

# **Gynter Grass bald anders: Taking the Self out of Autobiography in Grass's *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel***

Kirstin Gwyer

*Modern Languages, Oxford University*

Jesus College, Oxford OX1 3DW

[kirstin.gwyer@mod-langs.ox.ac.uk](mailto:kirstin.gwyer@mod-langs.ox.ac.uk)

Kirstin Gwyer is Departmental Lecturer in German at the University of Oxford. The author of *Encrypting the Past: The German-Jewish Holocaust Novel of the First Generation*, she has also written on H. G. Adler and W. G. Sebald, on second- and third-generation post-Holocaust literature, and on post-*Wende* writing, and she is currently working on a comparative monograph on *Contemporary Jewish Literature*.

## **Gynter Grass bald anders: Taking the Self out of Autobiography in Grass's *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel***

Grass's autobiographical volume *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel* is indebted to a range of world-literary predecessor texts, chiefly and most widely researched among them Grimmelshausen's *Simplicissimus Teutsch* (1669). However, it will be argued here that the full import of *Simplicissimus* for *Beim Häuten* emerges only when considered in conjunction with another, rather less closely examined source text: Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* (1867), whose eponymous protagonist furnishes the image of the self as alliaceous construct of layers without a core that also informs Grass's own use of the onion trope. Between them, *Simplicissimus* and *Peer Gynt* have provided Grass with an intertextual model for auto-subversive self-writing that exposes the autobiographical conceit of 'telling the truth about the self' (Lejeune) for the fiction it is.

Keywords: Grimmelshausen, *Simplicissimus*, Ibsen, *Peer Gynt*, Grass, *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel*, *Blechtrommel*, *Hundejahre*, autobiography, self-writing, intertextuality, onions

From Grimmelshausen to de Coster, Joyce to Döblin, or Remarque to Céline, the first volume of Grass's autobiographical trilogy makes reference to a range of world-literary influences that became important to the author over the course of his writing career. Of these, Grimmelshausen, with his *Simplicissimus Teutsch* (1669), also provides an extensively developed, intricately layered source text for *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel* (2006) itself. However, while the significance of *Simplicissimus* for Grass's autobiographical portrait of the artist as a young man has been widely and insightfully discussed in terms both thematic and generic, it will be suggested here that its full implications for *Beim Häuten* emerge only when considered in the light of another, rather less closely examined prototext: Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* (1867), whose eponymous protagonist furnishes the image of the self as alliaceous construct of layers without a

core that also informs Grass's own use of the onion trope. A more in-depth exploration of identity (de)construction, and of its presentation in and as narrative, in Ibsen as well as Grimmelshausen will show that what Grass seems to have identified in both predecessor texts was a template for self-writing which was less autobiographical than auto-subversive. A finalized identity is never attained in any of the three works, with the production of narrative merely serving further to defer signification. A reading of Grass's work against its source texts suggests that a more fruitful approach to *Beim Häuten* might be to think of it not as misadvertised memoir but as openly 'self'-undermining self-writing: auto-graphy, rather than *autobiography*.

### **Grass and Grimmelshausen**

Grass's deployment of the *Simplicissimus* material in *Beim Häuten* is complex and multifaceted. Research in this area has focused predominantly either on the thematic part played in Grass's text by the figures of Grimmelshausen's Simplicius and his protean doppelgänger Baldanders, or on the generic inspiration drawn from *Simplicissimus* as a picaresque retrospective on war.<sup>1</sup> In both respects, there has been a strong tendency to treat Grass's intertextual identification with Grimmelshausen as revealing an underlying disposition towards avoidance or elusion and thus as characteristic of Grass's inability or unwillingness to confront the past any more directly than he had done in his earlier, openly fictional writing. In more critical evaluations, this is regarded as deliberate equivocation, giving the lie to the confessional

---

<sup>1</sup> Günter Grass, *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel* (2006) (Munich: dtv, 2008). Hans Jakob Christoffel von Grimmelshausen, *Der Abenteuerliche Simplicissimus Teutsch* (1669) (Munich: dtv, 1997). References to this edition of *Beim Häuten* will be included in parentheses in the text.

stance commonly read into his alleged reason for turning to autobiography ‘weil dies und auch das nachgetragen werden muß’ (8). As Helen Finch argues: ‘Grass’s usage of *Simplicissimus Teutsch* [...] allows Grass’s self in the past to evade certain confrontations with the specific guilt of his wartime SS membership, even as the framing narrative claims scrupulously to accept responsibility for that guilt.’<sup>2</sup> In what follows, it is not my intention to dispute the circumlocutory quality of Grass’s method. Rather, my aim is to explore his intertextual engagement from an angle that makes the personal disengagement appear as an integral feature of Grass’s self-searching recollections and reinforces Rebecca Braun’s suggestion that critics demanding of his writing that it uncover ‘bare facts’ to tell the ‘truth’ may have ‘missed the point’.<sup>3</sup>

Where his thematic Grimmelshausen borrowings are concerned, Grass’s remembered self, or selves, seem to resonate with the ‘Überlebenskünstler Simplicius’, who bears numerous different identities – from innocent lost in the woods, to soldier, lover, vagrant and hermit – and who survives many adventures over the course of the war (146). This identification blends with, and merges into, another, this one with Grimmelshausen’s icon of mutability, the shape-shifting Baldanders, whom Grass invokes, retrospectively, as a ‘reflexive Wunschidentifikation’ in the context of his

---

<sup>2</sup> ‘Günter Grass’s Account of German Wartime Suffering in *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel*: Mind in Mourning or Boy Adventurer?’, in *Germans as Victims in the Literary Fiction of the Berlin Republic*, ed. by Stuart Taberner and Karina Berger (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2009), pp. 177-90 (p. 182).

<sup>3</sup> “‘Mich in Variationen erzählen’: Günter Grass and the Ethics of Autobiography’, *The Modern Language Review*, 103 (2008), 1051-66. Braun’s argument in this very persuasive article connects Grass’s strategy to his public self-presentation and reception, but her point in fact extends beyond this arena to the question of an ‘ethics of autobiography’ more broadly.

childhood self's escapist fantasies: 'Schon immer wollte ich weranders und woanders, jener "Baldanders" sein' (38).<sup>4</sup>

According to the narrator, the younger Grass's identification with Grimmelshausen's literary protagonists provided a form of escape first from the stifling confinement of his petit-bourgeois home, and later, if inadequately, from the reality of a war far more terrifying than his escapist fantasies could have imagined. These literary flights are set up in an early description of literature as a portal to alternative realities, where Grass says of his younger self: 'Bücher waren ihm von früh an die fehlende Latte im Zaun, seine Schlupflöcher in andere Welten' (37). After the erstwhile fantasized escape has come true, the only way out is through more imagination, such that the child's daydreaming becomes the soldier's 'Überlebensstrategie', allowing Grass, in his retrospective account, to make it through the war thanks to the 'internalized literary models' of Simplicius and Baldanders.<sup>5</sup>

### *Simplicissimus as 'Schlupfloch'?*

In the critical literature, this intratextual characterization of books as escapist 'Schlupflöcher' is commonly extended to the metatextual and turned back on Grass's narrative technique, with the result that the use of intertextuality in *Beim Häuten* as a whole has come to be regarded as a means of disappearing into the 'Schlupfloch' of earlier works of literature, allowing not just Grass's protagonists in the past but also the author in the present to avoid having to engage directly with a reality they are reluctant

---

<sup>4</sup> Alice Mazurek, 'Die Erinnerung liebt das Versteckspiel der Kinder': *Der Erinnerungsprozess in Günter Grass' Beim Häuten der Zwiebel* (Marburg: Tectum, 2011), p. 80.

<sup>5</sup> Mazurek, p. 84; Finch, p. 183.

to face. In this reading, the wishful self-identification of Grass-the-narrated with his protean protagonist forebears remains a feature of Grass-the-narrator, who switches between different borrowed modes and guises to be always ‘bald anders’, never himself.

Anne Fuchs has highlighted the ‘picaresque rendition of the immediate post-war era’ in the middle part of the memoir, where Grass presents himself as ‘a stray self who lives a vagabond-like existence in search of food, women and entertainment’, as ‘modelled’ on Grimmelshausen.<sup>6</sup> In this middle section, the shift in tone ‘converts the moralising self-consciousness of the first part of the autobiography into a comic representation of history’s incongruities’, and ‘the confessional gesture of the first part of the text is superseded’.<sup>7</sup>

Other critics have identified an evasive impulse in ‘Grass’s indebtedness to Grimmelshausen throughout the battlefield sequences of *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel*’.<sup>8</sup> Here, the biographical and literary kinship Grass establishes between himself and the Baroque author appears as a strategy allowing him to justify, mitigate, or avoid his own experiences by placing them and their retrospective reworking on a (literary-)historical continuum:

---

<sup>6</sup> “‘Ehrlich, du lügst wie gedruckt’: Günter Grass’s Autobiographical Confession and the Changing Territory of Germany’s Memory Culture’, *German Life and Letters*, 60 (2007), 261-75 (pp. 273-74).

<sup>7</sup> Fuchs, pp. 274, 273.

<sup>8</sup> Richard E. Schade, ‘Layers of Meaning, War, Art: Grass’s *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel*’, *The German Quarterly*, 80 (2007), 279-301 (p. 291).

Grass greift mit seiner Referenz auf Grimmelshausens Text auf bereits vorhandenes Material zurück, stellt den Zweiten Weltkrieg in die Tradition vergangener Kriege und sagt damit aus, dass Kriege, unabhängig von der Art der Waffen, von politischen Hintergründen und vom Jahrhundert, Faszination und Kampfbegeisterung wecken und am Ende doch nur [...] Schrecken sowie Leid mit sich bringen.<sup>9</sup>

By misleadingly creating ‘den Eindruck eines zyklischen Geschichtsbildes, des schlimmen Immergleichen’, this reliance on ‘bereits vorhandenes Material’ has been criticized for painting an ‘ahistorical picture’ that ‘elides Grass’s personal memory’.<sup>10</sup> This may be judged the inadvertent effect of an inability on his part to engage directly with a traumatic chapter of his life and, as such, ‘might be viewed as a necessary strategy to record horrors that would otherwise find no adequate literary expression’.<sup>11</sup> Where personal memory is unreliable, or has been degraded or traumatically corrupted, intertextual citation can serve as a filler and referential shorthand: an ‘Informationsstütze, um im Rahmen der Kriegsschilderungen nicht weiter ins Detail gehen zu müssen und dem kundigen Leser die Situation dennoch deutlich zu umreißen’.<sup>12</sup> Trauma-induced blindspots can be filled in, and a sense of the magnitude

---

<sup>9</sup> Mazurek, p. 84.

<sup>10</sup> Klaus Haberkamm, ‘Simplicianische Zwiebeln: Zur Wirkungsgeschichte Grimmelshausens bei Grass’, *Simpliciana: Schriften der Grimmelshausen-Gesellschaft*, 30 (2009), 199-217 (p. 206); Finch, p. 183.

<sup>11</sup> Finch, p. 182.

<sup>12</sup> Mazurek, p. 84.

of events can be communicated, even if the individual, subjective account falters. Klaus Haberkamm goes even further in emphasizing the ‘Schlupfloch’ aspect of this approach:

[Grass] sucht sich [...] psychologisch gewissermaßen hinter dem Stichwort des Zitierens vor dem Entsetzlichen zu verbergen. [...] Der Ich-Erzähler weist ausdrücklich darauf hin, dass er die fürchterliche Welt des Krieges mit Hilfe fortlaufender, sein Werk einbeziehender Intertextualität ins Literarische sublimieren möchte. Er gibt sozusagen der Literatur vor der Realität den Vorzug.<sup>13</sup>

Others read Grass’s recourse to intertextuality as a more deliberately evasive or self-exculpatory manoeuvre designed to appeal to the readers’ understanding, or to distract them from looking too closely. Mazurek suggests that Grass’s alignment with Grimmelshausen may be an attempt to mitigate a youthful commitment to National Socialism by presenting it as the pale displacement fascination of a young boy who is actually ‘vernarrt ins stockfinstre Mittelalter oder in die barocke Zeitweil eines dreißig Jahre währenden Krieges’ and will not, or cannot, see what is happening in his present (38).<sup>14</sup> Finch proposes that Grass’s use of ‘the picaresque self-image borrowed from Grimmelshausen’ encourages the reader ‘to identify with his activities on the front to a problematic degree’.<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> Haberkamm, p. 206.

<sup>14</sup> Mazurek, p. 81.

<sup>15</sup> Finch, p. 182.



### *Simplicissimus as non-memoir*

The evasiveness of *Beim Häuten* and its avoidance of personal specificity are indisputable. However, a closer analysis of Grass's deployment of intertextuality suggests that while evasiveness and avoidance of the personal may be a welcome collateral outcome, Grass is, paradoxically, looking to his main source texts for a model of how to be more, rather than less, authentically autobiographical.

There are clues to this where Grass points to Grimmelshausen as an intertextual influence in terms of his process, rather than just the content and genre of his work. This is chiefly the case following Grass's depiction of the aftermath of his first 'Feindberührung', as it is euphemistically termed. The scene is given to us as a montage of ravaged forest, scattered bodies and severed limbs, all tropes as harrowing as they are familiar, and indeed harrowing precisely because of their capacity to trigger a reflexive response in an audience conditioned by earlier representations of war (142). Indeed, Grass attests at the end of the passage that he cannot evoke the horror of war without invoking as his literary ancestors Remarque or Céline. In this, he aligns himself with Grimmelshausen, whose seemingly authentic wartime accounts draw on source texts such as the contemporary historical journal *Theatrum Europaeum* or Eberhard Wassenberg's chronicle *Teutscher Florus* (1647), and whose most gruesome battle descriptions are indebted to Martin Opitz's translation of Philip Sidney's *Arcadia* (1590):

Noch wacklig auf den Beinen, war ich einem Bildersturm ausgesetzt. Rings der Jungwald zerfetzt, die Birken wie übers Knie gebrochen. [...] Verstreut lagen Körper, vereinzelt und übereinander, tot, noch lebend, gekrümmt, von Ästen gespießt, durchsiebt von Granatsplittern. [...] Auch wären Körperteile zu finden

gewesen. [...] Ich blieb in naßgepißter Hose lautlos und sah nahbei den geöffneten Leib eines Jungen, mit dem ich gerade noch weißnichtwas gequasselt hatte. Die Eingeweide. Sein rundes Gesicht, das im Moment des Todes geschrumpft zu sein schien...

Aber das, was hier im einzelnen geschrieben steht, habe ich ähnlich bereits woanders, bei Remarque oder Céline gelesen, wie schon Grimmelshausen bei der Schilderung der Schlacht von Wittstock, als die Schweden die Kaiserlichen in Stücke hauten, überlieferte Schreckensbilder zitierte... (142)

The analogy Grass draws here between Grimmelshausen and himself is often misinterpreted in critical literature. Richard Schade has suggested of this passage: ‘The battle description is as much indebted to seventeenth-century literary fiction as it is to the memory of real-life battlefield experiences.’<sup>16</sup> But the crucial point here is not whether Grass is indebted to literary material from the seventeenth or any other century, nor is it the anyway elusive distinction between fiction and memory. The commonality Grass is emphasizing between himself and Grimmelshausen is not the content of their writing but the act – and indeed the necessity if not inevitability – of intertextual borrowing itself. This seems to suggest that Grass’s primary interest in Grimmelshausen’s work is not as a successful model of an autobiographical retrospective on war but as an ‘unsuccessful’ one.

---

<sup>16</sup> “‘... immerzu Krieg’: History, Intertextuality and the Memoir of Günter Grass’, *German Studies Review*, 34 (2011), 261-76 (p. 269).

A closer look at the rest of the passage just cited would appear to reinforce this suggestion and cast Grass's interest both in Grimmelshausen's mercurial protagonists and in his text as picaresque self-narrative in a rather different light: as part of a more fundamental attempt to undermine the autobiographical 'fantasy' of 'constituting the self as complete subject' and 'telling the truth' about it.<sup>17</sup> If Grass 'hides behind Grimmelshausen's fiction', or that of any of his other literary predecessors, he hides there in plain sight.<sup>18</sup> The intertextually informed description of the war-torn forest and soldiers is self-consciously interrupted by Grass's deliberate foregrounding of the constructedness of 'his' retrospective. The explicitly signalled recourse to intertextuality punctures the illusion initially established of genuine first-person-singular recollection. The narrator is now self-professedly unreliable, lacking authentic access to either his former self's mind or his own life story, both of which are overcoded by, or even wholly made up of, imagery not original to either the narrating or the narrated self. Even the 'Bildersturm' at the time, if this is in fact how the narrated self experienced the situation, seems to have been filtered through impressions formed by others before him.

Not only can Grass-the-narrator not communicate what he has witnessed in his own words and images without the words and images of others crowding in, but even his initial impression may have been an intertextual amalgamation of his own 'Schreckensbilder' with those of others. The very notion of telling 'his' life story is undermined by this intertextual predetermination and, related to it, by the absence of a unified, coherent self to construct it around. Without access to its own mind as it was at

---

<sup>17</sup> Philippe Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, ed. by Paul John Eakin, trans. by Katherine Leary (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), p. 131.

<sup>18</sup> Schade, 'Layers of Meaning', p. 291.

the time – if its mind was ever its own – the narrating self is reduced to observing itself from an outsider's perspective. It can never be congruent with the narrated self, which in turn will never be congruent with itself. The silent 'ich' in urine-soaked trousers – though this, too, may be a borrowed image – is not the same as the 'ich' who has read Remarque, Céline or Grimmelshausen, which in turn is a different 'ich' from the one narrating. And none of them is the 'ich' who was actually there. Any notion of a coherent self has been replaced by a conglomerate of conflicting external perspectives and intertextual quotations.

The place where this seems to be communicated most clearly is in the use of the hypothetical subjunctive 'Auch wären Körperteile zu finden gewesen' (142). The use of the Konjunktiv II in an impersonal construction here suggests that this is a third-party perspective not available to, or not shared by, the narrated self in the past, which marks out the image as an unverifiable later insertion, possibly of someone else's 'Schreckensbild'. In iconic literary or cinematic scenes of wartime death and destruction, there are usually severed body parts. In this case, the narrated self either did not see any or chose not to look, or the narrating self does not remember what the narrated self actually saw. Conversely, the narrated self may have seen severed limbs, but the image is too iconic to sound authentic as an un-self-questioning assertion of fact in the indicative.

Mirjam Gebauer has suggested with reference to this passage that Grass is using 'Das Vorbild Grimmelshausen [...] um auf die textliche und sprachliche Vorgeprägtheit der autobiographischen Darstellung und damit auf die Unmöglichkeit eines

authentischen Zugangs zur eigenen Lebensgeschichte hinzuweisen.’<sup>19</sup> While this is clearly true, and while I agree that Grass therefore ‘entlarvt sich selbst als “Kompilator” literarischer Zitate’, what is being revealed here goes beyond the simple ‘Unzuverlässigkeit des pikaresken Erzählers’ as narrative strategy.<sup>20</sup> It is not just a case of Grass choosing fiction over ‘reality’, because ‘in [seiner] Autobiographie weniger zur Debatte steht, ob etwas tatsächlich so passiert sei, als vielmehr, wie die Erzählkunst den Wirklichkeitsstoff zu verwandeln mag’.<sup>21</sup> Rather, ‘Wirklichkeit’ and ‘Erzählkunst’ are presented as inseparable: as inextricably linked as ‘Schilderung’ is from ‘zitieren’, as Grass puts it with reference to Grimmelshausen’s depiction of the Battle of Wittstock. Beyond just being deliberately or programmatically unreliable, *Beim Häuten* seems designed to illustrate the essential impossibility of authentic autobiography, or perhaps to encourage a revision of what we think of as authentic autobiography.

In what follows, it will be proposed that what Grimmelshausen has to offer Grass in this context is not primarily a means for avoiding self-exposure but a model for exposing self-narration. Rather than a ‘Schlupfloch’, he seems to have provided a template of a non-memoir, whose recollections are no more original than Grass’s own and whose protagonist – sliding from guise to guise without achieving self-realization, in the manner of a subverted *Bildungsroman* – remains incongruent and essentially unknowable, just like the autobiographical subject in Grass’s writing. In isolation, this

---

<sup>19</sup> ‘Grimmelshausen und Kafka: Zwei Modelle autobiographischer Inszenierung in Günter Grass’ *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel* und Imre Kertész’ *Dossier K.*, *Orbis Litterarum*, 64 (2009), 457-77 (p. 466).

<sup>20</sup> Gebauer, p. 468.

<sup>21</sup> Gebauer, p. 469.

connection is hard to verify. Where it becomes much more clearly visible is not in Grass's recourse to Grimmelshausen directly, but in where this overlaps with his engagement with another source text: that of Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* (1867). Read in conjunction, the three works reveal their underlying pattern of a failed self-narrative in which the quest for congruent identity is undermined by the very medium in which it appears, with the attempt to narrate the self merely serving to increase the distance between narrating subject and narrated object. From this constellation emerges as the only remotely authentic form of self-narrative the openly unsuccessful one, in which 'the self' is exposed as a fictitious construct and autobiography as auto-graphy, with no prior truth claim.

### **Grass and Ibsen**

Where *Peer Gynt* is mentioned as a source text for *Beim Häuten*, reference tends to be restricted to Grass's borrowing of the onion trope as a metaphor for the self, as well as memory, a borrowing signalled by repeated allusions to his late mother's purported custom of referring to her 'vielversprechendes Muttersöhnchen' as 'mein kleiner Peer Gynt' (433, 57):

While the onion in Grass's autobiography started as a metaphor for the composition of memory and the process of remembering, it quickly shifts into a metaphor for the author himself. [...] Often called 'Peer Gynt' by his mother,

Grass transposes his unsuccessful experience of trying to get to the bottom of his character onto the famous scene of the onion in *Peer Gynt*.<sup>22</sup>

*Peer Gynt*, whose eponymous protagonist is prone to flights of fancy and paints rosy pictures for his mother of the great future that lies in store for them both once he is famous, a king, or an emperor, shows us Gynt trying, and failing, to become this, or any, congruent self. After a lifetime on stage in which he assumes and discards identities like borrowed garments, from troll prince to slave trader, to prophet, scientist or gold digger, with, ultimately, nothing to show for it, he finally communicates the realization of his failure in Act V, Scene 5, in a mock ante-mortem obituary, delivered in self-address, and through the prop of an onion as substanceless pile of peel to illustrate what his quest to become ‘someone’ has left him with. Taken at face value, the onion scene ‘is generally read as a rare moment of truth for Peer, in which he recognizes the vanity of his lies and delusions, his lack of authentic “core”’.<sup>23</sup>

Soll ich sterben einst, – und dem entrinn’ ich wohl kaum, –  
So kriech’ ich unter ’nen windbrochnen Baum,  
Und deck’ mich zu, wie ein Bär, mit Blättern  
Und ritz’ in die Rinde mit riesigen Lettern:  
Hier ruht Peer Gynt, des Landes Zier,  
Kaiser von all dem andern Getier. –

---

<sup>22</sup> Rebecca Braun, *Constructing Authorship in the Work of Günter Grass* (Oxford: OUP, 2008), p. 179.

<sup>23</sup> Sara Jan, ‘Peer Gynt and the dialogic imagination’, *Ibsen Studies*, 4 (2004), 40-54 (p. 44).

Kaiser?

*(Lacht innerlich.)*

Noch immer das alte Geliebte!

Du bist kein Kaiser; du bist eine Zwiebel.

Jetzt will ich dich einmal schälen, mein Peer!

Es hilft dir nichts, stöhnst du auch noch so sehr.

*(Nimmt eine Zwiebel und pflückt Haut um Haut ab.)*

Da liegt die äußere, zerfetzte Schicht; –

Der Gescheiterte, der um sein Leben ficht.

[...]

Hier ist das Goldgräber-Ich; – fahr hin!

Der Saft ist weg, – war je einer drin.

[...]

Hier der Altertumsforscher, kurz aber kräftig,

Und hier der Prophet, frisch und vollsäftig.

[...]

Das hört ja nicht auf! Immer Schicht noch um Schicht!

Kommt denn der Kern nun nicht endlich ans Licht?!

*(Zerpflückt die ganze Zwiebel.)*

Bis zum innersten Innern, – da schau' mir einer! –

Bloß Häute, – nur immer kleiner und kleiner. –'<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup> Henrik Ibsen, *Peer Gynt* (1867), trans. by Christian Morgenstern (1901) (Berlin: Holzinger, 2016), v. 5, pp. 156-57. Other German translations, including by Ludwig Passarge (1881) or



Evidently, Volker Neuhaus is entirely correct in stating, with reference to Grass's use of the onion trope: 'Grass zitiert Gynt geradezu, wenn er schreibt, seine "Lebenszwiebel" berge "am Ende, nachdem Haut auf Haut geschält war, keinen sinnstiftenden Kern".'<sup>25</sup> Reminiscent of Peer Gynt, and before him Simplicius, Grass's life as it is presented in *Beim Häuten* appears as a string of disjointed episodes, in which he plays a series of unconnected, superficial roles. Familiar stock characters cleave his formative years into stereotypical stages without telling us anything much about him as an individual: impressionable Hitler Youth, shell-shocked soldier, itinerant 'Heimkehrer', chain-smoking existentialist. Where is Günter Grass in all of this? With the exception of a remembered postwar encounter with his Kashubian great aunt Anna, who, harking back to his childhood days, addresses the adult Grass as 'Ginterchen', his first name is, tellingly, never used, and even this evasion is rendered generic in a passing intertextual equation of the author with Rumpelstiltskin (18, 464).

Grimmelshausen, Ibsen and Grass all seem aligned in their presentation of the narrated self as a core-less onion. However, as with Grimmelshausen, Grass's main intertextual interest in Ibsen is not for his content but for his process. In *Peer Gynt*, he finds a template for self-writing that succeeds by failing: by demonstrating its own impossibility and puncturing the autobiographical illusion of self-congruence. Beyond the symbolic significance of the onion to represent the self as 'a multi-layered product of constantly changing and often contradictory times' and communicate that 'there is no

---

Hermann Stock (1953), may have been familiar to Grass, but textual correspondences suggest that the Morgenstern version may have been the one he consulted in detail.

<sup>25</sup> *Günter Grass*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2010), p. 244. Neuhaus is referencing Grass, p. 433.

essential core of meaning that can be invoked to make sense of the subject and his actions', Gynt's onion monologue can be read as forming part of a larger formal experiment with modes of self-narration. From a comparative juxtaposition with two other models of self-writing – the biographical and the fictional – it, ironically, emerges as the least deceitful.<sup>26</sup>

### ***Peer Gynt as anti-biography***

The biographical counter-model to Gynt's self-account as endless layers without a core appears just two scenes prior to the onion monologue, in Act V, Scene 3, and is partly responsible for prompting Gynt's 'self'-inspection. In this scene, Gynt witnesses a priest deliver a eulogy at a man's funeral. The man was not rich, famous or in any way heroic; on the contrary, Gynt remembers him from an earlier encounter in Act III, Scene 1 where he witnessed the same man cut off his own finger to evade conscription. Yet the priest has no trouble praising the deceased, and giving a coherent account of his life in retrospect, for, in the context of the play, the man may have broken the laws of his country, but he went on to redeem himself in the eyes of society by abiding by the play's 'heimlichste Weisheit', 'Mensch, sei Du': as an uncomplaining, hard-working farmer and family man, he was fully himself.<sup>27</sup>

In thematic terms, this appears to establish the deceased as a positive foil to Gynt and, by analogy, Grass himself. However, the drama seems to work against itself here at a formal level, for Ibsen destabilizes the seemingly straightforward ideal of being wholly and congruently oneself – an ideal already called into question by the fact

---

<sup>26</sup> Braun, 'Ethics of Autobiography', p. 1065.

<sup>27</sup> Ibsen, v. 3, pp. 147-50; ii. 6, p. 50.

that it is first presented to us as humanity's aspirational precept by the dubious figure of the Troll King – by presenting the question of selfhood as inextricable from that of narrative.<sup>28</sup> Gynt's first response, on hearing the priest's tribute, is to highlight its constructedness by referring to the practice of giving a eulogy as 'einen sogenannten Erinnerungsblick | Wohlwollend über ein Leben zu werfen' and calling this a 'schöner christlicher Brauch'.<sup>29</sup> The customary retrospective is only a so-called one, for in actuality, it involves the opposite of looking, or at least of looking closely, back over a person's life. As a particularly forgiving form of biography, a eulogy merely foregrounds how any form of life-writing is likely to involve the smoothing over of contradictions and reconciling of inconsistencies in order to give the retrospective impression of a coherent self, create an artificially linear and teleological 'life story', and thus make a person's past appear edifying, exemplary, as a cautionary tale or a lesson to us all, or simply as a life well lived, from the outside. However, as the juxtaposition between the priest's narrative and Gynt's suggests, the self projected in this way is the artificial construct of third-person biography, not a lived reality.<sup>30</sup>

---

<sup>28</sup> Ibsen, ii. 6, p. 50.

<sup>29</sup> Ibsen, v. 3, p. 150. The Danish original has 'såkaldt erindringsblik'.

<sup>30</sup> The irony here is that it takes Peer Gynt, whose last name etymologically links him to the practice of squinting or looking askance, to point this out. This would make his assessment untrustworthy, were it not for the fact that his two main foils, the deceased peasant and the woman who loves him, Solveig – who are conventionally interpreted as positive counterparts to his onion-layer self – are identified as being, respectively, near-sighted and blind. This might make Gynt one-eyed king, though clearly he must still be considered an unreliable witness. (Ibsen, v. 3, p. 149; v. 10, p. 183. For the etymological derivation, see Otto Reinert, 'Notes to *Peer Gynt*', *Scandinavian Studies*, 67 (1995), 434-75 (p. 435).)

In the onion monologue, we observe Gynt's attempt to apply what he has witnessed the priest do to his own past. He imagines fashioning its disjointed episodes into the coherent tale of an individual's life, to be carved, epitaph-like, into the bark of the tree that marks his imaginary grave, just as Grimmelhausen's Simplicius, in his attempt to make narrative sense of his self, initially wrote on tree bark.<sup>31</sup> But like Simplicius, Gynt comes up short: the layers of the onion refuse to coalesce into a single image, and there is no redemptive linearity to the jumble of misadventures he has lived.

The majority position in Ibsen studies has long been that this episode marks Gynt's confrontation with his 'undeveloped and infantile character' and sees him face 'the emotional state he has denied and escaped from all his life'.<sup>32</sup> For Grass's purposes, however, *Peer Gynt* seems to have offered not an account of an inauthentic life but a laying bare of the inauthenticity of life-writing.

### ***Peer Gynt as autofiction***

The other counter-part to Gynt's onion monologue is self-narrative in the guise of fiction. The most obvious example of this is our very first encounter of Peer Gynt, at the opening of the play, which starts with Gynt in mid-flow, dishing up the latest episode of

---

<sup>31</sup> The correspondence between the texts is in general so striking that a deliberate intertextual echo on the part of Ibsen seems to suggest itself, though this is unverified and, to my knowledge, has not been explored.

<sup>32</sup> Marit Aalen, 'Tears, remorse and reparation in Henrik Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*', *The Scandinavian Psychoanalytic Review*, 37 (2014), 113-24 (p. 120). There have, however, been some very convincing recent oppositions to this reading, including Jan, 'Peer Gynt and the dialogic imagination', cited earlier, and Leonardo Lisi, 'Allegory, Capital, Modernity: *Peer Gynt* and Ibsen's Modern Breakthrough', *Ibsen Studies*, 8 (2008), 43-68.

his life-story to his half-disbelieving, half-spellbound mother. Peer Gynt's account in this scene is pure fabrication, but not of Gynt's own making. It is, in fact, an embellished retelling of a Norwegian folktale. However, despite therefore being an already fictional creation further fictionalized, Peer Gynt's story can also be read as illustrating the impossibility of authentic self-narrative in any form.

To justify his laziness and absenteeism, Peer spins his mother a yarn about being carried off by an enormous reindeer and almost plummeting from the top of a mountain ridge and drowning. His mother, vacillating between incredulity and concern, gets swept up in the illusion of truth. Though she seems to know that what he is telling her could not have happened in the way he claims, and responds with indignation to the realization that she has been duped, she continually suspends her disbelief when the tale sounds particularly authentic, which, paradoxically, is always in places where it is most fictitious. This blurs the boundaries between authenticity, truth and fiction, just as it did in Grass's account of his 'Feindberührung', and in Grimmshausen's battle depictions before him.

At first glance, Gynt's use of intertextuality seems, ironically, to align his concoctions with the priest's contrived eulogy, with both men apparently resorting to fiction to sugar-coat an unpalatable reality for a more-or-less knowingly deceived audience. However, there is a further twist to Peer Gynt's reindeer fabrication, which redeems its use of fiction over the priest's. Gynt's 'self'-narration is further complicated by the fact that, before he slips into the role of Gudbrand Glesne, the mythical reindeer rider from Norwegian folklore, he is already a fictional character, invented not by Ibsen, but, apparently, by Norwegian hunters, and recorded by Peter Christen Asbjørnsen in *Norwegian Popular Fairy Tales and Legends* (1845). The collection includes Gudbrand Glesne's adventures alongside those of another local hunter, one 'Per Gynt', a teller of

tall tales who reportedly enjoyed inserting himself as protagonist in the fictional material he promulgated. 'Per Gynt', who in Asbjørnsen's edited version is given a narrator who is also called 'Per', experiences many of the adventures Ibsen's Peer does, though not the reindeer ride. If there was ever a 'real' Norwegian hunter on whom these fictionally enhanced versions of Gynt are based, he is lost between the mythical 'Per Gynt', embellished in popular transmission and in the account of his namesake, and the narrative self-stylization Peer Gynt gives himself as Ibsen's dramatized recreation. Pe(e)r as the public know him was always already a fictional distortion. Yet for the autobiography of a man whose 'self' is an intertextual creation and compilation of other people's constructs, the fact that it is fiction makes it strangely true.

This must have resonated with Grass, who begins *Beim Häuten* by querying the point of retelling his story autobiographically when the first and most enduring account of himself will always be through and as the persona of Oskar, such that

alles, was mir ab den ersten und seit den zweiten Zähnen widerfuhr, längst [...] zu Zettelkram wurde, der seitdem einer Person anhängt, die, kaum zu Papier gebracht, nicht wachsen wollte [...] und sich dank ihrer Blechtrommel einen Namen machte, der fortan zitierbar zwischen Buchdeckeln existierte und in weißnichtwieviel Sprachen unsterblich sein will. (8)

Like Pe(e)r Gynt's, his story as the public knows it has always been fictionally mediated 'Zettelkram'. No one, including Grass himself, will ever have access to a self before his first fictional alter ego, and all the subsequent interpretations put forward by a, variously, venerating or vilifying public. The realization expressed in *Beim Häuten* is that there is no authentic original self. The 'self' is an intertextual composite, a

patchwork of his own and other people's projections, and Grass's open-ended conclusion at the close of the text reads above all as an acknowledgment of this insight: 'So lebte ich fortan von Seite zu Seite und zwischen Buch und Buch' (479).

What distinguishes this approach to self-writing from both sugar-coated biography and simple autofiction is the fact that its inauthenticity is openly acknowledged, and no attempt is made to disguise the fact that the congruent self is a figment of the imagination. By the time Ibsen's Peer Gynt attempts to tell 'his' story and finds a pile of peel, the openly acknowledged recourse to fiction appears, paradoxically, as the most genuine way of narrating himself.

### ***Peer Gynt as 'self'-subverting auto-graphy***

What is more, the fact that Gynt is both a teller and a product of tall tales seems, on closer inspection, to be acknowledged from the outset, long before he supposedly has a moment of self-realization in the onion scene. The introductory yarn of 'his' reindeer ride is just the first case in point. Gynt's mother accuses him here of having borrowed a made-up story and embellished it further in order more successfully to deceive her. In fact, Peer's additions to the original serve to foreground its, and his, constructedness, rather than disguise it, even to a reader not familiar with the source text. Like Gudbrand Glesne in the version recorded by Asbjørnsen, Peer Gynt claims that the buck carries him up Gjendin Ridge before ending up in the mountain lake where Gynt is able to free himself. However, while the folktale follows a teleological narrative arc that ends with Glesne victorious, Peer Gynt's version is constructed around a split in both protagonist and narrative perspective. At the height of narrative tension, when the reindeer plunges from the cliff into the abyss and Åse is, impossibly, sure that her son is about to tell her

that he has plummeted to his death, Peer Gynt encounters not his death but Peer Gynt, on the back of a reindeer, emerging from the bottom of the lake to meet him:

Nieder, nieder, nieder sauste es.

Aber aus der Tiefe grauste es

Weiß wie eine Renntierbrust. –

Mutter, das war unser eigen

Bild, das aus des Bergsees Schweigen

Tief vom Grund zum Spiegel eilte,

Umgekehrt, wie unser Sturz

Lotrecht auf ihn nieder pfeilte.

[...]

Bock vom Berge, Bock vom Grunde

Stieß zur selbigen Sekunde!

Das Gespritz' und das Geklatsche!

Na, da lag man in der Patsche. –<sup>33</sup>

Logically, the 'eigen Bild' is of course Peer Gynt himself, as he imagines himself making contact with his own reflection in the surface of the lake upon impact.

Grammatically, however, there is no discerning a self in the encounter between 'Bildnis' and 'Spiegel'. Both the 'sausen' from up above and the 'grausen' from down below are embedded in impersonal constructions, while the 'ich' has disappeared in the

---

<sup>33</sup> Ibsen, i. 1, pp. 7-8.



clash between one fictional Peer Gynt and another, and one intertext and another, with the final, collectivizing ‘man’ suggesting less a merging than a doubling of ‘selves’.

The splitting and reduplication of persona and perspective in this first scene sets the tone for the play as a whole. There is no utterance or perception in it that does not turn out to be ambivalent. As Sara Jan has shown beautifully, with recourse to Bakhtin’s concept of dialogism, this even extends to the status of the imagination itself, which superficially seems to be disparaged, including by Peer Gynt himself, and which therefore has long been treated with suspicion in critical readings, but which, as Jan points out, in fact ‘always answers back’.<sup>34</sup>

By the time we get to Peer Gynt’s onion monologue in Act V, the splitting and doubling of voices and subjectivities has been developed to the point where Gynt speaks in no fewer than three different persons with and of himself, with the first-person singular further dividing into selves past, present and future, as well observing and experiencing:

Soll ich sterben einst, – und dem entrinn’ ich wohl kaum, –  
So kriech’ ich unter ’nen windbrochnen Baum,  
Und deck’ mich zu, wie ein Bär, mit Blättern  
Und ritz’ in die Rinde mit riesigen Lettern:  
Hier ruht Peer Gynt, des Landes Zier,  
Kaiser von all dem andern Getier. –  
Kaiser?  
[...]

---

<sup>34</sup> Jan, p. 42.

Du bist kein Kaiser; du bist eine Zwiebel.

Jetzt will ich dich einmal schälen, mein Peer!<sup>35</sup>

The monologue is in fact no such thing. It is poly-vocal and poly-perspectival, undermining any artificial notion of a congruent, self-identical 'ich' as produced by conventional life-writing in the 'Hier ruht Peer Gynt' vein, and replacing this with a more authentic approach to self-narration that regards the self as a construct of contradictory layers without a single, 'true' core. Telling this self is a constantly self-revising process with no resolution and no final product: not autobiography but auto-graphy.

### **Grass and 'Grass'**

The practice of perspectival refraction and of splitting and distributing the 'self' across multiple personal pronouns is perhaps the most striking 'self'-subverting feature of Grass's narrative technique also. Going back to *Die Blechtrommel*, and again in *Beim Häuten*, this is Grass's primary means of dismantling the 'fictive unity' of the 'I' to introduce ambiguity or doubt and highlight the constructedness of the self.<sup>36</sup> This can appear evasive in *Beim Häuten*, because it stresses the unbridgeable distance between narrating subject and narrated object and withholds the authentic confessional disclosures an association of the act of 'Häuten' with self-revelation might have led us

---

<sup>35</sup> Ibsen, v. 5, pp. 156-57.

<sup>36</sup> Philippe Lejeune, 'Autobiography in the Third Person', trans. by Annette Tomarken and Edward Tomarken, *New Literary History*, 9 (1977), 27-50 (p. 32).

to expect. It is, however, an authentic illustration of the insight, not only where Grass is concerned, but for life-writing generally, that:

Autobiography is a collaborative act even when accomplished by one person;  
that person is always multiple and self-referential when writing.

Autobiographical faithfulness becomes a matter of being truthful about the  
process of self-reflection in narrative.<sup>37</sup>

Like Peer Gynt in the self-reflective reindeer ride, the Grass of *Beim Häuten* is inherently non-self-identical and non-original in the sense referred to by Berman, in which any form of self-narrative splits the autobiographical agent. Again as in *Peer Gynt*, this sense is further enhanced in Grass's writing by an acute awareness of the self as intertextual composite, where later variants obscure or belatedly come to determine earlier ones, and the distinction between origin and replica or literature and reality is irreversibly blurred. A passage in *Beim Häuten* that illustrates both of these aspects occurs immediately after Grass is called up to join the *Waffen-SS*:

Beschwichtigungen sind auf Abruf zitierbar: Die Einberufung und ihre Folgen, das ist doch durchgekauft alles, wörtlich in Reihe gebracht und zum Buch geworden. Über siebenhundert Seiten lang wälzen sich die 'Hundejahre' dahin. Hinlänglich steht geschrieben, wie jemand, der Harry Liebenau heißt, sobald er Soldat wird Tagebuch führt und [...] Briefe [...] schreibt [...]: 'Ich habe noch

---

<sup>37</sup> Jessica Berman, *Modernist Commitments: Ethics, Politics, and Transnational Modernism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), p. 148.

keinen Russen gesehen. [...] In Bunzlau hingen fünf Soldaten und zwei Offiziere an sieben Bäumen. [...] Zwei Tage lang konnte ich nichts schreiben, weil wir Feindberührung hatten. Viele leben nicht mehr. Nach dem Krieg werde ich ein Buch schreiben...'

Ich aber, dem im September vierundvierzig gewiß kein zukünftiges Buch drangvolle Seiten versprach, der aber im Sinn hatte, gleichfalls ein Diarium mit gesammelten Augenblicken zu füllen, saß in immer noch knielangen Hosen auf der Holzbank eines Eisenbahnabteils III. Klasse. [...] Im Kopf ging es unsortiert zu [...]. Doch kein Gedanke gibt ein Zitat her [...], nur der Einberufungsbefehl knistert in der Brusttasche meines zu engen Jacketts. (114-15)

As in *Peer Gynt*, the self here views itself from the outside or as a third party intertextually refracted. In fact, the whole passage is a play on the idea of 'zitieren'. Just as some of Grass's early experiences had become 'Zettelkram' attached to Oskar, who took on a life of his own and came to exist 'zitierbar zwischen Buchdeckeln', Grass can only cite his experiences as a soldier to the extent that they are intertextually available to him in fictionalized form in *Hundejahre* (8). The one version of Grass that is not 'zitierbar' is the self that was drafted to the front 'in real life'. No 'Zitat' is forthcoming here. This 'Ich', viewed in third person, is available only as a stock image (the too-young soldier still in 'knielangen Hosen') and has been displaced by his fictional alter ego, Harry Liebenau, to the point where Harry seems to have been the original diary-writer, whom the Grass-the-recruit, impossibly, intends to copy. As in *Peer Gynt*'s reindeer tale, the idea of an undivided 'ich' has been ousted by mutually reflecting intertextual variants, deriving, in this instance, primarily from Grass's own world literature. Of these variants, it ceases to be clear who has created whom or, as Grass

phrases the dilemma with reference to Oskar, ‘wer wem was in den Mund gelegt hat [...], wem man am Ende glauben soll, was hier wie da fehlt und wer wem die Feder geführt hat’ (312). According to Grass’s autobiography, at least some of the things listed in Harry Liebenau’s letter also happened to him as a soldier, but we cannot say if the way they are described by Harry is how Grass experienced them, or whether their fictionalization in *Hundejahre* has informed or revised them in Grass’s recollection, as is further underlined in the passage by the confusion of past and present tense. In consequence, the motivation behind his self-narrative ‘Weil dies und auch das nachgetragen werden muß’ also turns out to be dialogic and self-subverting, for the confessional meaning we initially ascribe to ‘nachtragen’ – as the belated supplementation of facts to amend formerly incomplete information – vies with its mirror opposite, the endlessly self-revisionist deferral of meaning in *Nachträglichkeit* (8).

### **Conclusion: Grimmelshausen revisited**

A more in-depth exploration of the significance of *Peer Gynt* as source text for Grass’s auto-graphical project of ‘self’-subversion also brings out more clearly the extent of Grass’s indebtedness to Grimmelshausen. The splitting and redoubling of the self in and as text, and the use of self-refraction and self-citation, as means of drawing attention to the inauthenticity of self-congruence in autobiography are not just a feature of *Peer Gynt* but can already be found in *Simplicissimus*. The encounter between Simplicius and Baldanders in Chapter 9 of the ‘Continuatio’ reads like a template for passages such as the reindeer scene in *Peer Gynt* or the Harry Liebenau excerpt in *Beim Häuten* and appears almost as a keystone of their ‘self’-subverting auto-graphies.

In the 'Continuatio', one of multiple codas to Simplicius's inconclusive self-quest, Simplicius, demonstrating the inherent self-incongruence of the autobiographical narrator, enters the forest apparently to encounter himself: 'meinen eitelen Gedanken Gehör zu geben'.<sup>38</sup> Instead of self-contemplation, he finds self-refraction when he comes face to face with Baldanders, an only seemingly inert stone statue without a solid 'Fundament' to anchor it. As Simplicius soon realizes, this is fitting, for his efforts to unsettle the statue to get a better look at it reveal its shapeshifting nature and set Baldanders off on a series of transformations. In this, the restless Baldanders appears as the inconstant Simplicius's double, but he also introduces himself as Simplicius's lifelong companion and trigger of *his* many transformations, responsible for making him 'bald groß bald klein, bald reich bald arm, bald hoch bald nieder, bald lustig bald traurig, bald böß bald gut und in Summa bald so und bald anders'.<sup>39</sup> Simplicius's self-identity is called into question by the impossibility of identifying an original between the two mutually reflective figures. This is enhanced by the fact that Simplicius and Baldanders are both already replicas by dint of being, respectively, a textual reconfiguration of Grimmelshausen himself (Simplicius's 'real' name, Melchior Sternfels von Fuchshaim, is an imperfect anagram of the fictitious editor's and the author's name) and an intertextual figure borrowed from Hans Sachs. Finally, by performing the impossible feat of ending his self-narrative with the awakening of the trigger that initiated it, Simplicius causes the entire text to double back on itself in the manner of 'a serpent devouring its own tail / tale', as Ian Fleishman has observed in a

---

<sup>38</sup> Grimmelshausen, p. 520.

<sup>39</sup> Grimmelshausen, p. 521.

different context.<sup>40</sup> The *ex post facto* textual genesis offered in the ‘Continuatio’ retroactively makes dismantling the autobiographical conceit of Simplicius’s narrative its self-consuming foundation.

Though the idea of a non-self-identical self writing a ‘self’-subverting autobiography had evidently been put into practice long before Grass’s mother ever called him her little Peer Gynt – if she did –, Ibsen’s model of an alliaceous protagonist observing his layers-without-a-core offers a resonant illustration of it. At the same time, a triangulated reading of Ibsen and Grimmelshausen alongside *Beim Häuten* allows their previously under-acknowledged destabilization of self-writing to come to the fore. These are the shifting, mutually reflective foundations on which Grass’s *Beim Häuten* rests. He is Simplicius and Gynt, Oskar and Harry, he is ‘Grass’ in every variant, always Baldanders, but never himself. It is indeed ‘doubtful’ if ‘this represents a genuine engagement with the author’s own biography’.<sup>41</sup> What we do get from *Beim Häuten* is an authentic illustration of autobiographical process as the ‘self’-devouring writing of an ‘immer wieder im fiktionalen Gestrüpp verschwindendes Ich’ and a text openly founded on the self-disclaimer ‘Wer schreibt, gibt sich auf’ (39, 352).

---

<sup>40</sup> ‘A Printed Proteus: Textual Identity in Grimmelshausen’s *Simplicissimus Teutsch*’, *The German Quarterly*, 84 (2011), 4-20 (p. 6).

<sup>41</sup> Stuart Taberner, ‘Private Failings and Public Virtues: Günter Grass’s *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel* and the Exemplary Use of Authorial Biography’, *Modern Language Review*, 103 (2008), 143-54 (p. 154).