war years with his oeuvre. As Richard Schade writes in his essay “Layers of Meaning, War, Art: Grass’s *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel*”:

Throughout the memoir the reader is reminded of titles written during the years well after the purview of the autobiography (1939-1945). The text functions as a kind of bibliography, as a literary biography of sorts, reminding the reader that the young man who came of age in *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel* went on to produce texts relevant to the events of his entire life.⁷⁸⁵

One could reformulate this last sentence in reverse order: Grass reminds his readers of the fact that the productivity of his later career was fueled by these years as an adolescent during the Nazi years and a young adult in the fifties. Similarly to Christa Wolf, for whom the war and early post-war years were decisive in terms of her life-long engagement with the socialist idea, Grass had always depicted his witnessing of the Nazi era and his subsequent coming to awareness after 1945 as the engine that drove his writing and his advocacy of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* in the Federal Republic.

Considering the *Waffen-SS* revelation, it is somewhat surprising that Grass *still* presents himself as an authority in the memory discourse after the publication of *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel*. The status as witness without guilt, to which Weigel assigns the authority of the Hitler Youth generation,⁷⁸⁶ while by and large historically accurate due to their young age, becomes at least questionable in Grass’s case. He was, in his own words, part of a system “das die Vernichtung von Millionen Menschen geplant,

⁷⁸⁵ Richard E. Schade, “Layers of Meaning, War, Art: Grass’s ‘Beim Häuten der Zwiebel,’” *The German Quarterly* 80.3 (2007): 279-301.

⁷⁸⁶ See Sigrid Weigel, “Generation as a Symbolic Form”

organisiert und vollzogen hatte”⁷⁸⁷ “Selbst wenn mir tätige Mitschuld auszureden war,” he writes in *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel*, “blieb ein bis heute nicht abgetragener Rest, der allzu geläufig Mitverantwortung genannt wird.”⁷⁸⁸ The twist that enables Grass to speak about the Nazi period with an authoritative voice, still as a spokesperson of a “Generation [...], die mit kindlichem Aneignungseifer die Nazi-Ideologie übernahm, die in den letzten Kriegsmonaten zum Verheizen bestimmt war, die sich durch die Nachkriegszeit hungerte und eine Schubumkehr unserer politischen Kultur zustande brachte,”⁷⁸⁹ as Wilfried Schoeller put it, is part of his ostentatious rhetoric of self-accusation.

Andreas Huyssen, in his review of Grass’ autobiography for *The Nation*, describes that after an initial sense of betrayal he was surprised to discover the harshness with which Grass tackled the ideological aberrations during his adolescence:

Grass comes down hard and unsentimentally on his inability as a young man to read the signs of the times—the nonconformist fellow student who one day disappeared from the classroom; the Catholic teacher who ended up in a nearby concentration camp; his mother’s hints about the persecution of the Jews. Indoctrinated as he was, he saw and looked away. Günter Grass’s *éducation politique* was slow in taking shape, and his memoir acknowledges it.⁷⁹⁰

Indeed, the self-accusatory tone in the part where Grass writes about his adolescence is disarming and appears genuine. Nevertheless, the manner in which he presents his guilt appears exaggerated and almost seems exculpatory, as I have demonstrated in the previous chapter. He makes a point of depicting Grass the memoirist as the harshest critic of Grass the teenager:

[D]as Belasten, Einstufen und Abstempeln kann ich selber besorgen. Ich war ja als Hitlerjunge ein Jungnazi. Gläubig bis zum Schluß. Nicht gerade fanatisch

⁷⁸⁷ Grass, *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel* 127.

⁷⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸⁹ Schoeller, “Unversöhnt mit sich selbst,” 314.

⁷⁹⁰ Andreas Huyssen, “I’m Not the Man I Used to Be. Günter Grass’ *Peeling the Onion*,” *The Nation* August 13 (2007): 25-28, 26.

vorneweg, aber mit reflexhaften unverrücktem Blick auf die Fahne, von der es hieß, sie sei ‚mehr als der Tod‘, blieb ich in Reih und Glied, geübt im Gleichschritt. Kein Zweifel kränkte den Glauben, nichts Subversives, etwa die heimliche Weitergabe von Flugblättern, kann mich entlasten. Kein Göringwitz machte mich verdächtig. Vielmehr sah ich das Vaterland bedroht, weil von Feinden umringt. [...] Um den Jungen und also mich zu entlassen, kann nicht einmal gesagt werden: Man hat uns verführt! Nein, wir haben uns, ich habe mich verführen lassen.⁷⁹¹

His willingness to judge himself harshly is juxtaposed with the teenager’s appearances.

Teenage Grass regularly “comes to life” in order to remind the memoirist as well as the reader to see the historical situation from his perspective:

Sobald ich mir den Jungen von einst, der ich als Dreizehnjähriger gewesen bin, herbeizitiere, ihn streng ins Verhör nehme und die Verlockung spüre, ihn zu richten, womöglich wie einen Fremden, dessen Nöte mich kaltlassen, abzuurteilen, sehe ich einen mittelgroßen Bengel in kurzen Hosen und Kniestrümpfen, der ständig grimassiert. Er weicht mir aus, will nicht beurteilt, verurteilt werden. Er flüchtet auf Mutters Schoß. Er ruft: ‚Ich war doch ein Kind nur, nur ein Kind...‘

Ich versuche, ihn zu beruhigen, und bitte ihn, mit beim Häuten der Zwiebel zu helfen, aber er verweigert Auskünfte, will sich nicht als mein frühes Selbstbild ausbeuten lassen. Er spricht mir das Recht ab, ihn, wie er sagt, ‚fertigzumachen‘, und zwar ‚von oben herab‘.⁷⁹²

Both the self-accusation as well as the offer of an apology that becomes manifest in these last two passages serve the purpose of exonerating Grass from the blame of having been in the *Waffen-SS*, while simultaneously portraying the author as a highly self-critical and thus exemplary memoirist.

I agree with Ulrich Greiner’s subtle critique of this skillful yet exaggerated self-criticism when he writes: “Selbst die eindrucksvoll herausgearbeitete Selbstzerknirschung, die man in den Memoiren von Grass nachlesen kann, entbehrt nicht

⁷⁹¹ Grass, *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel*, 43-44.

⁷⁹² Ibid 36-37.

eines gewissen Sündenstolzes.”⁷⁹³ Jens Jessen more explicitly condemned the “Spektakel der Selbstanklage” that Grass,⁷⁹⁴ in his view, staged in his interview with the *FAZ*: the caption of his article in *Die Zeit* reads, “Die öffentliche Selbstrechtfertigung des großen Schriftstellers ist so unnötig wie ärgerlich.”⁷⁹⁵ To call Grass’s confession an entirely staged “Aufschrei einer gequälten Seele in maximaler Lautstärke,” as Jessen does, is too harsh a judgment, and I do not support Jessen’s suggestion that the interview was a marketing trick to sell his book. My main criticism is directed at the imbalance between Grass’ ostentatious self-accusation with regard to his adolescent aberrations and the comparatively meager commentary on the belatedness, with which he confessed the important historical detail that he was a member of the *Waffen-SS*. Considering that most critics did not even bother to discuss the moral issue of his joining the *SS* at seventeen and that his moral failure was rather seen to be his long-term silence, that the author, in his attempt to tame his critics, participated in a discourse about guilt and innocence that had long become outdated. One could say that he simply addressed the wrong issue.

The debate in 2006 would have been an appropriate moment for Grass either to reflect whether his long silence was caused by restrictions inherent of the post-war discourse or to simply withdraw from public discourse. Instead, he displays a strong desire to remain the advocate of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, as though nothing had changed since the 1960, as the following statement shows that Grass made on television in 2006:

⁷⁹³ Ulrich Greiner, “Es ist nun wirklich genug! Der Fall Grass: Was bleibt von den ‘Flakhelfern’ und ‘Schülersoldaten’? Vor allem Selbstgerechtigkeit und Moralismus. Eine Polemik,” *Die Zeit*, August 24, 2006, in Kölbel, *Ein Buch, ein Bekenntnis*, 174-175, 175.

⁷⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁹⁵ Jens Jessen, “Und Grass wundert sich. Die öffentliche Selbstrechtfertigung des großen Schriftstellers ist so unnötig wie ärgerlich,” *Die Zeit*, August 17 2006, in Kölbel, *Ein Buch, ein Bekenntnis*, 172-174, 172.

Und was sagen Sie denen, die von Ihnen als moralischer Instanz nun enttäuscht sind?

—Ja, ich muss mit dieser Kritik leben, ich will das alles auch nicht zurückweisen, aber wenn ich das so zur Kenntnis nehme, werd ich an meinen politischen Beurteilungen und meinen Einschätzungen nichts zurücknehmen. [...] Das sind Einschätzungen, die ich auch aufgrund meiner Erfahrungen gemacht habe. Ich gehöre zu dieser gebrannten Generation und habe daraus sehr früh dann nach und noch mit dem Wachsen meiner politischen Einsichten und Kenntnisse meine Konsequenzen daraus gezogen.⁷⁹⁶

Since he cannot relinquish his responsibilities as a spokesperson of society, he seems to posit here, he will simply have to “endure” the personal criticism. My analysis of the Grass debate has shown that by 2006 the writers had been deprived of the authority they once had as moral-political figures in the political discourse. It seems that Grass, however, refused to recognize this change.

⁷⁹⁶ Günter Grass, Interview with Stephan Lohr, *Norddeutscher Rundfunk* (NDR), August 12, 2006, http://www.ndr.de/land_leute/norddeutsche_gesichter/nkult354_page-2.html.

Conclusion

During the Christa Wolf debate in 1990–91, Ulrich Greiner described the merging of aesthetics, biography, and memory politics in post-war German literature as

“*Gesinnungsästhetik*,” and Wolf as the most prominent representative of this conception:

In der *Gesinnungsästhetik*, und ihr herausragendes Beispiel bleibt Christa Wolf, sind Werk und Person und Moral untrennbar. Der Text ist der moralische Selbstentwurf des Autors. Und der Autor ist identisch mit seiner moralischen Absicht.⁷⁹⁷

While Greiner uses the term “*Gesinnungsästhetik*” critically and applies to post-war German literature as a whole, I want to suggest at the end of this chapter to turn it into an unironical, analytical category and to use it exclusively for writers of the Hitler Youth generation. No other generation in the post-war era made both their writing *and* their politics so dependent on a morality intrinsically linked to the Nazi era. “*Gesinnung*,” a term with moral and political implications that is perhaps best translated as “morality,” is a crucial category for understanding the work of Grass, Walser and Wolf, and in order to understand their “*Gesinnung*” one needs to take into account how their Hitler Youth biographies shaped their development as writers during the post-war era. Their historical position between the perpetrator and the first post-war generation, an ambiguous place between innocence and guilt, made the public reflection on their upbringing both in literary and political terms necessary. “Werk und Person und Moral”⁷⁹⁸ were intrinsically connected for them.

In this chapter, I have traced the disintegration of this triad by focusing on the literature and the reception of Grass, Walser, and Wolf in the twenty years following

⁷⁹⁷ Greiner, “*Gesinnungsästhetik*” 216.

⁷⁹⁸ See previous quote.

Germany's re-unification. When the memory discourse changed after 1990 the writers's representative role as the generation of witnesses became increasingly less important, while simultaneously the critics acknowledged this role for the first time. My goal has not been only to outline the development in the reception of Wolf, Walser, and Grass, but also to unveil that these authors themselves reflected upon the dismantling of their authority in the public sphere. It should now be apparent that they did so in different ways:

It seems that Christa Wolf's belief in socialism was so closely connected with her pre-war biographical and so constitutive of her post-war identity as a writer and public persona that she was unable to admit the failure of the socialist German experiment even after the collapse of the GDR. I have shown, however, that the critics overlooked the self-reflective qualities of the 1990 text *Was bleibt*. In many ways, the participants of the debate merely repeated what Wolf had already stressed in the text herself, namely that, despite the Stasi surveillance she endured during the seventies, and despite the obvious failure of the East-German state, she unsuccessfully searched for a new language that would enable her to regard the socialist experiment in more critical terms. I have illustrated that in this disclosure of her weakness, Wolf offers a generational explanation. While the younger writer in *Was bleibt* takes a critical stance and expresses the oppressive tendencies of the regime without fear, Wolf's alter ego, is unable to do so because the state presents such an important part of her personal history. Only twenty years after Germany's reunification in her novel *Stadt der Engel*, Wolf finally distances herself from her socialist past—along with a type of biographical writing typical for the author throughout her career. I have read the surrealist ending of the novel as a

counterpoint to her previous writing and an act of liberation. The novel does not reveal a new language critical of the GDR. Neither does it address Wolf's Stasi affiliation in the sixties in a sufficient way. But after a long period of self-introspection, in which the author withdrew more and more from the public sphere, she releases herself from the self-assigned moral and political responsibilities in *Stadt der Engel*. She died one year later in December 2011.

Walser, one could argue, was the most perceptive of the three authors. Since the late 1970s he had rejected the idea of being part of a generation representing what from his perspective was a guilt-ridden memory of the Nazi period. When memory became an important topic again during the 1990s he used his popularity in order to subvert the role he knew was expected of him as a former Hitler Youth. Instead of emphasizing the importance of ritualized Holocaust memory, he expresses his utter annoyance with it. Both with his *Friedenspreis* speech (1998) and with his novel *Tod eines Kritikers* (2002) he sought to provoke. Supposedly speaking as a private person who “just said what everyone thinks,” he demanded the normalization of Germany's memory discourse in his Frankfurt speech, and he thereby distinctly opposed Grass and other intellectuals of the Hitler Youth generation. A few years later, he performed the role of a writer who “just wrote a satire about the literary scene,” while consciously playing with the most explosive issue in German public discourse to the present day in order to make the point that literature ought to be free from moral claims—even with regard to anti-Semitism. Though it was precisely Walser's goal to reject moral-political responsibilities derived from his generational background, his stark protest underlines the significance of this discourse for the writer's work.

Grass, by comparison, displays an unimpaired desire to maintain his role as Germany's moral and political spokesperson, even after his *Waffen-SS* confession in 2006. Unlike Wolf whose commitments were shaken up by the fall of the Berlin Wall, and unlike Walser, who had long given up such a position, Grass's self-reflective writing never concerned his post-war persona but was always limited to his role during the war and shortly thereafter. In *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel*, he offers the same approach to his biography as during his entire career, the sole exception being his slightly more ostentatious self-accusation, which I have read as an attempt to buffer the impact of criticism he expected after the *Waffen-SS* revelation. The feuilleton, however, was not nearly as interested in Grass's guilt during the Nazi as in his post-war dishonesty—a topic Grass failed to address.

The analyses in this last chapter show that there are two reasons for the Hitler Youth generation's long-lasting influence in the public sphere. On the one hand, the writers themselves displayed a strong sense of commitment to building a new and better Germany. Their moral-political mission was shaped by their coming of age in Nazi-Germany and the recognition that they had blindly followed a murderous regime. From the beginning of their careers, Grass, Walser and Wolf hence saw themselves as political writers, their engagement in the public sphere driven by their generational experience. On the other hand, their enduring intellectual prominence in the public sphere equally resulted from a strong desire for clear-cut role models in Germany's post-war society, both in the East and West. After the moral and political disaster of the Third Reich, the need for iconic figures who represented the successful transition from Nazi enthusiasm to the post-war democracy cannot be underestimated. The Hitler Youth generation, less

implicated than the perpetrator generation, was the first generation able to fill this need. Thus, for a long time, the two Germanies were willing to grant the writers as much authority as they wanted to have in the public sphere.

After 1990, however, the parameters changed. Although the detachment from the Hitler Youth generation took almost twenty years, much longer than predicted, the generational change ultimately did happen—not only because of Germany's different political landscape and the country's increased distance to World War II but also because Wolf's affiliations with the *Stasi*, Walser's memory provocations, and Grass's *Waffen-SS* past damaged the moral credibility of these writers. Greiner, Schirrmacher, and Bohrer, however, quoted in the introduction to this chapter, were only partly right in their prognosis that this generation of writers would resign. Interestingly, it seems that while the Hitler Youth generation was relieved of its political responsibility, the high esteem of its contributions in the aesthetic realm remains unbroken. They left the stage as political commentators during the twenty years after Germany's reunification. But they are—or were, in Wolf's case—still very much present in their role as writers.

Coda

In the four chapters of this dissertation, I sought to illuminate the childhood bonds between Günter Grass, Martin Walser, and Christa Wolf, as a result of their shared generational experiences of the Nazi era. I argued that *Gruppe 47*— often used as a synonym for the “first generation of post-war writers”—the label under which the works of Grass and Walser are usually subsumed along with those of writers such as Alfred Andersch and Hans-Werner Richter, does not capture the particularity of either the politics or the literature of these two writers of the Hitler Youth generation. Instead, I contended that their intense, biographically motivated engagement with German politics, perhaps surprisingly demonstrates a much stronger affinity with the works of the East German writer Christa Wolf.

In fact, Grass and Wolf appear as the western and eastern sides of the same coin, so to speak: they came to embody the memory of the Nazi past by speaking to and about their generation, the children of Hitler, on both sides of the Berlin Wall. They became the representatives of the work of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, vanguards in understanding and working through the past—*their* past, the childhood and adolescence of a generation that grew up under Hitler, and subsequently became the subject of many of their books. But while he shared in the public recognition of Grass and Wolf, and all three were seen to symbolize Germany’s political development after 1945, the departure from Nazi ideologies and the fight for democratic values, I argued that Walser himself never fully endorsed the political discourse represented by his generation, which was primarily a memory discourse focusing on Germany’s historical guilt. His conservative politics since the late seventies, his strong nationalist discourse, his dream of a reunited Germany and

nostalgia for a German *Heimat* separated him from Wolf and Grass. As a result of his right-wing political leanings, Walser—unlike the two others—did not write about his upbringing during the Third Reich until the end of the nineties, when he used his childhood memoir *Ein springender Brunnen*, as well as a series of other texts, as a means not so much to work through the past, but to protest against the public role he believed the mainstream left-wing memory discourse had forced on him and his generation.

I argued that, at least to some extent, Walser's provocative agitations of the discourse surrounding his generation and their relationship to the Nazi past became a kind of tilting at windmills. After 1990, this discourse had already begun to change, as a result of changes in Germany's self-understanding following reunification, and as the feuillets developed an increasingly critical position towards the three authors and their generation in a number of heated public debates. I claimed that while the three writers remained respected figures within the literary realm, over the course of the nineties they increasingly lost their authority in the political sphere.

At the end of my analysis it is worth asking how the authors see themselves in the cultural-political realm today. While Grass and Walser have never really connected over their shared childhood experience, the two writers have recently begun to bond over a common enemy: the media, or, to use the more nuanced German term, the "Öffentlichkeit". In 2007, in an interview with *Die Zeit* on the occasion of their 80th birthdays, both men speak in terms of a victimhood that had not been heard before, revealing the extent to which they both felt they had been demoted by the media and thus deprived of the respect and recognition they think they deserve for their life's work. When asked about the heated controversies following Walser's provocative

Friedenspreis speech and his own Waffen SS revelations, Grass for example said that “Im Ausland schüttelt man den Kopf darüber, wie man mit uns beiden hierzulande umgeht.”⁷⁹⁹ Referring to the negative reviews of his reunification novel *Ein weites Feld* (1995), he added: “Dieser Mangel an Respekt unseren Leistungen gegenüber, den finde ich entsetzlich.”⁸⁰⁰ Walser’s strong aversion to the media could not have been more obvious in the interview, as he continually attacks the journalists Iris Radisch and Christoph Siemes, and expresses his fatigue about the alleged stupidity of their questions—“Jetzt brauche ich Zigarillos!” as he laments, “Das kann ich nur noch als Raucher bestehen.”⁸⁰¹ Even without actually being criticized by the journalists, Walser preemptively suggests that the media is to blame—though it is not made entirely clear what they are to blame for: “Dieses Gespräch muss auch ein Gespräch sein über das Medium Öffentlichkeit, das ihr verwaltet und mit dem wir 40 Jahre lang zu tun haben. [...] Die Vierte Gewalt dürfte sich ruhig auch einmal selbst kritisieren.”⁸⁰²

In her article on the symbolic character of generational memory, Sigrid Weigel claims that these authors sought to create and disseminate an apologetic discourse of avoidance with regard to the legacy of the Third Reich. In contrast, I believe that I have shown that none of the three authors examined in my dissertation used the idea of childhood innocence to evade historical responsibility in such a simple manner. Rather, the sense of victimhood seems to have emerged with old age—and not with regard to their childhood biographies but to their legacy as cultural figures during the post-war era.

⁷⁹⁹ Günter Grass and Martin Walser, “Wer ein Jahr jünger ist, hat keine Ahnung. Ein Zeit-Gespräch zwischen Martin Walser und Günter Grass,” *Die Zeit*, July 2, 2007, <http://www.zeit.de/2007/25/L-Grass-Walser-Interview/komplettansicht>.

⁸⁰⁰ Ibid.

⁸⁰¹ Ibid.

⁸⁰² Ibid.

It's worth noting, however, that only the two male authors began to represent themselves publicly as artists mistreated by the public. In contrast, Christa Wolf withdrew from the political arena after reunification and tried to come to terms with the end of the socialist dream in private. Her last statement made before she died was not public and political but aesthetic, as I argued in my reading of the strange ending of her novel *Stadt der Engel*, where I see her releasing herself from the responsibility of explaining her politics, and her errors, to the German public.

Walser and Grass' new discourse of victimization, however, proved to have a long reach, affecting the memory about Wolf even after her death. While Grass' eulogy for Wolf began by praising her accomplishments, it ended with bitter accusations against the media, who in Grass' view, had badly mistreated the East German author during the debate surrounding her novella *Was bleibt*. Why, Grass asked, had none of those who attacked Wolf during that time apologized for carrying on a smear campaign against the author based on "Verleumdungen, verfälschte Zitate, Rufmord"?⁸⁰³ Up until her death, he claimed, Wolf's critics had revealed a shocking lack of precisely that trait of character she herself embodied: "Mut zum Selbstzweifel."⁸⁰⁴ But nobody is listening to Grass anymore, it seems, even when he attempts to hold on to his role as a societal spokesperson for the state of the German nation. When *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel* was published in Israel in 2011, he falsely claimed in an interview with *Ha'aretz* that six million German soldiers had been killed in the Soviet Union—the actual number being

⁸⁰³ Grass, "Was bleibt. Trauerrede," *Berliner Zeitung*, December 14, 2011, <http://www.berliner-zeitung.de/kultur/abschied-von-christa-wolf-was-bleibt--trauerrede-von-guenter-grass,10809150,11302844.html>.

⁸⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

around one million.⁸⁰⁵ While one might expect a reaction of outrage on the part of the German “Öffentlichkeit”, it was a sign of Grass’ declining status that no such widespread outrage occurred. In touching on the idea of German suffering in World War II, which was already long regarded as passé, Grass enacted his own irrelevance. Of the few critical articles in the German feuilleton that even commented on the event, a few reacted with cynicism,⁸⁰⁶ but by and large, it seems that the critics merely sighed and moved on to more pressing, more relevant topics. Sometimes, one critic remarked, it would be better if Grass were just silent.⁸⁰⁷

⁸⁰⁵ His precise words were these: “Of eight million German soldiers who were captured by the Russians, perhaps two million survived and all the rest were liquidated. There were about 14 million refugees in Germany; half the country went directly from Nazi tyranny to communist tyranny. I am not saying this to diminish the gravity of the crime against the Jews, but the Holocaust was not the only crime. We bear responsibility for the Nazis’ crimes. But the crimes inflicted serious disasters on the Germans and thus they became victims.” Tom Segev, “The German who needed a fig leaf,” *Ha’aretz*, 26 August <<http://www.haaretz.com/weekend/magazine/the-german-who-needed-a-fig-leaf-1.380883>>. In reality, between 700,000 and 1.1 million Germans had died in captivity, mostly from hunger. For an account of this latest Grass affair and useful historical background, see Peter Jahn, “Wie Günter Grass den Weltkrieg verrechnet,” *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, September 1, 2011, <http://www.sueddeutsche.de/kultur/relativierung-von-kriegsgraeulen-wie-guenter-grass-den-weltkrieg-und-dessen-folgen-verrechnet-1.1137420>.

⁸⁰⁶ See, for example, Ulrich Gutmair, “Holocaust-Mathe mit Günter Grass. Lasst uns alle Opfer sein,” *taz*, September 1, 2011, <http://www.taz.de/!77313/>.

⁸⁰⁷ See the last sentence in Gerrit Bartels: “Auch Deutsche unter Opfern. Porträt Günter Grass, Schriftsteller,” *Der Tagesspiegel*, September 2, 2011, <http://www.tagesspiegel.de/meinung/portraet-guenter-grass-schriftsteller-auch-deutsche-unter-den-opfern/4570368.html>.

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