Autobiographical writings have figured prominently in German literature for the last two decades, a trend that can be attributed most readily to the passing of the «eye witness generation,» those who still have memories of National Socialism. Combined with the demise of communism in the East, the desire to tell one’s side of the story is now stronger than ever, often generating considerable controversy (Tate). Such feverishly debated memoirs often include revelations about the involvement of noted authors, such as Christa Wolf, with the East German secret police, the Stasi. Yet just when no one expected any more surprising revelations about past transgressions, Günter Grass admitted publicly in a 2006 interview in the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung that he briefly had been a member of the Waffen SS. This interview prepared readers for the publication of Grass’s problematic disclosures in his autobiographical narrative, Beim Häuten der Zwiebel, bringing once again a controversial autobiography into the limelight. This belated confession unleashed vehement attacks not only on Grass’s literary prowess but even more disconcerting, on his moral character, essentially a double edged assault distinguishing the controversy surrounding his autobiography from the responses to other literary confessions.

Grass had exploded onto the literary scene in 1959 with the publication of Die Blechtrommel, his best selling and critically acclaimed novel that probingly posed questions about the destruction of his home city of Danzig, pondered the Nazi past, and accusingly pointed out the remnants of Hitler’s Germany rampant in the Federal Republic. To this day, Grass has maintained his questioning and probing in his literary texts and essays. Politically, he allied himself closely with the Social Democratic party, and spoke publicly and critically about German politics. Such constant questioning and political positioning thrust him into the limelight and earned him unparalleled acclaim in Germany and abroad. For decades, Grass was celebrated unapologetically as the conscience of West and then later of united Germany. The awarding of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1999, though a global recognition of his life work, championed his first novel, Die Blechtrommel. Crowning him «the great prober of the history of the twentieth century,» the press release accom-
panying the prize announcement claimed that Grass’s excavations of the past go «deeper than most and he unearths the intertwined roots of good and evil.» Indeed, in Die Blechtrommel, «he comes to grips with the enormous task of reviewing contemporary history by recalling the disavowed and the forgotten: the victims, losers and lies that people wanted to forget because they had once believed in them.»

Grass’s delayed revelation about his own complicity falls squarely within this framework of lying, forgetting and suppressing. In fact, it was precisely the more than sixty year delay, which garnered the most intense critiques. As Frank Schirrmacher wrote «Und er, der in Fragen der historischen Schuld zum womöglich wichtigsten Auskunftgeber der Deutschen wurde, hat darüber bis heute geschwiegen. Niemand wüßte davon, nicht einmal seine Kinder; nur seine Frau» (qtd in Kölbel 26). This statement is not quite true, for Grass did reveal his secret in an interview with Klaus Wagenbach in 1963, but Wagenbach neglected to print the information (Schade 298). The fact however remains that Grass withheld what many would view as a very important detail of his biography for more than sixty years. Indeed, it was widely believed that Grass was merely a Flakhelfer at the end of the war. Even his Nobel biography makes only passing reference to «military service and captivity by American forces 1944–46.» Consequently, critics, scholars, and readers felt betrayed, and this emotional response has colored all attempts by these very different constituencies to come to terms with Grass’s past.

Grass’s critics fall into two camps: the one side damns Grass for his silence, the other pleads for understanding. Both sides feel compelled to pass judgment, a circumstance guided as much by Grass’s entire biography as this one small detail. From the moment Grass burst onto the literary scene in the late 1950s, he was a sensation. His subsequent penchant for engaging in political discourse has made him ripe for polemics on either side of the political spectrum. Moreover, it has become commonplace for reviewers and critics to equate Grass with his protagonists. Rebecca Braun argues that «Grass’s works [...] place the relationship between the author and the public sphere very squarely at their centre» (5), a fact that makes the public and critical outcry over Beim Häuten der Zwiebel not only understandable but even wholly unremarkable.

As is to be expected, literary critics and scholars have already devoted considerable attention first to the controversy and secondarily to Grass’s text (Kölbel). The accusatory tone of the headlines cannot be overlooked, ranging from calling him a «gefallener Engel» (qtd. in Kölbel 50), and «fehlbar und verstrickt» (qtd. in Kölbel 52) to suggestions that he return his Nobel Prize (Wolfgang Borsen) and his honorary Gdansk citizenship (Lech Walesa).
Noted Grass scholar, Siegfried Mews views the impassioned debate following the book’s publication as «a continuation of those [heated discussions] in which the author has been engulfed for […] decades» (3). Indeed, the heated exchange between his contemporaries, critiques and scholars in response to Grass’s disclosure has diverted attention from the autobiographical text itself. Therefore, I choose to focus here on a nuanced reading of *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel* that teases out the ways in which Grass grapples with memory through the metaphors of the onion and amber. Rather than make a personal and therefore moral judgment about Grass’s revelation, I choose to highlight how Grass himself recognized the moral conundrum that his lie of omission created. As scholarly engagement with the text has demonstrated, Grass’s autobiography fits precisely within the thematic and narrative strategies previously developed in his oeuvre. Within the broader context of autobiographical writing in Germany in the twenty-first century, I thus demonstrate that Grass’s autobiography is both a logical next step within his own oeuvre and a concomitant part of the current memory culture propagated in Germany.

Though Grass’s narrative follows a linear trajectory, the work itself is a collection of highly stylized episodic accounts. Whereas most critics have opted to read the book as autobiography, this stylization blurs the line between pure fiction and pure autobiography. This tendency heretofore has been ignored by many critics, who are insistent on reading the text as a confessional autobiography. Within the scope of autobiographical writing, the distinction between fictional autobiographical accounts (I would include Christa Wolf’s *Was bleibt* in this category) and real autobiography is essential. As the distinguished theorist of narratology, Franz K. Stanzel has pointed out, despite the fictionality often inherent in autobiographical writing, the genre itself causes readers to have a heightened expectation that the text promises historical authenticity, an expectation that Stanzel doubts is possible to fulfill (326). He points out, for instance, that Grass previously had incorporated elements of his biography into his Danzig Trilogy, albeit totally in fictional form (and even with the omission of the SS affiliation). For Stanzel, Grass’s reflection on his early years in *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel* is problematic, for the narrated events are colored by the lens of the fiction through which Grass had previously narrated them (329).

As is well established, Grass always has infused himself and his life into his literary works. Rebecca Braun, for instance, has argued that Grass has been «present as a clearly recognizable self-image» predominantly in works since the late 1960s (3). She claims that by «directly thematizing the problems of writing about himself» *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel* «draws attention to issues of authorship that have […] informed all his writing to date» (4). Similarly,
Anne Fuchs suggests that «the notion of life writing emphasizes the performance of identity through storytelling» (Phantoms 162). She labels Grass’s book «a confessional narrative that combines the admission of personal guilt and shame with an exploration of the imagination in coming to terms with the past» (197). Yet, she insists that confessional autobiographies such as Beim Häuten der Zwiebel should not be viewed through the lens of historical analysis, for «our understanding of National Socialism and its legacy is no longer premised on the structural analysis of power but more on the working-through of the screen memories that we fabricate to cover over an unpalatable past» («Ehrlich» 264). For Fuchs, the controversy following Grass’s admission resides solely in the public’s perceived desire for transparency from the author («Ehrlich» 267). In his essay, «Günter Grass and the Cold War,» Frank Brunssen portrays Grass as a politically active writer for whom the NS period was pivotal for an understanding of his entire oeuvre. While conceding that Grass’s late confession makes scholars and critics alike uncomfortable, Brunssen suggests that «Grass has used the example of his own life story again and again to illustrate how it could come about that young people like himself could, until 1945, be staunch supporters of National Socialism» (160). Christoph König proposes that Grass
dokumentiert eine objektive Falschheit, sich selbst eingeschlossen, ob absichtlich oder nicht. Diese Form der Enthüllung verträgt – nach seinen Maßstäben – das Authentische nicht, und so setzt er dazu, den Jungen, der er war, zu verleugnen. Insofern geschieht nichts Neues: Grass enthüllt wie seit jeher (und wie es heute alle machen) und er leugnet weiterhin, performativ, indem er von dem Jungen nichts wissen will oder ihn verachtet. Das ist dem Werk aufgetragen und prägt seine Form. Sein Autor verträgt keine Schwächung der eigenen politischen «persona.» (8)

In other words, König suggests that Grass distances himself and his public-political persona from the «character» in the book. The text corroborates this, for Grass draws a very decisive line between his life before and after the end of the war. Thus, despite the controversy, it is fitting to read Beim Häuten der Zwiebel as a literary (i.e. fictional text) wherein the young Nazi is not Grass himself, but rather a character manifestation, a protagonist not unlike Grass, but a fictional character nonetheless. This argument is somewhat undercut, when one reads subsequent chapters, for the correspondence between the literary accounting and the details of Grass’s biography are too close to be coincidental. While Richard Schade has pointed out that Grass intentionally avoided the term autobiography, there is nonetheless a palpable tension between the author’s biography and the narrative retelling of that biography (282). Of the scholars who have chosen to comment on the text, Schade maintains it rounds out the picture of Grass that readers have held to date, pro-
posing that the delayed confession «[…] does not absolve the author of his
guilt – nor is it meant to; it does, however, allow for a fuller understanding
of Grass the person» (289). Indeed, the confession does call into question the
assumptions that readers, critics and scholars have had about Grass the man,
Grass the artist, Grass the writer.

Contrary to Schade, Stuart Taberner calls the book an apologia (145). Ta-
berner maintains that a complete understanding of Grass’s narrative can only
occur if one also considers the historical, cultural and political contexts at the
time of its publication. He argues that the text «responds to a contemporary
fascination with the ‹lived experience› of ‹ordinary Germans› under National
Socialism,» which shifted in the early 2000s to portrayals of «Germans as vic-
tims» (146–147). Taberner proposes that Grass’s stature as a writer in Ger-
many elevates him above the ordinary – he is exceptional rather than representa-
tional. The confession, Taberner suggests, makes him more ordinary, makes
him more like his readers, and thus the text «prompts its reader to develop a
degree of understanding for ‹ordinary Germans› while also insisting on their
generalized answerability for German crimes» (152). This interpretation fo-
cuses squarely on the book’s content, pushing the controversy aside. Despite
or perhaps because of the controversy surrounding Grass’s autobiography,
Beim Häuten der Zwiebel occupies a special place among contemporary nar-
ratives focusing on the current fascination with memory culture in Germany.
For Helena Gonçalves da Silva, Grass’s book demonstrates the author’s «pro-
cess of grappling not only with his country’s historical legacy, but also with
his own past» (168). Indeed, Da Silva accuses Grass of «pass[ing] on his moral
trauma to the next generations» (156).

In Beim Häuten der Zwiebel Grass painstakingly tries to recreate a twenty
year span of his life, from the outbreak of war in 1939 to the publication of
Die Blechtrommel in 1959. As previously noted, critics jumped at the chance
equate Grass with the book’s protagonist. Yet despite the relative familiar-
ity of many episodes in the book, it is a highly stylized piece of literature, and
Grass confounds readers by subverting the first person accounting through
references to the same protagonist in the third person, resulting in a blurring
of the line between fiction and autobiography. It is a compilation of personal
and social history into a Kunstwerk. The narrative can be divided into three
distinct periods: the period from Grass’s youth through his capture as a pris-
oner of war (the confessional part of the book), an adventurous account of the
immediate postwar years, and the liberation of both Germany and the author
from the intellectual strictures of the Nazi period (Fuchs, «Ehrlich» 267).
The controversial confessional passage can almost be overlooked, taking up
a mere two pages of the 479-page tome. As the book progresses chronologi-
from 1939 to the publication of Die Blechtrommel, Grass conflates time. Interspersed with his memories are attempts to corroborate those memories, specifically the recollection of trips taken to Poland and the re-acquaintance with people/characters from his past.

Grass clearly outlines his motivation for dredging up his own past immediately: «Weil ich das letzte Wort haben will» (8). Less clear, however, is the division between reality and fiction, between truth and falsehood: «Schon ist widerlegt, was jeweils auf Wahrheit bestehen will, denn oft gibt die Lüge oder […] die Schummelei, den haltbarsten Teil der Erinnerung ab; niederge- schrieben klingt sie glaubhaft und prahlt mit Einzelheiten, die als fotogenau zu gelten haben.» (9) This passage makes it obvious that Grass desires clarity from the process of putting pen to paper: that which is written must be true. The controversy, however, actually succeeds in subverting this message, for it is the revelation of a previously hidden truth that ignites the uproar. Subsequently, Grass dances around the notion of clarity: «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 Lügendich- schichten» (10). Repeatedly in the text, Grass plays with the word Lüge, combining it here with Geschichte, setting readers up for the complexity of the tale at hand: as the pages progress, a mixture of stories, history, and lies confront readers. Grass utilizes the metaphor of peeling an onion to convey his quest to peel back the layers of memory as he struggles to tell his life’s story, particularly the story of his younger years. As the narrator slowly strips back the layers of his memory, unanswered questions plague him. This portion of the narrative underscores the author’s attempt to assuage his guilt at being the one who left too many questions unanswered.

Immediately in the first chapter readers learn of the disappearance of his uncle, a fact that the elder Grass views as questionable. The passage of time and maturity that comes with age leads Grass to ask «wagte ich nicht zu fragen, weil kein Kind mehr?» (16). Additional disappearances occur: his classmate Wolfgang Heinrichs, a Latin teacher, a fellow recruit who refuses to take up arms. The narrator recalls that each disappearance transpired without question or commentary, prompting him to wonder in hindsight: «wieder einmal keine Fragen gestellt» (22). Other troubling events occur: synagogues set afire, glass windows broken (26). From the perspective of old age Grass bemoans his lack of engagement: «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.» (26). Because of his age, Grass could not really be considered a fellow
traveler, one who blindly accepted the Nazi doctrines as they were handed down, for he was not even old enough to think about them critically. At the same time, however, Grass readily admits that he did get caught up in the trappings quite readily: «Noch während der letzten Jahre der Freistaatzeit – ich zählte zehn – wurde der Junge meines Names durchaus freiwillig Mitglied des Jungvolks, einer Aufbauorganisation der Hitlerjugend.» (27) This passage is telling, for although the reader realizes that the narrator is referring to himself, the author purposefully creates a distance between his beliefs and his actions by referring to himself in the third person. This passage underscores the conundrum Grass was in, caught between his present as moral conscience of the country and his compromised past. Grass is unable to identify with the child that he once was; this passage thus emphasizes the chasm between what he was and what he has become.

This distance also allows feelings of guilt to plague Grass. Through the process of exploring his memory, of peeling his onion, Grass seeks the source of these guilt feelings. Guilt is something ever present: «[Die Schuld] steht dann doch, sobald die Zwiebel Pelle nach Pelle geschrumpft ist, dauerhaft den jüngsten Häuten eingeschrieben: mal in Großbuchstaben, mal als Nebensatz oder Fußnote, mal deutlich lesbar, dann wieder in Hieroglyphen, die, wenn überhaupt, nur mühsam zu entziffern sind. Mir gilt leserlich die knappe Inschrift: Ich schwieg.» (36) The source of Grass’s guilt: his silence. More than either the onion or the amber, it is the trope of silence that binds the mature Grass to his younger self. We can interpret this reference to silence in two ways: Grass’s initial silence as a child and youth regarding the curious disappearances surrounding him, but more importantly, his later silence about his own past. This autobiographical account clearly lays bare the sense of anguish that the author has carried all these years.

Readily, Grass admits to his fascination with National Socialism and his willingness to serve that cause: «Fest steht, ich habe mich freiwillig zum Dienst mit der Waffe gemeldet.» (75) The tone turns confessional8 as the narrator admits that he enjoyed the way a uniform drew attention to him. Adding to the touch of innocence with which Grass recalls his past, his hometown did not suffer under Allied bombings in the same fashion as Cologne, Hamburg or Berlin. In fact, he refers to the bombings as «feierlich schön.» (76). Set in this context, Grass’s actions are almost commonplace; he is no different from other fifteen year olds who seek adventure, wishing to make their mark as heroes:

Nichts gibt Auskunft darüber, was in einem fünfzehnjährigen Jungen vorgeht, der aus freien Stücken unbedingt dorthin will, wo gekämpft wird und – was er ahnen könnte, sogar aus Büchern weiß – der Tod seine Abstriche macht. Vermutungen
This passage is a perfect example of the lack of reflection in the book, for Grass does not view this as an indictment of masculinity, and narrates from a perspective that ignores all feminist discourses of gender that have advanced as Grass has matured.9 There are times when the onion fails him and he turns to amber to prod his memory. Found predominantly on the Baltic Sea, amber is tied closely to place, an element that always has been important to Grass and his oeuvre. At first glance, the amber presents a sense of permanence for it fixes things in both time and place. Neither of these objects, however, can provide absolute clarity. A peeled onion often provokes tears, which serve to blur vision. Amber filters the light that passes through it. Even though Grass turns to the amber for clarity, it does not provide the transparency that Grass seeks. Following the assassination attempt on Hitler, for instance, Grass recalls his faith in Hitler as unwavering:

sobald auf der Zwiebelhaut kleingeschriebene Randnotizen allzu beredsam mit Anekdoten und milieugesägten Vertälljens von dem ablenken wollen, was vergessen sein will und dennoch querliegt.

Dann muß ich mir aus dem Fach über Stehpult den durchsichtigsten Bernstein greifen, um herauszufinden, wie unbeschadet sich mein Glaube an den Führer trotz überprüfbarer Fassadenrisse, zunehmender Flüsterparolen und des überall, nun auch in Frankreich rückgängigen Frontverlaufs konserviert hatte. (106)

Less than two months before Germany capitulated, Grass received his Einberufungsbefehl. Grass reveals his assignment to the SS in a chapter entitled «Wie ich das fürchten lernte,» in which the narrator toys with the gravity of this memory: «Zu fragen ist: Erschreckte mich, was damals im Rekrutierungsbüro unübersehbar war, wie mir noch jetzt, nach über sechzig Jahren, das doppelte S im Augenblick der Niederschrift schrecklich ist» (126). Twice in this sentence Grass uses a form of the word «Schreck,» a term weighed down with horror in this instance, a circumstance that makes it all the harder to believe that Grass was able to suppress this memory for 60 years. This section is fundamental to decoding Grass’s relationship to the past. It is also a passage laden with temporal overlays. The «Schreck» to which Grass refers is an emotion that is clearly associated with hindsight. Given what Grass knows about the atrocities perpetrated by the Nazis, most specifically the SS, he can only react with horror at this memory. Yet, readers must recall that Grass is attempting to write an autobiographical text here: to the extent that he tries to relay the
past, he also interprets that past. The passage continues with just such an interpretation:

Der Zwiebelhaut steht nichts eingeritzt, dem ein Anzeichen für Schreck oder gar Entsetzen abzulesen wäre. Eher werde ich die Waffen-SS als Eliteeinheit gesehen haben, [...]. Die doppelte Rune am Uniformkragen war mir nicht anstößig. Dem Jungen, der sich als Mann sah, wird vor allem die Waffengattung wichtig gewesen sein: wenn nicht zu den U-Booten, [...], dann als Panzerschütze in einer Division, die [...] neu aufgestellt werden sollte, und zwar unter dem Namen «Jörg von Frundsberg.» (126)

Grass attempts to recollect the feelings and emotions he had as a fifteen year old, and this description portrays the teenage Grass as a product of his generation, a generation of young men fascinated by war, desirous of action, and seeking to be heroes, if for no other reason than that seems to be what was expected of them. At this juncture, one should not criticize the memoirist/author for including this passage. However, it does not excuse nor lessen the impact of the revelation about Grass’s past, a revelation that based on his political convictions and stature as conscientious admonisher of all things remotely smacking of Nazism, one would have expected many years prior.10

It is not that Grass does not attempt to address the fact that he was silent. He simply is unable to find closure:


Remorse accompanies this sense of responsibility, but does not erase the naiveté of his younger years.

Grass was an obedient soldier; during training: «[...] habe alles, was mir befohlen wurde, ohne Hintersinn ausgeführt» (131). His stint with the Waffen SS was short-lived; an injury on April 20 ended his conscription. Following his release from military hospitals, he was held as a prisoner of war. It seems that Grass was able to surrender his steadfast belief in National Socialism quite readily. Reflecting on Hitler’s death, he remarks that the great «Führer» was no longer even missed: «Er war weg, als hätte es ihn nie gegeben, als wäre er nie ganz wirklich gewesen und dürfte vergessen werden, als könne man ganz gut ohne den Führer leben» (181). Such a passage leads the reader to question the sincerity of Grass’s earlier professed convictions. Even more tellingly
however, this passage suggests an overwhelming ease with which Grass (and the German people) were able to forget about Hitler. Put into the context of this delayed confession, Grass’s «amnesia» seems almost commonplace – an attitude of «moving on» or «moving forward» pervaded in the immediate postwar years. Here Grass points out that he was just like everyone else, an attitude that belies his later position as the country’s moral compass. Indeed, Grass did not view Germany’s capitulation as a big deal:


It is unclear whether this passage reflects Grass’s true feelings at the time or whether they have become clouded with the passage of time, a circumstance that Grass admits is possible: «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.» (184) Admittedly, a significant amount of time had passed before Grass was able to fully understand his own ignorance during the Third Reich: «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.» (221) Shame, however, remains: «Wie dem Hunger kann der Schuld und der ihr folgamen Scham nachgesagt werden, daß sie nagt, unablässig nagt, aber gehungert habe ich nur zeitweilig, die Scham jedoch.» (221).

The narrative ultimately spells out the process behind Grass’s recognition and acceptance of the reality of the Nazi atrocities, a process that lasted approximately one year:

Even when confronted with photographic evidence of the atrocities committed in the concentration camps, Grass was unable to comprehend the enormity of the Nazi crimes. While the passage of time was necessary for Grass and others like him to comprehend their most recent history, he also takes advantage of the gap this passage of time allows, enabling him to dissociate himself from his own actions. Grass likens his process of remembering to the viewing of a film, a further manifestation of this distancing effect, a technique that renders the ultimate confession less impactful.\textsuperscript{11}

It is the fragility of memory that predominates in this book: Grass endeavors to hold on to distant memories, either by uncovering them (as in the peeling of the onion) or by fixing them in time and space (the amber), yet still colored by a filter that alters the narrator’s perception of them. Grass seeks clarity from both metaphors:

\begin{quote}
Was auf ersten Blick täuscht: beim Häuten der Zwiebel beginnen die Augen zu schwimmen. So trübt sich ein, was bei klarer Sicht lesbar war. Deutlicher hält mein Bernstein fest, was als Einschluß zu erkennen ist: vorerst als Mücke oder Spinne. Dann aber könnte ein anderer Entschluß, der Granatsplitter, sich in Erinnerung bringen, der in meiner linken Schulter verkapselt ist, als Andenken sozusagen.\textsuperscript{}``
\end{quote}

Grass’s use of the onion as a metaphor helps to convey the lack of transparency of memory, for when the onion juices cause tears, the vision of the peeler becomes clouded. As Nicole Thesz argues, Grass’s works have moved from the depiction of childhood in the Nazi period to the «fading of memory through generational change.»\textsuperscript{(2)} The text portrays a decisive break in Grass’s biography occurring when he is released from his prisoner of war status. At that point, he begins his life anew: «Das mir in frühen Jahren enttschwundene Ich muß ein leeres Gefäß gewesen sein»\textsuperscript{(226)}. Whereas his youth emphasized war games followed by his eventual draft, the period ushered in by Germany’s capitulation erased this «Ich,» his ego. It was the very moment in which Grass confronted the concept of freedom that made a blank slate possible: «Erinnerungsschnipsel, mal so, mal so sortiert, fügen sich lückenhaft. Ich zeichne den Schattenriß einer Person, die zufäl-
lig überlebte, nein, sehe ein fleckiges, sonst aber unbeschriebenes Blatt, das ich bin, sein könnte oder werden möchte, der ungenaue Entwurf späterer Existenz»\textsuperscript{(228)}. Whereas the reference to a «fleckiges Blatt» serves as a veiled reference to Grass’s portion of the collective German guilt, he quite easily allowed his Nazi past to slide into obscurity: «Mein einstiges Jung-nazitum schien gründlich ausgeschwitzt zu sein. Mit dieser sich zänkisch hinschleppenden Vergangenheit wollte ich nichts zu tun haben»\textsuperscript{(264)}. His departure for Berlin marks the final erasure of his youthful transgressions:
«Ich war angekommen [in Berlin]. Kaum da, fiel alles ab, was von Düsseldorfer Angst her anhing. Oder war es schon immer so, daß es mir leichtfiel, Ballast abzuwerfen, nicht hinter mich zu schauen, sogleich anzuorden und dazusein?» (400). Indeed, Grass was able to «throw off» his past with the Waffen-SS for more than sixty years and play the role of the almost irreproachable intellectual.

It is the trope of silence that binds the elder Grass to his younger self. He found it difficult to accept his mother’s silence about the repeated rapes she endured at the hands of the Red army. Yet, it was also her firm belief that «Was schlimm war, das soll man vergessen alles...» (443). Ever the obedient son, Grass tried his hardest to forget his past. It is the process of writing about all that was forgotten, however, which forces him to acknowledge his own silence:

This passage reads as a brief resume of all the regrets that Grass has accumulated, and summarizes Beim Häuten der Zwiebel to this point in the narrative. He admits: «Nein, ich sah nicht zurück oder nur kurz schreckhaft über die Schulter» (322). It seems it is the ease with which Grass hid his past that has made it so difficult for scholars, critics and readers to accept the silence. Moreover, it is uncharacteristic when viewed in the context of his Frankfurter Vorlesungen (1990), wherein he explicitly instructed the students: «Ein Schriftsteller [...] ist jemand, der gegen die verstreichende Zeit schreibt. [...] Eine so akzeptierte Schreibhaltung setzt voraus, daß sich der Autor nicht als abgehoben oder in Zeitlosigkeit verkapselt, sondern als Zeitgenosse sieht, mehr noch, daß er sich den Wechselzonen verstreichender Zeit aussetzt, sich einmischt und Partei ergreift» («Nobelvorlesung»). Beim Häuten der Zwiebel casts the role of the author in a decidedly different light than Grass had
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once proposed. Indeed, it seems Grass the author now admits to his own fallibility.

As scholars such as Braun, Fuchs, Brunssen and Schade have shown, Grass’s literary works are tied intricately to the author’s biography. Indeed, this fact contributed widely to the controversy, for Grass’s outspokenness and notoriety prompted readers (and critics) to hold Grass to a higher moral standard. What kind of obligation does an outspoken author and statesman, such as Günter Grass really have to reveal those hidden (perhaps even suppressed) memories/secrets to the wider public? Does the fact that Grass has chosen to speak out publicly in political forums require him to be «holier than thou»? In his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, Grass refers often to the act of writing as a creation of lies: «Die Fähigkeit zur anhaltenden Tagträumerei, die Lust am Wortwitz und am Spiel mit Wörtern, die Sucht, nur deshalb und ohne Vorteil für sich zu lügen, weil das Schildern der Wahrheit zu langweilig gewesen wäre, kurz, was man vage genug Begabung nennt, war gewiß vorgegeben […]» («Nobelvorlesung»). Yet through his autobiography, Grass tries to exonerate himself. In the present day he firmly believes that he has mastered his Nazi past and left it behind him. Indeed, he assures his readers that this mastery occurred as early as the 1950s, when, during a trip to Italy, he and Anna encountered a group of young Italian fascists. As Grass describes them: «Sie waren so unbelehrbar, wie ich es einst im braunen Jungvolkhemd gewesen bin; gleich dem Giersch wächst das Unkraut nach, blüht immer aufs neue, verbreitet sich, und nicht nur Italien bietet das Klima für Nachwuchs.» (431). It is passages such as this that make it so difficult for readers to overcome their emotional response to Grass’s confession. The book is rife with contradictions: on the one hand readers know that Grass has indeed mastered his past and has served as an ardent critic; on the other hand, however, the passage implies that the young Italians (and all others implied by the word «Nachwuchs») cannot change. So where does that leave us? To find the answer, we must return to the very beginning of Beim Häuten der Zwiebel, wherein Grass very clearly stated that he wants to have the last word. From Die Blechtrommel forward, Grass drew the fodder for his literary texts from his own experiences. In Im Krebsgang, his last fictional work before Beim Häuten der Zwiebel, Grass touched upon the sufferings of the Germans during World War II. In portraying the Germans as victims in that work, Grass paved the way for his own confession, making this very personal examination of his own past a logical progression in Grass’s œuvre.12
Notes

1 I would like to thank Dr. Rachel Halverson and Dr. Andrea Fieler for their insightful reading of drafts of this manuscript.
2 See Rachel Halverson’s essay on Hermann Kant in this volume.
3 The interview was published four days before the book’s release. Having originally scheduled its publication in September, Steidl moved up the production following the interview. Despite or perhaps because of the controversy, the book became an immediate bestseller; the first edition printing of 150,000 copies sold out within days (Mews 337).
4 John Leonard surmises that critics viewed his confession so harshly precisely because we have learned «to judge him from his own bench» (35).
5 Similarly, Andreas Huyssen proposes that Grass’s story is not exceptional, but rather tells the tale of a German «everyman» (26).
6 Andreas Huyssen suggests that «the fact that he describes his youthful self alternately in the first and third person is not evidence of evasion, or of some mendacious effort to blur the line between memoir and fiction […]. Rather this oscillation in perspective marks the distance between memoirist and his teenage self» (26).
7 Schuld can be translated as both guilt and shame. Anne Fuchs, for instance, focuses on shame in her interpretation («Ehrlich»).
8 Schade refers to the «autobiography as confession» (289).
9 See also Finch 189.
10 Grass had numerous opportunities to reveal his past, the most commonly cited being the visit by Ronald Reagan and Helmut Kohl to the Bitburg cemetery (1985), where not only victims of the Nazis, but also members of the SS are buried. Richard Schade also points to the public suicide of a former SS officer in 1969, as well as various speeches commemorating the end of the war (298).
11 Grass continues the metaphor of photos and film in the second installment of his autobiography, Die Box.
12 Da Silva views this as «a move from experiential and survivor memory to postmemory […] thus clos[ing] a circle in Günter Grass’s work» (156). Grass continues to put his personal spin on the past, using his children’s voices and snapshot photos in Die Box (2008) and his own diary musings in Unterwegs von Deutschland nach Deutschland (2009).

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