
Memory and Identity in Autobiographical Texts by Günter Grass and Dieter Wellershoff

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Two young men, one born in 1925 and one in 1927, grew up during the Third Reich. One lived in the Rhineland, the other in Danzig. They were members of the Hitler Youth and Labor Service. Instead of waiting to be drafted, they both volunteered for the German military and ended up going to war at the Eastern front during the last year of World War II. Both were injured but survived. Each was rounded up by Allied Forces, and each spent a short time in a prisoner of war camp. Upon their release, each of them went on to become a writer, eventually writing memoirs incorporating their own battle experience—but not until many years had passed.

Dieter Wellershoff was born in 1925, and Günter Grass was born in 1927. Both wrote about the war in their fiction. While Grass did so from the start, and very explicitly, Wellershoff touched upon the war less directly through brief accounts of his protagonists' memories. It would not be until the late 1970s when Grass would address his own war experience, even in his essays.¹ Indeed both authors waited a long time to write their respective memoirs. Wellershoff published the account of his war experience *Der Ernstfall. Innenansichten vom Krieg* in 1995, whereas Grass' autobiography *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel* was released in 2006. Not surprisingly, the remembered events are quite similar, yet these recollections also impart markedly different images of two men in the trenches. Of course, there is the obvious difference that Wellershoff served in a "regular" Wehrmacht unit, whereas Grass confessed to having been a member of the infamous SS. However, it is not the insignia on their respective uniforms that distinguish the two at the frontlines, rather the different interpretations of events they offer. These dissimilarities in the recollections of the past cannot be attributed solely to individual perspectives or personal remembrances; they also reflect the changing intellectual attitude towards World War II between 1995 and 2006. These individual autobiographies must be considered in the context of their time of publication. Because identity is bound up in memory, these autobiographies reflect the ongoing debate about German identity at particular points in time. This underscores Jan-Werner Müller's argument that intellectuals must learn a common lesson from the Historians'

Debate: that “German identity can be redefined only through a reinterpretation of the past” (280).

The memory discourse in Germany can be connected to generational settings and political conditions. Considering cultural production such as books, films, speeches, exhibitions, and TV programs, Wulf Kansteiner has identified five stages of German memory, from the early days of Adenauer’s Germany until today. He sees in the 1980s a “revolution” in West Germany’s memory of the Third Reich, in that “a wide variety of media acknowledged the history of the ‘Final Solution’ and explored everyday life during fascism” (316). Following that stage is the phase which is ongoing today, where “more or less self-reflexive [sic] routines of Holocaust remembrance” have been developed and a new “memory status quo that cuts across political and generational divides” has been established. Ultimately, according to Kansteiner, this has been easing Germany’s path towards the goal of normalization. Both Wellershoff and Grass published their memoirs during this latest stage, but clearly there are still modifications of the memory discourse underway, and these have led to marked differences in the writers’ respective approaches to the past.

Wellershoff’s text became available in 1995, at a time when the fiftieth anniversary of the end of hostilities brought a renewed interest in the topic of World War II. However, while marketing considerations might have played a part in the release date set by the publisher, the fact remains that Wellershoff wrote his text in the context of the memory discourse of a recently reunified Germany under Helmut Kohl. In contrast, Grass’ autobiography is set from the perspective of the Berlin Republic with a Holocaust Memorial in place.

In her study of German national identity after the Holocaust, Mary Fulbrook states that “memory does not take place in a vacuum but under specific historical circumstances” (147). Here she affirms what Halbwachs had argued earlier, that “the essentially private, internal act of remembering can only take place within a collective social and cultural framework” (143). Historian Steve Stern uses the simplified yet descriptive image of a “giant collectively built memory box” to explain the framework in which the remembering takes place and which allows differing memories to exist side by side (xxviii).² Stern explains that in this memory box, the individual memories do not exist in an isolated fashion, rather they appear grouped together. They are intertwined and mutually affirming, thus creating a bond or a community in the form of the emblematic memories of subgroups. Accordingly, members of a community recognize themselves within the framework of memories, and they also find their collective identity in it. Naturally, in the process of this identification, personal memories adapt to the

framework, and as the discourse about the past changes, the identity of the group will also change. It follows, therefore, that actively changing the discourse about the past will change a present identity—affirming Müller’s mandate quoted earlier. This conclusion also confirms Halbwachs’ assessment that collective memories are independent of the past and only reflect present needs.

The phenomenon described above affects the analysis of the two texts in question: on one hand, Wellershoff and Grass recall their experiences through the filter of the social framework of Germany in the 1990s and 2006, respectively—their memories fit into the framework of the emblematic memory lore of soldiers in World War II. On the other hand, by publishing these remembrances, they propagate their respective views and shape the discourse of the past. Their shaping of discourse is even more pertinent given that these texts are not mere memories, but autobiographies. While an autobiography in general will claim an authenticity that a work of fiction does not, it is also more prone to promote a particular view of the past. As a literary genre, an autobiography is “a poetic reconstruction of a life history”; its writer is made into “a first person narrator of a work of semi-fiction” (Preece 39). By writing their autobiographies, Wellershoff as well as Grass reconstruct an image of themselves as young men. The fact that neither of them was in the resistance against Hitler calls for an explanation. In the attempt to explain the past and their own past actions while incriminating themselves as little as possible, they seek to define what was “normal” at the time and to make a distinction between a “normal German” and a Nazi perpetrator, including the possibility to associate the “normal German” with decency. As the perception of Germans under Nazism has changed over time and with different political conditions, so has the definition of normalcy. Both authors present a youthful identity that they hope, or have reason to believe, will be regarded as legitimate and acceptable in the discourse about the past.

The haunting life-long trauma of battle experience likely explains why Dieter Wellershoff once claimed, “Der Krieg war das Wichtigste in meinem Leben”³ [“The war was most important in my life”].⁴ Grass’ statement, “Das musste raus” [“I had to let it out”], likewise explains the compelling nature of his admission to membership in the Waffen-SS. In both texts, recollections of battle situations are written in the present tense, a stylistic device to communicate the immediacy of the experience after fifty or sixty years. However, memories are never just intellectual “pictures about the past,” as Fulbrook observes; rather they also serve to negotiate “one’s way in relationships in the present” (151). As the context of the memory changes, so does the interpretation of the intellectual image of the past. In short, if people remember an event that they had considered pleasant but learn later that

something terrible is associated with it, then they are subsequently unable to recall the event without qualifying their memory.⁵

Both authors demonstrate an awareness of the unstable nature of memories. Grass characterizes the “Erinnerung” as elusive and notes “sie [die Erinnerung] neigt zum Schönreden” [“memory has a tendency to gloss over events”] (8). Wellershoff explains that “Der Augenschein verdeckt die inneren Bilder und die Erinnerungen an den Krieg verwandeln sich in Bücherwissen” [“Appearances conceal the internal images, and memories of the war change into knowledge out of books”] (22). Nevertheless, both insist on the authenticity of their memories and point to an unchangeable basic truth. Hence, Grass wishes to decode the memories by “peeling the onion” until he has revealed the deeply hidden central core that will make him and others cry. By contrast, Wellershoff claims to present the readers with insider information and emphasizes the need to share his memories: “die grundsätzlichen Erfahrungen, die die Menschen mit sich und ihrer Geschichte machen, müssen festgehalten und erzählt werden” [“The fundamental experiences that people are going through in their lives and their histories have to be kept and told”] (23).

Grass and Wellershoff share the memory lore of the soldier, and according to a definition offered by Aleida Assmann, they certainly belong to the same social generation—a generation that shares seminal historical experiences and frameworks for their values and that has been socialized in similar ways (30). Therefore, it is not astonishing that Wellershoff was among the first to defend Grass when his SS membership became known. He stated Grass should not be condemned because “man lebt in der Welt, in die man hineingeboren wurde” [“one has to live in the world one was born into”] (“Echo”). There seemed to be a kind of solidarity of the old men, because, while Wellershoff was one of the first to defend Grass, he was by no means the only one. Contemporaries such as Ralph Giordano, Erich Loest, and Walter Jens also defended Grass, arguing that it showed courage to speak up after all these years (“Echo”). Accordingly, Grass and Wellershoff describe this world in similar ways and in an enthusiastic manner. Apparently, it was a splendid world where Wellershoff states, “man hatte das Gefühl, dass es mit Deutschland in allen Bereichen aufwärts ging” [“you had the feeling that Germany was on the upswing in all areas”] (*Der Ernstfall* 66), and Grass notes, “in der Wochenschau strahlte das Deutsche Reich” [“in newsreels, the Reich was glowing”] (*Beim Häuten* 27).⁶ Of course, both were well integrated in the system and its youth organizations. Thus socialized, it is not surprising that both greeted the beginning of the war with enthusiasm. Grass even remembers that he hoped that he would join the navy and be a sailor on a submarine in three to four years, if only the war lasted long enough (19).⁷ Both state that they had wanted to grow up and become men. In

those times, to become a man would mean to become a hero; hence, they wished to prove their courage and masculinity on the battlefield. In order to do this, Wellershoff felt it necessary to escape from his mother's grip—"Ich musste ihre klammernde Umarmung abstreifen" (29)—and Grass sought to break away from the narrowness of his parents' home and lifestyle (77). Obviously, both authors had subscribed to the Nazi ideology of masculinity.⁸ The recollections of both authors with regard to their desires demonstrate that adolescent sexuality certainly played into this ideology: the ideal man had no need to complain about a lack of female attention.

Thus, Grass and Wellershoff joined the military. They describe the training, the drills, the harassment, and the punishments. They describe various situations of daily life in the barracks, complete with the crude jargon of the military.⁹ Both express their desire to go to the front in order to end the exercises and replace brainwashing with real experience. Both describe action at the front lines and the first sightings of war dead, followed by more dead and wounded. Each of these authors poignantly imparts images of destruction and death, of fear and despair, and it becomes quite clear that these images are still vivid today. Interestingly, both texts contain similar descriptions of the trains or trucks carrying the writers when they were wounded, followed by the depiction of pastoral scenes at the places where they were treated: Wellershoff remembers Bad Reichenhall's snow covered mountains, and Grass points to the lilac in the garden of the hospital in Marienbad. Both relate their fear of the "Feldgendarmen," the military police that searched for deserters and hanged them without ceremony. Finally, creating or emphasizing a distance from Hitler, both describe Hitler's death as completely trivial. Wellershoff writes that he did not see anyone who was not entirely disinterested in this death (280), and Grass recounts, "Er war weg, als hätte es ihn nie gegeben, als wäre er nie ganz wirklich gewesen und dürfe vergessen werden, als könne man ganz gut ohne den Führer leben" ["He was gone as if he had never really existed and could be forgotten, as if it were possible to live just fine without the Führer"] (181). The problems that are important to these soldiers are their own survival and their immediate futures, with hunger ruling as their principal drive. However, in retrospect, both authors also note that they came to realize that neither heroism nor any particular skills saved them; it was just a lucky coincidence that allowed them to live while millions of others died.

The remembered experiences may be congruent, but the interpretations offered by the authors are not. In his attempt to uncover his youthful self, Wellershoff conveys the image of a young man who is clearly marked by the fascist ideal of masculinity and its Prussian code of honor, duty, and patriotism. The soldier is the

epitome of strength, courage, and decency who is willing to give his life in defense of his fatherland against evil dangers. Hence, Wellershoff affirms that soldiers were the heroes of his youth and compares his admiration of them to the idolization of today's pop stars. He acknowledges immaturity in his wish to become a soldier in order to grow up and prove his manhood, but he immediately tones down his self-criticism by pointing to today's young people who engage in artificial risks and adventures to escape the humdrum of their daily lives (24). Still, Wellershoff does not simply recall himself as an enthusiastic warrior but suggests that by the time he was becoming a soldier, he had doubts. He claims to have lost his original enthusiasm for the war and to be disillusioned about its outcome. Wellershoff states that he went to war "mangels einer Alternative und ohne Illusionen, aber mit einem vagen Pflichtgefühl, das im Grunde eine Solidarität gegenüber all jenen war, die es auch getan hatten und gegenüber den vielen, die gefallen waren" ["lacking an alternative and without illusions, just out of a vague sense of duty in regard to those who went before me and the many who had fallen"] (23). Here it becomes quite obvious that he adhered to the Prussian virtue of fulfilling one's duty. Having thus reaffirmed that a refusal to go to war was simply not an option, he explains that volunteering was a means to secure a better chance to survive, because one would receive better training. However, one had to volunteer for one of the elite units, for example air force pilots, submarines, paratroopers, or Waffen-SS.

Once a soldier, Wellershoff accepts his role and its code of conduct. Helping each other is good; stealing from one another is despicable and will be punished by the group. In accordance with the ideal of the hero, whining when hit is considered a sign of weakness. The narrator complains about the drills as being a primitive pedagogy designed for people who function only under pressure or the threat of sanctions (43), whereas as a volunteer, he had wanted to go the frontlines out of patriotic duty.

In further descriptions Wellershoff shows the unconditional acceptance of orders, even when they appeared to be unreasonable or insane. Trying to explain these phenomena along with German compliance with the regime in general, Wellershoff points to the intricate system of supervision and the atmosphere of fear. He evokes Foucault's view on Bentham's "Panopticon" (Foucault 200), where the prisoner who is visible from all sides never knows when he is being observed. To prevent further punishment, the prisoner modifies his behavior according to the rules without even realizing his behavior modification.

In his text, Wellershoff describes his personal experience, but intermittently he changes from the individual *ich* to a generational *wir*, in particular when he

talks about acceptance of the war. Thus, his personal decisions are sheltered in group decisions, and while perhaps objectionable or questionable as individual behavior, these decisions nonetheless find some explanation. He does, however, stress his personal ambivalence towards Hitler, his disgust of Goering, and his negative opinion of the Waffen-SS, which was surrounded by what he describes as an “aura of sinister rumors” (27). He also claims never to have heard any anti-Semitic utterances in his home and states that he believes his parents might have been “cautious” and possibly had never learned to express criticism (69). Clearly, Wellershoff is trying to excuse his parents’ behavior by pointing to the fact that Germans had experienced only a short period of democracy before 1933 and were largely unfamiliar with behaviors typical in democratic systems. Wellershoff’s insight here demonstrates the changing discourse about the generation responsible for the war. He concludes that for his parents, apparently, anti-Semitism must have belonged to the realm of inexpressibility. The resultant silence is again a behavior model that can be explained by Foucault’s Panopticism. It is important to note in this regard that the narrator speaks about his parents and their attitude towards anti-Semitism, completely omitting whatever opinion he himself might have had about that subject.

Wellershoff never questions the accuracy of the facts he remembers. However, he supplements his memories with facts that he subsequently learned about the war. His text judges and explains beliefs in 1944 from the perspective of 1994 and contrasts realities assumed as truths at the time with the lies they were subsequently revealed to be. Thus, his text is the account of a youth betrayed by Hitler. While Wellershoff admits that his generation had never questioned the reason and justification of the war, his texts present the image of a generation that was abused and sacrificed by a madman and his helpers. Although he had been old enough to be subjected to National Socialist indoctrination and too old to be able to claim Helmut Kohl’s “blessing of late birth” (Kansteiner 252), he was also considered too young to be a perpetrator. After all, he was seven years old when Hitler came to power and was not even an adult at the end of the war. Thus, his admission of immature support for the war was widely accepted and condoned in 1995. Wellershoff shows a young man who had gotten the short end of the stick. Who will condemn a young soldier because he is concerned about his survival, as long as he does it in an honorable manner?

When Wellershoff’s text was published, Helmut Kohl had been the West German Chancellor for thirteen years. In his thorough examination of the different stages of memory politics in Germany, Wulf Kansteiner explains that Kohl, throughout his tenure, pursued a “strategy of historicization” intended

to help the German people to “develop a healthy, self-confident historical consciousness ... which would enhance Germany’s standing in the world” (252). Accordingly, the Third Reich should be recognized as a part of the past that has only limited relevance for the present. While Kohl’s memory policies and projects were generally approved by the population, he was harshly criticized by liberal intellectuals and considered a “memory klutz” (256). According to various assessments by liberal intellectuals, Kohl’s Bitburg project had failed miserably, and his museum projects were suspected of whitewashing history. Also, Kansteiner points out that the Historians’ Debate took place in this time period, in which Jürgen Habermas discovered a “revisionist conspiracy at the heart of the West German historical establishment” (260). Kansteiner then contrasts Kohl’s Bitburg project to Richard von Weizsäcker’s famous anniversary speech, which set the tone for a different memory. While Weizsäcker acknowledged the pain of the Germans, he nevertheless declared that the suffering of the victims of genocide outweighed this pain and called for a continuation of self-critical reflection. This attitude towards a hierarchy of suffering was hailed by the liberal media but only slowly accepted by the conservative politicians of the 1980s. It did, however, take root in a unified Germany and has become the standard for official memory policy (256-257). Wellershoff’s memoir certainly contains a self-critical reflection of his youthful errors. At the same time, the text also contains a call for sympathy for having been betrayed. Stating that his generation had been lured into the delusion of acting rightfully for Germany’s honor, Wellershoff claims a spot in the hierarchy of suffering and invites his contemporaries to do the same.

With the growing distance from World War II and the passing of its contemporaries, retrospection into the war acquired greater urgency, particularly after the fall of the Berlin Wall. In his article about the air war, Volker Hage refers to an essay by Hans Magnus Enzensberger which sums up the need for remembrance: “If someone had once prophesied a future like that of the year 1990 to the cave dwellers of Dresden or Warsaw, they would have thought him crazy. For the people of today, though, their own past is just as unimaginable” (Hage 104). Public remembering should help fill this gap in the ability to imagine. In addition, after reunification German identity needed to be updated, including the reconciliation of two different historical perspectives relative to the two Germanys. While young people in East Germany had to learn that instead of descendants of heroic resistance fighters, they were the grandchildren of perpetrators, as Jana Hensel relates in her novel *Zonenkinder*, there was also a new space for more self-confidence. West Germans could point to their role as carriers of the burden of responsibility; after all, they had tried to make amends by paying reparations and

pursued an active policy of reconciliation with Israel. During the post war years and the German division, West Germany had tried to come to terms with its past and with Nazi perpetrators in different ways. After the attempt to reintegrate Nazi perpetrators under Adenauer, these perpetrators were singled out and blamed in the 1970s, allowing the general population to plead “not guilty.”¹⁰ In 1979, following the broadcast of the American television series *Holocaust*, the public debate about collective guilt started once more and led to reflection about personal involvement. It seemed that West Germans had at last accepted the notion of a collective responsibility.¹¹ Rendering the group guilty entitled the individual to claim personal innocence, as long as s/he could claim to have been a “normal” bystander who vowed not to forget. Thus, Wellershoff’s account can be seen as an early contribution to the debate about German normalcy (which later peaked in the Walser-Bubis controversy).

The text was published in 1995, after the Historians’ Debate and reunification, but before the Wehrmachtsausstellung, before lengthy debates about the Holocaust Memorial and the Walser-Bubis controversy, before Jörg Friedrich’s *Der Brand*, but also before Daniel Goldhagen’s *Hitler’s Willing Executioners*, at a time when neither the air raids nor the collaboration of the German people had yet been on the forefront of literary discussions. With the official memory allowing hardship to be ranked in relative terms, the recollections of a soldier could serve to add private memories to the official remembering. After reunification, German patriotism seemed slowly to gain popularity, even among leftist intellectuals. Hence Wellershoff could publish his memoir without being accused of a revisionist agenda, and the construction of an image of the honorable soldier serving his fatherland, despite the fact that he fought for the wrong reasons and the wrong leadership, had made it possible for him to claim to be a “good German.”

Lastly, with the controversial Wehrmachtsausstellung, the image of the honorable, thereby innocent German soldier has become indefensible. On the other hand, as a result of this collapse of the image of the honorable soldier, the Waffen-SS is no longer considered uniquely evil but can claim to be just one among many evil units of Hitler’s German military. The dualism between “good soldiers” and “bad SS-members,” therefore, has lost at least some of its validity.

This is the backdrop for Grass’ confession. In the attempt, however, to portray a somewhat unintentional and youthfully naïve membership in the Waffen-SS as normal, the discussion about his affiliation with the Waffen-SS does not take up very much space in Grass’ autobiography. Instead, the part of the text dedicated to his childhood and youth through the war is apologetic, not for Grass’ membership in the infamous SS, but mainly for the fact that he cannot claim to have been a

dissident. Thus, he regrets that he missed an opportunity to learn to doubt during his labor service, and he speaks about his ongoing feelings of shame:

Es verging Zeit, bis ich in Schüben begriff und mir zögerlich eingestand, dass ich unwissend oder, genauer, nicht wissen wollend Anteil an einem Verbrechen hatte, das mit den Jahren nicht kleiner wurde, das nicht verjähren will, an dem ich immer noch kranke.

[Some time passed until I understood and hesitantly accepted the fact that I had taken part in a crime unknowingly or refusing to know. This crime does not disappear or dwindle, and I still regret it.] (221)

Unlike Wellershoff, who presents the account of his remembering as facts, Grass continuously questions the accuracy of his memories. He distinguishes between “Erinnerung” and “Gedächtnis.” Whereas “Erinnerung,” in his definition, has a tendency to gloss over events and to embellish accounts, “Gedächtnis” appears to be meticulous and self-righteous (8).¹² In admitting that his persona is only “behauptet” [“claimed”] and keeps on vanishing in “fiktionalen Gestrüpp” [“fictitious undergrowth”], he deliberately blurs the borders between life, autobiography, and fiction. The reason he gives for using this technique is that the way to keep stories alive is to reinvent them continuously, because they always remain incomplete (223). He illustrates his point by referring to his fictional characters and pointing out how actual people made their way into his writing. The obvious distinction between person and literary self-image holds true regardless of whether the person shows up as a character in a work of fiction or as the first-person narrator in an autobiography. Nevertheless, Grass’ allusion to his literary texts attempts to offer a justification for his extended silence by showing that he did engage with his own past in his literature. At the same time, by flirting with both autobiographical and fictional character, he creates a distance between the writer and his youthful self that allows him to face and confess painful facts. On the other hand, Grass’ accusation of himself offers an identification model for others. Grass confirms what Jan-Werner Müller describes as the situation of intellectuals in the Berlin Republic. Müller calls it “Modell Deutschland” and characterizes it as a form of patriotism recommended by the left. In this way “Vergangenheitsbewältigung” is national identity as well as German normality. It can serve as a model for a culture of post-totalitarian legitimacy, “in which the permanent responsibility of a collective subject” becomes the “basis of national identity” (256). This model allows public acknowledgments of past crimes and evaluates them as signs for personal autonomy and social integration. The discussion of the Holocaust Memorial in Berlin, as well as its final construction,

might be seen as an example for an active memory culture. However, having finally embraced von Weizsäcker's hierarchy of suffering, the Berlin Republic also allowed German losses to be memorialized. Starting with Sebald's *Literatur und Luftkrieg* lectures in 1999, the topic continued to gain influence with Grass' own *Im Krebsgang* or Jörg Friedrich's controversial study *Der Brand*. Just as Wellershoff could write about his battle experience without facing the accusation of subscribing to right-wing ideology, Grass wrote about the sinking of the *Wilhelm Gustloff* without being called a revisionist. He can even refer to himself as "Flüchtlingskind" (64) and contrast his fate and his lack of childhood documents and souvenirs to the experiences of a colleague who grew up at Lake Constanz. The new memory culture demanded a greater acceptance of personal responsibility on one hand, but as a result, conventional narratives of perpetrators, bystanders, and victims are challenged, as Cohen-Pfister and Wienröder-Skinner remark in the introduction to their study about (re)presentations of the past in post-unification culture (9). Grass certainly benefited from the blurring of boundaries between perpetrator and bystander. In his defense of Grass, the historian Hans Mommsen points to the fact that the German public had projected their participation in National Socialist crimes onto a small group of alleged NS perpetrators like the SS, in order to claim innocence. In his opinion, this is the reason that members of the Hitler Youth generation concealed their membership in the SS or other NS institutions. An important criterion to judge a person's conduct during the Third Reich has become the issue of normalcy: which behavior was considered normal without being enthusiastically supportive of NS ideas. Previously, having served in the SS would certainly have been deemed disgraceful opportunism; however, the deconstruction of the Wehrmacht changed that attitude. Thus, the excuse of youth sufficed to absolve the young SS member. Accordingly, critics like Franz Muentefering condemned the lateness of the confession but not Grass' person nor the content of his confession.

Finally, an important generational change is underway. While it is not surprising that Grass' contemporaries stood up in his defense, members of the generation of 1968 also did not condemn him outright. Klaus Staeck, president of the Academy of Arts in Berlin, stated he considered Grass' art, as well as his moral integrity, to be "beyond any doubt."¹³ The generation of 1968, once the loudest critics of their parents' generation, is sounding much more reconciliatory notes. Hannes Heer, in a speech dedicated to Dieter Wellershoff, stated that the questions of his generation have changed: instead of "What did you do during the war?" his contemporaries ask, "What would I have done?" (40). In her study about generational identities, Assmann points to the change from "Väterliteratur" to "family novels" (32).

Indeed, there have been a number of publications by members of that second generation who follow family histories across multiple generations. Instead of the accusations of the “Väterliteratur” of the 1970s and 1980s, which expressed the diametrically opposed attitudes of older and younger generations and aimed at separation from the fathers, the family novels attempt to show continuity and integrate the protagonist into the family structure. Often, these texts undermine clear boundaries between fiction and documentary. Uwe Timm’s text *Am Beispiel meines Bruders* also falls into this category. In his assessment of that text, Nikil Sathe suggests that the frankness with which Timm tackles this personal sphere was only possible later in life (53). While Sathe attests that Timm emphasizes that German suffering can only be seen in historical context, he nevertheless concludes that “Timm’s work can be located in a recent trend in which the authors of the 1968 generation demonstrate greater sympathy for the war generation” (67).

Wellershoff wrote his autobiography in the context of the early years of unified Germany. Germans were searching for an identity that was acceptable to them and to the world. While refusing to gloss over the Nazi period, the new identity also avoided blanket condemnation of the German people. It was “normal” to have served in the military during World War II, but by confessing his initial misguided support for Germany and the army, Wellershoff extends the definition of normalcy, pleads for understanding, and claims that he completed a learning process. At the same time, he uses the opportunity to address his own trauma. Accordingly, Wellershoff understood his text as writing against forgetting, to prevent the forgotten from returning in a different form (314).

By the time Grass published *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel*, the phenomenon of “Vergangenheitsbewältigung” had become an integral part of German identity. For the generation of the grandchildren, the past has been historicized. Familiar with World War II only through post-memory and studies in school, members of that generation are detached. Accordingly, the writer Juli Zeh observes that Grass’ membership in the Wehrmacht or the Waffen-SS plays no real role in her life (46). It appears that German “normalcy” has changed from having no past to claiming personal integrity by facing one’s past, even as connections to the actual past resonate to a lesser extent among one’s contemporaries.

In this context it was possible for Grass to publish his confession without risking too much criticism from the left or support from the right. Publication of this confession acquired certain urgency, given that Stasi files would have been accessible by 2007 and as a result, his SS membership might have become known. Grass stated he wanted to have “the last word.” It is clear, however, that this last word started the discussion anew.

Notes

¹ While there are short references to his life during the war in “Tagebuch, Mai 1971” and in “Zwischenbilanz,” the first essay that discusses the war is his contribution in 1979 to Jürgen Habermas’ *Stichworte zur “Geistigen Situation der Zeit”* titled “Deutschland—ein Schwebzustand.”

² While Stern studies Chile coming to terms with the past under Pinochet, his theoretical framework can also be applied to Germany.

³ Wellershoff made this remark during a personal conversation with me on 2 August 1995.

⁴ All translations of quotes from the original texts are my own.

⁵ Aleida Assmann refers to this in her study “Limits of Understanding.” She illustrates her point by discussing Martin Walser’s insistence on the innocence of his childhood memories, a point he made during the controversy following his speech for the acceptance of the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade.

⁶ As proof for their positive image of Germany, both mention the success of German athletes in the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin.

⁷ In his essay collection *Die Arbeit des Lebens*, Wellershoff notes almost exactly the same thing in recalling a conversation with a friend while returning from a military funeral (3: 98).

⁸ In his study *The Image of Man*, George Mosse noted that this image of ideal manhood was already created in the 19th century and used by National Socialism for its goals: the ideal man was honest, strong, decent, courageous, and patriotic. He was devoted to family and fatherland and thus different from the “other”: the Jew, or the homosexual, and so forth.

⁹ As proof for the unreliability of memory or to demonstrate a different ranking of the persons who are remembered, a small difference should be noted here: while Grass recalls that the military police looking for deserters were called *Heldenklau*, Wellershoff remembers *Heldenklau* as the name of the team of military physicians searching field hospitals for soldiers ready to be sent back to the frontlines.

¹⁰ The Filbinger Affair comes to mind where Christian Democrat Hans Filbinger resigned from his post as minister president of Baden-Württemberg for allegations regarding his behavior as a navy judge during the last months of World War II.

¹¹ Richard von Weizsäcker’s speech on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the German capitulation illustrates this attitude.

¹² The distinction between the German *Erinnerung* and *Gedächtnis* appears to be arbitrary, and the terms are thus difficult to translate. Similarly, “remembrance” and “memory” are largely synonymous.

¹³ Für den Präsidenten der Berliner Akademie der Künste, Klaus Staeck, 68, stehen “das künstlerische Werk und seine politische und moralische Integrität auch nach seinem Bekenntnis außer Zweifel” (“Echo”).

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